



Gallery of poems: Valerie Bloom

Valerie Bloom was born in Jamaica and came to England in 1979. She has performed her poetry extensively in Britain and abroad - in schools, universities, theatres, at festivals and on radio and television, and has published many acclaimed anthologies and collections of children's poetry.

She chose to write about a jug which was made in about 1800 in Staffordshire, and used to serve beer. The motif on the jug represents Britannia offering comfort to a slave, linking a traditional patriotic symbol with the new movement for the abolition of slavery. After the loss of the American colonies in 1783, attitudes in Britain towards slavery began to change rapidly. The British slave trade was finally abolished in 1807 and this jug may have been commissioned by a prosperous client involved in the anti-slavery campaign, which was highly unpopular in many quarters, for example seaports such as Bristol and Liverpool.

Once Upon A Time

Once he had a jug like this, though not for serving
beer,
Not squat, and made of finest porcelain, but
Rough, red clay, with slim and graceful neck,
It kept the water cool inside his mother's hut.

Once he watched vessels, boats, not pirate ships
With western flags and canvas sails a-quiver,
But small fishermen's crafts, which floated, bobbed
and weaved
Among the rushes on the Niger River.

He danced once, not to the sound of whip crack,
Limbo-ing across the deck from out a stinking hold,
But to the voice of talking drums, he pounded
Black earth, with nimble feet, carefree and bold.

He worked in fields, not on sugar-cane plantations,
Where lacerated black backs fester in the sun,
But among the palms, where digging, planting yams,
They spiced the air with laughter, talk and song.

Once he had a name, not borrowed from a stranger,
Not one with meaning long forgotten or unknown,
But a title held throughout his generations,
And one that he was proud to call his own.



Jug, Turner of Lane End, about 1800, Museum no. 2510-1901

He had a body, not a cherub's, softly plump and white,
With flowing hair tumbling down - instead,
He had a face and body, black and sinewy,
And hair curled tight, and close around his head.

One day he read a poem, and wondered at the hand
Which wrote 'twas mercy brought me from my Pagan land'.