Eleven Poems

by

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(Selected by Chana Bloch)

Editor’s Note: The poems “Blackbottom,” “Christmas Eve: My Mother Dressing,” “Squeaky Bed,” “Boy at the Patterson Falls,” “On Stopping Late in the Afternoon for Steamed Dumplings,” and “On the Turning Up of Unidentified Black Female Corpses” are from Captivity (University of Pittsburgh Press: 1989). The poems “Black Boys Play the Classics,” “After a Reading at a Black College,” “For Black Women Who Are Afraid,” “Grace Paley Reading,” and “Clitoris” are from Tender (University of Pittsburgh Press: 1997). We are very grateful to Toi Derricotte and the University of Pittsburgh Press for allowing us to include these poems here.

Christmas Eve: My Mother Dressing

My mother was not impressed with her beauty;

once a year she put it on like a costume,

plaited her black hair, slick as cornsilk, down past her hips,

in one rope-thick braid, turned it, carefully, hand over hand,

and fixed it at the nape of her neck, stiff and elegant as a crown,

with tortoise pins, like huge insects,

some belonging to her dead mother,

some to my living grandmother.

Sitting on the stool at the mirror,

she applied a peachy foundation that seemed to hold her down,

to trap her,

as if we never would have noticed what flew among us unless

it was weighted and bound in its mask.
Vaseline shined her eyebrows,
mascara blackened her lashes until they swept down like feathers;
her eyes deepened until they shone from far away.

Now I remember her hands, her poor hands, which, even then
were old from scrubbing,
whiter on the inside than they should have been,
and hard, the first joints of her fingers, little fattened pads,
the nails filed to sharp points like old-fashioned ink pens,
    painted a jolly color.
Her hands stood next to her face and wanted to be put away,
    prayed
for the scrub bucket and brush to make them useful.
And, as I write, I forget the years I watched her
pull hairs like a witch from her chin, magnify
every blotch—as if acid were thrown from the inside.

But once a year my mother
rose in her white silk slip,
not the slave of the house, the woman,
took the ironed dress from the hanger—
allowing me to stand on the bed, so that
my face looked directly into her face,
and hold the garment away from her
as she pulled it down.
When relatives came from out of town,
we would drive down to Blackbottom,
drive slowly down the congested main streets
—Beubian and Hastings—
trapped in the mesh of Saturday night.
Freshly escaped, black middle class,
we snickered, and were proud;
the louder the streets, the prouder.
We laughed at the bright clothes of a prostitute,
a man sitting on a curb with a bottle in his hand.
We smelled barbecue cooking in dented washtubs,
and our mouths watered.
As much as we wanted it we couldn't take the chance.

Rhythm and blues came from the windows, the throaty voice of
a woman lost in the bass, in the drums, in the dirty down
and out, the grind.
"I love to see a funeral, then I know it ain't mine."
We rolled our windows down so that the waves rolled over us
like blood.
We hoped to pass invisibly, knowing on Monday we would
return safely to our jobs, the post office and classroom.
We wanted our sufferings to be offered up as tender meat,
and our triumphs to be belted out in raucous song.
We had lost our voice in the suburbs, in Conant Gardens,
where each brick house delineated a fence of silence;
we had lost the right to sing in the street and damn creation.

We returned to wash our hands of them,
to smell them
whose very existence
tore us down to the human.

Black Boys Play the Classics

The most popular "act" in
Penn Station
is the three black kids in ratty
sneakers & T-shirts playing
two violins and a cello—Brahms.
White men in business suits
have already dug into their pockets
as they pass and they toss in
a dollar or two without stopping.
Brown men in work-soiled khakis
stand with their mouths open,
arms crossed on their bellies
as if they themselves have always
wanted to attempt those bars.
One white boy, three, sits
cross-legged in front of his
idols—in ecstasy—
their slick, dark faces,
their thin, wiry arms,
who must begin to look
like angels!
Why does this trembling
pull us?
A: Beneath the surface we are one.
B: Amazing! I did not think that they could speak this tongue.
For Black Women Who Are Afraid

A black woman comes up to me at break in the writing workshop and reads me her poem, but she says she can't read it out loud because there's a woman in a car on her way to work and her hair is blowing in the breeze and, since her hair is blowing, the woman must be white, and she shouldn't write about a white woman whose hair is blowing, because maybe the black poets will think she wants to be that woman and be mad at her and say she hates herself, and maybe they won't let her explain that she grew up in a white neighborhood and it's not her fault, it's just what she sees. But she has to be so careful. I tell her to write the poem about being afraid to write, and we stand for a long time like that, respecting each other's silence.
After a Reading at a Black College

