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DUPPY CONQUEROR

New and Selected Poems

Kwame Dawes

Edited by Matthew Shenoda

“Kwame Dawes is one of the most important writers of his generation who has built a mighty and lasting body of work.”—Elizabeth Alexander



Duppy Conqueror: New and Selected Poems represents an exciting addition to the growing body of work being produced by the prolific poet and writer Kwame Dawes. This volume represents the introduction of Dawes to a new core of readers in the U.S. and will delight those who have followed Dawes's eighteen previous collections over the last twenty years. Edited by Matthew Shenoda, *Duppy Conqueror: New and Selected Poems* showcases spirituality, political engagement, historical rootedness, and a commitment to beauty that underpins the best of reggae music.

And when I die, I will fly. What promises you have for me?
Call it a bargain-basement faith, but I have to find
something what can fit my broad hip and match my

complexion. What you have for me? When I die
my pains will be no more; I will touch clouds
damp with next week's storms, over

the cedars and pines, above the smooth green
thighs of the Blue Mountains, and when I dip like a bucket,
the water from the rocks will be cool blue.

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These poems seek a language that invokes and realizes Africa and its wide and varied diaspora. *Duppy Conqueror* is defiant, aware, and bold work.

KWAME DAWES was born in Ghana in 1962 and moved with his family to Jamaica at the age of ten. He is the author of eighteen collections of poetry, two novels, a short story collection, seven anthologies, several books of criticism, numerous essays, and has seen fifteen of his plays produced. In 2009 he was awarded an Emmy for his interactive website, LiveHopeLove.com. Since 2011 he has taught at the University of Nebraska as a Chancellor's Professor of English and has served as the Glenna Luschei Editor-in-Chief of *Prairie Schooner*. He is a Cave Canem faculty member and teaches in the MFA program at Pacific University. He lives in Lincoln, Nebraska.



MORE ABOUT *DUPPY CONQUEROR*...

Dawes's work is well-known in the UK, where in 1994 he won the prestigious Forward Poetry Prize, and where his UK publisher, Peepal Tree Press, has released almost two dozen of his titles. His reputation in the Caribbean is also quite strong given his deep roots in Jamaica and long-standing work as cofounder and programming director for the Calabash International Literary Festival. *Duppy Conqueror* represents the first introduction to the full range of his work in the U.S. and constitutes a watershed moment for the poet.

According to Egyptian American poet, Matthew Shenoda, who selected and edited the volume, "His is a poetic praxis reminiscent of [the] struggle to discover one's humanity. It is at turns deeply comforting and unsettling. But one thing that I continue to return to as a reader of Dawes's poetry, is the incredible sense of honesty found in his poems, that almost ethereal sense that the lived experiences of humanity, in all of its glory and banality, is a sacred thing, a thing to be relished, no matter its condition." Furthermore, the connection to reggae music, and particularly Bob Marley, should surprise no one who knows of Dawes's serious and groundbreaking scholarly work on what he has coined the reggae aesthetic. Shenoda, in his selection, sought to elucidate the qualities of this aesthetic: spirituality, political engagement, historical rootedness, sensuality, and an irrepressible commitment to the quest for beauty and empathic delight that underpin the best of reggae music in Dawes's poetry. *Duppy Conqueror* is defiant, aware, and bold work. It identifies the bull buckers and seeks to conquer them.

Indeed, the cover art reiterates Dawes's engagement with the imaginative force of Jamaican culture shaped by the spiritual power of redemption in the painting *Good Friday* by the late Jamaican master painter, Eugene Hyde.

The poems included in this collection form a coherent movement that reveal the heart of Dawes's project, a project that comes out of Dawes's own family and upbringing as the son of the Jamaican writer Neville Dawes and his artist and social worker mother, Sophia Dawes, as a product of Ghana, Jamaica, and North America. He has constantly sought a language and poetics that invoke and realize Africa and its wide and varied diaspora. The new poems included here are part of a sequence that won him a Guggenheim Fellowship. That sequence, *August: A Quintet*, dialogues with and draws inspiration from the monumental twentieth-century play cycle by African American playwright August Wilson.

