

# Reverie

2020 Edition

*Sean Bell Suite Reissue*  
(2011)

*Truth Thomas*  
*Metta Sáma*  
*Samantha Thornhill*  
*Alan King*  
*Delana Dameron*  
*Jacqueline Johnson*  
*Bianca Spriggs*  
*David Mills*  
*Derrick Weston Brown*

"People United" by Najee Dorey



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*Reverie*

*Special 2020 Sean Bell Edition*

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## **Sermon on the Block**

Blessed are the homeless who find ATM asylum: for  
their offering kingdom does not sleep nor slumber.

Blessed are those who do not mourn the death of paychecks:  
for eviction shall overlook them like the Passover angel.

Blessed are the meek: although they will have to be  
dead before they can cash in chips for the globe.

Blessed are vessels in the life hungry for refuge from fists:  
for they shall be satisfied until pimps sing siren songs.

Blessed are the merciful whose wardrobe is camouflage:  
for they shall not be blasted like shooting range targets.

Blessed are the children born to suckle Cristal breasts: for  
theirs shall be the kingdom of kindergarten concierges.

Blessed are the jaywalkers who do not play chicken  
with cabs, for they shall live to see the other side.

Blessed are graffiti artists who paint justice over persecution's  
door: although this will only make news in the kingdom  
of heaven.

### **The Lost Ones: the Sean Bells**

What is apparent: at some point today someone will use a gun and its bullets to shoot and kill someone. One person may be a police officer, & one person may be an unarmed person. Months ago a police officer was acquitted of murdering an unarmed young man (unless you count a hand contorted in the shape of a hand-gun as a weapon) in a fit of road rage; would you believe me if I told you the officer fled the scene? Would you believe me if I told you he wasn't charged with fleeing the scene? In the city where this murder took place, it is not against the law for a police officer to flee the scene of a crime. I refuse to poeticize here. I will not tell you that months ago the weather turned against the jury, that it stormed and lightning slashed the courthouse in half. I would be a simple liar. The day was beautiful. Warm, little to no humidity. The kind of day that embraces a man for getting out of a murder charge. I want to write enough to make you outraged. I'm outraged. On 7 December 1993, a police officer was acquitted of shooting an unarmed car thief. That was New Jersey. 9 July 1999, the Bronx: a police officer was acquitted of shooting an unarmed (unless, of course, one counts the squeegee as a weapon) homeless, drug addict. Another police officer, in Cincinnati, OH, 2001, was acquitted of shooting an unarmed man in a dark alley. The man refused to raise his hands, so the officer shot him. Chino, CA, 2006, an unarmed airman was shot by a police officer. Shall I retreat? Place these incidents in some historical context? Paris, TN 1963: an officer shoots a man for sitting on a whites' only bench, but now I've gone and identified the source of the problem: racial tension, and in this, our post-race, post-black age, I shouldn't do that. I should leave the facts bland, filtered of all their nuances, their realities. Shall I charge back to post-Civil Rights, or shall I just stop now? Shall I remind you of the drunken football player who was shot in San Diego, CA three times by an officer; shall I remind you the football player was unarmed? Are you sitting in front of your screen, shouting, well, what about all of the police officers who have been killed? Well, I'd say: I'm talking of unarmed people. & I'm talking of untrained people, folks who aren't trained to deal with high stress situations, everyday people with every problem under the clouds. I'm outraged. I'm talking 41 bullets, and I'm

talking 50 bullets. I'm talking death, not heroes & villains, not martyrdom, but the deaths of unarmed people by armed, trained police officers. Yes, I'm outraged. But where does rage get me? Ask the visionary Audre Lorde, and her writings will tell me: nowhere fast, unless I turn that rage into vision that vision into action.

& that's what we're doing here. Adding our voices to the choruses of voices that speak against the injustices, that speak without threat, but with a deep humanity and deep respect for the body. That's the space the gracious and generous Greg Thomas has given a few poets to sound off about the outrages. To turn rage and vision and pain and hauntings and agony and fear and apprehensions and love (do these officers remember that these people are loved by someone(s)?), to turn that hostility that hatred to active voice. To, hopefully, provide a space where questions may be raised, where we can begin to work out how police officers often become super-human, often appear above the law, often are held unaccountable for fatal errors.

