**Reflections on Home: Cincinnati**

Authors are often thinking about what “home” means. Is it just where you’re from, or is it something you can create? For African American writers, this has been a particularly difficult question, as many have had to work against prejudice and exclusion to claim a home in the United States. The following poem by Nikki Giovanni and essay by Ralph Ellison reflect on the meaning of home – specifically, on the homes they found in Cincinnati. Giovanni was raised in Lincoln Heights, and Ellison spent several months alone and wandering in the city after the death of his mother. As you read these works, think about what home means to you. What feelings does the word evoke? Has your home changed since you were younger? Did you ever have to leave home, like Ellison? What did that feel like, and what did it mean for you?

“A Poem for Carol” by Nikki Giovanni

(May She Always Wear Red Ribbons)

when i was very little

though it’s still true today

there were no sidewalks in lincoln heights

and the home we had on jackson street

was right next to a bus stop and a sewer

which didn’t really ever become offensive

but one day from the sewer a little kitten

with one eye gone

came crawling out

though she never really came into our yard but just

sort of hung by to watch the folk

my sister who was always softhearted but able

to act effectively started taking milk

out to her while our father would only say

don’t bring him home and everyday

after school i would rush home to see if she was still

there and if gary had fed her but i could never

bring myself to go near her

she was so loving

and so hurt and so singularly beautiful and i knew

i had nothing to give that would

replace her one gone eye

and if i had named her which i didn’t i’m sure

i would have called her carol

“February” by Ralph Ellison

February is a brook, birds, an apple tree—a day spent alone in the country. Unemployed, tired of reading, and weary of grieving the loss of my mother. I’d gone into the woods to forget. So that now all Februarys have the aura of that early morning coldness, the ghost of quail tracks on the snow-powdered brook which I brushed aside as I broke the brook to drink: and how the little quail tracks went up the ice, precise and delicate, into the darker place of the bank-ledge undisturbed. February is climbing up a hill into the full glare of the early sun, alone in all that immensity of snowscape with distant Dayton drowsing wavery to my eyes like the sound of distant horns. It’s walking through a parklike grove, the tall trees stark, the knee-high snow windblown and pathless, to a decaying shed sheltering a fine old horsedrawn sleigh, carved and scrolled with traces of goldleaf clinging to its flaking wood.

And the birds: I descended into a little valley in the windless quiet and the smell of apples and saw the air erupt with red tracer-bullet streaks of flight—across the snows, a carnival of cardinals. The red birds zoomed, the flickers flew, pheasants roared up like gaudy Chinese kimono rags. My heart beat hard and I saw the single tree, black-limbed against the sky, here and there the miracle of a dark red apple still hanging after months of ice and snow. I bent forward and knelt within the circle of the fruit-fall, searching out an apple missed by the birds. Sweet and mellow to the taste, it had been preserved by the leaves and grasses, protected by the snows. And I recalled the valley of two months before: *At the sound of my gun the birds came up along the hill in pars and swooped with a circling down into the thicket on the other side, and I had gone down into the valley, soft, then, with the glow of sunset, and found the cock quail dead upon the snow, its plumage undisturbed, the vapor rising slowly from its sinking blood….*And now in this place of hidden fruit and bird-tracked snow, I was seized with a kind of exhilaration. For was in my early twenties then, and I had lived through my mother’s death in that strange city, had survived three months off the fields and wood by my gun; through ice and snow and homelessness. And now in this windless February instant I had crossed over into a new phase of living. Shall I say it was in those February snows that I first became a man?

**Further Thinking:**

* Nikki Giovanni does not capitalize words in her poem, which is a deliberate choice to make her poetic language stand out. Consider using a similar technique in your writing, perhaps by removing punctuation or some other formal element of grammar or syntax. What changes about the writing when you make it stand out like this? How does it read differently?
* Ellison describes an “epiphany” in his essay, or a moment of sudden and transformative understanding. He uses the narrative of the essay to build up to that moment, making it more impactful. In your writing, consider telling your story in a way that leads up to a similar epiphany. How do you guide your reader to understand why the moment is important? What lesson do you want your narrator or character to learn in their moment of epiphany?

