

EVIE SHOCKLEY

o pioneer!

*“and the lord said unto satan, behold, he is in
thine hand; but save his life.”*

—Job 2:6

he made history sit up stiff like a new recruit waiting wide-eyed
for the next gust from winds of change. did another job
on the devil, in tailored sackcloth, catered ashes. sometimes he hears
the children’s voices louden slightly, as if they were coming back.
they are not. he claps his hands when no one’s looking, in time
with their dancing footsteps’ receding: a memory, a summons
ignored. all up in the sun’s face, his melanin bubbles to the surface
like struck oil. he snaps his past around him, a matador’s cape, to keep
himself from disappearing, becoming some black hole consumed
with its own success. he is a brewing storm, high but heavy, hanging
like a veil over that yellow daystar until he bursts into spears.

*— for craig griffith, byron taylor, and stanley
stallworth, elected to the partnership of sidley &
austin, chicago, 1998*

the ballad of anita hill

i.

beside a graveled path, stately trees
sweep back into a sudden arc: sun
cuts the bristly green rug. joggers wheeze
to a walk, watch the quiet field become

a trembling of squirrels and small
birds. cobwebs, dusty with dew,
cloud the shrubs: spiders enthrall,
simply by spinning out silken sinews

fraught deep within them. bereft of fear,
you were bright when you took center
stage: not dancing, perhaps, but clear:
prickly with bloodless truths. winter

fell, heavy and wet, quite out of season,
innocent. as if snow needs a reason.

ii.

sit up straight. smile. don't smile. wear
that nice suit, you know, the blue one
with the knee-length hem. say a prayer:
just a quick, silent "thy will be done."

bring your family (nuclear only). make
sure they dress middle-class and hug
you affectionately. be strong, or fake
it, but in a womanly way. don't be smug

or shy or prudish or loose, when testifying
that he said "pussy" or "penis" on the job:
push the words out, as if they were defying
gravity, then let them fly. weep. don't sob.

exude celibacy—heterosexual style.
sit up straight. smile. don't smile.

iii.

we crowned you for a day, a week, miss black
america: knew you as a round, brown face
pegged in a sharp, square frame: condemned your lack
of style—those tailored suits could never grace

the breasts of chocolate milk, the fleshy hips
we knew you had, the way an evening gown
would have: judged you on the size of your lips,
their color, whether they trembled, or turned down:

considered your talents—writing, teaching law—
yet ranked you highest for your undemonstrated
but patent skill at giving head (we saw
through your disguise): and ultimately rated

you a queen—bitch—jezebel—matriarch—whore,
destroyer of black manhood, and so much more.

lifeline

wedged in the top branches, rain still sighing
to earth as a dissolute sky dissolves,
a mozambican woman turns mother,
her water breaking loose to pool with the flood

licking the trunk below. a country-sized
puddle calls forth the child whose name, the mother
vowed, would not be *drowned*, no matter how
high she had to climb. my mother's water

washed her bare yellow bathroom tile many
years ago, a diluvial warning
of my struggle to arrive. we fought to
get me out, and have been tugging at each

other ever since, tethered by a cord
that simply thickens when it's cut. we
descended then, thirsting, churning, not into
the waters that hound the mozambican

mother, baying her and her baby in
the tree, but into that enduring ocean
in which—as mother, daughter, or both—a
woman's only choices are to drink or swim.