

Selected

Magma Selected highlights a single poet who is emerging or whose work deserves to be better known, allowing us to publish a wider selection of poems. Our Selected Poet for this issue is **Marvin Thompson**.



Triptych

1. 'A people without the knowledge of their past history, origin and culture is like a tree without roots.' Marcus Garvey

Dear Brecon Town Council

A mouth drying to mud, tightening lungs and eyes on the edge of tears:
that was the reaction of my Black British body
when, on this wind-lash of a lockdown morning, I read
who you class as a role model for my Welsh, Mixed Race children.
In 2010 (during Black History Month no less) a blue plaque
was unveiled in Brecon, honouring the life of a Welsh seafarer,
Captain Thomas Phillips. A man who grew rich from selling slaves;

humans like me, my parents, my brothers. Maybe I should show this slaver
more understanding: in later life, he wrote about his 'cargo' with tears,
suggesting all people are 'the work of God's hands.' Ah, I see.
Those were different times and Philips showed remorse so my body
should be calmed. Never mind that the racism thriving under our blue skies
was designed by men like Philips. Tell me, should I also read
the captain's Voyage Journal to my children

and teach them they are indeed picaninnies with watermelon smiles, children
whose ancestors have no place in history and have no name except slave
or nigger and owe all to Wilberforce? I pray that once you have read
this open message, your chest fills with a flaming desire to tear
the plaque from its wall or better yet, add an extra slab of blue slate
and inscribe it with: 'This Welshman sailed across seas
to enslave humans, growing rich from the sweat of their Black bodies.'

Yours faithfully, Mr M. Thompson

2. 'It was economics that determined that Europe should invest in Africa and control the continent's raw materials and labor. It was racism which confirmed the decision that the form of control should be direct colonial rule.' Walter Rodney

Huddled on deck, we wait to be fed, the wind slapping our negro bodies.
On our Guinea coast, I saw men I've known since we were children
leap overboard before the shackles cut our wrists. They are the sea;
my younger brother is the sea - I felt like a slave
the moment I was dragged from my home, the night a hot, sticky blue.
My brother always told me I spend too much time reading
the stars or discussing the missionaries' Christ. My tears

are too late. A bowl of cold porridge rests in my palms. I am a teardrop,
not an ocean - the waves are darkening, the sky is darkening and the body
of this ship is swaying. I trace my finger over my chest's H. The red wound
from the branding iron is now a white scar. 'That's a story for children!'
my brother laughed when I told him I'd dreamt Christ - the sky's blue
is swirling to black and sailors are pushing us away from the sea's mouth
back down to the Hannibal's belly and our stench, our slave piss.

The wind is braying and I hear my brother's voice: We are not slaves,
we are not slaves... Waves rise like hills and a hand tears
at my arm - I spin round to a sailor and our eyes meet. What does he see?
He steps away. I clamber to the ship's listing edge and fling my body
into the abyss of the squall, its endless, endless blue:
no angels. No smiling Christ and I am wet, a reed
in the waves. I am a brother. I am the sea. I am a cradled child.

3. 'When we revolt it's not for a particular culture. We revolt simply because, for many reasons, we can no longer breathe.' Frantz Fanon

Officer, with respect, I'm 63 and you're treating me like some childish idiot. Honestly, I have no opinion on Brecon's history of slaves or sailors. Yes, I walk past that plaque every day. I've read it, once, maybe. Like I explained, I retired from my council duties, with tears, long before any of the other... Look, I am growing quite blue with rage. I thought not having a solicitor would... Okay, I see. I'll explain myself again. I live with my wife. Nobody else.

Thanks to God's grace, we don't have to self-isolate but our bodies are a bit on the plump side. As such, we do a lot of walking. We're like kids enjoying the freedom of working from home. All I could see, when I woke that night, was my wife – her eyes were as wide as a whipped slave's and... Sorry. That was... Anyway, she was holding my blue tool bag. 'You'll need this,' she said. 'I better get ready,' I replied. But it was like... It was like it wasn't me talking. I chucked on my torn

overalls, kissed my wife, my rosary beads and tore down the road in my Range Rover. When I got to Captain's Walk, everybody you've mentioned was there and the bench beneath the plaque was already being got at with a chainsaw. Three men were dancing like wild, sweaty kids to UB40 and a madness took hold of me. From my bag, I pulled out my blue portable jackhammer: the cheers were like a rising sea. Officer, I didn't post the video on Twitter. What do I know about slaves?

Triptych was written as a commission for The Outposted Project (2020)

Marvin Thompson was born in Tottenham, London to Jamaican parents and now lives in south Wales. His debut collection, *Road Trip* (Peepal Tree Press, March 2020), is a PBS Recommendation. In 2020, *Road Trip* was selected by the Poetry Society as one of five Black Lives Matter Inspiration books, and is one of 40 recommended collections and anthologies for National Poetry Day. *The Guardian* described *Road Trip* as an 'invigorating journey through complexities of black British family life.' Twitter: @MarvinPoet