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MUSIC

Warsan Shire, the Woman Who Gave Poetry to Beyoncé's 'Lemonade'

By AMANDA HESS APRIL 27, 2016

When the credits roll on Beyoncé's new visual album, "Lemonade," which had its premiere on Saturday on HBO, one of the first names to flash on screen doesn't belong to a director, producer or songwriter. It belongs to a poet: Warsan Shire, a rising 27-year-old writer who was born in Kenya to Somali parents and raised in London.

Ms. Shire's verse forms the backbone of Beyoncé's album and its exploration of family, infidelity and the black female body.

"I don't know when love became elusive. What I know is: no one I know has it," Beyoncé says in a voice-over in the film, lines derived from Ms. Shire's previously published poem "the unbearable weight of staying — (the end of the relationship)."

She continues: "My father's arms around my mother's neck, fruit too ripe to eat. I think of lovers as trees ... growing to and from one another. Searching for the same light."

"Lemonade," which credits Ms. Shire with "film adaptation and poetry," may catapult her to a new level of pop-culture fame, but she is already known to many as a compelling voice on black womanhood and the African diaspora — one particularly resonant in the digital age. And her international following, captivated by her quiet charisma and compulsively shareable lines, may be as devoted as the Beyhive.

Ms. Shire has published chapbooks of poetry — including "Teaching My Mother How to Give Birth" in 2011 and "Her Blue Body" in 2015 — but much of her reputation was built online by publishing on Tumblr and using Twitter like an open notebook. In 2014, she was appointed the first Young Poet Laureate of London. Her first full poetry collection, "Extreme Girlhood," is expected in the next year or so.

In the days after her work was proclaimed by one of the world's most influential black female artists, Ms. Shire laid low. She did not promote "Lemonade" or even tease its existence on social media. On Tuesday night, she finally published a tweet with a link to "Lemonade" and the note "yosra i hope you're proud of us." Yosra El-Essawy, a friend of Ms. Shire's and Beyoncé's official tour photographer, had served as an early link between the worlds of the young British poet and Queen Bey. She died of cancer in 2014.

(Through her agent, Ms. Shire declined to be interviewed for this article.)

For Ms. Shire's friends, colleagues and fans, "Lemonade" was a pleasant surprise. London poets "have been bowled over by Warsan's collaboration with such a huge star, which, of course, was a big secret, so we had no idea this was happening," said Bernardine Evaristo, a British writer and professor of creative writing at Brunel University London.

Nii Parkes, a founder of flipped eye, Ms. Shire's publisher, helped handle permissions for Ms. Shire's poetry to be featured in "Lemonade," and kept the collaboration secret for several months — even from Jacob Sam-La Rose, Ms. Shire's primary editor.

"It was a shock to me," Mr. Sam-La Rose said. "Warsan can be sneaky. I did not know what was going to happen, or have any idea how it happened."

Even people with toes in both worlds were surprised. Dream Hampton, a filmmaker and journalist, collaborated with Jay Z on his memoir "Decoded" and profiled Beyoncé in the magazine Giant. She had also discovered Ms. Shire on Myspace in 2009 and befriended her over Twitter and later, in London, over tea. She said that when Ms. Shire invited her to a private "Lemonade" screening in Los

Angeles, she knew something was up, but "I was totally surprised about the scope," she said. "I assumed there'd be 'a' poem." Instead there was an opus.

Ms. Shire stepped into the poetry world when she was a teenager. More than a decade ago, Mr. Sam-La Rose, the poetry editor of flipped eye, put on a student poetry workshop at a northwest London community center, and Ms. Shire was the first to show up.

"Her work was stunning," Mr. Sam-La Rose said. A few years later, the two began working together while Ms. Shire was studying creative writing at London Metropolitan University.

Ms. Shire graduated in 2010 and released her first chapbook with flipped eye the next year.

