

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Imani Tolliver: Two Poems

Imani Tolliver · Wednesday, December 6th, 2017

Imani Tolliver is a poet, artist, and educator. She is a Cave Canem Fellow and served as Poet Laureate for the Watts Towers Arts Center. Tolliver is a recipient of the Avest Award for Literary Arts, the Howard University John J. Wright Literary Award, and the Lannan Literary Fellowship at the Folger Shakespeare Library. She has also been recognized by the City of Los Angeles for her work as a promoter, host, and publicist in support of the literary arts in Southern California. Visit her website: www.imanitolliver.com.

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the fire this time. remembering april, 1992

i remember saying

boo

to a volvo on the westside

filled with frightened white faces

who was i to be afraid of, anyway

a twentysomething, veggie, westside girl

fighting the good fight of inclusion and voice

at a predominately white community college

by the beach

where my best friends sold jewelry and fell in love

boo

and i became their worst fear

and what must that fear look like

a skirt made of watermelon rinds

my face blackened with coal

each braid secured with tiny white bows

my head tilted to one questioning angle

ooga, booga, booga boo

and i am the minstrel show
 the kill whitey of nightmares
 the organizing, uppity type
 the well-read new negro with all the answers
 a revolution over my right shoulder
 an army of fatigued nappy babies
 in black berets to my left
 and my man, my king
 festooned in armory of red, black and green
 kwanzaa baskets brimming with fruit and ears of corn
 habari gani, my sister
 as my brown fist eclipses all traces of light

let me explain:

i know what it's like to be called nigger
 to favor the fairer without knowing why
 to fold my lips inward, suck them smaller than they are
 i remember fresh permanent relaxers
 and leaving the salon
 a southland breeze feathering all the shiny
 scabbed crown of me
 as i got in the car and sang songs
 on the wrong side of the f.m. dial
 remembering the anorexic, ditto and candies clad
 white girls of hale jr. high
 who taught me how to hate my body

this rage comes from somewhere

i remember finding out about the harlem renaissance
 at a bookstore on the westside
 all big and glossy
 like, of course you know about these painters
 and posers for james van der zee
 of course you marveled at the way he captured light
 on smoke and bourgeois ladies
 how he made up allegories with children
 superimposed in wedding portraits
 and angels in still lifes of the dead

there is a scream that occurs
 when you are left out of something

a dying happens
 to blacks who don't want you to acknowledge them
 at a westside gathering
 the dread who favors the white girls
 the way candy favors sweet

i mean without one, there is no other

there is a place where silence comes from

i remember tanks on palms boulevard
counting the flame twisters of south central
the day we learned our lives were cheaper
than we suspected

all i wanted to do
was to make sure my brother was safe
that my mama got home from the valley
that we were together
that we could survive this
praying that it would pass
and hearing over and over
that quote from a place i have forgotten

*you know you will be ready for a revolution
when you are ready to eat rats*

the grocery store on the corner
sold out of every bag of bread and gallon of milk
we watched newscasters call us names
finding a place for their rage
we watched interviewers on tv
asking the poor why they were taking baby formula
and diapers from abandoned markets
i suppose i never felt so small
so silent
because i wasn't ready for no bloody revolution
wasn't ready to eat rats
and the fist i held up on la brea and wilshire
that first night
was to protect myself from a brother
standing in the middle of the street
looking for a place to put his bullets, his rage

i do what i am supposed to do
learn to look beyond the signifiers of class and color
understand that beyond every revolution
is another story, another oppression

one summer in south central on a schoolyard
i noticed that everyone was brown
each african, cambodian, chicano child
looked a bit like me
i couldn't make out their races as they played
and i realized that we shared something

that i couldn't exactly name

it is the same feeling i get
when my friend john writes an enlightened poem
about the violation of white privilege
and owns his own peculiar benefit
doled out by the slave trade, centuries ago

it will be impossible to pay the debt
to rub smooth the relief of slavery from our backs
there may always be a time
when we favor our hair as smooth and glassy
as michael jackson's
look at the toll colonization and self-hatred
has taken on his face

i believe in love
and i will believe in it
until i am gone
until my scars are ash
and i am the sum of my journals

besides
how are you gonna hold hands with anyone
with your fists all balled up
like that

frida

despite the judas body, she painted

the body that cut their son into pieces
and still she painted

garden flowers in her hair, a rebozo on her shoulders
she painted

her diego
found the flesh of women irresistible
as did she
irresistible

if i were her lover
i would caution the seams
the cut and sewn parts

she would hold me
in the same mouth warmed by posole, chili

her lick, a sliver of flan
with caramel at the tip

i would coax the sweet
peel back the bristle
to find the tender waiting
becoming the taste of what tastes it

her paintings follow me
they come as cards, trinkets
from women, always

the jewelry
the paintings
the tiny altars and books
tell me
speak

you must speak
cough the ribbons of your tongue free
lick the flesh that calls you
ink fingertips when you cannot find a brush
walls when canvas is not nearby
put flowers in your hair
the big, gorgeous ones from your garden
wear the colors of your own flag
create when baffled
create when sorrowful
abandon the prickle of fear
and be of your own making
begin from deep, deep
feel the tremor
the push, the work root
the quaking blossom
of who you really are

let light
let you
be free

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