Poem: 1974 Audre Lorde “Blackstudies”

Audre Lorde

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Blackstudies

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FULL TEXT

I
1 A chill wind sweeps the high places.
2 On the ground I watch bearers of wood
3 carved in the image of old and mistaken gods
4 labour in search of weapons against the blind dancers
5 who balance great dolls on their shoulders
6 as they scramble over the same earth
7 searching for food.

8 In a room on the 17th floor my spirit is choosing
9 I am afraid of speaking
10 the truth
11 in a room on the 17th floor
12 my body is dreaming
13 it sits
14 bottom pinned to a table
15 eating perpetual watermelon inside my own head
16 while young girls assault my door
17 with curse rags
18 stiff with their mothers old secrets
19 covering up their new promise
20 with old desires no longer their need
21 with old satisfactions they never enjoyed
22 outside my door they are waiting
23 with questions that feel like judgements
24 when they are unanswered.

25 The palms of my hands have black marks running across them.
26 So are signed makers of myth
27 who are sworn through our blood to give
28 legend
29 children will come to understand
30 to speak out living words like this poem
31 that knits truth into fable
32 to leave my story behind
33 though I fall through cold wind condemned
34 to nursing old gods for a new heart
35 debtless and without colour
36 while my flesh is covered by mouths
37 whose noise keeps my real wants secret.

38 I do not want to lie. I have loved other
39 tall young women deep into their colour
40 who now crawl over a bleached earth
41 bent into questionmarks
42 ending a sentence of men
43 who pretended to be brave.
44 Even this
45 can be an idle defense
46 protecting the lies I am trying to reject.

47 I am afraid
48 that the mouths I feed will turn against me
49 will refuse to swallow in the silence
50 I am warning them to avoid
51 I am afraid
52 they will kernel me out like a walnut
53 extracting the nourishing seed
54 as my husk stains their lips
55 with the mixed colours of my pain.

56 While I sit choosing the voice
57 in which my children hear my prayers
58 above the wind
59 they will follow the black roads out of my hands
60 unencumbered by the weight of my remembered sorrows
61 by the weight of my remembered sorrows
62 they will use my legends to shape their own language
63 and make it ruler
64 measuring the distance between my hungers
65 and their own purpose.
66 I am afraid
67 They will discard my most ancient nightmares
68 where the fallen gods became demon
69 instead of dust.
II
70 Just before light devils woke me
71 trampling my flesh into fruit
72 that would burst in the sun
73 until I came to despise every evening
74 fearing a strange god at the fall of each night
75 and when my mother punished me
76 by sending me to bed without my prayers
77 I had no names for darkness.

78 I do not know whose words protected me
79 whose tales or tears prepared me
80 for this trial on the 17th floor
81 I do not know whose legends blew
82 through my mothers furies
83 but somehow they fell through my sleeping lips
84 like the juice of forbidden melons
85 and the little black seeds were sown
86 throughout my heart
87 like closed and waiting eyes
88 and although demons rode me
89 until I rose up a child of morning
90 deep roads sprouted over the palms
91 of my hidden fists
92 dark and growing.

III
93 Chill winds swirl around these high blank places.
94 It is the time when the bearer of hard news
95 is destroyed for the message
96 when it is heard.
97 A. B. is a poet who says our people
98 fear our own beauty
99 has not made us hard enough
100 to survive victory
101 but he too has written his children upon women
102 I hope with love.
103 I bear mine alone in the mouth of the enemy
104 upon a desk on the 17th floor
105 swept bare by cold winds
106 bright as neon.
Their demon father rode me just before daylight
I learned his tongue as he reached
for my hands at dawn
before he could touch the palms of my hands
to devour my children
I learned his language
I ate him
and left his bones mute in the noon sun.

Now all the words in my legend come garbled
except anguish.
Visions of chitterlings I never ate
strangle me in a nightmare of leaders
at crowded meetings to study our problems
I move awkward and ladylike
through four centuries of unused bathtubs
that never smile
not even an apologetic grin
I worry on nationalist holidays
make a fetish of lateness
with limp unbelieved excuses
shunning the use of pronouns
as an indirect assult
what skin I have left
unbetrayed by scouring
uncovered by mouths that shriek
but do not speak my real wants
glistens and twinkles blinding all beholders
“But I just washed them, Mommy!”

Only the black marks on my hands itch and flutter
shredding my words and wherever they fall
the earth springs up denials
that I pay for
only the dark roads over my palms
wait for my voice
to follow.

The chill wind is beating down from the high places.
My students wait outside my door
searching condemning listening
for what I am sworn to tell them
for what they least want to hear
147  clogging the only exit from the 17th floor
148  begging in their garbled language
149  beyond judgement or understanding
150  “oh speak to us now mother for soon
151  we will not need you
152  only your memory
153  teaching us questions.”

154  Stepping into my self
155  I open the door
156  and leap groundward
157  wondering
158  what shall they carve for weapons
159  what shall they grow for food.

DETAILS

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