

“An Ode to Harlem”

Nkosi Nkululeko

Did you know they call us Rhythm Bearers  
‘cause these bones, beat very loudly.  
They’re the reason for Earth’s  
most violent of shudders.

I.

I heard the grounds here,  
sputter melodic tantrums,  
celebrating what little breath and black  
us boys cradle in back pockets  
‘Heard the air thins now.  
Heard it tires of our presence.  
of our music and dancing.  
Yes. We dance so hard, here, they say.  
Foxtrot, Jitterbug-like,  
Electric slide into Shmoney dance side step  
Yes  
with these legs,  
lightning stems, they are,  
pricking the ground  
with thunderous pulse,  
but bullets are dancers too, welding outros on the shells of our bodies  
so what is a sound like ours if it can still  
vanish at the end of a their song?  
Our skin, is always made the day’s last magic trick  
with a spell of bullets cascading in this purse of a lung,  
flung from authorized gunslingers, and their mouthful of batons  
and pistols whiplashin’ our spine  
so as to make smoke of us.

So did you know they call us The Once Were,

For us black boys are all past-tense nowadays,  
dwelling in a memory’s memory,  
pierced and full of mist,  
delicate as even a piece of air that could shatter.  
but did you know that even shards bellow

their glimmer like it's a mosaic of light?  
Did you know we still wail in the tongue of Garvey,  
from the gates of the dead  
a million of us marching on skylines and mountain tops  
with Malcolms and Martins stitched to the hems of our feet.  
Did you know we stomp thunder cries here.  
Did you know Satchmo, is restin on the porch of a cloud ska-ska-skattin'  
solemn tales of wolf whistles and lynch mobs  
and Marley's up here too, flaming a song of redemption  
hopin' the boys below, still full of breath and black will hear  
our lyric of caution.  
And one day, they will.  
Did you know that?  
There in Harlem.  
Our Harlem,  
open shrine full of horns  
and jazz and drum,  
they will hear us  
and their bodies will sing themselves out of a ruin.

Don't you know, these days, they call us a Survived Wreckage,

II.

..For though broken,  
we know much of resurrection,  
to draw back the blood that once divorced us,  
but did you know the children, sinless and  
drenched in their skin's neon black  
have not yet dipped well in their bodies  
they're still all fragile pulse, Jawbreaker,  
buzzer beater ball shot with  
a fetish for double-dutch entanglement  
did you know they've always  
been made martyr too soon...  
into wingless doves  
battling with amnesiac gravity  
falling upwards...ever so often,  
like spirits crawling out of bodies?  
Did you know, that it is for us,  
the women cry and an elegy

is sung and an ode rains  
from the eyes  
and their eyes chatter of our death.  
Did you know they speak our death  
like a rumor that rang true?

*“Did you hear the bullet and the boy? Did you hear the bullet and the boy pull the bullet in?”*  
*“He always wanted to ride shotgun.” “never should’ve worn that hoodie or that tie.”*  
*“Shouldn’t of worn that black tied to his hoodie.” “All that black he wore” “Did you hear the*  
*bullet bow tying itself to the boy’s black?”*  
“Did you?”

Did you know that when sun  
trickles towards the heavens  
we have to wonder,  
if the day is yearning for its sacrifice,  
if the wandering Reaper still seeks our skin,  
if its mouth, full of our tarred limbs,  
is still tooting its mating call,  
but don’t you remember our bodies are  
much learned in the act of rebirth?  
Like, no tombstone can hold down the Gospel in our bones.  
Can’t you hear us blossom out of the graveyard?  
Lost souls stepping back into the bodies  
from which we were wrenched.  
Don’t you know they now call us  
The Once Were But Soon To Become Again?

don’t you know  
that we always  
come back...?  
...don’t you know  
...?