

GEORGE ELLIOTT CLARKE
FLIGHT FROM THE CONGO
BY WILLIAM G. STAIRS¹

After squalling sails—
spittle haze of seaspray

(and we were thankful for the haze,
for sunlight now feels bitter)—

carried thither by tatters of foam,
we swished into Halifax harbour,
blurred by fog.

Happy we are
to bring our brine-burned bones back
to sea-salted coast,
the wash of cold wind,

so nicely *North*

of gold fish, gold nuggets,
and gold rum

(the gold-gilt Carib sea),

back now to stiff winds,
dangerous winter.

¹ William G. Stairs teamed with Henry Morton Stanley on his second Congo expedition. On this ill-fated adventure, the Nova Scotian-cum-British imperialist likely raped African women, but he definitely murdered African men. See *African Exploits: The Diaries of William Stairs, 1887–1892*, ed. Roy MacLaren (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1998). Stairs Street in Halifax is named for the swashbuckling pillager and cut-throat explorer.

There are no righteous tropics.

We've survived air shrill with arrows—
I mean, steaming, or a-boil, with arrows—

the jeering of arrows,
hitting us down,
a jesting gesture—
but successful, as in chess.

We should prefer stringy snow
along the sea strand—
New Darkness
or “Nova Scotia.”

Halifax is a hammering clamour of bells—
churches, weddings, chapels, funerals—

civilization:

We can munch Sicilian bergamot pears,
swallow a garden diet—
not suffer guts fed only fodder
or forage.

Here my crew can take a lass—
lips tasting of rain,
hair perfumed with April zephyrs,
body as nubile as honey
(so deliberately nubile as honey),
with skin rose-pink
(conch-shell rose-pink),
her whole body secret with comforts.

Here be delicious pillows:

A man can snooze with angels
or booze with devils—

and dream of the bony belles of Ipanema—
or the bonny, big-breast gals of Bahia.

Over there, down there, south—
where the Negroes swarm,
spears perforate and puncture us Europeans;
our blood swears against us;
we lose our minds, our ways.

I tire of eyeing crow-dark shadows,
of fearing sudden spears thrusting from shadows.

(From flesh, blood flew in withering gales.)

Our answer had to be sudden cacophonies
of gunpowder. Incessant.

I want to forget anchorage in a Congo river;

Mr. Joey Conrad (English-speaking Pole)
spitting out blood and booze;

nigger huts pregnant with garbage and corpses;

too much dust;
dust-laden dew;
too much diarrhea;

the diaphanous darkness,
strangely tangible;
strangling us.

(Chaps:

The Congo is an empire of spikes,
iron collars, and rawhide whips.
Human skulls brick every palace.)

Fact is—
one *Niger* wench got carried on board;
her scorched tits
so scorching to see.
Plenty hard alcohol
got her all alcoholic.

We treated her as a damp, trampled camp follower—
incurrigibly hearty—
suiting heartless, cold conjunction.

We were infallibly greedy:
Liking to wrestle a naked bitch.

She was unmercifully,
unceremoniously, fucked,
buggered, fucked and buggered again,
fucked and buggered again.

Us unblanching buffoons
made coal-scuttle maid
a Caucasian cocksucker,
but her very blood was poison.

Her bright smile was nerve-wracking:
She gave Joey C. a chilling grin,
just as she sucked in his peter,
then bit down unstoppably.

When he fell away, his blood flowering
from his stump of manhood,
those ruddy petals splintered
as they splashed us.

Hers was a trivial ruction,

but I could not bear to see
his unbearable body.

I blared, yelled, *Murder!*

The leering gal,
spitting out Joe's appendage,
got run through—
gorged on a sword.

Two bodies tumbled into a swamp.

About-face we went,
to retrace the shadowy passage,
to navigate a stifling river
with a cargo of sweat,
and cadaver-usurping flies,
to pass through oceanic darkness.

Halifax is hollow bells, kiting notes,
and soon hallowed blossoms
and hallowed belles
(hollow where it counts).

I want *Peace*, port, tarts, and wine.
No more skimpy guts.

Somebody, somebody, anybody,
please sing me, "Amazing Grace"!

Halifax, N.S.
1892

[Durham, North Carolina, 9 avril mmxiii]