

## BIRDS ON A POWERLINE

Mama Mary's counting them  
Again. Eleven black. A single  
Red one like a drop of blood

Against the sky. She's convinced  
They've been there two weeks.  
I bring her another cup of coffee

& a Fig Newton. I sit here reading  
Frances Harper at the enamel table  
Where I ate teacakes as a boy,

My head clear of voices brought back.  
The green smell of the low land returns,  
Stealing the taste of nitrate.

The deep-winter eyes of the birds  
Shine in summer light like agate,  
As if they could love the heart

Out of any wild thing. I stop,  
With my finger on a word, listening.  
They're on the powerline, a luminous

Message trailing a phantom  
Goodyear blimp. I hear her say  
*Jesus, I promised you. Now*

*He's home safe, I'm ready.*  
*My traveling shoes on. My teeth*  
*In. I got on clean underwear.*

Yusef Komunyakaa

## SALT

Lisa, Leona, Loretta?  
She's sipping a milkshake  
In Woolworth's dressed in  
Chiffon & fat pearls.  
She looks up at me,  
Grabs her purse  
& pulls at the hem  
Of her skirt. I want to say  
*I'm just here to buy*  
*A box of Epsom Salt*  
*For my grandmama's feet.*  
Lena? Lois? I feel her  
Strain not to see me.  
Lines are now etched  
At the corners of her thin,  
Pale mouth. Does she know  
I know her grandfather  
Rode a white horse  
Through Poplas Quarters  
Searching for black women,  
How he killed Indians  
& stole land with bribes  
& fake deeds? I remember  
She was seven & I was five  
When she ran up to me like a cat  
With a gypsy moth in its mouth  
& we played doctor & house  
Under the low branches of a raintree  
Encircled with red rhododendrons.  
We could pull back the leaves &  
See grandma ironing  
At their wide window. Once  
Her mother moved so close  
To the yardman we thought they'd kiss.  
What the children of housekeepers  
& handymen knew was enough  
To stop biological clocks,  
& it's hard now not to walk over  
and mention how her grandmother  
Killed her idiot son  
& salted him down  
In a wooden barrel.

Yusef Komunyakaa

## A PRAYER FOR WORKERS

Bless the woman, man, & child  
    who honor Earth by opening shine  
in the soil—the splayed hour  
    between dampness & dust—to plant  
a few seedlings in furrows, & then pray  
    for cooling rain. Bless the fields,  
the catch, the hunt, & the wild fruit,  
    & let no one go hungry tonight  
or tomorrow. Let the wind & birds  
    seed a future ferried into villages  
& towns the other side of mountains  
    along nameless rivers. Bless those  
born with hands made to do work,  
    hewn timbers & stone raised from earth  
& shaped in circles, who know the geometry  
    of corners, & please level the foundation  
& pitch a roof so good work isn't diminished  
    by rain. Bless the farmer with clouds  
in his head, who lugs baskets of dung  
    so termites can carve their hives  
that hold water long after a downpour  
    has gone across the desert & seeds  
sprout into a contiguous greening.  
    Bless the iridescent beetle working  
to haul the heavens down, to journey  
    from moon dust to excrement.  
The wage-slave's two steps from Dickens's  
    tenements among a den of thieves,  
blind soothsayers who know shambles  
    where migrants feathered the nests  
of straw bosses as the stonecutters  
    perfect profiles of robber barons  
in granite & marble in town squares  
    along highways paved for Hollywood.  
Bless souls laboring in sweatshops,  
    & each calabash dipper of water,  
the major & minor litanies & ganglia  
    dangling from promises at the mouth  
of the cave, the catcher of vipers at dawn  
    in the canebrake & flowering fields,  
not for the love of money but for bread  
    & clabber on a thick gray slab table,  
for the simple blessings in a small town  
    of the storytellers drunk on grog.

Bless the cobbler, molding leather  
    on his steel latch, kneading softness  
& give into a red shoe & a work boot,  
    never giving more to one than the other,  
& also the weaver with closed eyes,  
    whose fingers play the loops & ties,  
as if nothing else matters, daybreak  
    to sunset, as stories of a people  
grow into an epic stitched down  
    through the ages, the outsider artists,  
going from twine & hue, cut & tag,  
    an ironmonger's credo of steam rising  
from buckets & metal dust, & the clang  
    of a hammer against an anvil,  
& the ragtag ones, the motley crew  
    at the end of the line, singing ballads  
& keeping time on a battered tin drum.

Yusef Komunyakaa