

CARILLONNEURS

In memoriam John Lewis and C.T. Vivian

Oh, the bells ring! Oh, the bells ring!
There is a chain turned into fleece,
The unbroken thread of freedom
Reweaves prisoners' manacles
By pain into silk stronger than stone.

Oh, the bells ring! Oh, the bells ring!
Tolling from John Brown, to Frederick Douglass,
To Harriet Tubman, to Rosa Parks,
To Malcolm X, to Martin Luther King Jr.,
To Bobby Kennedy, to C.T. Vivian,
To John Lewis, to George Floyd,
To Black Lives Matter, to you
And me in the thriving streets.

Oh, the bells ring! Oh, the bells ring!
For every slave and slave owner
Shackled through death or life
By a tuneless stride of racism;
With so many hopelessly knotted
In privilege's golden rope,
It's the slave who frees herself
Thereby the slave master too.

Oh, the bells ring! Oh, the bells ring!
The plantation now the corporation,
Bullwhips cracked across backs of poverty wages
Or so-called excess labor made disposable,
Forgotten in zones of abandonment
Only to be an incarcerated workforce for pennies;
And the noose hasn't become just more double-speak,
It's still publicly cinched round black necks,
Let the ballad of suffering sound.

Oh, the bells ring! Oh, the bells ring!
To even contemplate forgiveness
Through reparations black lives
Extend to white supremacy,
On the first unfeigned cracks
In this porcelain vessel,
The gift of sages who know
To trade in power's drunkenness
Means to grab the clappers
Like gonads or vaginas,
Anguished cries on all sides
Snuffing the last vestiges of music.

Oh, the bells ring! Oh, the bells ring!
When she and I walked with our whiteness
Up on the street protest of black people
Demanding restorative justice in the 3rd Ward,
Their home riddled and tossed aside
By those of our likeness, and the
Tinsel looks darted at us in the eyes
Of the young, she and I with looks balancing
Wobbly fear along the edge of possibility,
Got quieted by several elders
Sitting in lawn chairs or leaning on canes
Who gave almost imperceptible nods
For trust to flicker delicate and unmistakable
Like the first star in a night sky.

Oh, the bells ring! Oh, the bells ring!
A new generation of Panther spirits
Immense in courage and grace as of old
Stalk within today's masked protestors,
Flipping on its head COVID-19's choice
Of ducking infection or scratching out
Another day's pay to forestall eviction,
Instead taking to the streets
The wisdom of Africa in America,
Allows white allies to catch these rhythms
Enough to at last follow something
Humbled by time's tightened wires
Into the sacred beyond reason,
And it gets real with skin pigmentations
For sharing the beat of equality for all.

Oh, the bells ring! Oh, the bells ring!
These great ones with household names,
Or a name known along the block,
Were shown by others before them
To climb a stairway into the belfry
Of some little country church
Gone large in every public square
In the fields and factory lines,
Any scheme backs are bowed
By desolate noise or bereft silences,
To take hold of the ropes
And sound the bells beyond all religion.

Oh, the bells ring! Oh, the bells ring!
Listen closely, they rain justice-notes
Wash clean the most tender and tough
Place inside you and me,
The space between them and us,
Where peacemaking risks it all for a song.