CREATIVE PACKET

Featuring Cornelius Eady and Arlene Keizer

Poetry Reading
Wednesday, April 10, 7:00 pm
African Community Theatre, Oscar Ritchie Hall (225 Terrace Drive, Kent, Ohio 44242)
Cornelius Eady
Cornelius Eady is the author of several books of poetry, including the critically acclaimed *Hardheaded Weather*, which was nominated for an NAACP Image Award, *Victims of the Latest Dance Craze*, winner of the 1985 Lamont Prize from the Academy of American Poets, *The Gathering of My Name*, which was nominated for the 1992 Pulitzer Prize, and his most recent collection *The War Against the Obvious*. With poet Toi Derricote, Eady is cofounder of Cave Canem, a national organization for African American poetry and poets. He is the recipient of an NEA Fellowship in Literature, a John Simon Guggenheim Fellowship in Poetry, a Rockefeller Foundation Fellowship to Bellagio, Italy, and The Prairie Schooner Strousse Award. Eady has been a teacher for over twenty years and is currently the Chair of Excellence in the English Department at the University of Tennessee Knoxville.

Arlene Keizer
Arlene Keizer, an Afro-Caribbean-American poet and scholar, writes about the literature, lived experience, theory, and visual art of the African Diaspora. The recipient of an Academy of American Poets Prize, she later earned an MA in English and Creative Writing (Poetry) at Stanford University and a PhD at the University of California, Berkeley. She is the author of *Black Subjects: Identity Formation in the Contemporary Narrative of Slavery*, and her poems and articles have appeared in *African American Review, American Literature, Kenyon Review, PMLA, Radical Teacher, TriQuarterly*, and other journals and exhibit catalogues. New poems are forthcoming in *Obsidian: Literature and Arts in the African Diaspora*. Arlene completed *Fraternal Light: On Painting While Black* (Winner of the Stan and Tom Wick Poetry Prize at Kent State University) with the support of fellowships from the Beinecke Library at Yale and the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, where she has been reading Beauford Delaney’s mail. Born to emigrants from Trinidad, she lives in Brooklyn, NY and teaches at Pratt Institute.
GOD COULD NOT MAKE HER A POET
By Cornelius Eady

Thomas Jefferson said this, more or less,
After he read the musings of the clever African
Phillis Wheatley, a sensation of both the Colonies
And England, a black patriot, though a slave.
Whatever a black hand can build, he knew,
Could only be guided by a master’s vision,

Like this room of the mansion he probably
Wrote his opinion in—what black mind could
Dream in these proportions? And gather
The slope of these Virginia hills so lovingly
To his window? God could give her words,
But the subtle turn? Like giving a gull
A sack of gold.

*Originally published in Poem-a-Day on February 24, 2022, by the Academy of American Poets.*
DIABOLIC
By Cornelius Eady

"Their colour is a diabolic die."
—Phillis Wheatley

What they say they are
And what they actually do
Is what Phillis overhears.
It’s like she isn’t there.
It’s like she’s a ghost, at arm’s length, hearing
The living curse out the dead—
Which, she’s been led to believe
No decent person does in a church.

How they say they love her
And how they look at her
Is what Phillis observes;
Like she’s the hole in the pocket
After the money rolls out.

God loves everybody—even the sinner,
(they say)
Even a mangy hound can rely
On a scrap of meat, scraped off the plate
(they say).

What they testify
And what they whisper in earshot
Is as dark as her skin, whistled from opposite sides
Of a mouth.

Is she the bible’s fine print?

I'M A FOOL TO LOVE YOU
By Cornelius Eady

Some folks will tell you the blues is a woman,
Some type of supernatural creature.
My mother would tell you, if she could,
About her life with my father,
A strange and sometimes cruel gentleman.
She would tell you about the choices
A young black woman faces.
Is falling in with some man
A deal with the devil
In blue terms, the tongue we use
When we don't want nuance
To get in the way,
When we need to talk straight.
My mother chooses my father
After choosing a man
Who was, as we sing it,
Of no account.
This man made my father look good,
That's how bad it was.
He made my father seem like an island
In the middle of a stormy sea,
He made my father look like a rock.
And is the blues the moment you realize
You exist in a stacked deck,
You look in a mirror at your young face,
The face my sister carries,
And you know it's the only leverage
You've got.
Does this create a hurt that whispers
How you going to do?
Is the blues the moment
You shrug your shoulders
And agree, a girl without money
Is nothing, dust
To be pushed around by any old breeze.
Compared to this,
My father seems, briefly,
To be a fire escape.
This is the way the blues works
Its sorry wonders,
Makes trouble look like
A feather bed,
Makes the wrong man's kisses
A healing.