**Stories of Loss and Survival**

Many of us go through incredibly difficult experiences, and it can be challenging to put into words how those experiences change us. Authors frequently use their art to explore how past traumas, losses, and struggles have shaped their lives. This is a particularly prominent genre within African American literature, in which authors frequently turned to song, poetry, and fiction to give voice to struggles for freedom, equality, and recognition, or to commemorate the lives of those who were lost due to violence, poverty, and addiction. In Andre 3000’s rap verse below, he recounts the death of a high school classmate whose awareness of her own mortality leads him to understand how fragile life is. Similarly, Audre Lorde uses her poetry to explore all the ways that the world tries to make sure that people like her don’t survive. The fact that she *has* survived is, for her, a reason to use her artistic voice to share her triumph with others. As you read these pieces, think about an important life lesson that you have learned. How would you describe that lesson to someone? What adversities have you overcome, and what have those experiences taught you about loss and grief, but also about joy and survival?

“Da Art of Storytellin’ [Part 1]” by Outkast

Versé by Andre 3000

“Now Suzy Skrew had a partner named Sasha... Thumper

I remember her number like the summer

When her and Suzy, yeah, they threw a slumber

Party, but you can not call it that 'cause it was slummer

Well, it was more like spend the night

Three in the mornin', yawnin', dancin' under street lights

We chillin' like a villain, and a n\*\*\*\* feelin' right

In the middle of the ghetto on the curb, but in spite all of the bulls\*\*\*

We on our back, starin' at the stars above (Aww, man)

Talkin' bout what we gonna be when we grow up (Mm)

I said, ‘What you wanna be?’ She said, ‘Alive’

It made me think for a minute, then looked in her eyes

I coulda died, time went on, I got grown

Rhyme got strong, mind got blown

I came back home to find lil' Sasha was gone

Her mama said she with a n\*\*\*\* that be treatin' her wrong (Man)

I kept on singin' my song and hopin' at a show

That I would one day see her standin' in the front row

But two weeks later, she got found in the back of a school

With a needle in her arm, baby two months due

Sasha Thumper”

“A Litany for Survival” by Audre Lorde

For those of us who live at the shoreline

standing upon the constant edges of decision

crucial and alone

for those of us who cannot indulge

the passing dreams of choice

who love in doorways coming and going

in the hours between dawns

looking inward and outward

at once before and after

seeking a now that can breed

futures

like bread in our children’s mouths

so their dreams will not reflect

the death of ours;

For those of us

who were imprinted with fear

like a faint line in the center of our foreheads

learning to be afraid with our mother’s milk

for by this weapon

this illusion of some safety to be found

the heavy-footed hoped to silence us

For all of us

this instant and this triumph

We were never meant to survive.

And when the sun rises we are afraid

it might not remain

when the sun sets we are afraid

it might not rise in the morning

when our stomachs are full we are afraid

of indigestion

when our stomachs are empty we are afraid

we may never eat again

when we are loved we are afraid

love will vanish

when we are alone we are afraid

love will never return

and when we speak we are afraid

our words will not be heard

nor welcomed

but when we are silent

we are still afraid

So it is better to speak

remembering

we were never meant to survive.

**Further Thinking:**

* In Andre 3000’s verse, he uses what is called “enjambment,” which is when a line of poetry continues over from one line into the next. For example, this happens in the following line: “When her and Suzy, yeah, they threw a slumber/Party, but you can not call it that 'cause it was slummer.” The phrase “slumber party” carries over from the end of the first line into the second, stretching the line out and continuing the momentum of the rhyme. Try and see if you can use enjambment in a similar way in a poem: what challenges does it present? What new rhyme schemes does it let you use?
* Audre Lorde titles her poem “Litany for Survival,” which directly references the religious practice of a “litany,” or a recitation of prayer requests in a church. In other words, Lorde is saying that her poem is a request for attention and respect, much like a preacher might request that the churchgoers pray for certain people or honor certain religious figures. In your writing, see if you can use a form from outside of literature, such as a form of religious prayer, or a speech, or a familiar document such as a letter or an email. How does using this form change the way you write?

