Poem: 1974 Audre Lorde “Blackstudies”

Audre Lorde

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

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

The palms of my hands have black marks running across them.
So are signed makers of myth
who are sworn through our blood to give
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.

IV
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.