MANCHILD
By Cornelius Eady

for bell hooks

A warning one white friend hisses
To the one standing nearest to me
At an Upper West Side newsstand.
As if my ears
Could not cradle human speech.
This is the birth of a regret:
My surprise of the woman on my right
As I reach to buy a paper.
How her
Where? becomes an Oh.
How they grin,
I am a close call, how they grin,
Pickpocket my ease,
How they
Grin, then push off down the street.
Now I have the rest of Saturday.
Who will touch my hand,
Who will take my quarters,
These clots of syntax
Growing cold in the blush of my palm?

From Hardheaded Weather (Putnam, 2008)
SEDUCTION
By Cornelius Eady

I am never alone in this world.
Here are the famous silhouettes on the
  window shade
And the reason they embrace:
The romantic ballad on the record player
That spills out of the window
Cracked a third of the way open
And down the block, where everyone else is dreaming
  or trying to dream,
Off the walls of the Baptist church,
Off the man who leans on the pharmacy at the corner
  waiting for the phone to ring,
Off the empty seats of the ice-cream parlor,
Around the corner to the all-night grocery
Where the kid behind the bullet-proof glass
  sways his hips,
His feet making tiny, absent steps
  upon the floorboards.
It is a spring night, and perhaps every street
  is like this,
The air rich and edible as fruit.
A couple, returning from a dance,
Takes the center of the sidewalk with a generous,
  uneven gait,
Aiming for each other’s lips, but hitting the eyebrows,
  the forehead . . .
It doesn’t matter. Tonight, as I watch from above
We all fall in love,
As would anyone who crosses the lovers’ path
As their shadows glide across the front porches,
Brushing against the stoops,
Too busy to notice they’re locked in the beat
Or that a light goes out above their heads.
FOUND METAPHOR
By Arlene Keizer

a queen of spades
facedown on the pavement
her cheeks her palms pockmarked
by gravel

in this neighborhood
the voice of the law—
truncheon swing, siren, bullhorn soundwave—
travels on every breeze
even a joker knows
when to assume
the position

From Fraternal Light: On Painting While Black, Kent State University Press, 2023
A COUNTRY METER
By Arlene Keizer

“Solvitur ambulando.” “It is solved by walking.”

Tramping away from Paris
into the countryside, you’re seen
as poor and odd, but
not as prey. You’re too rare here
to be a threat. No one
offers you a ride either.

Free to stroll and stride and commit
colors to memory, free
to unpack easel and paint box
in a fallow field, at liberty
to set the sun
in its rightful place.

swing low, golden eagle,
golden double, coming for to carry me
up in the middle of the air
steal away steal away o pray
my wings are gonna fit me well
I ain’t got long to stay here

Tramping this straight Roman road—
slave-built imperial trace—
you find that the voices
can’t outsing you
when you’re backed by
a chorus of fraternal light.

From Fraternal Light: On Painting While Black, Kent State University Press, 2023
DARK RAPTURE
By Arlene Keizer

The tropical forest travels
with Papa Bois, with
his power, is
the force of flowering.

Oh, what we can do when the right gods
watch over us.

The garret studio vanishes
under a visual fantasia—
cool light the full spectrum—
red orange yellow green blue indigo violet.
At the center is green
heightened by black, lightened
by white. Two trees
announce that the body
and the throne and the wood
are one.

Oh, what we can do when the eyes of love
are upon us.

The subject of the dream is
the dreamer. The landscape
sings the painter’s wish fulfillment—
improvised pastoral symphony,
syncopated rite of spring.

Our music has never failed us, never
failed us.

From Fraternal Light: On Painting While Black, Kent State University Press, 2023
LEAVING GREENSTREET: BEAUFORD’S PSALM
By Arlene Keizer

You have raised me up
to the third floor
above the hustlers and rent boys
who taught me how to live
here.

New punks beat me up
to claim their territory from
a “nigger queer,” but I got
a few licks in: you have not
suffered my enemies
to rejoice over me.

I’m sailing for the City of Light
of my own free will,
so that my glory may sing
   praise to you      and not be silenced.

From Fraternal Light: On Painting While Black, Kent State University Press, 2023
WRITING YOU FROM A PLAGUE YEAR
By Arlene Keizer

“Is this why we sing through/these death marches?”

I was already thinking of you
before the dying began in earnest,
before hubris and hate delivered
ten thousand hecatombs of corpses.

You knew all these losses:
motherloss and brotherloss and
fatherloss and piercing sisterloss,
lived through pandemic and white riot,
knew the fall of the self through
immeasurable space and knew
the feeling of the bottom coming up
hard, under your hands and knees.

Did you ever wish for a less keen
eye, or corrective vision?
Teach me how to see clearly
to the final other side.

Your sight is a four-stringed instrument
tuned differently for every ceremony—
sometimes a banjo
whose gut strings stretch from Senegambia
to the Carolinas,
then a subtle cuatro, then
a Mahalo ukulele,
now a lute, now a lyre
silent in the rust-red hands of Orpheus.

From *Fraternal Light: On Painting While Black*, Kent State University Press, 2023