"The editing process was amazing and, at times, infuriating," Mr. Sam-La Rose said. Ms. Shire would hand in a manuscript, and by the time Mr. Sam-La Rose could finish his notes, she would turn in another batch of poems for review.

In elite London poetry circles, the initial reception was underwhelming, Mr. Parkes said. But online, readers were enthralled. They pulled out lines and posted them on their own blogs. One of her most-quoted prose poems is "Difficult Names": "Give your daughters difficult names. Give your daughters names that command the full use of tongue. My name makes you want to tell me the truth. My name doesn't allow me to trust anyone that cannot pronounce it right."

Early on, Ms. Shire experimented with form. In 2012, she recorded the spoken-word album "warsan versus melancholy (the seven stages of being lonely" and posted it on Bandcamp. Fan art circulated, too. Christine Mehr, a San Francisco digital content creator, shot an impressionistic short film featuring Ms. Shire reading her poem "for women who are difficult to love."

To many readers, Ms. Shire's clear voice in the online cacophony felt transformative.

"There was a consumer pull," Mr. Parkes said. "People were saying her name all over the place. That's when other publishers started to get interested in her work,

when the bookstores started calling."

Her physical presence, too, drew audiences in. "She has a quiet voice," Mr. Parkes said. "At a lot of readings, if that's the case, people will start to chatter. But because she's so centered, they'll grow quiet."

Last fall, when Ms. Shire headed to Johannesburg to give a reading with a feminist collective, she found the seats and aisles filled with women (and a few men), many standing at the back and crouching at the lip of the stage to hear her speak.

"She reads like how Nina Simone sounds," said Milisuthando Bongela, a South African culture writer who helped arrange the gathering. "Everyone in the audience started reciting with her as she read, as if we were fans at a music concert singing along to our favorite songs." She added: "It was church."

In addition to being named Young Poet Laureate, Ms. Shire won the Bunel University African Poetry Prize in 2013. A judge, the poet Kwame Dawes, said of the decision, "This was actually easy for me." In 2014, she lived in Australia for a six-week stint as Queensland's Poet in Residence. Her work has been featured in the anthologies "The Salt Book of Younger Poets" and "Long Journeys: African Migrants on the Road."

Her new fame poses challenges. "My frustration and my fear is that people will reduce her to a pop phenomenon," Mr. Parkes said. "As the work is cut and pasted and passed around, you can lose the context, the line endings, the tensions. There's a great deal of craft in her work, and I'm keen for people to remember that."

In "Lemonade," Ms. Shire's work was tailored for Beyoncé. The adaptation switches up pronouns ("you" becomes "I"), cuts lines, expands metaphors and swaps an "Allah" for an "oh my God." But within hours of the release of "Lemonade," Amazon.com had sold out of paperback copies of "Teaching My Mother How to Give Birth" and "The Salt Book of Younger Poets."

Mr. Parkes had expected that demand, but because he could not disclose the project ahead of time, was unable to advise booksellers to fortify their stock. Now,

Mr. Parkes said, flipped eye is currently in talks with American publishers to print "Extreme Girlhood" in the United States.

For now, Ms. Shire's focus is on that book. "She's not interested in being the writer of the moment," said Nick Makoha, a British poet who has worked with Ms. Shire. "This is what she'll be doing into her 90s."

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The Atlantic

Leaves of Grass, by Walt Whitman

A review

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The appearance of Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* in a new edition has revived a discussion always imminent when the name of this writer is brought forward, and always more or less acrimonious. Some persons even imagine it obligatory upon them to deny him all merit of poetic endowment, so violent is their revolt against the offensiveness which Mr. Whitman has chosen to make a central and integral point of his literary method. Such critics stultify themselves by the coarseness of view (and sometimes of expression) with which they meet the grossness they condemn. If they can see nothing in this book except indecency and bombastic truisms, the inference must be that their sensibilities are not delicate enough to recognize the fresh, strong, healthy presentation of common things in a way that revivifies them, the generous aspiration, the fine sympathy with man and nature, the buoyant belief in immortality, which are no less characteristic of the author than his mistaken boldness in displaying the carnal side of existence, and his particularity in describing disease or loathsome decay. It would be a waste of time to discuss the question whether or not Mr. Whitman is a poet: abundant authority, both creative and critical, has recorded itself on the affirmative side. Nor is it worth while to debate upon the form he has adopted, which is not the startling novelty which many, including the poet himself, have assumed it to be.

