I was initiated into the poetry of trance on a rainy Saturday afternoon in mid-October 1958 (baseball season was over for the year) when I wandered down to the basement of our house to pick through some of my grandfather’s forgotten books. I was eight years old. I vaguely remembered that my grandfather had copied poems into the inside cover of his favorite volumes, and I had decided to try to find one. (I didn’t yet know that after his death his books had been given away to a local Jewish charity, and that his poems were thereby lost forever.) I opened a musty anthology of poetry to a section called “Night” and read a poem that immediately arrested me.

There was no title or author’s name attached to this songlike poem, and somehow I imagined that my grandfather must have written it. I read it straight through, and its simple incremental rhythm seized me. I read it again slowly, pronouncing every word to myself, and suddenly I was in two places at once: I was standing next to a bookshelf in a small, one-windowed room in my parents’ basement, and I was lost in the middle of a field somewhere in southern Latvia with a storm wildly brewing around me. I felt as though the words of the poem, like the storm itself, had cast a “tyrant spell” upon me. I couldn’t move.

I can still feel the terrible immediacy of this poem written in the present tense. I couldn’t tell if the poem was a charm inviting the storm into the world or a spell warding it off. I read the first stanza and felt the dusk purpling around me, an icy wind blowing out of control, invisible hands holding me by the shoulders. I said, “And I cannot, cannot go.” The repetitive stresses were like two blows to my chest.

I recited the second stanza and felt the enormous weight of winter coming down. I could feel the giant trees giving way, their limbs burdened with snow. I was far from home. The storm was coming after me, but I couldn’t bring myself to leave. I stubbornly repeated the refrain, “And yet I cannot go.” The word go, which rhymes with “snow,” was like a door slamming in my head.
I read the third stanza aloud and felt that I was standing in the middle of the world. I saw clouds stretching beyond clouds above me. They were layered all the way to heaven. I saw barren spaces stretching out endlessly below—the blasted country of hell. But I was firmly planted on the ground, a tree rooted to the earth. I took heart from the line “But nothing drear can move me.” I recognized the word drear from Poe’s “The Raven”: “Once upon a midnight dreary...” I knew the double meaning of the word move. So the gloomy storm couldn’t affect me or make me give way. I wouldn’t budge. I asserted: “I will not, cannot go.”

I felt a deep resolve, and for a moment when I said it I remembered how I had stood on the hood of a car in the parking lot across the street from the hospital where my grandfather had gone to die. I started waving wildly, furiously, when I saw him standing at the window on the seventh floor. I remembered how he had pressed his lips to the glass and then touched the spot with his hand; it was the same way he used to kiss me on the upper arm at night and then seal the kiss with his fingertips. A gesture of unworldly tenderness.

And then I remembered how I had stood by the side of my grandfather’s grave when they lowered him into the ground. I threw a shovel of dirt onto the coffin, like the other men. Some kindness had passed out of the world, but I wouldn’t move away, I would never give him up. The storm was coming right for me, but suddenly I had the words for what I had felt then. I was determined by what I could not resist. I said, “I will not, cannot go.”

I don’t know how long I stood there on that rainy Saturday afternoon, lost in a book in the basement of my childhood house, in a cluttered Jewish cemetery on the south side of Chicago, in the middle of a field somewhere in Latvia, on an English moor. It would be years before I discovered I had been reading a lyric by Emily Brontë; I recognized the style as soon as I encountered “No Coward Soul Is Mine.” I suppose that in some sense I never really shut that worn anthology of poetry again, because it had opened up an unembarrassed space in me that would never be closed. I had stumbled into the sublime. I had been initiated into the poetry of awe.
THE NIGHT IS DARKENING ROUND ME

The night is darkening round me,
The wild winds coldly blow,
But a tyrant spell has bound me
And I cannot cannot go.

The giant trees are bending,
Their bare boughs weighed with snow;
And the storm is fast descending,
And yet I cannot go.

Clouds beyond clouds above me,
Wastes beyond wastes below;
But nothing drear can move me,
I will not cannot go.

*Emily Brontë*
The stultifying intellectual loneliness of my Watts upbringing was dictated by my looks—dark skin and unkonkable kinky hair. Being glowered at was a constant state of being. The eyes of adults and children alike immediately informed me that some unpleasant ugliness had entered their sphere and spoiled their pleasure because of its close and onerous proximity. I recall one such moment very strongly: a white man was standing in front of me at such an angle that I was momentarily uncertain what he was frowning at. I turned to look behind me and saw nothing.

I have come to mark such moments—as they have recurred throughout my life—as indicative of the significance of physical likeness, beyond the issue of physical beauty: of the importance of "mirror image" (a phrase that recurs in one form or another in my poetry); in the ongoing dialogue of race, as I’ve struggled to grasp and respond to what others assume when their eyes are directed at or on me. I find the shifts in visual context as infuriating now as they were in childhood. The act of wading through stereotypes, in order to become clearly visible in the larger society, corresponds exactly to that moment when Lewis Carroll’s Alice steps through that looking glass.

