

A Poem for Benjamin Thomas

In Memory of Benjamin Thomas, 1883-1899

A sense of foreboding spread
through Alexandria's streets
the night before the lynching.
The crescent moon, as it set
in the western sky, illumined
scores of Black men who gathered
to protect Benjamin Thomas
as he languished in his jail cell.

But the mayor and police halted
the community's heroic efforts
like a raging fire can silence a town.
Alone and vulnerable,
Thomas would later emit a scream
from the depth of his being,
the primal cry to his mother
for succor in his final moments.

Let us honor this voice
and this bright life
beyond his gruesome death,
this once vibrant body full of promise
now tortured and maimed
and hanged until lifeless.
With his lynching a piece of us was killed, too:
We wear the same shroud.

How do we make sense of
Benjamin Thomas's short life?
If we callously allow simple hemp fibers
to become a noose,
a poplar tree or a lamppost
to become a gallows,
what will we fashion
of our history books?

His life breath, usurped violently,
is like ours, fragile
and full of human spirit,
innocent and vital.
One with our mother breath.

May our grief over his cruel loss
impel us to action.
May his memory nourish our resolve.

(c) Zeina Azzam, Poet Laureate of the City of Alexandria, Virginia, August 2022