

From: *I. The Records of Richard Preston*¹

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I.

Halifax—this Venetian backwater—
shrinks from the *al fresco* sea,
openness.

An *Inferno* of rum and opium,
it yields only bones of light,
broken on pebbles,
tangled in seaweed,
mangled in breakers.

White gulls screech grey ruin
over the foam-scourged beach,
the waste.

Provincial is Halifax,
and its Baptists mere backwash
(hogwash)
of London's ocean-striding Believers.

(Each colony is the Empire's cradle and grave:
Shakespeare fathers Shakespeare the slave.)

II.

Flinching at sight of Africans
darkening their walnut or cedar pews,
our local, blanching Baptists
hang before us a Dante Christ—

¹ Virginia, U.S., ex-slave Richard Preston (d. 1861) founded the African Baptist Association of Nova Scotia (1853). He was ordained a Baptist minister in 1831 by the (British) West London Baptist Association, an accomplishment necessitated by local white Baptist hostility to the idea of a separate black church (even though white Baptist services were segregated).

sallow, yellow, sickly,
in Rembrandt-sombre shadow.

(This halo'd Jesus
dies like Beowulf.)

These Jimmy-crack-corn-and-I-don't-care nihilists,
Negrophobes and antichrists,
want no truck with Black Refugee idealists,
reject any church just for Negroes,
and so yell involuntarily convoluted objections.
They prefer us pickaninnying Caucasian cotton,
to look away, look away, look away,
to bullwhip land,
somewhere over a red, white, and blue,
star-spangled rainbow,
but not to look to Christ,
not to exercise the hard muscle of *Faith*.

They want to corner off blackness,
head it off,
rope it in,
back it down,
nail it down,
shut it up,
white it out.

In Nova Scotia,
theology furnishes theatre.

Here, then, not only is every black—
if Nova Scotian—
an American,
he or she constitutes, *by birth*, the Devil's Party.

Hence, the Halifax Baptists—
icy in blood,
sulphurous in heart,
eager to play gods in black robes,
carp at us more than they harp.

Jaded, silver-tongued, brown-nosing blackguards,
 green-eyed, yellow-bellied, purple-faced, raging,
 they don a pristine whiteness,
 claim,

*“Adama ed Eva perdettero il paradiso
 Per aver voluto sapere troppo.”*²

They pour cold water on our baptisms,
 try to stifle our worship,
 because we are not eunuch
 or anus-souled Believers.

In our Black-saint services,
 a tambourine beats like a heart.
 “Pass Me Not” starts up.
 Mournful trumpets
 and brash, brash trombones
 tell of a Heaven that’s nigh—
 as if we’re on the brink—
 ebony us—
 of cerulean blue.

And why not?

Against our epoch of erasure,
 we raise a song.

² “Adam and Eve lost Paradise / Because they wanted to know too much.” *Lo Strano Vizio della Signora Wardh* (1969).