

# Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

## Matthew E. Henry: Two Poems

Matthew E. Henry · Friday, May 5th, 2023

### when asked to read a poem for the Black History Month assembly

the vice principal kept his hand on the fire alarm.  
the principal dialed 9 and 1, her trembling finger  
poised over the final digit. the superintendent  
scoured district bylaws to find a fireable offense.  
at least one guidance counselor had pooped her pants.

before I picked up the microphone, most sneaker squeaks  
and side conversations ceased. all the auditorium-ed ears  
waited for whatever out of pocket thing they thought I'd say,  
rehearsed the list of "incidents" they were sure I'd mention.  
the whispered events some labeled "racist," other called  
"accidents" or "unfortunate" they were convinced  
I'd put on blast. some shifted uncomfortably thinking  
of things overheard—in classrooms, the caf, a car—, or  
remembered things they thought, said, done themselves.

before I started reading, some internally argued about  
the existence of "white privilege" and "white fragility,"  
mentally hosted an Oppression Olympics—a broad jump  
comparing slavery and the Jim Crow era to the horrors  
their own ancestors faced, regardless their nation of origin.  
asked themselves when "our month, our assembly" would be,  
clenched fists folded under crossed arms.

before I opened my mouth, some asked why I had to be  
so divisive, why school had to be so "woke"—somehow  
making the word sound like it started with an "n," ended  
with a hard "er"—while others smiled, rubbed hands,  
there for all the smoke.

after I finished reading, the tension in the room remained  
unabsorbed by the white and wood panels covering the walls,  
which I thought was strange since I read a poem  
about why squirrels are infinitely superior to dogs.

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## thank you, systemic racism

for making shoplifting easier—  
as you coon hunt me around the store,  
the white boys I paid, pick-pocket  
a Christmas wish list for my kids.

for believing centuries of cotton fields,  
fire hoses, and batons have hardened our bodies—  
crucible cured our skin—to hold more pain, denying  
me opioids after my car crash, saving the heroin  
and fentanyl statistics for your own.

for the welcomed elbow room  
on buses, planes, and trains, whether  
or not I turn up the Adjei-Brenyah  
of my Blackness.

for your Sambo-ing sight at recess,  
in gym class, and all musical ensembles  
where I was picked early, gifted with more  
than 10,000 hours to live up to your assumptions.

for the paradoxical irony  
of low expectations—your dim light  
making college professors and employer  
impressed by my slightest effort, blinded  
by the black star of my brilliance.

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