

ED ROBERSON

Preface to *MPH: The Motorcycle Poems*

In the summer of 1970, Andrew Welsh, Dick Vandall, and I rode cross-country from Pittsburgh to San Francisco and back on two BMW motorcycles. Andy was a PhD candidate at the University of Pittsburgh, finishing a dissertation that was later published by Princeton University Press as *Roots of Lyric* (1978). Dick was an artist who was interested in Pre-Columbian iconography and Native American quest traditions and rituals.

I had just published my first book with the Pitt Poets Series (*When Thy King Is a Boy* [1970]), and I was now reading anthropology, ethnographic collections, and the poetry of those cultures and traditions so different from the white Western literary canon. I set out to teach myself the art of poetry in a broader and deeper context than the historical examples I'd been taught in school. I wanted my readers to be able to recognize the art that is latent in the poetry I lived as a black man in America. I read chants, war and shamanic power songs, praises and prayers—and I learned how to hear and record them as they existed in contemporary life.

The motorcycle trip itself felt like a quest, and I often had the feeling that I was discovering new direction for my writing. We stopped at several Native American sacred sites mentioned in the Native literatures, such as the Black Hills in South Dakota, the Hopi mesas in Navajo County, Arizona, and the White House Ruin in Canyon de Chelly, Arizona. We encountered all the current road spirits, monsters, and demons that two white guys and a black dude on motorcycles in the 70s would call up from the American dirt.

On a trip a year later, in 1971, we went together to the ancient Mexican cities of Tula and Teotihuacan. There, with the much broader sense of time and narrative that these sites brought forward, I began working on my own African culture with a much deeper clarity. Out of all these experiences, and especially focused by a reading of Peter Matthiessen's book about New Guinea, *Under the Mountain Wall: A Chronicle of Two Seasons in the Stone Age* (1962), I worked out a personal song cycle that became my second book, *Etai-Eken* (1975).

Along the way, the unfinished manuscript of motorcycle poems somehow got shoved aside and lost.

Though the manuscript itself was lost, many of the ideas, images, and structures I'd discovered when I wrote it appeared from memory in many of my new poems. And apart from the lost manuscript, I still had some fragmentary notes. I especially loved a chant that I found in the notes. I published the excerpt as a single poem without the original opening sections, which I could not reconstruct from memory.

Last summer, while dismantling my house in New Jersey and preparing it for sale, I found two envelopes in the attic that had somehow followed me through four house moves without my knowledge of their whereabouts. The whole manuscript and its piles of notes were not there, but a mostly finished draft of the opening songs were, especially the surrounding sections of my beloved chant.

I scanned the packet enough to know what was there, but I found out quickly that to engage with a forty-year younger self was not easy. I took nearly a month before I sat down and read the pages that had become almost legend to me. The fear was that I would find the things much smaller and with many fewer layers than I had imagined all these years.

So when I finally read what was in the packet, the big news was not that something had been found but that something had always been there. These words forty years old sounded like me, had my thoughts, and mostly had my way of seeing. This was my work then as now. It could use an old-man haircut, but it is nonetheless my head.