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Published Poem: 1993 Audre Lorde, "Women on Trains"

Audre Lorde

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Women on Trains

Lorde, Audre . In *The Collected Poems Of Audre Lorde* , Lorde, Audre, 448-449. New York: 1997.

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FULL TEXT

for Jacqui and Angela

1 Leaving the known for another city
2 the club-car smells of old velvet
3 rails whisper relief mantras
4 steel upon steel
5 every fourth thud breaks the hum
6 "stand and fight," I said
7 leaving my words for ransom
8 "your only way out."

9 This train is a doorway
10 bent into the shape of a scale.

11 Eleanor Roosevelt riding the rails
12 behind her husband's casket
13 forefinger tense along a propped cheek
14 one knuckle caressing her lips
15 young Nell's dreams strung along
16 sentinel stalks of mullein
17 giving
18 in the whip of the journey's wind
19 my mother's mandatory hat
20 at a no-nonsense tilt
21 beside the tenement windows of wartime
22 scanning Lenox Avenue
23 for a coal-delivery truck.

24 Women on trains
25 have a life
26 that is exactly livable
27 the precision of days flashing past

28 no intervention allowed
29 and the shape of each season
30 relentlessly carved in the land.

31 I have soared over crannied earth
32 spread like a woman waiting
33 but this angled sky anchors me
34 inward through the ugliness
35 shards of bright fireweed loosestrife
36 and stacks of heat-treated lumber beyond
37 the bare arms of scrub-maple and poplar
38 already ablush.

39 Was it ever business as usual for these women
40 as snow-driven hopes and fears swirled
41 past tenement office windows
42 and nappy-topped stands of unreachable trees
43 flowed along in the southern dusk?

44 The coal truck arrived after dark dumping
45 barely half-a-ton of bituminous
46 my father gone to his second job
47 she shoveled it down herself
48 in the freezing Harlem night
49 and coal dusted my mother's tired hat
50 as the subway screamed us home.

51 Women on trains have a chance
52 to unweave their tangles.
53 Perhaps between Blythe and Patchoula
54 Eleanor chose to live her own days.
55 The subway tunnel walls
56 closed in like thunder
57 and my mother never had a chance
58 to lay her magic down.

59 Between new lumber and the maples
60 I rehear your question
61 owning
62 the woman who breaks the woman
63 who is broken.

64 I counseled you unwisely my sister
 65 to be who I am no longer
 66 willing to be for my living
 67 stopgap hurled into the breach
 68 beyond support beyond change
 69 and I search these rushing sun-dark trees
 70 for your phone number
 71 to acknowledge
 72 both you and I
 73 are free to go.

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