

"African Canadian in Union Blue" by Michael Fraser

 [cbc.ca/books/african-canadian-in-union-blue-by-michael-fraser-1.4110981](https://www.cbc.ca/books/african-canadian-in-union-blue-by-michael-fraser-1.4110981)

CBC Books · May 12



Michael Fraser won the 2016 CBC Poetry Prize for "African Canadian in Union Blue." (Krystyna Wesolowska)

I was AWOL, an unpaid ridge runner, hawking
distance from the coal-shaded Fifty-fourth
Massachusetts, pulling fleet foot through night
brush, my feet bramble-clawed and day-sore
yowling for a pair of spendy cruisers.
Bounty men near caught me in tamarack
larch. I saw their smoothbore guns day clear,
their eyes haired-up and owly. I was hanging
by my eyelids and angled abeam through
light-blazed meadow balm, jumping log cob
and bull stumps, moss-bitten rot-hole fallers,
deploying all the natural speed my buck-bred
seed-folk gave me. I was baseborn in Chatham,

mammy giving life to six pin-baskets in a rickety
pushcart. If I were to see him now, I'd ask daddy
why he heeled-off before eyeing me wrapped in
scrapped yarn. His master named him John, echoing
the new testament, and what mammy's broken water
branded me. Whitney's cotton gin nearly snapped
his hamitic saddle-brown back half open. Some days
he bleated raw like a crushed side-born calf, sliding
away from full breath. Heard he upped and skyrooted
through Virginia pine faster than whiskey jacks whistling
over feed camps, and sparked mammy's teenage
mind before stone-rolling to his novel life, a rail toad
booming around rusted aged jimmys and ragshag
toonerville trolleys. I continued dim-moon travelling
west through puckerbush, sledge, and prick-filled
tanglewood, lodging with other lucked-out negroes
beside slick calm finger lakes, hauling soaked rick to
hem-load tipcarts. We'd light down to chew tuff
cow-greased pone before snacking tobacco ropes,
our smoky tea-skinned black bodies day-whipped
and legged out. White clodhopper abolitionists and
schoolmarms let me sleep on shakedown and boil-up
my battered threads out back, stooped over hose bibbs,
rubboards, or wind-turned mill wash. A swamp Yankee
and his jake leg wife above Rochester stodged up
scrapple, fire-burnt tunkup, and slack salted Pope's nose.
We popped it down with overproof lamp oil and everyone
was all in, plow shined. My mind was so jag skated,
I talked all my closed business like I was up a redwood
tree. Can't extract when my head clunked the sewed-rag

shuck bed. I night-woke bedfast with scarlet runners
beetling my bare flesh. Sweat runnelled and rilled
either side of my chest hillslopes. Heard hushed words
and realised they were studying to forlay me to sellers.
Morning I pretended to smudge along, then lit
out crow-quick past tumps and shadebark glades of
knurled hickory. On the final night, I met bullhorn
thunderheads throwing froth-smurred gulley washers
and stump-mover skies. I squinched and child-stivered
through teeming chizzly freshets that sizzled and gaffed me,
the mud water pooling the path's apron. Almost done in,
I saw America's back forty sproutland, sun-glimming
and drying after the rains had sugared-off. I went down
the ravine scoop smiling towards birlers and their floaty
Niagara chuck boats, waiting to river cross into Canaan.