

Ugly Beauty (from the book)

For the American clipper ships

Such works of wonder
Anchored to such tawdry deeds
Sea-kites
Elegant blends of air and speed
Sea-kites
Trailing a putrid aroma
The savage scent of greed

They fled Luanda all sails set
A swoosh of grace
A Baltimore Clipper fleeing that heathen place
Blockade warships pretended to give chase
Although none could keep apace with American ingenuity
And its swoosh of flowing grace

Oh they fled the Gold Coast scudding
Gunwales near a flooding
Fishes feasting on their chum
Bodies bloating in their wake
And from below
A tight packed human hum
A song so soundly wrought
That far off whales and dolphin took note
And when the heavens heard the song the cargo wrote
Clouds swelled the sea threatening to swamp the boat
A swirling wind taunted sailors in the rigging
From the bilge below a humming moan
Oh you should have heard them moan

Jamming the middle passage groan

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They left Luanda laden
A cargo of breathing gold
Sardined humans shackled in the hold
Trailing salt bleached bones all along the way
Five million left Angola,
sold and betrayed
Aboard a ship of bondage under a sail of cloud
A village uprooted and set adrift
A familiar night stolen by the shifting sky
A starred bridge from Southern Cross to Drinking Gourd
A swift sea change into someone else
Somewhere else after or before the humming
A name
A headless man
A child
A life casually tossed overboard
For every 100 sold 40 more lightened the load
Oh such a ship of beauty linked to such an ugly deed
Shackled people inside a swoosh of grace and speed

Auctioneers waiting by the Charleston holding pens
Waiting for the clipper ships unlading

And the bidding to begin
Builders and outfitters all along the way
Divvying up their shares of the clipper pay
Beauty skipping over the foaming waves

Its hold crammed with humming slaves

One party's profit means another party's pain
Playing jazzy contradictions in a profit margin game
With freedom and fairness still on the lam
A blued moaning swoosh vamping on the ugly beauty jam
A blued humming swoosh vamping on the ugly beauty jam