

Partridge Boswell

Nightswimming

...this inability to renew themselves at the fountain of their own lives

– James Baldwin

– *for Ralph Bunche*★

In my topia, all the beaches will be open
 only at night. The moonshine will make us
whole and holy in each other's eyes. The dark

water shall baptize the dark skies, and we'll rejoice
 drenched in our blackness. We'll imbibe our darkness:
a long cool drink we needed to slake our dying thirst

for each other, for ourselves, immersed in night rain –
 not the virga of love that falls and never quite touches
our earthen skin, but a long steady gullywasher of open

clouds raising their falling voices in the joyful chorus
 of our communion, drowning drop by drop a lone
world aching to glisten new. Breathing as we swim

in our element, we'll remember our fish-selves
 enveloped in an oceanic realm terrestrials clamber
over each other to be closer to, their washed-up awe

always gawking at the horizon. In my topia, our future
 past is now. Round midnight, rain and thunder stop
and we linger on hushed sand, basking in our blackness,

stretched in serene soulness blessed as a piano's soft
 hammers drifting over nightwater. At the end of race
we begin to bake bread that tastes of life again, a recipe

too old to trace our origin. Police do not come with
 their kleiglit dogs and hoses – only fireflies in dune
grasses. No one says: You can't be here or tries to prove

the color of water. We talk and dine, sing and drum,
dancing in a fireglow carried by torch from Olduvai,
amniotic sea rising in us, waves breaking the loaves

of our bodies open. And we float on that first note
held past human explanation, an umbra blooming
the deepest indigo of our devotion – fermata of all

we say and do and so become – calling our luminous
skin past curling lips and teeth of foam into the calm
unconditional tide that carries us safely home.

**...when I think of such outrageous atrocities as this latest swimming pool incident, which has been perpetrated on Los Angeles negroes, my blood boils. And when I see my people so foolhardy as to patronize such a place, and thus give it sanction, my disgust is trebled. Any Los Angeles negro who would go bathing in that dirty hole with that sign "For Colored Only" gawking down at him in insolent mockery of his race, is either a fool or traitor to his kind."*
– Ralph Bunche in a 1926 address to older African Americans while a student at UCLA. Named for Bunche – the first African American to be awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1950 – the first black beach in south Florida was dedicated in 1949, simultaneously validating the integrity of the local black community while perpetuating racial segregation.