# Cornelius Eady
## Lyric & Dramatic Imagination
*By Reamy Jansen*

Cornelius Eady was one of five poetry finalists for this year's National Book Award for his seventh book of poems, *Brutal Imagination*. The volume is composed of two poetic cycles, "Brutal Imagination" and "The Running Man Poems." Eady's poetry, from *Kartunes* through *The Autobiography of a Jukebox*, has been filled with lyrics about African-American life and culture. Nevertheless, his two present sequences are Eady's most sustained and intense views to date on race and racism in America. "Brutal Imagination" refers to the negative glare of Susan Smith's October 1994 accusation that her car, along with her two young children, had been stolen by a black man, who had forced her from the car and then disappeared with her offspring and vehicle in Union County, South Carolina. This invented figure is Eady's narrator and guide (there's often a Virgilian quality to Eady's work) through an unsavory and all-too-familiar American drama, and his persona's haunted voice informs us, "Since her fear is my blood/And her need part mythical,/Everything she says about me is true." An accommodating shibboleth, Susan's invention explains to us from the driver's seat, "We roll sleepless through the dark streets, but inside/The cab is lit with brutal imagination." Eady's second series of poems in *Brutal Imagination* is derived from his libretto for *Running Man*, a jazz opera with a score by Diedre Murray (a composer and jazz performer who has played cello with Henry Threadgill's Sextett). *Running Man* is based on the real-life story of a young black man who makes steady progress from precocity and promise to predation and death. The fate of Eady's "Tommy" can be construed as one much larger than that of a single individual, for as Miss Look, the persona of the first poem, tells us, when Tommy left his home as a bright autodidact, "The birds and trees lost/Their Latin names,/Our world shrank back/To just a world."

### Books by Cornelius Eady

**The Autobiography of a Jukebox**
(*Carnegie Mellon University, 1997*)

**Brutal Imagination**
(*Putnam/A Marion Wood Book, 2001*)

**The Gathering of My Name**
(*Carnegie Mellon University, 1991*)

**Kartunes** (*Warthog Press, 1986*)

**You Don't Miss Your Water** (*Henry Holt, 1995*)

In my talk with Eady, we touched on matters central to his work: the poet's role in society; his personal sense of himself as a poet; the making of *Brutal Imagination*; and the wide range of his collaborative work in music and theater, especially with Diedre Murray. His inclination to work with other artists led to his founding, in conjunction with the poet Toi Derricotte, the nonprofit writers' organization Cave Canem, which is devoted to developing African-American poetic voices. (The phrase *Cave Canem* means "Beware of Dog," and can be found over the entrance of "The House of The Tragic Poet" in Pompeii, Italy.) Each year CC sponsors a summer retreat, whose faculty includes the two founders and such distinguished poets as Lucille Clifton and Michael S. Harper. The impressive results of the workshop's participants can be found in *Cave Canem V* (for a copy and more information, e-mail cavecanempoets@aol.com). Eady's plans include a dramatic version of *Brutal Imagination* at the Vineyard Theater, starring Joe Morton as the imaginary black man and Sally Murphy as Susan Smith, and a "new and selected" volume of his poetry. Cornelius Eady is a visiting professor in Creative Writing at The City College of New York. Previously, he served as director of The Poetry Center and associate professor of English at State University of New York at Stony Brook.

**The Bloomsbury Review:** *I want to start by asking you about your sense of a poet's vocation, a subject you introduce in a couple of books, especially in your collection* The Autobiography of a Jukebox. *In "A Small Moment" there's this great scene where you go into the bakery, and there's the smell of cheese and toast, and you say,* "What's that smell? *I am being/A poet, I am asking/What everyone else in the shop/Wanted to ask, but somehow couldn't ... Some days, I feel my duty;/Some days, I love my work." Is that what the poet does: ask in the shop what everybody else ... ?*

**Cornelius Eady:** At that moment, that seems to be the job ... the idea of saying something that needs to be said or would like to be said but is held back. That sometimes is the poet's job.

