

Eady, Cornelius
BRUTAL IMAGINATION [pointer]
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Eady, who lives in New York, is the author of six previous volumes of poetry and two music-dramas. He is currently Distinguished Writer-in-Residence at The City College of New York. The connection in Eady's work between music and drama, drawing on their close associations in African-American traditions, has never been more integrated and integral to the work at hand. The present volume comprises two distinct but related "song cycles," the first of which lends the collection its title. Though each poem here stands adequately on its own, assembled they form an even more powerful and coherent poetic narrative, the protagonist of which is the "dusky angel" invented by Susan Smith in 1995 to explain the abduction and disappearance of her two young sons. (She later confessed to leaving them in the back seat of the car she drove into a lake.) He examines the stereotypical black male in the white imagination who "loped from ear to ear" via rumor, becoming ever more phantasmagorical. The effect is chilling. With both wit and well-directed anger, the poet calls upon other mythical characters of the white imagination, Uncle Ben, Aunt Jemima, Buckwheat, Steppin Fetchit, the "ghost[s] of the scripts." The second cycle of poems derives from Eady's libretto for "Running Man," presented at Here Theatre in New York in early 1999, which concerns the portrayal of a black man who ventures from the small Southern town of his birth to a Northern city, as presented in the recollections of his family. Here the language is both more rhythmic and idiomatic, as when "a sinner smacked to the floor by the holy spirit" is compared to a flopping fish "scooped from a pond," a cogent metaphor for the rural black exodus of the 1940s and 1950s.

After overexposure in the print and electronic tabloids, this may hardly seem a fit subject for poetic exploration, but Eady's touch is masterly.