The only profitable point of view from which *Leaves of Grass* can be regarded is one that, while giving distinctness to the serious error of unclean exposure and to the frequent feebleness of form and style which reduce large portions of the work to tedious and helpless prose, leaves our vision clear for the occasional glimpses of beauty that the book discloses. We must also take into account the imagination often informing some one of these rhapsodies as a whole, even when its parts are found to be weak, repetitious, and blemished by inanity or affectation. The absurdities, the crudities, in which Whitman indulges are almost unlimited and all but omnipresent. For illustration, he gives utterance to phrases like this: "I effuse my flesh in eddies and drift it in lacy jags." Following a vague impulse, without depth of reflection, to find new modes of expression, he cries: "Eclaircise the myths of Asia!" "I expose!" is another of these exceedingly pointless inventions; and we cannot see that the ends of freedom in art, or grandeur of any kind, are served by adopting as the symbol for a writer the term "literat." To call him an "inkrat" would be much more forcible and original. On the other hand, these pages bring to light a mass of vivid and well-chosen though sometimes uncouth epithets. The swimmer is graphically described as swimming "through the transparent green-shine." The "blab of the pave" conveys its meaning accurately and with novelty. What delicate and refreshing aptness there is, too, in this sentence: "The carpenter dresses his plank, the tongue of his foreplane whistles its wild ascending lisp!" Nothing could be better. In the long pieces where much is trite and tame—malformed prose essays they are, rather than poems—there still exists a relation, an order which often brings some very simple and common thought into a light of unexpected significance. But it is sheer fatuousness in the poet, and would be in us, to assume that these two lines, headed To You, constitute a poem, or anything but worthless print:

"Stranger, if you passing meet me and desire to speak to
me, why should you not speak to
me?
And why should I not speak to you?"

Then, to learn the better side, read Pioneers, O Pioneers, with its steady, splendid, masculine swing, as of a people marching, and its inspiriting sense of comradeship and New World progress; the terse and imaginative lines to the Man-of-War-Bird; or the wonderful sea-shore elegy that begins, "Out of the cradle endlessly rocking." These are full of strength, pure emotion. The same may be said of that night-poem on the death of Lincoln, which contains an impressive chant to Death, the "dark mother always gliding near with soft feet." What could be fresher, fuller of our native coloring, than the picture of spring in this poem?

"With the Fourth-month eve at sundown, and the
gray smoke lucid and bright,
With floods of the yellow gold of the gorgeous,
indolent, sinking sun, burning, expanding
the air,
With the fresh, sweet herbage under foot, and the
pale green leaves of the trees prolific,
In the distance the flowing glaze, the breast of the
river, with a wind-dapple here and there."

The lines "To a Locomotive in Winter," wherein the author hails it as the

"Type of the modern—emblem of motion and
power—pulse of the continent,"

offer the finest embodiment of the grandeur of applied mechanics which American poetry has yet produced. And, throughout, the sentiment of democracy, of manliness, of hope for humanity, is something to be valued in Whitman's work. He sings, "Muscle and pluck forever!" "We have had," he declares, "ducking and deprecating about enough." He aims to increase virility in manners, thought, and writing; and from this effort, whatever the mistakes or limitations of its method, American life and literature are not likely to suffer harm.