**TBR:** *So, more than grilled cheese?*

**CE:** The idea of saying things that we all observe, that we all notice, and don't really examine. I think poetry basically has that function in society. And I find occasions for that. One big influence on my poetry is William Carlos Williams' idea of exploring what's beneath the surface of the everyday. For example, "Between Walls," one of my favorite poems, seems to be about rubbish, trash, yet he's also looking out the window at something that he's not particularly paid much attention to. And he's able to make you focus, to look at life more immediately. All good art does that ... reorders the way we look.

**I've been trying for most of my career to have balance, to have a way of getting through life and not let what I know is out there overwhelm me. And I think art, to some degree, is a response to that.**

**TBR:** *A lot of times I also see you as the happy poet.*

**CE:** Well, I have a good disposition, yeah [laughs].

**TBR:** *Yes, and you say, "I love my work," but you also admit, "I feel my duty." Is there sometimes a conflict? Does duty trump love at times?*

**CE:** Being a writer can be difficult because you're always being bombarded by stories, or you'll be overhearing something ... a snip of

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conversation or an image will flit by, and suddenly you have that urge to talk in the voice of the writer ... and it's a drag [laughs]. You'd rather be doing something else, or living your life, yet your real work is intruding.

**TBR:** *I remember Philip Levine saying that he felt during the sixties that he had to write about the Vietnam War. He did, and he said all those poems are awful, unfortunately.*

**CE:** Sure, but, you know, he's being hard on himself. In the bubble of that moment, he was doing what needed to be done. Unfortunately that was that moment, that era, when poetry needed to come up and say something. Silence would have been the awful thing.

**TBR:** *Yes, in that sense, you're right. Staying with vocation, in "Gratitude," in* The Gathering of My Name*, you say, "I'm a black,/American poet,/and my greatest weakness/is an inability/to sustain rage." Then at the end you say something similar, but you add, "I have proof,/and a job that comes/As simple to me/as breathing." So, "the inability to sustain rage." That's important?*

**CE:** To go back to what Levine was saying, when you're attuned to what's going on, you have to report that. On the other hand, you don't want to become something that overwhelms you. What I'm trying to get at in those lines is that the work isn't forced, that I don't want it to be something that destroys it from within. I've been trying for most of my career to have balance, to have a way of getting through life and not let what I know is out there overwhelm me. And I think art, to some degree, is a response to that.

**TBR:** *And that "rage" would be mainly about race and class?*

**CE:** To a great extent, yes. What you know is what you see, what you're involved in. That's also my background and my upbringing, which was very community-oriented. I didn't grow up in a neighborhood where people didn't look out for one another, where your concern wasn't also somebody else's.

**TBR:** *This was Rochester, New York?*

**CE:** Yes. I left Rochester when I was 24. I'm a native; I was born there and grew up there and went to the schools. I was in the first wave of busing.

**TBR:** *Did that sense of vocation come out then? When did you know that you wanted to write poetry?*

**CE:** I was encouraged by my homeroom teacher [laughs]—Joanna Mason. I was really dabbling in songwriting, like any other teenager at that time. I had a talent, and songs were easy to write, but Joanna kept me aware of the fact that this was a talent, that it wasn't just something you played with. She was very good at gently pushing me. And that forced me to go off to the main branch of the public library in Rochester. Around that time I had published four poems—lyrics maybe—in the high school literary magazine. And the reaction to them was unexpected—positive—from people who were complete strangers. One of the poems was about Martin Luther King after he'd been assassinated, and I realized that people were actually beginning to consider that I was a poet. And I didn't know what that meant, so I started frequenting the literature stacks and reading poetry because of that. I discovered who was writing and what that was about, and I was sort of stunned into rethinking what was possible.

**TBR:** *What moved you to* Brutal Imagination*? Did it start out as one poem or as a project?*

**CE:** As the Susan Smith drama was being played out, a friend of mine, Chuck Wachtel, who's a novelist, came up with this brilliant idea of imaginary black men. He called me up and said he was going to do this book with different sections, with different writers and different approaches to the subject of imaginary black men. Chuck was going to write a novella, and he asked me to do a cycle of poems, and we were going to have a graphic artist, Sue Coe (a political painter emphasizing cruelty and indifference and influenced by artists such as Leon Golub, Stanley Spencer, Francis Bacon, and, of course, Goya; she's best known for her book *Dead Meat*, a grizzly tour of slaughterhouses). But somehow the project lost steam. The verdict had come in, and Smith was sitting in prison. And I had gone to do other things, such as some theater pieces, *Running Man* and *You Don't Miss Your Water*. But I kept being nagged by this guy; an idea had taken hold, and I kept writing poems. So, at the end of *Running Man* I started reconsidering what the rest of those poems in *Brutal Imagination* were going to be like. Then I worked out the larger sequence.