Maybe one day we will have
written about this color thing
until we've solved it. Tonight
when I read my poems about
looking white, the audience strains
forward with their whole colored
bodies—a part of each person praying
that my poems will make sense.
Poems do that sometimes—take
the craziness and salvage some
small clear part of the soul,
and that is why, though frightened,
I don't stop the spirit. After,
though some people come
to speak to me, some
seem to step away,
as if I've hurt them once
too often and they have
no forgiveness left. I feel myself
hurry from person to person, begging.
_Hold steady, Harriet Tubman whispers,
Don't flop around._
Oh my people,
sometimes you look at me
with such unwillingness—
as I look at you!
I keep trying to prove
I am not what I think you think.
Finally, the audience gets restless, & they send me to hunt for Grace. I find her backing out of the bathroom, bending over, wiping up her footprints as she goes with a little sheet of toilet paper, explaining, "In some places, after the lady mops, the bosses come to check on her. I just don't want them to think she didn't do her job."
On Stopping Late in the Afternoon for Steamed Dumplings

The restaurant is empty
except for the cooks and waiters.
One makes a pillow of linens
and sleeps, putting his feet up in a booth;
another folds paper tablecloths. Why
have I stopped to eat alone on this rainy
day? Why savor the wet meat of the
steamed dumpling? As I pick it up,
the waiter appraises me. Am I
one of those women who must stop
for treats along the way—am I that starved?
The white dough burns—much too hot—yet,
I stick it in my mouth, quickly,
as if to destroy the evidence.
The waiter still watches. Suddenly
I am sorry to be here, sad,
my little pleasure stolen.
Squeaky Bed

At your mother’s house we lie
stiff in our bed as paper dolls.
Soon you snore and the crickets burst
through the window with squeaky horns.

She is old and toothless,
when we make love we
rock in the arms of a
new mother, she will not hear.

The crickets never sleep. All night
they want it.
Love is more real
than fear. Soon we will
give ourselves over to the noise.

Clitoris

This time with your mouth on my clitoris, I will not think
he does not like the taste of me. I lift the purplish hood back
from the pale white berry. It stands alone on its thousand branches.
I lift the skin like the layers of taffeta of a lady's skirt.
How shy the clitoris is, like a young girl
who must be coaxed by tenderness.
Boy at the Paterson Falls

I am thinking of that boy who bragged about the day he threw a dog over and watched it struggle to stay upright all the way down.
I am thinking of that rotting carcass on the rocks, and the child with such power he could call to a helpless thing as if he were its friend, capture it, and think of the cruelest punishment.
It must have answered some need, some silent screaming in a closet, a motherless call when night came crashing; it must have satisfied, for he seemed joyful, proud, as if he had once made a great creation out of murder.
That body on the rocks, its sharp angles, slowly took the shape of what was underneath, bones pounded, until it lay on the bottom like a scraggly rug.
Nothing remains but memory—and the suffering of those who would walk into the soft hands of a killer for a crumb of bread.
On the Turning Up
of Unidentified Black Female Corpses

Mowing his three acres with a tractor, 
a man notices something ahead—a mannequin—
he thinks someone threw it from a car. Closer
he sees it is the body of a black woman.

The medics come and turn her with pitchforks. 
Her gaze shoots past him to nothing. Nothing
is explained. How many black women
have been turned up to stare at us blankly,

in weedy fields, off highways,
pushed out in plastic bags,
shot, knifed, unclothed partially, raped,
their wounds sealed with a powdery crust.

Last week on TV, a gruesome face, eyes bloated shut. 
No one will say, "She looks like she's sleeping," ropes
of blue-black slashes at the mouth. Does anybody
know this woman? Will anyone come forth? Silence

like a backwave rushes into that field
where, just the week before, four other black girls
had been found. The gritty image hangs in the air
just a few seconds, but it strikes me,

a black woman, there is a question being asked
about my life. How can I
protect myself? Even if I lock my doors,
walk only in the light, someone wants me dead.
Am I wrong to think
if five white women had been stripped,
broken, the sirens would wail until
someone was named?

Is it any wonder I walk over these bodies
pretending they are not mine, that I do not know
the killer, that I am just like any woman—
if not wanted, at least tolerated.

Part of me wants to disappear, to pull
the earth on top of me. Then there is this part
that digs me up with this pen
and turns my sad black face to the light.