Incappable of imagining my world, removed from it by gender and race as well as by time and place, Lewis Carroll had nevertheless provided me with a means (and an attitude) with which to assess, evaluate, and interpret my own journey through this bizarre actuality of late-twentieth-century America, where nothing is ever as it seems. I was a Negro child—yet this book, and its poem "Jabberwocky," served singularly to buoy my self-esteem, constantly under assault by my Black peers, family members, and the world outside.

I found the rejection unbearable and—encouraged by my parents to read—sought an escape in books, which were usually hard to come by. In the South Central Los Angeles of the 1950s and 1960s, there were only three Black-owned bookstores, and I would not
discover them until early adulthood. In my childhood there was no
Harlem Renaissance, no Black arts movement; I did not encounter
the poems of Paul Laurence Dunbar and James Weldon Johnson
except at church socials and in the early 1960s, during Negro History
“week” celebrations. There were no images of Black children of
any age in the American literature I encountered. The sole exception
was “Little Black Sambo,” whom I immediately rejected upon find-
ing the book on my desk in the first grade—along with equally
boring books featuring Dick, Jane, and Spot. There was no way in
which I could “identify” with these strange images of children. I was
born and raised in the white world of Southern California; it gave
birth to me, but excluded me. Even the postwar Watts of the poet
Arna Bontemps, and the South Central Los Angeles that would
riot in 1965, were predominantly working-class white neighbor-
hoods with small Black enclaves.

Whenever my father visited public libraries, he allowed me to
roam the stacks. This was my Wonderland. I was immediately
enthralled with the forbidden world of adult literature, hidden away
in leather-bound tomes I was neither able to reach nor allowed to
touch. I hungered to enter, and my appetite had no limits. I plowed
through Papa’s dull issues of National Geographic and Mama’s tepid
copies of Reader’s Digest and Family Circle in desperation, starved. At
age ten I consumed the household copy of the complete works of
Shakespeare. Although the violence was striking, and Hamlet
ingrossing (particularly Ophelia), I was too immature to appreciate
the Bard until frequent rereadings in my mid-teens.

On Christmas, thereabouts, I received Johanna Spyri’s Heidi as a
well-intended gift. I had exhausted our teensy library, and my
father’s collections of Knight, Esquire, and Playboy (kept in the
garage), and had begun sneaking through my mother’s dresser
drawers to scarf on unexpurgated Henry Miller. But between my
raids on the adults-only stuff, there was nothing but Heidi, reread in
desperation until I could quote chunks of the text, mentally squee-
ing it for what I imagined to be hidden underneath. One early
spring day, my adult cousin Rubyline came by the house with a
nourishing belated Christmas gift: an illustrated collection of Alice’s
Adventures in Wonderland and Through the Looking-Glass. (She also
gave me my first Roget’s—which I still use—on my twelfth birthday
in 1958.) In love with poetry since kindergarten, my “uffish” vows were startlingly renewed. I promptly retired *Heidi* and steeped myself in Alice to an iambic spaz.

In the real world I was an outsider, but in the stories and poems of Carroll I *belonged*. Why? Perhaps because when he freed Alice in the mirror, he also freed my imagination and permitted me to imagine myself living in an adventure, sans the constraints of a racist society. If a drink or a slice of cake could transform her, alter her shape and size, the next leap for me was the most illogically logical of all: *Why not a transformation of her skin color?* In my frequent rereadings of Alice, I rewrote her as me.

“Jabberwocky” was and remains one of only a dozen poems I’ve ever loved enough to memorize. It heads the very long list of my favorite childhood poems, along with Poe’s “Raven,” Service’s “Cremation of Sam McGee,” Byron’s “Prisoner of Chillon,” Coleridge’s “Rime of the Ancient Mariner,” Henley’s “Invictus,” and E. A. Robinson’s “Richard Cory.” To the astute reader, Carroll’s lasting influence on my poetry is easily discerned. Many have referred to “Jabberwocky” as nonsense, but in my Los Angeles childhood, it made absolutely one hundred percent perfect sense. And within the context of Los Angeles as the millennium approaches, that “nonsense” is dangerously and exhilaratingly profound.

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**JABBERWOCKY**

"Twas brillig, and the slithy toves  
Did gyre and gimble in the wabe;  
All mimsy were the borogroves,  
And the mome raths outgrabe.

“Beware the Jabberwock, my son!  
The jaws that bite, the claws that catch!  
Beware the Jubjub bird, and shun  
The frumious Bandersnatch!”
He took his vorpal sword in hand:
   Long time the manxome foe he sought—
So rested he by the Tumtum tree,
   And stood awhile in thought.

And as in uffish thought he stood,
   The Jabberwock, with eyes of flame,
Came whiffling through the tulgey wood,
   And burbled as it came!