The poets represented here are love. Imagine what compassion and desire to change the everyday it takes to sit in front of a blank page, all the rage in the world heating up your belly, and to turn out poems of weeping, poems of celebration, poems of angst, hopeful, wandering, all-embracing poems. I honor these poets who honor Sean Bell, the most recent highly publicized victim of police shooting. I honor Bianca Spriggs who wrote for Nicole Paultre Bell because "...her [voice] was being swept under. Here is a woman with grief pressing in on her on all sides and the only thing we're hearing is how hard it is for her and the children. Sure, but a natural human reaction to injustice and lack of principles SHOULD be an expression of anger." And I honor Jacqui Johnson who wanted to "... strip the circumstances that surrounded the murder of Sean Bell to the most basic human elements. The poem as witness." I honor Alan King who "...thought about the abuse of power among police officers and how when somebody's reaction is fatal, folks want to commemorate the 'fallen officer' as a credit to their precinct. Most of the times when I see 'RIP' and the officer's name—usually in the news or on a specialized banner on a bus—I have to wonder what the officer did to lose his life." I honor Derrick Weston Brown whose poem comes from a "... place of despair, and jaded understanding that black life is still not valued. I've had my own experiences with law enforcement, luckily none were life-threatening, but I understood the gravity of any and every encounter with the police.

There were others that I knew, however, who weren't so lucky." I honor Samantha Thornhill who, similar to Derrick, felt helplessness: "How long will the black body continue to be devalued by bullets and exonerating decisions? The question that repeats over and over in my mind is what will it take? And any possible answer to that simply scares me." And I honor DéLana Dameron and David Mills (whose poems initially tempted me to seek space to express our rages/visions/loves) who had the will and power and courage and heart to share their works. I honor all who are, at this very moment, working to bring together more voices that speak out against these violations of the body, the spirit, the mind, the heart. I honor Greg Thomas who suggested I call this portfolio "The Sean Bells," in acknowledgement of all the unarmed people who have lost battles with armed officers. I honor Aquarius Press' *Reverie* for keeping the courage to do the startling work, the hard work, the unabashedly beautiful work.

*In love, Metta Sáma*

**This Camel's Back**

*After Sean Bell*

I.

Unconcerned with the needle  
in the haystack, and the pot  
at the ass end of rainbows.

No crusade for the magic  
stick, or godmother's wand.

Let us ponder the proverbial  
straw.

We have been journeying  
this desert for days.

Sandstorms to skin  
cousin water  
singing livid from hoses;

in the distance, cacti  
echo arrested men.

By day we are candles  
burning at both ends;  
at night we shiver like astronauts  
in our measly tents.

This Everest on legs, beast  
that schleps us all,  
requires more water than we  
have to give it, but somehow  
we make do.

Somehow it does too;  
hefts the weight of regret  
across rejoicing sand.

II.

If more boulevards named after dead men;  
if nooses resurrecting  
from the shallow graves of history;  
if black gold proving yet again  
its invisibility  
to the scales of justice;  
if the reality of being life's lover  
but never the world's friend;  
if a sunken city or evolution

towards bulletproof skin  
isn't straw enough—then

it fears me to think  
of what it will take  
to break  
this camel's back  
at last.

**The Losses**

*so many cops I feel like a thug, when  
I see the boys in blue I feel like a blood*

—Guilty Simpson

we meet at traffic stops,  
or at traffic lights—they pull up  
beside me, sweeping a bright  
beam through my car, laughing  
when I shield my eyes

I wasn't always so jumpy,  
didn't have paranoia  
crowding my head

in elementary school,  
I wore that badge  
proudly as a patrol

and would salute them  
every time they passed  
on our streets

that's before my boy Jerry,  
riding with some friends,  
was pulled over by off-duty cops  
who had them handcuffed, lying  
on their stomachs

and Marvin, my god  
brother, driving to his girl's  
spot when a speeding squad  
car struck from behind

they locked him up for  
disturbing the peace  
when all he asked was  
*didn't you see my car?*

and when he threatened  
to sue, *for what?*, they said,  
*there's no record*

*of you being arrested*

now my pulse shutters  
at anything flashing behind me—  
every Crown Vic, Impala or Malibu  
is possibly unmarked