"I devote a great deal of my time and energy promoting and advancing the poetry of others—this is my passion," says Dawes, who currently spearheads a series of exciting publishing initiatives for African and African American poetry even as he continues to edit the prestigious journal *Prairie Schooner*.

"But it is great to be able to share my own work with the world. This is new poetry and a gathering of some old favorites. I am excited about traveling around the world sharing this new book with readers."

Over the next six months, *Duppy Conqueror* will be launched domestically and internationally, beginning in Seattle, the home of Copper Canyon Press, with stops in Lincoln, New York, Chicago, Texas, Rotterdam, London, Kingston, Tunis, and Accra.

REVIEWS, LINKS & INTERVIEWS

Kwame Dawes

<http://www.kwamedawes.com>

Blue Flower Arts Profile

<http://www.blueflowerarts.com/kwame-dawes>

John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation Profile

<http://www.gf.org/fellows/17186-kwame-dawes>

Watch the PBS NewsHour Poetry Series Profile on Kwame Dawes

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f_aV3DZJ75A

Listen to Kwame Dawes read “Tornado Child” Poetry Everywhere with Garrison Keillor on PBS.org

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/poetryeverywhere/uwm/dawes.html>

Read “The Art of Collaboration: An Interview with Kwame Dawes” in *Calabash: A Journal of Caribbean Arts & Letters*

<http://www.nyu.edu/calabash/vol5no1/0501115.pdf>

Visit LiveHopeLove.com

<http://www.livehopelove.com>

Watch Kwame Dawes read “New Day,” inspired by Barack Obama

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cXKiaig75CA>

Visit Kwame Dawes’s British Literature Council Profile

<http://literature.britishcouncil.org/kwame-dawes>

Read the *New York Daily News* Interview with Kwame Dawes

<http://www.nydailynews.com/blogs/pageviews/2012/07/ghanian-poet-kwame-dawes-discusses-newly-established-african-poetry-book-series>

“This first U.S. selection from the Jamaica-bred, Nebraska-based poet (he also has a reputation in Britain) is his 16th book of verse in just 20 years; it reveals a writer syncretic, effusive, affectionate, alert to familial joys, but also sensitive to history, above all to the struggles of African diasporic history—the Middle Passage, sharecropper-era South Carolina, the Kingston of Bob Marley, whose song gives this big book its title. Dawes is at home with cityscape and seascape, patois and transatlantic tradition; in the title poem from his first book, “Progeny of Air,” “propellers undress the sea;/ the pattern of foam like a broken zip/ opening where the bow cuts the wave.” Yet he is drawn more often to life stories: his troubled brother, his own relocations, Marley and Marley’s widow Rita, the archetypal wanderers of the American South: “Hurl me through memory,” he writes in “Carolina Gold,” “and I will return... with the stories strangers/ tell me at the crossroads.” Thirty-nine new poems speak to and about the characters in August Wilson’s plays: “You, August, have carried in your belly,/ every song of affront your characters/ have spoken...and in this cacophonous chorus/ we find the ritual of living.” (Apr.)—*Publishers Weekly*



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“[S]ometimes forgetting the panorama/ these poems focus like a tunnel,/ To a way of seeing time past,/ a way of seeing the dead,” writes Dawes of his own writing, which is often deeply concerned with the long aftermath of the African diaspora. Raised in Jamaica, Dawes takes some of his cues, and this book’s title, from reggae music. But his voice in these long and short poems and sequences selected from each of his

many books, which began appearing in the mid-1990s, is crystal clear, accessible and serious, mixing a time-less myth-making energy with a strong contemporary conscience: “Your history is scattered across the city,” he writes, “even strangers have seen you stumble, your heartbeat/ echoing in your head. They have shown pity/ and collected your story; given you food/ like alms for the poor. You dignify their pity.” While Dawes has been a force in various forms of art — he’s even won an Emmy! — this book, which includes a generous selection of new poems, will bring him to the notice of a wide audience for the first time, perhaps initiating Dawes’ arrival as a major poet.” —NPR, “Guns, God And A Reggae Beat: 2013 A Poetry Preview”

INTERVIEW WITH KWAME DAWES ON *DUPPY CONQUEROR*

How many previous collections did you go through to make your selections?