But when we consider Whitman's laudation of the flesh, the case is different. It is fitting to recall here the cardinal points of his creed in this regard. He himself says,

"Nor will my poems do good only, they will do just as much harm, perhaps more." He claims to be the poet of the body and the soul, and says that the soul is not more than the body,—in this showing an identity of thought with Rossetti; yet he looks forward (in The Mystic Trumpeter) to "a reborn race . . . women and men in wisdom, innocence and health—all joy." In his final manifesto occur these words: "I announce the great individual, fluid as Nature, chaste, affectionate, compassionate, fully armed . . . a life that shall be copious, vehement, spiritual, bold." All this shows clearly enough that his ultimate aim is good, and that he does not set out to revel in indecency. But the plan he pursues results just as badly as if this had been his purpose; for he makes public and permanent all that which nature has guarded, in both the savage and the civilized, with mystery, holiness, and the delicate, inexorable laws of modesty. Oddly enough this elaborately natural poet breaks one of the deepest and finest of natural laws; and instead of making the body sacred, he despoils it of the sacredness which mankind now generally accords to it. He degrades body and soul by a brutish wallowing in animal matter as animal matter, deprived of its spiritual attributes.

Mr. Whitman prides himself on his healthiness. What is health? Nothing else than the buoyant, normal exercise of physical faculties, in easy unconsciousness of their mode of acting. The moment there is friction, the moment we become conscious of these functions—in heart, stomach, or brain, for example—which ought to be carried on without sensation, health is broken, and sickness supervenes. In like manner, when Mr. Whitman begins to finger over and brood upon the secret processes of certain functions which should work unobserved, he becomes unhealthy. Corrupt he may not be, but he is undeniably morbid. It is his ambition to be "inclusive," to express extremes of good and evil; to fly from one pole to another, in everything. In the sphere of the body he accomplishes this manoeuvre perfectly; for his presentation of man's physical being is as often diseased as the reverse. He does not seem to be aware of his "inclusiveness" in this direction. If made so, he might reply with these peremptory words from his Song of Myself:—

"Do I contradict myself?
Very well, then, I contradict myself,

(I am large, I contain multitudes)."

But multitudinousness cannot make the spectacle of his morbidness any more acceptable. It cannot palliate the gross impropriety of which he is guilty, in publishing what is unfit for repetition; an impropriety doubled by the retention of this disgusting stuff in a new edition issued after many years, during which the author has had ample opportunity to free himself from his youthful crudities. Every one imbued with the "primal sanities" must be revolted by this offense, and protest against it. Fortunately, however, the chief damage done will be to the author himself, who thus dishonors his own physical nature; for imperfect though the race is, it still remains so much purer than the stained and distorted reflection of its animalism in *Leaves of Grass*, that the book cannot attain to any very wide influence.

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SENSE OF SELF

New poems by Terrance Hayes and Deborah Landau.

By Dan Chiasson

Hayes is one of only a few contemporary poets whose invented forms have caught on.

A self-portrait by the American poet Terrance Hayes graces the cover of "How to Be Drawn" (Penguin), Hayes's fifth book of poems. If you want to be drawn, one straightforward plan would be to draw yourself, as Hayes has done; change the word to "represented," and the political meanings of his title become clear. Hayes is black. In American poetry, if a black person wants to exist at all, he can either submit to representation by white artists or choose to portray himself. But words are trickier than charcoal and pencil: Hayes can't make a poem that "looks" like Terrance Hayes, by the standards of visual art, since "Terrance Hayes," by the standards of poetry, doesn't exist until his words invent him. Authors, after all, aren't causes; they're effects produced by their own language.

Hayes is forty-three and lives in Pittsburgh, where he is a professor of English at the University of Pittsburgh*. In 2010, his volume "Lighthead" won a National Book Award, and last year he received a MacArthur "genius" grant. He played basketball for Coker College, in South Carolina, where he was an Academic All-American, but he has the bounding imagination of someone fortified and defended, for years, by shyness. If you judge a poem by how big a chunk of reality it smuggles into language before returning it, transformed, you will have a hard time beating this catalogue from "Wigphrastic":

Nonslip polyurethane patches, superfine lace,

Isis wigs, Cleopatra wigs, Big Booty Judy wigs

under the soft radar-streaked music of Klymaxx

singing, "The men all pause when I walked into the room."