I stop at the sight  
of one—searching a back  
window for strobe lights,  
the trunk for extra antennae

now a riot blazes in my blood,  
I count them dying in the line  
of duty, relieved for the losses

**After the fifty shots were erased**

*for Sean Bell and others*

The bike cart-wheeled behind him.  
The wheels, skyward, continued spinning  
when the police car cut toward  
the curb in front of me. His flight,  
so quick off the seat, hands rebuked  
handlebars and spirited up, palms forward,  
away from his chest, away from his pockets.  
I knew this prelude and prayed for his life.  
Blue lights flashed against the black pants,  
against the black hoodie, against the man,  
and I slowed down in my passing car,  
afraid for what I could witness  
too soon after the fifty shots were erased.

**Untitled**

naked tree branches  
spray of fifty bullets  
a groom returns home  
without breath,  
    without wife

another marvels  
eleven extra holes  
in his body  
revealing a light  
no man should ever know

## SKULL HIVE

*for Nicole Paultre Bell*

Beware the chronic hum of bedlam  
that swelters from so many open mouths.  
Beware this slush of terminal grieving.  
Beware the notched lens and the sudden  
arms escorting you forth from the beastbelly's  
maw. Remember, the dwelling place  
of treachery resides in this new court  
of Philistines. They have handed you  
a carcass for your hive. Now you must be  
about the business of making honey.  
Churn it until it is buxomsweet and globule  
full with the marrow and sinew of your  
slaughtered. Feed them the regurgitation  
of their own executions in fat, greedy,  
handfuls, straight from the skull  
of what they left for you to outlive. Trust.  
They will not choke it down. Ripe  
as a fermented oil slick, it will taste  
as it should and float alongside what  
remains of your resolve down their throats.  
Have none of this sweetmeat yourself  
so densely flavored with the intoxicants  
of mourning. It is enough that you should  
enter their camp and slay them in  
their stronghold with your own hands.

### **Forever's Bread**

Topless brothel hotbed of narcotics  
and prostitution. Club Kahlua, where  
the sadness of 3600 seconds sometimes  
equals one happy hour. This 'set' where  
some do upside down policing, walking on  
their heads, while thinking on their feet  
near the chicken and rice, the sporting life.

*O is where is thy sting? Does anyone know the nor where my yoke is light  
and my easy is burden? He who words my hear the now hour is and coming.*

As if he found another face, a man wears  
a Chicago White Sox hat backwards. He could  
use this cap while his first face sweet-talks  
a stripper, or orders something heartless and dark.

*And know have you not the happened?*

Eight men empty the evening.

And as if this were a game  
of pool, an invisible hand shoots  
the break. The men split into two  
groups rolling along the sidewalks  
smooth, grey, playing surface.

G-d, an illusory pool shark, calls  
the shots: black man street corner  
pocket. A lonely eight ball, this  
brother dressed in ebony leans against  
the dizzying rims of a sable Navigator.

Quarrel/some burden/some worry/some

On a narrow street where cold creeps  
into the wee hours' fingers, Sean  
and his boys pour into his Altima.  
As he guns into the pilot side of an  
unmarked Ford Freestar, his head  
lights butter the pavement. One hand  
on the passenger's headrest, he peers  
over his shoulder and notices a life growing  
thin behind him. The way vomit causes

a head to snap forward, his hoopty lurches into the Freestar again. As officers overcoat the undercovers, infinity lives between quiet and the flash of gunfire. Hence, contagious shooting spreads like a yawn. Hence, Sean's head falls forward as if someone has stapled two encyclopedias to his chin.

Assassinate /shun litigate/shun execute/shun devastate/Sean

Was it his ghost or a shoelace of smoke that inched from the Altima's radiator? Did a memory fidget in the back of his brain? When you die do you step into a vestibule between this world and the next? When you die does infinity feel the dent?

Central booking waiting.... fingerprints waiting: this time five cops were turning themselves...

*And another open was booked—by the written which were...*

“If there's no indictment: that boy dies twice.”

