

# Middle Passage

by Robert Hayden

## I

*Jesús, Estrella, Esperanza, Mercy:*

Sails flashing to the wind like weapons,  
sharks following the moans the fever and the dying;  
horror the compass and compass rose.

Middle Passage:

voyage through death  
to life upon these shores.

“10 April 1800—  
Blacks rebellious. Crew uneasy. Our linguist says  
their moaning is a prayer for death,  
ours and their own. Some try to starve themselves.  
Lost three this morning leaped with crazy laughter  
to the waiting sharks, sang as they went under.”

*Desire, Adventure, Tartar, Ann:*

Standing to America, bringing home  
black gold, black ivory, black seed.

*Deep in the festering hold thy father lies,  
of his bones New England pews are made,  
those are altar lights that were his eyes.*

Jesus Saviour Pilot Me  
Over Life's Tempestuous Sea

We pray that Thou wilt grant, O Lord,  
safe passage to our vessels bringing  
heathen souls unto Thy chastening.

Jesus Saviour

“8 bells. I cannot sleep, for I am sick  
with fear, but writing eases fear a little  
since still my eyes can see these words take shape  
upon the page & so I write, as one  
would turn to exorcism. 4 days scudding,  
but now the sea is calm again. Misfortune  
follows in our wake like sharks (our grinning  
tutelary gods). Which one of us  
has killed an albatross? A plague among  
our blacks—Ophthalmia: blindness—& we  
have jettisoned the blind to no avail.  
It spreads, the terrifying sickness spreads.  
Its claws have scratched sight from the Capt.'s eyes  
& there is blindness in the fo’c’sle  
& we must sail 3 weeks before we come  
to port.”

*What port awaits us, Davy Jones’  
or home? I’ve heard of slavers drifting, drifting,  
playthings of wind and storm and chance, their crews  
gone blind, the jungle hatred  
crawling up on deck.*

Thou Who Walked On Galilee

“Deponent further sayeth *The Bella J*  
left the Guinea Coast  
with cargo of five hundred blacks and odd  
for the barracoons of Florida:

“That there was hardly room ’tween-decks for half  
the sweltering cattle stowed spoon-fashion there;  
that some went mad of thirst and tore their flesh  
and sucked the blood:

“That Crew and Captain lusted with the comeliest  
of the savage girls kept naked in the cabins;  
that there was one they called *The Guinea Rose*  
and they cast lots and fought to lie with her:

“That when the Bo’s’n piped all hands, the flames  
spreading from starboard already were beyond

control, the negroes howling and their chains  
entangled with the flames:

“That the burning blacks could not be reached,  
that the Crew abandoned ship,  
leaving their shrieking negresses behind,  
that the Captain perished drunken with the wenches:

“Further Deponent sayeth not.”

Pilot Oh Pilot Me

## II

Aye, lad, and I have seen those factories,  
Gambia, Rio Pongo, Calabar;  
have watched the artful mongos baiting traps  
of war wherein the victor and the vanquished

Were caught as prizes for our barracoons.  
Have seen the nigger kings whose vanity  
and greed turned wild black hides of Fellatah,  
Mandingo, Ibo, Kru to gold for us.

And there was one—King Anthracite we named him—  
fetish face beneath French parasols  
of brass and orange velvet, impudent mouth  
whose cups were carven skulls of enemies:

He'd honor us with drum and feast and conjo  
and palm-oil-glistening wenches deft in love,  
and for tin crowns that shone with paste,  
red calico and German-silver trinkets

Would have the drums talk war and send  
his warriors to burn the sleeping villages  
and kill the sick and old and lead the young  
in coffles to our factories.

Twenty years a trader, twenty years,  
for there was wealth aplenty to be harvested



have been prepared for what befell.  
Swift as the puma's leap it came. There was  
that interval of moonless calm filled only  
with the water's and the rigging's usual sounds,  
then sudden movement, blows and snarling cries  
and they had fallen on us with machete  
and marlinspike. It was as though the very  
air, the night itself were striking us.  
Exhausted by the rigors of the storm,  
we were no match for them. Our men went down  
before the murderous Africans. Our loyal  
Celestino ran from below with gun  
and lantern and I saw, before the cane-  
knife's wounding flash, Cinquez,  
that surly brute who calls himself a prince,  
directing, urging on the ghastly work.  
He hacked the poor mulatto down, and then  
he turned on me. The decks were slippery  
when daylight finally came. It sickens me  
to think of what I saw, of how these apes  
threw overboard the butchered bodies of  
our men, true Christians all, like so much jetsam.  
Enough, enough. The rest is quickly told:  
Cinquez was forced to spare the two of us  
you see to steer the ship to Africa,  
and we like phantoms doomed to rove the sea  
voyaged east by day and west by night,  
deceiving them, hoping for rescue,  
prisoners on our own vessel, till  
at length we drifted to the shores of this  
your land, America, where we were freed  
from our unspeakable misery. Now we  
demand, good sirs, the extradition of  
Cinquez and his accomplices to La  
Havana. And it distresses us to know  
there are so many here who seem inclined  
to justify the mutiny of these blacks.  
We find it paradoxical indeed  
that you whose wealth, whose tree of liberty  
are rooted in the labor of your slaves  
should suffer the august John Quincy Adams  
to speak with so much passion of the right

of chattel slaves to kill their lawful masters  
and with his Roman rhetoric weave a hero's  
garland for Cinquez. I tell you that  
we are determined to return to Cuba  
with our slaves and there see justice done. Cinquez—  
or let us say 'the Prince'—Cinquez shall die.”

The deep immortal human wish,  
the timeless will:

Cinquez its deathless primaverbal image,  
life that transfigures many lives.

Voyage through death  
to life upon these shores.