An ekphrastic poem is one that describes a work of art; "Wigphrastic" describes Ellen Gallagher's "DeLuxe," a portfolio of sixty works on paper that depict, among other things, vintage ads for hair straighteners and skin whiteners. You can see the piece, and explore all of Hayes's references, on his Web site. If the Internet had been around when T. S. Eliot wrote "The Waste Land," the idea of literary difficulty might have been moot.

Hayes is a poet of swallowed garrulity, imagined riposte, mock correction, and interior litigation. We all have, in our heads, a marionette theatre where we stage what we might have done and should have said. There we are always the conquering puppet. Hayes's poems are like a Pixar version of the mental marionette show, a dazzling space crammed with comic jabs. "Black Confederate Ghost Story" recalls a hick "handyman's / insistence that there were brigades of black / Confederates." Hayes replaces his actual, too polite response with a B-movie horror sequence:

Attention, African-American apparitions hung,

burned, or drowned before anyone alive was born:

please make a mortifying midnight appearance

before the handyman standing on my porch

this morning with a beard as wild as Walt Whitman's.

Except he is the anti-Whitman, this white man

with Confederate pins littering his denim cap and jacket.

(And by *mortify*, dear ghosts, I mean scare the snot out of him.)

The tone is taken partly from those "Attention, shoppers" announcements heard in supermarkets; instead of flocking to the produce aisle, these "ghosts," literally "mortified" by having been murdered, are summoned to metaphorically "mortify" this

cartoonish dolt. I never noticed before that Whitman's name is very nearly "white man": the poem, like all of Hayes's poems, operates by swift cuts and screens until it finds an opening. Hayes imagines a "tolerant" Whitman "waltzing across the battlefield like a song / covering a cry of distress"; Hayes himself wants to be "a storm / covering a Confederate parade."

Racial trauma is everywhere in Hayes's work, instantiated by his personal ghosts—an absent father, a mother who worked as a prison guard, an array of family troubles and damage. But he is brilliantly boxed in by his style, which elates in the language it finds to express tragedy. Hayes has called himself "a gray-area, between-area person"; his poems refuse black-and-white emotions. I have no idea how he works, but the poems give the impression of spontaneity; even if he labors over them, the result is a wild ride without an off switch, an unbroken verbal arc propelled by his accelerating actions of mind. The poem "How to Be Drawn to Trouble" starts out as a tribute to James Brown, "stoned on horns and money," who was briefly an inmate in the prison where Hayes's mother worked. By its close, Brown's song "Please, Please, Please" has gone from soundtrack to sing-along, as Hayes recalls a searing night from his past. His mother has "gone out Saturday night, / and come home an hour or so before church":

She punched clean through the porch window

When we wouldn't let her in. I can still hear all the love buried

Under all the noise she made. But sometimes I hear it wrong.

It's not James Brown making trouble, it's trouble he's drawn to:

Baby, you done me wrong. Took my love, and now you're gone.

Those lyrics are at once sung by Brown, cried by Hayes's father, and written by Hayes. So much of life is an uncanny acting out of emotions that we first encounter in art, a notion that Hayes's verse, in which the poet quotes his father's quotation of James Brown, explores with extraordinary power.

