Poetry is pulling together and assembling the bits and shards of hurt, address, recall, and feeling, splicing and stirring them all into wholeness, into strength.

On a recent Saturday night, the weekend that time jumped ahead, revelers, outside my window, pierced my sleep. Over and over, they addressed one another, loudly, taking pleasure in repeating My Homey this and My Homey that; except another word was used, one beginning with n and ending with r. It has dual power, this word, expressing endearment and hatred as well. But those who use it to share companionship can be pushed out to the corners of visibility. Audibility, though, is another matter; the sound of blackness resonates everywhere, and its beat permeates our hear-space.

The black poetic ground of the Commonwealth is deeply rooted, buried almost 400 years ago with the urban birth of slavery. Back in Puritan times, the folks traveling on the Arabella knew their future depended on kinship; so they created a brotherhood, little different from using my homey today – which basically means we are in this together and must hold tight against the night.

Puritan prosperity, though, legislated the shackling of others, Native Americans and transported Africans. Three years after the buying and selling of flesh began, the Puritans enacted slavery as law, in the 1641 code, the Body of Liberties. A proud woman was in the first slave shipment into Boston, and she
entered history in protest in 1638. Like the recent outdoor revelers, her cries pierced the night after Samuel Maverick, her purchaser, ordered her to bed with a male he owned so he could anticipate a fresh dark child to train up in his bidding. Loud in the night, she keened her violation, and an Englishman visiting Maverick included her protest in his memoir, entering her voice into history.

Yesterday’s time, when she had dominion over the use of her body, had changed, slipping into another register, like the time bump the My Homey guys outside my window were acknowledging. They commandeered the night; and Miss 1638 also took that right, railing against what had become the new normal. Black poetry, like black language, black style, interrupts the norm; it is syncopated, and stands out against the accepted, interjecting itself, becoming counter-rhythmic to the usual and the reductive.

This anonymous, resisting woman wasn’t alone. There were others who rejected enslavement; some fought the status quo with their voices and others with their feet. In the early 1700s, when New England newspapers were first printed, the notice columns were crammed with runaway ads, revealing the visual style of the mostly male escapees, who created a look of difference with a mix of color and pattern, standing out boldly against an everyday, bland background. They were seen and hunted, as they escaped into the unknown, seeking independence.

In 1746, we leave the terrain of the anonymous black female voice. In that year, Lucy Terry composes a ballad in iambic tetrameter. Fifteen years before Phillis Wheatley landed in Boston, Terry versified in Deerfield, about villagers, killed in a Native American raid. Perhaps because she lived outside a city, we hear
less about Terry than Wheatley, a classically educated prodigy, purchased as a child. Terry lived longer than Wheatley, and had other rhetorical skills. Before the Vermont Supreme Court, she argued and won a property case against an acquisitive neighbor. Later, she appealed to the Williams College Board of Trustees to accept one of her sons; the board, however, ruled against her. Terry and Wheatley exemplify an early African talent for language, oral and written, and both claimed visibility.

Yes, there were extraordinary Africans in the Enlightenment, who linguistically slipped beyond their shackles. Among them stands Obour Tanner, a Newport slave, who wrote letters, not poems. Tanner and Wheatley shared a correspondence that lasted years. Knowing the value of her letters, and coming to the end of her days, Tanner created a succession plan. She gave the letters to Harriet Beecher Stowe’s sister-in-law, urging Mrs. William Beecher to entrust them into the right hands for preservation. Jacqui Parker, actress and playwright, recently wrote a play about Phillis Wheatley, performed in February at Hibernian Hall. Tanner is prominent in the play; so is another woman of color, a musician, whose complexion allows her to move between divided worlds. It is comforting to think that Phillis, who died young and poor, in her early thirties, had friends who managed to perpetuate her reputation.

It is this early New England trinity of black women poets that I wish to salute today. Objectified in the 17th and 18th centuries, they remain relevant because they turned their situation inside out through creative expression, written and oral. Seen and positioned as black nonentities, they boldly took subjectivity for themselves and their progeny through the wound that destroyed
the time they had known. These three initiating black muses set a recuperative, linguistic agenda, which later generations, male and female, have deepened and extended. Poetry, black poetry, is the terrain of creative contest, the ground of asserting the right to voice, the right to meaning, the right to survival, and doing so against the odds heavily arrayed against the worthiness of the self and the extended community.

They came to a place that did not recognize the past, that obliterated and reset it, and so they rallied in protest whenever they could, and this protest was syncopated, like their poetry, piercing into the everyday so that recognition might be gained. Syncopation is often applied to music; it adds a grace note to the measure. Blacks tend to syncopate what they encounter. Where there is division, they insert togetherness, often by singing in harmony when they work and when they give thanks. On the slave ship, languages, beliefs, understandings were brought together, and the impulse was to create the new with what remained of the old, celebrating and securing what could survive. The past was gone. And so they kept what they could from what they had, splicing elements together.

In their sundered world, they assembled a new wholeness from the pieces; they became adept at this; they stressed saving and combining, and this was the basis of the style and language that kept them from dying when all they knew was destroyed, and they had no place to go, except off into the night. Staccato and syncopation, sass, became their style, look, mantra, their modus operandi, and they lit out into the darkness, making sound from their pain and repeating their right to belong in a world that grabbed them from all they were, so that others might be enriched and seen as supreme.
And so, in the wilderness of the night, a woman keens. Violated, she is pushed to do what she does not desire. Against her will, her body is made a field for planting alien seed. You may drain off my blood, she says; but I will be remembered. Yes, you have ripped and torn me from all I knew, all who loved me, but I still have voice. It is mine, and I will shape it to the times so that what needs to be said is uttered. I reserve the right to split the night, remembering the dark poets of ages past, who understood the syncopation of time and slipped from one poetic register to another, from the formal into the colloquial, celebrating memory. I too can split the night, observing the syncopation of the hour.

And now I end with Derek Walcott’s words, saluting the Nobel Laureate, born on a slave-trading island, who passed last month: “... the fate of poetry is to fall in love with the world, in spite of History.”