

8/20/16

Dear Fatisha,

I was thinking today of how we first came to meet, at that bookstore up in Harlem. How Wes and I, on the way out, having heard the Chicago poet we came to hear, Carolyn Rogers, stopped in our tracks when your voice came over the partition that separated the reading room from the rest of the store. How, without a word to each other, we turned and went back in, and for half an hour sat, as you recited, without page or prompt, poem after poem, into the stunned silence, such was the surprise of your voice, and your words.

Who *is* she? The question went around when you were done calling us all to task, asking why we hadn't done more- *What if you was bulletproof/would you make a revolution then?* I remember how you held your hands, fingers pressed to palm. All the host had said, by way of introduction, was that you were a guest, a last minute addition to the program. From California, she added.

Two days later, on a Tuesday morning, that voice came to me again, blind, over an office partition, into the cubicle where I sat proofreading the science pages that Paul Robeson's son had translated from Russian into English. That's her! I said to my co-worker, that's the poet, as I craned around the corner, making signs to my supervisor to hire her, please, right away, she's amazing, I don't care if she can only type ten words a minute, if her hair looks uncombed, if she's wearing no makeup! And you turned to face me, with something like recognition, the most direct eyes I'd ever seen, while I mumbled remember, we met Sunday, when you read *Every crazy man must love a crazy woman*, and my heart said, yes, of course, why didn't I think of that line, why didn't I write it down...

After that we walked every day to lunch in the playground down the road leaning against the stone turtle and smoking and reading things to each other so upon our return the manager would look up at the clock in his office which faced the elevator and stare at our strange grins. Sylvia the typing pool supervisor would say to me one day, please tell your friend to stop typing poems when she's supposed to be typing pages of the new journal already late for press. And you looked at me as if it were betrayal to even deliver the message. Those poems came out of you nonstop every day, and then your voice turned them into gold. They made me high, more than the reefer, more than the turtle which, after a while, seemed to smile, as the children ran around us.

Little by little, we formed our group--The Bud Jones Poets, based on a redcap developed by Wes in one of his stories, whose anonymity you liked-- you, me, Wesley, Verano, and that eighteen-year-old genius kid Dennis you discovered, who wrote *I Could Always Tell When My Mother Was Talking to Miss Ann*. We became like family, including your son, Tabala- war drum. Even now, your history astounds me: the men in suits who came to your hotel in the Village, when we put a ladder to your window and snuck you and your partner Earl with his double bass out, while they questioned the guy at the desk in the lobby; your real name, which we never found out (What is it?); the accidents that seemed to follow you, like the flood in Wesley's apartment, the day after you moved in. We fought often, you and I, over how many nights we would read in that cold, poorly-lit basement, how many times rehearse till your poem with the line *The more you stiffen/ the more I'm able to bend* ran smoothly into mine, *You're The One*.

You came to Brooklyn and left a note, believing I was home, just not answering the door. I confess now this island boy was somewhat intimidated by your worldliness, the way you and your words dared all comers, the way you challenged me to be more, the force you believed we could be, against all odds- *What if you was bulletproof...?* We loved you, but you scared us when you hit that woman with your flute, after she complained of your late-night playing, when you took that saxophone player from his wife, leaving her devastated. When you told the audience to hold their applause, and they needed so desperately to let you know how much you moved them. *I come from another planet, a bodiless being*, you insisted.

When we read at that prison upstate, the inmates sat mesmerized. You answered their questions as if you knew their lives, as though you knew where they should go from there. When Wes went to jail for refusing to go to Viet Nam, you became a fundraising force, made us the faithful who helped to see him through. And when the cancer came to your door, you directed it to a corner, while you took up a brush like a new weapon and began painting watercolors, learning by walking the long corridors in museums and observing techniques, how an arm draped over a lover's shoulder, how a cupboard braced against a wall. I have a few of the hundreds you did, the woman with experienced eyes observing me as I write this, the pendulous breasts unafraid of drooping.

I never flew to California to visit you in that nursing home. Wes did, and spoke of your calm resolve to the end. Your greatest disappointment was in Tabala, he said, who had bonded with his father as he grew to manhood, becoming successfully conservative, far removed from the rusty-headed boy who leaned against your leg while you read, who once caused a flowerpot to fall from your windowsill, narrowly missing a pedestrian eight stories below, whom, when he came to complain, you threatened with real injury. Tabala, down South somewhere, far from his mother.

From time to time I take down your books, *Sapphire Longing In the Blue Dust* and the other one the name of which escapes me now, and your ms *Ballet Largo*. And I read your verse, your mythic but oh-so-real lyricism, and between the lines I find you, remonstrating, dismissing the fearful, rejoicing in the possible, *Sapphire- fat in the desire/to make love real*.

Since you left, Dennis has found his way back to poetry, our wonder boy now in his fifties picking up the pen again. Wesley is as droll as ever, as when after his apartment flooded he quipped, "First time tragedy, second time farce." Recently, his house in the woods burned down.

I say now, more bravely than I ever could before, I love you. Perhaps it's the start of my revolution.

Always, Mervyn