Audre Lorde's signed draft "Women on Trains" poem to Angela Bowen and M. Jacqui Alexander

Audre Lorde

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WOMEN ON TRAINS
FOR Angela & Jacqui

Eleanor Roosevelt riding the rails
behind her husband's casket
forefinger tense along the propped cheek
one knuckle caressing her lips
young Nell's dreams laced between
the sentinel stalks of mullein

giving
in the whip of the journey's wind
my mother's mandatory hat
in a no-nonsense tilt
at the office windows in wartime
scanning Lenox Avenue
for the coal delivery truck.

Women on trains have a life that is
exactly liveable
the precision of days flashing past
review overlook - no intervention allowed
the true shapes of each season
relentless - carved out across the land.

I have dreamed over mountains
the earth crannied below
deep - a spread woman waiting
but the pace of this laden sky heals me
through the ugliness
stacks of heat-treated lumber
and beyond
the bare arms of scrub maple and poplar
already ablush a promise
like the bodies of children sleeping.

Was it ever business as usual for these women
as the snow-driven hopes and fears
swirled past the tenement office window
and nappy-topped stands of unreachable trees
flowed along in the southern dusk?
The coal truck arrived after dark
barely half-a-ton of dusty bituminous
and she shoveled it down herself
in the frigid Harlem night
the tenants briefly appeased
and coal dust on my mother's tired hat
as the subway screamed us home.

Women on trains have a chance
to unweave our tangles
was it between Blythe and Patchoula
Eleanor chose to live her own days?
I have just counseled a woman
badly
to be who I am no longer willing to be
for my living
a stopgap hurled into the breech
beyond any touch of support
I search through these rushing sun-dark trees
for your phone number
to acknowledge both you and I
are free to go.

Audre Lorde's signed draft of Women on Trains poem to Angela Bowen and M. Jacqui Alexander as a new title.