*If we lord we live to the if, and if we die we die to the to, and blessed are the die who dead in the now*

Officer Oliver will remind prosecutors that he logged  
over 600 arrests. He'll want to put the grand  
jury in his shoes, but remember he was thinking  
with his feet

*To keep Judas... who can against, against?*

Remember instead of groomsmen there's  
gravediggers; instead of bridal white there's  
widow's black; instead of a best man  
there's burial; instead

of a toast there's tragedy. Instead of champagne  
and chit-chat, there's beer and brandy.

*I was drink and you gave me no thirsty. I was food and you  
gave me no hungry. I was clothed and you nakeded me.*

Pity/ us fury/us cancer/us villain/us murder/ us scandal/ us ruin/us  
danger/us envy/ us: Continue/ us

*When the now hour—comes—remember me as you lord into your kingdom...  
On the first week of the day, women and certain other theys... then and went  
and bowed their faces to the afraid. They themed to say, seek do you why the,  
the?... not here he*

How do you scratch the surface of a city  
that never itches? When a man loses  
his life who finds it?

*I the am and the resurrection. If eats of this anyone, he will forever, forever's  
bread. For my indeed is food flesh. Let not your you be troubled because I go to  
place a prepare for you where you will wedding the when.*

I, Sean take thee

*Sometimes we don't know what; sometimes we don't know why.*

Nicole to be my wife

*On the night I was betrayed*

To have and to hold

*Do not pass me by*

In sickness and in health

*Into your hands we commend our brother*

For rich or for poorer

*The body and the blood*

For better or for worse

*The lord be with you and also with you*

To love and to cherish

*Take all of you drink this is the cup of my blood.*

'Til death does its part.

*He makes me to lie down in green pastures*

If there is anyone who disagrees with this

*Though I walk through the alley of the shadow of breath*

Speak now

*While on others thou art calling*

Or forever holster your piece

*Through him with him in him.*

At this scene I be dead

*You live and reign forever and ever*

I now pronounce you

murdered and wronged

*Dashes to dashes us to us.*

*I am Offal and Omega and the the...*

Fool/ proof fire/ proof bullet/ proof:

Trigger/happy/ Niggers? Sad

**Bell Canto**

*For Sean Bell and family*

Your mind wants to believe  
it was a misunderstanding

the officers were scared rookies  
it was dark

but truth suffers no allowances

Spread out before you are snatches of  
eye-witness accounts in print. The grainy footage  
of gun butts tempering jaws; the swollen voice of  
the bride.

This is a different type of jilting; no story  
of a runaway bride found with thawing feet,  
and no sign of her imagined hispanic abductor.

No. You don't want to believe this.  
Your mind is tired of "Again"

This happens.  
Same city.  
Same sons.  
Same make and model.  
Same implied threat empty hands carry.  
Same text book response.  
Same salvo.  
Same torrential rain roar of shell casings  
muting a Bell.

Clip emptied.

Reload

Your mind is a busted reel  
of images; that officer from grade school  
who never wore his gun around the students.

Reload

The stories you ghosted  
from the barber's chair;  
regulation choke holds  
boot heels on testicles  
a nightstick renovating a ribcage

Reload

The white boy in 10th grade  
who caught a cafeteria tray to the head  
for Rodney King in '92

The forearm planted in  
your chest from the  
officer who didn't  
care to hear your explanation  
for arriving late to a sold out  
ball game even though you  
bought tickets in advance.

His words  
"No admittance"  
mean more now than then

you use this as your caption  
to narrate the picture  
of the uniformed triggermen in the photo  
silent unblinking  
hands hidden  
behind their backs

at ease  
acquitted

your mind wants for a  
parable, a moral  
and there isn't one

## **Contributors** (from the 2011 edition)

**Derrick Weston Brown** holds an MFA in Creative Writing from American University. He is the founding Poet-in-Residence of Busboys and Poets. He also teaches creative writing to high school and middle school students in D.C. He is a native of Charlotte, North Carolina and resides in Mount Rainier, Maryland. His work has been published in such journals as *Warpland*, *Mythium*, *The Drunken Boat*, *Tidal Basin Review* and *Little Patuxent Review*. His first full length collection of poetry, *Wisdom Teeth*, was released this year by Busboys and Poets Press/PM Press.

