Lunch breaks, summer I was 20 clerking for the City, I’d sit on marble benches across from the glass palace of DWP, over at the Mark Taper, a theater-in-the-round, eat my sack lunch of sandwich and chips, and read a book – *Leaves of Grass, The Voice That Is Great Within Us*. . .

It was hot, upper 80s, the air particled with smog that made an opaque scrim if you gazed down Dewap and Fig to the hills of Chavez Ravine in the distance.

I’d lie down and feel the marble under me, let angers drain from my body as the stone lifted its arms and cold thighs, wresting anguish away.

Once, after a long time lying still as a cadaver, diffuse sun washing over me, I thought back a half-dozen years to the first time I’d been there, taken with other boys my age, me alone Japanese, and first heard a magisterial language:

> *Sirs, I am sixty years old. I have lived all my life Like a wild beast in hiding. Without child, without wife People forget me like the mist on Monkey Mountain.*

“Bring two dollars and a sack lunch,” Quincy said through his missing front teeth, dreadlocks dangling to frame his face. “We goin’ to see a play by a Caribbean brother.”
About twelve of us, bloods and a Buddhahead at the Watts 
Writers’ Workshop, 
were carted by bus, 103rd St. to downtown, Four Tops on our 
transistors—
“Baby, I need your loving . . .” as we swayed and rolled our hands, 
mimicking 
moves the Tops made as they crooned “Got to have all . . . Oowhoo 

We made it to the Music Center, filed out, $2 matinee, got second 
row seats; 
lights going dim, then dark, and a spot fell on the white disc of an 
African drum, 
then a luminous moon floated over a volcano, soft CO₂ fog 
creeping onto the stage. 
A dancer. Then a tall man in a top hat and frock coat, his face 
half-white with makeup. 
They gyrated, then spider danced, weaving their hands, and a 
voice rose, 
the rich Caribbean patois, a creole of English I’d never heard, 
and yet understood. It was chanting, chanting . . .

Ooo, it’s the Uncola Man! The Uncola Man!
someone down the row whispered and was shushed, then a soft 
billow of light 
tumbled its fingers through a cataract of glitter across the rise of 
voices and the moon.

Sirs, make a white mist
In the mind; make that mist hang like a cloth
From the dress of a woman, on prickles on branches, 
Make it rise from the earth, like the breath of the dead 
On resurrection morning, and I walking through it . . .

It was a dream and I was in it, back as a boy in fields of cane by 
the sea again, 
weeping for that memory at fourteen, the sound and strophes of 
my own desmesne
reaching, even now, through tides and shallows glittering with
the night’s cascade
I still wear as a mantle of stars and warm rain dancing me into
the next silver decade.

GARRETT HONGO, poet, essayist, and memoirist, is author of many books, including The River of
Heaven, Coral Road: Poems, and The Mirror Diary. He is Distinguished Professor in the College of Arts
and Sciences and professor of creative writing at the University of Oregon.

Image: Mischa Askenazy (1888-1961), Chavez Ravine, c. 1940