**TBR:** *At a number of points you made your character sympathetic to Susan; he has something of a caretaker role.*

**CE:** I realized how complicated he was. Yes, he does the dirty work, but he's there emotionally, and also there's my sense that he's ancient, that he's always been there in various roles. He's the boogie man, and he fills up various dreams that we have.

**TBR:** *Since he's been invented, he puts himself in the place of the person who invented him. He's very dimensional.*

**CE:** Exactly. He inhabits Susan's space.

**TBR:** *And then "Brutal Imagination" ends with his "birthing," which also includes sections from Susan Smith's handwritten confession.*

**CE:** Right, we go back to the beginning. As she's killing her babies, she's giving birth to him. That was a difficult poem to write. I left out a lot. It was hard to keep my hands off what I thought we should be seeing at that moment. What's really ugly is the deliberateness of Smith's actions. For example, the prosecution actually got the same make of car, set it up with a video camera in the backseat at about the level of where the kids were in the car seat, and then they pushed it out into the lake. You actually see how long it took for that car to fill with water, and you have to understand that those kids had to have known. People want to think that they were asleep. There's no way those kids could have slept through it all.

**TBR:** *So there was some point where you checked yourself.*

**CE:** I didn't want to make it horrific. But she is standing there, on the shore, watching the car go down. Cold-blooded woman.

**TBR:** *And "The Running Man" poems? Is there a symmetry*

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*there with "Brutal Imagination"?*

**CE:** Yeah, with "Brutal Imagination" we take a mythical person and make him real, and with "The Running Man" we take a real person and make him the culturally charged black male.

**TBR:** *He starts out as young, talented, and gifted. And then degenerates into something that's a nightmare. He, too, gets "birthed."*

**CE:** For real. So they are related.

**TBR:** *You're drawn to collaboration, it seems to me.*

**CE:** I had to learn it, to tell you the truth. I had to learn that sometimes a line that worked well on the page would not work as well sung. One difference between "The Running Man" poems and those in "Brutal Imagination" is that the line is looser in the former.

**TBR:** *And you like working in those shorter lines? Four feet, three feet ... three and a half. You like three and a half—that extra syllable.*

**CE:** Yeah, I do. Left to my own devices, that's the way I prefer to write. There's a certain cadence that I fall into, and it's very comfortable. But the thing about writing theater is that I have to rethink that phrasing, because Diedre Murray was saying to me, "I love it, but you can't sing it." Her perspective made me think more clearly about the idea of personification in "Brutal Imagination." I think I wouldn't have tackled the idea of the persona, even if Chuck had given me the idea, without having moved through theater for a few years. ■

REVIEWER: **Reamy Jansen** is a contributing editor to *The Bloomsbury Review*. He is an essayist and critic and a vice president of The National Book Critics Circle, www.bookcritics.org.

The three poems accompanying this interview with Cornelius Eady were ones he chose to leave out of the volume but which have since been worked into the stage version of Brutal Imagination. When I asked him why the three didn't quite fit into the book, he wrote me the following: "The Stagolee poem was cut because I felt that section of the book [Part II] worked better with African-American icons which originated in the white imagination—and Stag is based on a real guy. 'Shirley McCloud' was deleted because the story is told too late in the book. 'The One Who Did It' takes its title and first line from an unpublished novelette about Susan Smith by my friend, Chuck Wachtel, who gave me the idea for the book. For a while, it was the poem that came before 'Birthing,' the last book in the Susan Smith cycle, but it felt too much like a summing up." —R.J.

**[Editor's Note:** *TBR* regrets that the poems are not included in the web archives, but copyright obligations required us to delete them.**]**

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