

Light Song of Light by Kei Miller



Over the last twenty years, the New and Next Generation initiatives have sought to introduce readers to the best poets currently writing. In this context, Kei Miller is represented for his poetry – in another context, he might equally be chosen for his novels, his short stories, his essays or his academic work. A prolific, wide-ranging and prize-winning writer, Miller creates poems notable for their clarity and grace, and he is an outstanding performer of his own work. His blog www.underthesaltireflag.com gives privileged access to a mind at work on matters of social injustice, race and gender.

The Longest Song

John Cage's composition 'As Slow as Possible' began being played in St Burchadi's Church, Germany in 2001 and is scheduled to end in the year 2640.

The longest song begins like a comma, a rest
that lasts for eighteen months. Long enough
that when the first chord is heard, surprising

as an extinct bird come back to life, many
cannot stop their tears. And one man
has told his wife he plans to weep

until the music has reached its next rest.
I suspect were we to pilgrim towards this
hymn, were we to sit in the hard pews

and only listen, patient through its months
of silence, our lives would be held
like a story my father tells me is true:

a man with a noose round his neck is allowed
one final song. He stands on the stage
and with a voice rivaling Franco Corelli, begins

ten billion green bottles standing on the wall.
And though this man has never lost count
of his bottles, all have lost count

of the years that have passed since,
the world outside the world of the song.
A hundred years at least they have stood still:

a man, his executioner, and the small crowd
of witnesses, all held as we too could be held
in a single room, our lives echoing

beyond their natural years, stretched
between clef and final fall, crescendo
and diminuendo, of one incredible song.

Unsung

There should be a song for the man who does not sing
himself – who has lifted a woman from her bed to a wheelchair
each morning, and from a wheelchair to her bed each night;
a song for the man recognized by all the pharmacists, because
each day he has joined a line, inched forward with a prescription
for his ailing wife; there should be a song for this man
who has not sung himself; he is father to an unmarried son
and will one day witness the end of his name; still he has refused
to pass down shame to his boy. There should be a song
for the man whose life has not been the stuff of ballads
but has lived each day in incredible and untrumpeted ways.
There should be a song for my father.

The Law Concerning Mermaids

There was once a law concerning mermaids. My friend thinks it a
wondrous thing – that the British Empire was so thorough it had
invented a law for everything. And in this law it was decreed: were
any to be found in their usual spots, showing off like dolphins,
sunbathing on rocks – they would no longer belong to themselves.
And maybe this is the problem with empires: how they have forced
us to live in a world lacking in mermaids – mermaids who under-
stood that they simply were, and did not need permission to exist
or to be beautiful. The law concerning mermaids only caused
mermaids to pass a law concerning man: that they would never
again cross our boundaries of sand; never again lift their torsos up

from the surf; never again wave at sailors, salt dripping from their curls; would never again enter our dry and stifling world.

Discussion Ideas

- More information about John Cage's composition 'As Slow As Possible', subject of 'The Longest Song' - http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/As_Slow_as_Possible. Miller uses Cage's space in which to contemplate ... what?
- The current performance of 'As Slow As Possible' takes place in a church, a setting which informs Miller's poem. It's not necessarily a religious piece of music though – what might the poem have been like if the piece of music was being played out on a fairground organ?
- What's the difference between 'There should be a song for my father' and 'This is a song for my father'?
- 'There was once a law concerning mermaids' – what does this storytelling-style introduction to the poem lead you to expect? Are those expectations confirmed or confounded? Think about your answers in relation to the tone, subject and intent of the poem.
- Many poets and critics tried to pin down the description of the prose poem, but there's no one set definition. Based on Miller's example, what's *your* definition of the prose poem?

Kei Miller was born in Jamaica in 1978. He read English at the University of the West Indies and completed an MA in Creative Writing at Manchester Metropolitan University. His poetry collections include *Kingdom of Empty Bellies*, (Heaventree Press, 2006) and *There Is an Anger That Moves* (Carc Janet, 2007). He is also the editor of Carcanet's *New Caribbean Poetry: An Anthology*. He has been a visiting writer at York University in Canada and currently teaches Creative Writing at the University of Glasgow. His recent collections include *A Light Song of Light*, published by Carcanet in 2010, and [*The Cartographer Tries to Map a Way to Zion*](#) (Carc Janet, 2014), which was shortlisted for the Forward Prize for Best Collection.

www.underthesaltireflag.com

Other books by Kei Miller

- *Kingdom of Empty Bellies* (Heaventree Press, 2006)
- [*There is An Anger that Moves*](#) (Carc Janet, 2007)
- [*The Cartographer Tries to Map a Way to Zion*](#) (Carc Janet, 2014)

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