

# MARY LANE POTTER

## Argument for Sainthood

*for Gil Scott-Heron, 1949-2011*

It's still *winter in America*. No news to you.  
Sandra Bland. Breonna Taylor. George Floyd. Freddie Gray.  
I'm playing No Knock on repeat, Whitey on the Moon too.  
When I sold my vinyl, yours were the only songs I saved.  
You're my David, divine psalmist, flawed king—gone too long.  
It's you I call on to *wash my troubles away*,  
not just John Coltrane or Lady Day.  
Saint Gil, soul soother, soul stirrer, help us march our troubles away.

I saw you once. In '83, crammed club, Minneapolis.  
“He's high,” my friend said, “singing about junkies and angel dust.  
That's not jazz.” Rapt by your rhythms, tender tones, warm smile,  
I shot back, “He calls himself a *bluesologist*, says he's like a griot,  
a storyteller beat-rhyming the lives of his people,  
all people, in homes, bars, jails, on the streets, in the news—  
with humor—like Arna Bontemps and Langston Hughes.”  
Saint Gil, sing our lives to us now.

You'll make fun of me defending you to a champion of the oppressed.  
But you said it yourself: *the entire Black experience*—rage, protest,  
jobs, apartheid, war, dreams, joy, laughter, Spirits, grandmothers, loving hands—  
was your work. You wrote *storm music* for when *the weak are terrorized and  
the strong are challenged*. You bridged races, classes, peoples, continents, time.  
*A good poet feels what the community feels,  
like if you stub your toe, the rest of the body hurts.*  
Saint Gil, keep *storm music playing in our hearts*.

No doubt you'll laugh off my calling you a saint, too.  
You ripped off every label they slapped on you—  
spoken-word musician, jazzman, father of hip hop,  
warrior wordsmith, protest singer, godfather of rap,  
black Bob Dylan, ravaged genius, tortured soul, crack addict.  
Always a moving target, you'd just recite, with that sly grin,  
*I'm a piano player. I write and then I play what I write.*  
Saint Gil, play for us, play until we come round right.

*Eccentric, obnoxious, selfish, and arrogant—*  
that's who you say you are, your own Devil's Advocate.

So why this hagiography  
sampling your discography?

If saints carve their own way of being in the world,  
if saints have faith *we can sure enough change the world*,  
if they proclaim humor our sixth sense, our everyday miracle,  
if saints are messengers wounded by the sharp truths they carry,  
if saints are made by suffering,  
if they see the lie of perfection and are not undone by falling,  
if saints sing, *No matter how wrong you've gone,*  
*you can always turn around*,  
if they show us that holy means turning and turning and  
turning, hoping to come down where we ought to be,  
if saints battle demons,  
if they know *Man is a complex being.*  
*He makes deserts bloom—and lakes die*,  
if saints burn brighter than angels,  
you, piano player, are a saint,  
the one we need now.  
Saint Gil, can you hear us calling,  
calling your name?

Mary Lane Potter

(Quotes from Scott-Heron's memoir, *The Last Holiday*,  
and *Now and Then*, his collected poetry)

### Author Biography

Mary Lane Potter's books include the novel *A Woman of Salt*, the story collection *Strangers and Sojourners*, and the memoir *Seeking God and Losing the Way*. Her essays, stories, and poems have appeared in *Parabola*, *Witness*, *River Teeth*, *Still Point Arts Quarterly*, *Rogue Agent*, *The Ekphrastic Review*, *Minerva Rising*, *Women Studies Quarterly*, *Beloit Fiction Journal*, *North American Review*, *Tampa Review*, *Tiferet*, *SUFI Journal*, *Spiritus*, *Leaping Clear*, and others.  
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