

Classic Poetry Series

Ai

- poems -

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Conversation

We smile at each other
and I lean back against the wicker couch.
How does it feel to be dead? I say.
You touch my knees with your blue fingers.
And when you open your mouth,
a ball of yellow light falls to the floor
and burns a hole through it.
Don't tell me, I say. I don't want to hear.
Did you ever, you start,
wear a certain kind of dress
and just by accident,
so inconsequential you barely notice it,
your fingers graze that dress
and you hear the sound of a knife cutting paper,
you see it too
and you realize how that image
is simply the extension of another image,
that your own life
is a chain of words
that one day will snap.
Words, you say, young girls in a circle, holding hands,
and beginning to rise heavenward
in their confirmation dresses,
like white helium balloons,
the wreathes of flowers on their heads spinning,
and above all that,
that's where I'm floating,
and that's what it's like
only ten times clearer,
ten times more horrible.
Could anyone alive survive it?

Anonymous submission.

Ai

Grandfather Says

"Sit in my hand."
I'm ten.
I can't see him,
but I hear him breathing
in the dark.
It's after dinner playtime.
We're outside,
hidden by trees and shrubbery.
He calls it hide-and-seek,
but only my little sister seeks us
as we hide
and she can't find us,
as grandfather picks me up
and rubs his hands between my legs.
I only feel a vague stirring
at the edge of my consciousness.
I don't know what it is,
but I like it.
It gives me pleasure
that I can't identify.
It's not like eating candy,
but it's just as bad,
because I had to lie to grandmother
when she asked,
"What do you do out there?"
"Where?" I answered.
Then I said, "Oh, play hide-and-seek."
She looked hard at me,
then she said, "That was the last time.
I'm stopping that game."
So it ended and I forgot.
Ten years passed, thirtyfive,
when I began to reconstruct the past.
When I asked myself
why I was attracted to men who disgusted me
I traveled back through time
to the dark and heavy breathing part of my life
I thought was gone,
but it had only sunk from view
into the quicksand of my mind.
It was pulling me down
and there I found grandfather waiting,
his hand outstretched to lift me up,
naked and wet
where he rubbed me.
"I'll do anything for you," he whispered,
"but let you go."
And I cried, "Yes," then "No."
"I don't understand how you can do this to me.
I'm only ten years old,"
and he said, "That's old enough to know."

Ai

Riot Act, April 29, 1992

I'm going out and get something.
I don't know what.
I don't care.
Whatever's out there, I'm going to get it.
Look in those shop windows at boxes
and boxes of Reeboks and Nikes
to make me fly through the air
like Michael Jordan
like Magic.
While I'm up there, I see Spike Lee.
Looks like he's flying too
straight through the glass
that separates me
from the virtual reality
I watch everyday on TV.
I know the difference between
what it is and what it isn't.
Just because I can't touch it
doesn't mean it isn't real.
All I have to do is smash the screen,
reach in and take what I want.
Break out of prison.
South Central homey's newly risen
from the night of living dead,
but this time he lives,
he gets to give the zombies
a taste of their own medicine.
Open wide and let me in,
or else I'll set your world on fire,
but you pretend that you don't hear.
You haven't heard the word is coming down
like the hammer of the gun
of this black son, locked out of this big house,
while massa looks out the window and sees only smoke.
Massa doesn't see anything else,
not because he can't,
but because he won't.
He'd rather hear me talking about mo' money,
mo' honeys and gold chains
and see me carrying my favorite things
from looted stores
than admit that underneath my Raider's cap,
the aftermath is staring back
unblinking through the camera's lens,
courtesy of CNN,
my arms loaded with boxes of shoes
that I will sell at the swap meet
to make a few cents on the declining dollar.
And if I destroy myself
and my neighborhood
"ain't nobody's business, if I do,"
but the police are knocking hard

at my door
and before I can open it,
they break it down
and drag me in the yard.
They take me in to be processed and charged,
to await trial,
while Americans forget
the day the wealth finally trickled down
to the rest of us.

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