Matthew Shenoda, the wonderful Egyptian American poet with a preternatural knowledge of reggae music and world poetry has now earned the title Mr. Selector for his incredible work in going through my eighteen books of poetry and a three-hundred-plus-page unpublished epic, called *August: A Quintet*, to pull together this really coherent and thoughtfully representative sampling of my poetry.

So, all was left to the eyes of Shenoda?

Copper Canyon's editor, Michael Wieggers, was smart to respond well to Shenoda's prompting, and it is hard to not be moved and impressed by Matthew's care and intelligence in making these choices. Of course, Shenoda sought my opinion all the way through, and I like his clear commitment to the spirit of the reggae aesthetic in my work: work that is political, historically conscious, spiritual, lyric, and sensual all at the same time. I am very pleased with the selections.

What discoveries did you make as you re-read yourself?

There are these strange thematic patterns. Sight, or the lack thereof, for one, is a recurring motif, which makes sense given my struggles with my eyesight over the years. But mostly what moves me when I look back at the early work is the liveliness of the imagination and the risk-taking. I envy the easy Jamaicanness in the cadence and allusions in those early poems, I really do.

What did you notice on the level of voice?

There is a frenetic energy to some of those poems, a seemingly fearless pleasure in taking risks with language. I really like that. I am also moved by what I can only call a consistent clarity of purpose in the work that I have never been fully aware of. I have been consistently fascinated with place, home, memory, and faith. This gives me great comfort.

Please explain what a duppy is for those who don't know.

I am glad you have asked this because I want people to start there. A duppy is essentially a malevolent spirit of the dead in Jamaica. Of course a duppy can be a good spirit, I suppose, but rarely so. If a spirit is hanging around, as duppies do, there has to be something up with the spirit that can't be good. Bob Marley is who I am drawing on in this title. His brilliant song, "Duppy Conqueror," declares himself to be the conqueror of duppies, the defeater of duppies. The full line is, "if you are bull-bucker, I'm a duppy conqueror."

The same folks may need an explanation of "bull bucker."

Well, the bull bucker is the malevolent incarnation of the spirit world. So there is an ethical call in this book, there is a political call in this book, and there is a sly arrogance in the title—I might as well quote Bob Marley on his way on stage one afternoon: "I and I don't come to bow, I and I come to conquer." Yeah, that's me.

What is it like to be an artist with so many national hyphenations?

Let's see what you mean, Ghanaian-Jamaican; Ghanaian-Jamaican-African American; and briefly the Canadians were willing to call me Ghanaian-Jamaican-Canadian. I have even been categorized Black British. And you know that given that my father was actually born in Warri, Nigeria, I could include that nation in my heritage.

Confusion, one could say, but is there an upside?

It can be extremely useful in the multicultural sweepstakes. So here is the truth, I don't feel as confused about my national sense of self as these clusters sound like when they are spoken. Secondly, I have claimed most of these because my writing reflects the truth that I have sought and found a sense of home in all these places. My writing, I believe, has benefited from this quest. I sometimes fully identify with Kamau Braithwaite's mantra: "Never seen a man travel more seen more lands than this pathless, harborless spade." Of course I don't feel harborless or

pathless most of the time, but when I do, I embrace its possibilities. This, I believe is his point. I forgot to mention, South Carolinian. I am also a citizen of the great republic of South Carolina.

You're an American citizen. Are you also an American poet?

Yes. America, for all its problems, has many great remarkable values, one of which is to make it possible for me to answer yes to such a question without irony or fear of contradiction. I am an American poet. It is allowed, it is embraced. But the greater gift of my Americanness is my capacity to be both inside and outside of that American identity. I could write a good book called "On Becoming American" because I believe that is my condition. I am wrestling with what it means to become American, what is lost and gained. I did not become American in the spirit of abandoning what I was before, in the spirit of unbecoming Jamaican or Ghanaian, but in another spirit, that of adding to who I am. I like to see it in that light. I am adding to who I am.

You lived in South Carolina for over two decades. What was absorbed into in your writing from that turn in the South?

The reason it is a cliché to say that the South remains deeply defined by its haunting and persistent history is because it is true. In many ways understanding South Carolina helped me to understand the complex truth of America. For a while, I found it easier and emotionally more honest to say I was South Carolinian than to say I was American. I owe that troubled beautiful state a great deal because it gave me the fodder for at least half the books I have written. Most of all it helped me to find Africa fully formed and powerfully present in America.

