



# CONVERSATION WITH PHILLIS WHEATLEY

## #14

Tiana Clark

*Recovered Letter from Obour Tanner*

To Phillis Wheatley in Boston [Massachusetts]

New Port, February 6th, 1772

Dear Sister,

I'm a savage. There is savage-me, inside, wild-thick as sin, so much, my Soul  
is clabbered, but there is a Change, I sense, inside my curdled mess, Christ hung

and crucified in me, daily, a Saving Change. The Ship. Do you feel the ship, pitching,  
sometimes, inside the skin under your skin -chanting- as the Atlantic *whispered*,

lulling us, fluid as hymn and semen, in wet languages we couldn't understand?

Remember the ships

that brought us over the bent world. Let us praise these wooden beasts that saved  
the evil beast of us. Do you remember the ship, Phillis, do you remember

the rocking black milk, like I do? Remember the bowels from the reek  
inside the deathly ship? There was nothing in us to recommend us to God,

except the bowels of divine love. Remember inky black, starless black,  
blue-black with moaning, smelled like salt and salvation: God's skin hammered

with long nails like our breath, bleeding.

But we converted—we have been saved by a Saving  
Change: my Heart is a true snow-white-snow heart, Of true holiness, pure

as buttermilk, evangelical as buttermilk. But Repentance can save our people  
from a land of seeming Darkness, and where the divine light of revelation

(being cloaked) is as Darkness. What was darker than the bowels of that ship  
you were named after, do you remember Phillis, how black, black is?

The mold? Our sin, the trigger—that mist was on everything, fuzzing our damp  
little bodies with spores, encircling the air, emerald rust crawled and blossomed

inside our young lungs—it coughs and rackets the bright blood from us, like a claw  
scraping, no, like soft applause from the balcony for the swarthy to sit upon

during church, like when me met, I was a dozen broken roses, bruised as velvet,  
English and reaching desire for you,

across the pews, across the vastempty spaces, where two slaves  
(who could read and write) could touch—each other—there, as women

and call it: Praise.

Let us marvel at the Love and Grace that bought  
and brought us here. Amen.

Your very humble servant and friend,

Obour Tanner