**DéLana R.A. Dameron** won the 2008 South Carolina Poetry Book Prize, selected by Elizabeth Alexander, for her book *How God Ends Us*. She has received fellowships from New York University, the Cave Canem Foundation, Soul Mountain and the Constance Saltonstall Foundation for the Arts.

**Jacqueline Johnson** is a multi-disciplinary artist creating in both writing and fiber arts. She is the author of *A Gathering of Mother Tongues*, published by White Pine Press and is the winner of the Third Annual White Pine Press Poetry Award. She is also the author of *Stokely Carmichael: The Story of Black Power* by Simon & Shuster Books. Johnson has received awards from the New York Foundation of the Arts, the MidAtlantic Writers Association's Creative Writing Award in poetry and the McDowell Colony for the Arts. She is a Cave Canem fellow.

**Alan King** is a poet and journalist living in the D.C. metropolitan area. He writes about art and domestic issues on his blog at <http://alanwking.wordpress.com>. In addition to teaching creative writing throughout the D.C./Baltimore region, he is a part-time poetry instructor at the Duke Ellington School of the Arts and the senior program director at the D.C. Creative Writing Workshop at Charles Hart Middle School in D.C.'s Congress Heights neighborhood. He is also a Cave Canem fellow and VONA Alum. Alan is currently a Stonecoast MFA candidate and has been nominated for both a "Best of the Net" selection and a Pushcart Prize. His book, *Drift*, will be published through Willow Books in January.

**David Mills** has a Master's in Creative Writing from New York University and is a cum laude grad of Yale University. He is a 2010 Queens Poet Laureate finalist. He has won NYFA, Breadloaf, Henry James, Brio, PALF (to travel to a writer's conference in Ghana, West Africa) and Soros fellowships. His poetry has appeared in *Ploughshares*, *Fence*, *Jubilat*, *Callaloo*, *Rattapallax*, *Aloud*, *Dark Symphony*, *Reverie*, *Tidal Basin Review*, *Margie*, *Black Renaissance Noir*, *Obsidian III*, *Brooklyn Railand* and *Hanging Loose Press*, to name a few. David Mills' book, *Dream Detective*, was a small press bestseller. He has recorded his poetry on RCA recording artist Steve Coleman's album *Black Science*.

**Metta Sáma** is the author of *South of Here* (New Issues Press, 2005). Her poems and book reviews have been published or forthcoming in *Blackbird*, *Crab Orchard*

*Review, Drunken Boat, Diner, Esque, hercircle, Paterson Literary Review, Verse, Vinyl* and *Zone 3*, among others. In addition to her creative work, she has published scholarship on poetic form and African Diasporic Women's Literature. Metta is an amateur photographer ("becoming quite an expert at iPhone photographs!") and an amateur painter. She is the fiction editor of *Ragazine* and she teaches African American Literature, African American Narratives & Black Women Writers at Lehman College and Hunter College.

Affrilachian Poet and Cave Canem fellow **Bianca Spriggs** is a multidisciplinary artist who lives and works in Lexington, Kentucky. Currently a doctoral student at the University of Kentucky, she holds degrees from Transylvania University and the University of Wisconsin. Named as one of the Top 30 Performance Poets by TheRoot.com, Bianca is a recipient of both an Artist Enrichment Grant and an Arts Meets Activism Grant from the Kentucky Foundation for Women. In partnership with the Kentucky Domestic Violence Association, she is the creator of The Swallowtail Project, a creative writing workshop dedicated to the women inmates at the Federal Prison Camp and the creator and Artistic Director of the Gypsy Poetry Slam featured annually at the Kentucky Women Writers Conference.

**Truth Thomas** is a singer and poet, born in Knoxville, Tennessee and was raised in Washington, D.C. He is the author of three collections of poetry: *Bottle of Life*, *A Day of Presence* and *Party of Black*. His new book, *Speak Water*, is forthcoming from Flipped Eye Publications in 2012.

Trinidadian born **Samantha Thornhill** has traveled as far as South Africa and Hungary to present her work to a variety of audiences. Aside from teaching poetry to actors in training at the Juilliard School, she also serves as writer-in-residence at a high school in the South Bronx, grooming the next generation of poets. Her poems have appeared in numerous literary journals and her ode to the folk singer Odetta was published by Scholastic last year in the form of a picture book for children and adults. She lives in Brooklyn.