

Chapter Twelve

Dr. Tolbert Small



## The Rivers and Streams of Life

Dr. Tolbert Small

Physician, poet, social activist and humanist, these words describe Tolbert Small. He has worked as the leading physician for the Oakland based Black Panther party, setting up their national sickle cell anemia project and the George Jackson free clinic. Pro bono, he cared for all the rank and file party members, including all of the leadership. Huey Newton, Bobbie Seale, Angela Davis, Elaine Brown, George Jackson, and David Hilliard were all his close friends, comrades and patients. He was known as the people's doctor. He was the first outside physician to visit the adjustment center of San Quentin to visit George Jackson and the adjustment center of Folsom to visit David Hilliard. He has won numerous awards and published numerous poems. In 1972, he became one of the first physicians to visit the Peoples Republic of China and he became one of the first western physicians to practice acupuncture in the United States. He and his wife co founded the Harriet Tubman Medical Office where he has practiced healing since 1980.

Most of his poems can be seen on the following web site: <http://sites.google.com/site/maskpoetryofdrtolbertsmall/>;  
Dr. Tolbert believes that poetry belongs to the people.

## The Rivers and Streams of Life

Rivers

Rivers are the blood of life;  
As our rivers flow to nourish mother earth.  
So our blood flows to nourish the human spirit.

The Yangtze flows for the yellow man.  
The Danube flow for the white man.  
The Congo flows for the black man.  
The Amazon flows for the brown man.  
The Mississippi flows for everyman;  
Yet it also flows for the redman.  
Perhaps, all rivers flow for all men.

All of our rivers flow to nourish mother earth,  
So our blood flows to nourish the human spirit.

The river gives life until poverty plagues its shores  
With cholera and hepatitis.  
Until greed plagues its shores with mercury and dioxin,  
Then the river gives death.

What fool would fight nature to dam our rivers,  
To block their flow?  
What fool would poison or pollute our rivers?  
Only one fool, Man.  
Man, blessed with a free will to serve.  
Man, cursed with a free will to destroy.

As zealots of racism and religion destroy themselves,  
So zealots of greed destroy our rivers.  
Perhaps, man serves as a zealot for both good and evil.

## The Rivers and Streams of Life

### Slaves

Great pyramids, rise up from the desert to challenge the stars.  
Oh monument to pharaoh, the living god, who built thee?  
Surely, not pharaoh and the dead gods he worshipped.

Mighty acropolis, the height of the city,  
The home of the great gods Zeus and Athena;  
Who built thee? Not Socrates. Not Plato.  
Not the great kings who bowed before thee.  
What rough hands carved thy marble wonder?  
How many backs were lashed to create your beauty?

Aeterna Roma, who built your great pagan temples?  
Who built your mighty coliseum?  
How many backs were lashed to create your beauty?  
Who built your aqueducts?  
Aqueducts that perpetually flows into each century.  
Slaves, truly the most came from the least.

Great White House, cradle of democracy, eternal seat of freedom,  
Who cast thy heroic bronze statues?  
Who carved thy pristine white marble walls?  
Did the lazy dark people build this citadel of freedom?  
How many slaves' backs were lashed to create our great White House?  
Truly, the slaves who crawled through your backdoor built your front door.

## The Rivers and Streams of Life

### The Tall Trees

Hail to thee,  
Oldest of all that lives,  
Tallest of all that grows.  
We bow before thee, Oh towering steeple.  
Your beauty touches the sky.  
Your limbs stretch upward to kiss the gods.

Mighty cathedral cast your shadow over the forest.  
Let your feet dance among the sparkling ferns.  
Let your roots embrace the mountain stream.

What mystery lies in a pine cone that the tallest of all trees  
Should spring forth from the smallest of all seeds.

Dam! Cursed to crawl beneath your roots,  
Did the snakes of the world envy your long life?  
Overnight  
    Devastated  
    Wasteland  
    Crime of all crimes.

What fool would cut down the most spiritual of all?  
Only one fool, man, the most brilliant of all thinkers,  
Man, blessed with knowledge, but cursed with a free will.

Oh bleeding forest, your barren and gnarled stumps  
Serve as tombstones, relics of the life  
That scraped the sky.

The Rivers and Streams of Life

Harriet Tubman

Before I be a slave, I will be dead in my grave  
And go home to my maker and be free.  
Harriet Tubman: "I was a stranger in a strange land;  
I was free and they should be free also."  
The Poet: "Like the northstar, love guides the true revolutionist."  
John Brown: You are a general who led your slave troops through the  
swamps,  
Up the mountains, and across our vast lands."  
Vox Populi: "Go down Moses, let my people go."  
The Poet: My people were brought to the shores of America  
Not for the American dream but for the American nightmare."  
For the love of my people,  
Once again I crawl through the embers of hell;  
Through fleeting storms and the scorching sun,  
I carried my precious cargo northward.  
With a sky for a roof, leaves for a mattress,  
And a gully for an outhouse, we struggled forward.  
Our weary bones, aching to see the light,  
] Struggle through the frigid night.  
My train never stalled;  
] My train never lost a passenger.

Before I be a slave, I will be dead in my grave  
And go home to my maker and be free.

Master's blows dented my forehead.  
Master's whip scarred my back.  
Master's lust raped my body.  
Master's greed sacked my clothes.  
Master can steal my body  
But master can not steal me.  
For slavery can only chain my bones  
But not my spirit.  
The gentle breeze of freedom  
Shall forever blow through your chains.

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Before I be a slave, I will be dead in my grave  
And go home to my maker and be free.

Working Man

I am a working man.  
I grow, chopped, and sampled your cotton.  
I toiled the red clay of Mississippi.  
I survived, though denied education and the right to vote.  
I survived your lynchings.  
I survived racism, a living relic of slavery.  
I suffered indignities and injustice because of my color,  
But I did not give up.  
I kept my manhood.  
I moved north to the promised land.  
I built your trucks.  
I ran your factories.  
I scoured your floors.  
I lived in your tenements.  
I too am a working man.  
I raised my family with a strong voice.  
I taught them right from wrong.  
I taught them dignity amidst poverty.  
I taught them love and responsibility.  
I taught them the meaning of struggle.  
I built this nation.  
I too am a working man.  
I too am an American.  
At the age of eighty-eight,  
I embrace death with a kiss.  
Death has ended my suffering.  
To die is not a tragedy,  
If one has lived and fought the good life.  
In my last journey, I will not bow my head.  
For I am a man.  
I am an American.  
I built this nation.