Walking with Ghosts

Qwo-Li Driskill

Earthworks Series
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Qwo-Li Driskill: Walking with Ghosts
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Map of the Americas

I wish when we touch
we could transcend history in
double helixes of dark and light
on wings we build ourselves

But this land grows volcanic
with the smoldering hum of bones
All that’s left
of men who watched beloveds
torn apart by rifles
Grandmothers singing back
lost families
Children who didn’t live
long enough to cradle a lover
arms around waist
lips gently skimming nape
legs twined together
like a river cane basket

Sometimes I look at you
and choke back sobs knowing
you are here
because so many of my people
are not

Look: my body curled and asleep
becomes a map of the Americas
My hair spread upon the pillow
a landscape of ice My chest the plains
and hills of this land My spine
the continental divide
my heart drums the
rhythm of returning
buffalo herds Do you
notice the deserts
and green
mountains
on my belly's
topography
or the
way
my
hips
rise
like
ancient pyramids
My legs wrapped with the
Amazon the Andes the Pampas
the vast roads of the Incas
here are rainforests
highlands
stolen breath
trapped deep
in mine
shafts and
my feet
that reach
to touch
Antarctica

When your hands travel
across my hemispheres
know these lands
have been invaded before
and though I may quiver
from your touch
there is still a war

It is not without fear
and memories awash in blood
that I allow you to slip between
my borders
rest in the warm valleys
of my sovereign body
offer you feasts and songs
dress you in a cloak of peacock
feathers and stars
These gifts could be misconstrued
as worship
Honor mistaken for surrender

When you taste my lips
think of maize
venison
perfect wild strawberries

Notice the way my breath smells of cedar
my sweat flows like slow Southern rivers
and my flesh burns with history

Honor this

I walk out of genocide to touch you
What You Must Do

First, call the words from your marrow.
Pull them from strands of muscle,
dark and warm.
You will bleed.
Form them into clay.
Breathe.

Then, offer them your flesh.
They will take nothing less.

Run with your words to the top of a cliff.
Let go.

Hurry.

They come for us in the morning.

For Marsha P. (Pay It No Mind!) Johnson
found floating in the Hudson River shortly after NYC Pride, 1992

You are the one whose spirit is present in the dappled stars.
JOY HARJO from “For Anna Mae Aquash . . .”

Each act of war
is whispered from
Queen to Queen
held like a lost child
then released into the water below.
Names float into rivers
gentle blooms of African Violets.

I will be the one that dangles
from the side but
does not let go.

The police insisted you leapt
into the Hudson
   driftwood body
   in sequin lace
   rhinestone beads
   that pull us to the bottom.
Just another dead Queen.

I am the one who sings Billie Holiday
as a prayer song to you, Marsha P.

We choke on splintered bones,
dismembered screams,
the knowledge that each
death is our own.
I pour libations of dove’s blood,
leave offerings of yam and corn
to call back all of our lost spirits.

Marsha P, your face glitters with
Ashanti gold
as you sashay across the moonscape
in a ruby chariot ablaze.
Sister, you drag
us behind you.

When we gather on the bridge between
survival and despair,
I will be the one wearing gardenias
in my hair,
thinking about
how we all go back to water.
Thinking about
the night
you did not jump.

I will be the one
with the rattlesnake that binds
my left arm and
in my right hand I will carry
a wooden hatchet to
cut away at the
silence of your murder,
to bite down hard on the steel of despair.

Girl, I will put your photo
on my ancestral altar
to remember all of us
who never jumped.

Miss Johnson, your meanings
sparkle like stars dappled
across the piers of the
Hudson River.

Gathered on the bridge
we resist the water.
Letter to Tsi-ge'-yu

Tonight your tears
follow me home
Hover around my shoulders
like a ske'na
haunting as history
bright and wondrous as fireflies

Tsi-ge'-yu
160 years ago
they rounded us up with guns
filled rivers with our blood
stripped our lives to marrow and
beat us with the bones

We are still trying to escape soldiers
hide our babies
hold on to clods of earth
as they drag us away by our feet
screaming and bloodied

Our families are supposed
to tell us these stories
you say
You're my family now

Tsi-ge'-yu
Tonight I pluck
your tears from air
wrap them in deerskin
string them on spider silk

Look
I wear them
around my neck like cornbeads

selu           corn
giga           blood
sgflu:gi       You are my sister
gvhwanosda     whole

These are the words our bodies
were not meant to carry
but do

These survival songs
put us back together

In this city that
does not belong to us,
we sink our teeth deep into
words ripped from our mamas' mouths
tsuko:li      bones
kanoges:sdli  history
sink our teeth deep and
repeat what we know is sacred

Cherokee Translations:
Tsi-ge'-yu: "Beloved." Literally, "I love her/him."
ske'na: human or animal ghost
Grandmother Spider's Lesson for an Urban Indian Queer

She clings to her web, four stories up, holds fast against the Seattle wind and rain. Her abdomen is a perfect black bead that catches light like a crystal. Her legs delicate as an infant's hands. She weaves a night threaded with moonbeams. Grandmother is alive, four stories up. "Grandmother," I say, "we never stop spinning from one death to another, from one impossible situation to the next. This is a city where homeless Indians have their noses broken by skinheads, where Queer kids sell their bodies to eat tomorrow. We have no reflections here. They think we should be ghosts."

Sugar, she laughs, just keep weaving. Don't let them tear you down. Look! I am alive, four stories up! They build skyscrapers on top of our homes, but we're still here.

Her body is silhouetted against the Seattle skyline, miracle spider alive four stories up.

Cling fast, she tells me. Keep weaving. Life will stick.

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epg 4 tj gwy

delovvy
Dir[a]s 4 oh
scat up

gveyu' haiku tsalagi

Aquadan’togi
atsilvsga hawini
ganhgo’i sali

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cherokee love haiku

My embodied heart
blooms, opens beneath
his persimmon tongue.