**Stories of the Past and the Future**

In a letter to Robert Hooke in 1675, the famous scientist Isaac Newton wrote that if “If I have seen further it is by standing on the shoulders of Giants.” Many of us, like Newton, owe a great deal to people who came before us, and authors are no different. All artists owe debts to the people they read and listened to growing up, and they frequently pay homage to those ancestors in their art. Black History Month is an opportunity to reflect on the labors and legacies of Black writers and activists. In the song “Ode to a Black Man,” Phil Lynott, lead singer of the popular band Thin Lizzy, recounts his connections to Black artists who paved the way for musicians like him to succeed. Similarly, the poem “Miz Rosa Rides by Bus” by Angela Jackson honors the sacrifices of those who struggled for racial justice by embodying the perspective of Rosa Parks as she refused to give up her seat on the segregated buses in Montgomery. As you read these works, consider who or what from the past inspires you. How would you use writing to honor those who have pushed you towards success? How can art look to the past in order to pave the way to a better future? What famous people would you like to get inside the mind of?

“Ode to a Black Man” by Phil Lynott

If you see Stevie Wonder tell him I hear

If you hear Stevie Wonder tell him I see

I don't want no songs for plants

I want songs for me

I don't want no songs for plants

I want liberty living in the city

If you see the doctor tell him he's king, Dr. Martin Luther

If you see the doctor tell him he's still king, you too Muhammed Ali

But this bad black boy won't be blown away by anything

Yes this bad black boy won't be blown away by anything

There are people in this town

That try to put me down

They say I don't give a damn

But the people in this town

That try to put me down

Are the people in the town

That could never understand a black man

Don't take it no more

Don't take it no more

Don't take it no more

There are people in the town

That try to put me down

They say I don't give a damn, damn

But the people in the town that try to put me down

Are the people in the town that could never understand a black man

Don't take it no more

If you see Robert Johnson, you too Robert Marley, Robert Mugabe

Now tell him I hear

If you see Malcom tell him I'm next, vexed

If you see Jimi, Jimi Hendrix

If you see my brothers tell them it's clear

I've been living on the wrong side

Now I hear

Don't take it no more

I don't take it no more

Mr. Joshua Nkomo

Don't take it no more

Jomo Kenyatta, oh no

Don't take it no more

Haile Selassi, Rastafarian

Don't take it no more

Professor Longhair

Don't take it no more

“Miz Rosa Rides the Bus” by Angela Jackson

That day in December I sat down

by Miss Muffet of Montgomery.

I was myriad-weary. Feets swole

from sewing seams on a filthy fabric;

tired-sore a pedalin’ the rusty Singer;

dingy cotton thread jammed in the eye.

All lifelong I’d slide through century-reams

loathsome with tears. Dreaming my own

silk-self.

It was not like they all say. Miss Liberty Muffet

she didn’t

jump at the sight of me.

Not exactly.

They hauled me

away—a thousand kicking legs pinned down.

The rest of me I tell you—a cloud.

Beautiful trouble on the dead December

horizon. Come to sit in judgment.

How many miles as the Jim Crow flies?

Over oceans and some. I rumbled.

They couldn’t hold me down. Long.

No.

My feets were tired. My eyes were

sore. My heart was raw from hemming

dirty edges of Miss L. Muffet’s garment.

I rode again.

A thousand bloody miles after the Crow flies

that day in December long remembered when I sat down

beside Miss Muffet of Montgomery.

I said—like the joke say—What’s in the bowl, Thief?

I said—That’s your curse.

I said—This my way.

She slipped her frock, disembarked,

settled in the suburbs, deaf, mute, lewd, and blind.

The bowl she left behind. The empty bowl mine.

The spoiled dress.

Jim Crow dies and ravens come with crumbs.

They say—Eat and be satisfied.

I fast and pray and ride.

**Further Thinking:**

* Lynott references several famous Black artists and activists, such as Martin Lither King Jr. and Muhammed Ali. But he also references several others that may not be as familiar to you. Google those names and read about those figures. Why do you think Lynott included them as part of the people he was paying respect to? In your stories about the past, think about including references to famous people that your audience could learn more about. Who is not as famous as others, but deserves to be?
* Angela Jackson uses the phrase “Jim Crow” several times in her poem. This is a reference to the “Jim Crow Era” in the American South (lasting from around 1880 to about 1960) in which African Americans were technically free under the law but still experienced intense discrimination, exclusion, and even violence. She refers to Jim Crow “flying,” turning the phrase into a poetic metaphor: rather than just a term referring to a time period, the words now also represent a literal bird that flies over “oceans and some.” Think about using a metaphor in your writing. What popular image, idea, or concept could you use in an unexpected way, like how Jackson uses Jim Crow in an unusual way?