

BILL HARRIS

Excerpt from *Booker T. & Them: A Blues*, a book length bio-poem.  
Set during the so-called age of Booker T. Washington, it is the depiction, in historical and imaginative ways, of several figures, with the emphasis on black males in the process of seeking to be men that mattered in a racist America. Also of concern in the work are their affects on history and each other. Call it a gathering of evidence for a hoped for greater understanding through the poetic route of who they were, and the forces that shaped them.  
Professor Lyons is among the invented characters whose creation and inclusion are in no way meant to alter the actual history of the period.

The book is scheduled to be published by Wayne State University Press in 2013.

### *INTERLUDE 3*

*In which is related an imagined concert  
by imagined Professor Lyons at Tuskegee.*

Tuskegee, “Warrior” in the Muskogean  
(Muskogee) dialect of the Creek language.

Meanwhile, on the Normal School For Colored Teachers  
at Tuskegee campus, where Thrift & Patience &  
the Godliness of Dirt Scratching & By-Scraping  
head the curriculum. There are queer goings on.

Professor Lyons, mathematics instructor from  
Columbus O., short on patience with whites after  
barred by a bitter suite of Jim Crow orchestrated  
backs turned & doors slammed in the face  
of foolhardy aspiration—tutoring t’ward  
a classical music career; hardened, settles  
for the democracy of absolute value,  
axis of symmetry, common factors, parallels,  
& numerical logic.

On occasional evenings, when frustration  
at conditions hell, west, & crooked rise in him  
like weatherglass mercury, he steals in  
where, at room’s rear a donated piano rests,  
between little Old Glory’s on sticks, & black-framed  
Republican presidents glowering from their place  
above the slate boards where that day’s lessons  
in saleable skills & acceptance of social  
realities were chalked in neat cursive script.

Lyons plays.

Passers by, their Bible & broom duties done, hear,  
ease in, hushed, watch the random recital. Someone  
runs to tell others. *Hurry!* They, collars loosened,  
jackets & aprons off, join to hear him plaiting  
& yoking, stacking & stringing out quadrilles &  
arias & marches & waltzes, with the new  
syncopated cadences of blue-black music's  
raddled, multipart harmonic displacements on  
colored spirituals, & good ol'-time gospel  
shouts; new rollicking, black style musical oil &  
water, or cornbread & buttermilk conversations  
Principal Washington would deem indecorous.

It is, it is—well, is like a monkey on a  
buzzard's back; along for the ride but jumping or  
bumping to its own cut-loose rhythm, as it's host  
flap-flaps, 1,2 steadily along, 3, 4,  
with each pieced & patched note shape-shifting shift-shaping  
to its own needs, & its all. . .while the cat's away . . .  
they can humanly do to keep from singing &  
dancing 'round the potbellied stove.

Is, some wonder,  
the of-the-minute concoctions they're hearing,  
design?, coincidence?, serendipity?, luck?,  
accident?, or score settling?

For, though he never  
says, nor never dare they ask, they discern, without decoding  
note for note, it is music in condemnation  
of that nasty black bird, who just grewed, never was born;  
turning from jokesman to spokesman, entertainer  
to restrainer, who tangles the traces to the  
plow of their life; put chiggers in the grits of their  
liberty; clogs the flue & backs smoke up in the  
house of their security; puts soot in the soup  
of their pursuit of happiness; boil weevils  
in the patch of their equal protection; holes  
in the roof of their peaceful assembly &  
association; blood on the moon of their pre-  
summed innocence; rust in the water of the well  
of their opinion & expression; & sics hell's  
hounds on their defense against arbitrary  
arrest & detention.

& when Lyons is through  
the sum of his notes & rhythms & suspected  
reasons ringing, pedal-pointed in their chests &  
crania, they slip away with non-applauded  
awe, & he sits a spell, like an engine coming  
to rest after a long uphill haul.