The Gullah-Geechie people have preserved in their bodies and songs and ways and language the very bridge back to Africa that the Middle Passage and its pernicious forces of self-loathing, brutality, amnesia, and shame sought to burn down. I learned how to be black in America by living in South Carolina, and I found that it is possible for love and understanding to prevail between two races that did not always enjoy those qualities. It is home in the way that homes are both places of reassurance and succor and at the same time places of contention, loss, and sorrow. The state embraced me, not without initial reservation, but slowly and then wholeheartedly, and for this I am grateful.

Like many poets, including Robert Pinsky and Cornelius Eady, you're deeply engaged with music. When did this begin?

Like anyone living in this world in the last hundred years, I have an easily collected and tabulated soundtrack to my life. The ubiquity of the radio, the record player, the various evolving portals of sound have ensured that for each significant moment in my life there is a song playing in the background. I have always enjoyed music, from the jazz my father played on his reel to reel and stereo when we were children; to the folk songs, religious songs, and popular songs of my Ghanaian relatives; to the shaping great NEWS of reggae music in the 1970s. I would go on to play in a reggae band, Ujamaa, in Canada and to indulge in the powerful confluence of music and poetry that this afforded.

Poetry is music in many ways isn't it?

I ascribe to the well-founded view that poetry's DNA is entwined with that of music and that the poet's ear is as critical to her success as are her intelligence, her sentiment, and her rhetorical facility. So bringing music out of poetry is part of what I believe I must do as a poet. Anyway, I am just jealous of musicians—of how much riotous emotion they can evoke with just the right combination of notes and rhythms. It's not fair. Look, as a poet from Jamaica I can pontificate all I want, but if I cannot even begin to approach the post-post modernist genius of someone like Lee Scratch Perry with my poems, I better, as folks in America sometimes say, ask somebody.

If you got the chance to talk lyrics and tone over lunch with Leonard Cohen and Bob Dylan, and there were two more chairs at the table, who would you invite?

Since this is as unlikely to happen to me as me raising someone from the dead, I am going to assume you are asking me to embark on a no holds barred fantasy, and so I would resurrect the dead and ask Bob Marley to join

us to talk about what he called “the beauties” and then beg Nina Simone to come and school us on her magic. Finally, I would stand up to vacate my chair so Bessie Smith can come settle herself and disturb our souls with the stories she has to tell. I will just hover about in amazement, taking notes, of course.

Who are some of the poets whose work simply frightens you?

Well, here is a confession. What terrifies me about poets is their capacity to render me redundant. You know when you read a poem, and you think, “Why do I bother?” It is exacerbated when the poets are closer to your idea of home, when the willful delusion of saying, “Well, I can do the same for the world I know,” no longer holds. The redundancy is particularly acute in such instances. Thus opening a new book from such poets does scare me. I am scared of how good they will be, how much they will fill me with awe, joy, and unmitigated despair in one instance.

Do such poets have names?

Well the list includes Derek Walcott and Lorna Goodison. And even though he has been dead for almost two decades, the fact that we have recovered at least fifteen fully formed unpublished manuscripts by the brilliant Jamaican poet Anthony McNeill is cause for great alarm in me. Fear comes from those who have gone before and from those who are coming from behind, so at my back I always hear Ishion Hutchinson hurrying near.

Reflect on a time in your life when poetry was the only answer, and a time when you looked around and realized that poetry would fail.

Poetry has never been the only answer for me. It has always been a comfort, a source of delight, of insight and wisdom, a way to see and feel the world. It has helped me to find out what I know, to express the depths of love, of loss, and of desire that have overwhelmed or confounded me, and it has given me that thing that Lorna Goodison often speaks of, that thing which she witnessed growing up in Jamaica—the satisfaction and affirmation of being known for doing at least one thing very well. But poetry constantly fails for me—it fails because of my limitations as a poet, and beyond that, what I believe to be the fundamental limitations of language, which constitute the haunting mixture of despair and foolish hope that separates the imagined thing, the perceived thing, the felt thing, from the craft that expresses it.

Purchase *Duppy Conqueror: New and Selected Poems* by Kwame Dawes



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