Hayes's titles often set up arbitrary collisions, self-imposed restraints, hodgepodge high-wire ideas: "Portrait of Etheridge Knight in the Style of a Crime Report," "Instructions for a Séance with Vladimirs," "Some Maps to Indicate Pittsburgh." All of

these poems, foregrounding their own eccentricity, choose rather rigid homemade forms and then stick to them. If the past is prologue, we may now see a rash of poems in the style of a crime report: Hayes is one of a small number of contemporary poets who have invented forms that actually caught on. My favorite is a form that predominates in "Lighthead," an adaptation of the Japanese slide-show format used for business presentations, called *pecha kucha:* twenty slides shown for twenty seconds each. In Hayes's hands, short poems take the place of slides (each can be read in about twenty seconds); the result is a total overhaul of linear narrative, a story with twenty beginnings and twenty endings.

In poetry, form and feeling relate in countless unpredictable ways. The risk with Hayes's work, which fits strong emotions into virtuoso forms, is that the emotions may also come to seem virtuosic. The poems handle form so deftly that they sometimes seem backfilled with feeling, as though Hayes is afraid of his own aplomb. But the greatest poets can use their style as a way to see past it. Hayes is good enough that we want from him even more, which may mean, in his case, even less: fewer turns of mind, fewer formal tricks and contrivances. I realize that I am in the unenviable position of telling him that he ought to have less fun on the page. Hardly anyone who reads him will agree with me.

Deborah Landau's new book, her third, is "The Uses of the Body" (Copper Canyon). Many of her previous poems dealt with the accommodations made, in daily life, for fantasy, especially for sexual fantasy. They had a wonderful close-up strut and naughtiness, but you couldn't really tell what was in the writer's heart; the poems starred their speakers, whose performances were no less showy for being so personal.

Landau, who directs the Creative Writing Program at N.Y.U., has found an insidiously catchy music in "The Uses of the Body." It's like weaponized *vers de société.* Here is a section from "The Wedding Party":

Oh, skin! What a cloth to live in.

We are not at the end of things.

He's tuxedoed and I'm in a cocktail dress.

How gussied up we get.

Drink this, roll that.

Another sender different gender.

We're going to hit a winner.

We're going to swallow vodka

and slap down money

and stand around frocked and gossiping

and bleed a little in the bathroom

from earlier today when we were a little minx.

(He really is *of the masses*, mama said.)

The phrases—"gussied up," "slap down money," "hit a winner"—are outtakes from the fifties flicks that many weddings still absurdly resemble. The brutality sneaks in sideways, especially in the shrewd deployment of that creepy "we" into which the "I" seems to have been forcefully conscripted. This was supposed to be a wedding night—what are we doing downing vodkas in a casino?

There are several bodies in "The Uses of the Body": a woman's, torn between sexual "urge" and the "mandate" that keeps it in check, resisting the "somber hungry forcefield" of men's gazes; the body of a sick friend, "frayed" and "decayed" before he dies and is "removed // from it promptly and with force"; the body of a fetus, "pale and puny," who "welled inside me // without visa without a pretty box / dollface-down" or "bald and silverfisted" on an ultrasound. Poetry, too, is a body, built to last—"butchered," as Allen Ginsberg wrote, out of poets' "own bodies" and "good to eat a thousand years." It makes a deathless sustenance out of waste and loss. The uses of its body are never clearer than when it lists the uses of ours:

The uses of the body are heavy and light.

Bellinis, cradles, carousels.

Biopsies, sobriety, sensible shoes.

I am cozy, I am full of want until chest pain,

until a heavy cramp. The pain of form.

See how caught up we are

in our habitual flying patterns

until we have to look the unfair doctor in the eye.

The genitals are irrelevant then.

Dr. Rutkowski, what was it you said?

"The pain of form" is an odd outburst here, as though the poem has borrowed its conflicted relationship with its body from the poet's ambivalence toward her own. Landau gives us the sublime feeling that formal accomplishment comes with a steep cost. Art uses us; it may even use us up. ♦

*An earlier version of this article misstated where Terrance Hayes is currently teaching.

Dan Chiasson has been contributing poems to the magazine since 2000 and reviews since 2007. He teaches at Wellesley College. His poetry collections include "Where's the Moon, There's the Moon" and, most recently, "Bicentennial."

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