One, two! One, two! And through and through
   The vorpal blade went snicker-snack!
He left it dead, and with its head
   He went galumphing back.

"And hast thou slain the Jabberwock?
   Come to my arms, my beamish boy!
O frabjous day! Callooh! Callay!"
   He chortled in his joy.

'Twas brillig, and the slithy toves
   Did gyre and gimble in the wabe;
All mimsy were the borogroves,
   And the mome raths outgrabe.

*Lewis Carroll*
Perhaps it was how the poem’s title first wedded my tongue, without any hesititation, conscious negotiation, or humbug: “Annabel Lee.” It seemed as if some deep part of myself already knew the rhythm and emotion of this name—a Southerness in its music. But Edgar Allan Poe’s “Annabel Lee” also ushered in a disquieting mystery and the strange feeling of eavesdropping on something almost taboo.

At nine years old I knew next to nothing about this kind of love, although I had been touched by an element of it in the blues that drifted out of the radios in our kitchen and living room. To know this great longing through words made me tremble inside my skin, and I believe it helped me traverse some new territory in my imagination. “Annabel Lee” was familiar and distant, ethereal and knowable, and not quite flesh: Had she wandered from across the tracks to my forbidden “neck of the woods,” and why did I sense her with such imaginative authority? She was there and not there. In this sense, I feel that I grasped Poe’s Gothicness. But I had also been transported in my psyche to immediate possibility: my Annabel Lee became a honey-colored Goldie Rae Magee. And I can still half hear my nine-year-old voice saying, “She was a child and I was a child,/ In this kingdom by the sea....”

At the time, of course, when I memorized this first poem, I couldn’t have been conscious that this otherworldly love between two children embodied Poe’s recurring theme of Death in Love. Also, I don’t believe I was fully aware of the possible critique of class in the poem. Now, “So that her highborn kinsmen came” seems more about authorial reality than an excursion into Gothic imagination.

And there is another moment in the poem that challenged the regional orthodoxy I grew up with: “And neither the angels in Heaven above / Nor the demons down under the sea / Can ever dis-sever my soul from the soul....” Within the psychological iconography in which I was born and raised in rural Louisiana, angels and demons were more than powerful; there wasn’t any human emotion that could challenge them or diminish their powers.
It should be no surprise that James Weldon Johnson’s “The Creation” would be the second poem I memorized. At Sweet Beulah Baptist Church, Reverend Duncan could really preach—no doubt about that. But there is something in “The Creation” that transported me beyond my imagination. This lyrical narrative has a fiery precision that pulled me into its sway: I felt lost and found through the poem’s music. In many ways, Reverend Duncan’s image of God parallels Johnson’s: “And God walked, and where He trod / His footsteps hollowed the valleys out / And bulged the mountains up.” This majestic, brute force seems like a forerunner of some god of high-tech thunder—a bionic godhead. But there was also something different about Johnson’s God: “This Great God, / Like a mammy bending over her baby, / Kneeled down in the dust / Toiling over a lump of clay. . . .” In retrospect, I know it had to have been the cinematic Southernness of this image that connected me emotionally to Johnson’s poem. I feel that I knew this surreal figuration: it seemed to weigh flesh against all the abstraction and hyperbole, alongside an exhortation and metaphoric playfulness.

I am thankful that these two poems led me to other more challenging ones. My mind and body can almost recall (if not relive) that moment in the urgency of language when I discovered “Annabel Lee” and “The Creation,” and it seems as though this must be what happens when one falls in love the first and last time.

ANNABEL LEE

It was many and many a year ago,
In a kingdom by the sea,
That a maiden there lived whom you may know
By the name of Annabel Lee;—
And this maiden she lived with no other thought
Than to love and be loved by me.

She was a child and I was a child,
In this kingdom by the sea,
But we loved with a love that was more than love—

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I and my Annabel Lee—
With a love that the winged seraphs of Heaven
Coveted her and me.

And this was the reason that, long ago,
   In this kingdom by the sea,
A wind blew out of a cloud by night
   Chilling my Annabel Lee;
So that her highborn kinsmen came
   And bore her away from me,
To shut her up in a sepulchre
   In this kingdom by the sea.

The angels, not half so happy in Heaven,
   Went envying her and me:—
Yes! that was the reason (as all men know,
   In this kingdom by the sea)
That the wind came out of the cloud, chilling
   And killing my Annabel Lee.

But our love it was stronger by far than the love
   Of those who were older than we—
   Of many far wiser than we—
And neither the angels in Heaven above
   Nor the demons down under the sea
Can ever dissever my soul from the soul
   Of the beautiful Annabel Lee:—

For the moon never beams without bringing me dreams
   Of the beautiful Annabel Lee;
And the stars never rise but I see the bright eyes
   Of the beautiful Annabel Lee:
And so, all the night-tide, I lie down by the side
Of my darling, my darling, my life and my bride
   In her sepulchre there by the sea—
   In her tomb by the side of the sea.

*Edgar Allan Poe*