

three reminders from the birth and blood chorus

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Drawing on Sylvia Wynter's analysis of police brutality, slavery, and colonialism more broadly, this poetic meditation offers an ancestral choral resource for us, the contemporary survivors of U.S. State Violence, from feminized ancestral survivors of enslavement and colonialism. In these three reminders, unnamed and unnamable ancestors offer their experiences and lessons as context for this moment, and remind us of the ongoing and never simple or easy liberatory survival work that they did and are doing. They offer it towards our most powerful presence in these hostile times.

i.

teeth. we paid. usually in teeth and dreams. teeth and dreams and calories, mostly iron. stomach lining and the lining of clothes that wore out where no one could see. patches of hair we thought we could afford and edges of nails reddened by worry.

we paid for loving you with days and nights of openness. anytime being punchable in the gut. all the ways they could hurt us through you. we paid with renewable grief and one hundred thousand different fears. we paid with all our credit. all our credibility. because we cared too much. because we loved you, they could always say we were over-reacting. they could always say we were biased. we paid with never being neutral again. never again capable of hiding where we stood. we stood with you. which meant we could not be clean. which meant we could not be taken anywhere without making a scene. the same scene over and over again upon separation. our time turned into a recurrent dream. our bodies never again whole. our minds full and so often leaking. you. we paid for loving you with you yourselves. each changing self. the losing you we feared and underwent over and over again like once wasn't enough to make us long forever. once there was you, once any of you, then all time became loss. every moment holding mourning, always knowing what we could not keep which was you. ourselves. or anything. it was everything. literally everything. the price we paid for loving you.¹

ii.

what they took. what they took. was touch. what they took. was taste. every touch become iron. every taste become deficiency. every day become craving. what they took. was sight. meaning what you saw would have to be known by the way they unsaw you. what they wanted was everything. every tooth every skin cell every muscle every vocal chord every hand that could still drum. what they wanted was to live forever. what they wanted was to outrun death. so they chased us like the unchaste after lust.

and retake the stakes unshake the breaks make out the fake open the ache taste back our touch we must.²

iii.

we didn't have so much of what you call corsets. or access to ribbons and eyelets and gowns. under their gowns what they wanted was a shape like ours. so what we had was breathing. you can breathe into any muscle, you know. any muscle. no matter how small or how tired. no matter how overused or bruised. sometimes you had to small your breathing so nobody could see what you were doing. sometimes that illusion of small was what you were making with a breathing that went up into your head instead of down into your belly. sometimes the suggestion of slightness in the face of whiteness was all that saved your life. because they would have killed you if they could see, blamed you for the seeing of themselves. so you sent breath exactly where it was needed like an economist under sanctions. you willed yourself the tentative boundaries of your pores, you made them quiet in some places, a low vibration so no one would hear because unnoticed was unharmed.

or sometimes you made the sweat sweet air around your skin shake loud and loose because being unnoticed was in fact the fastest way to be harmed. you could only trust yourself about when and where. and that was how you got to know god. you learned to listen to the unhearable. you learned to check for the smallest things. because how small were you yourself. and it resonated with you that god would kill his best most loving child, because though you paid attention to every sign it didn't always work. and when it didn't work, the intelligent breathing, the hiding in plain sight, you lost everything, your children and your chest and the boundary of light around your skin. you lost your chin, your kin and your sleep. and you had no breathing left to weep, you had used it all.

and by you, of course we mean us. you are not small at all, except for what we taught you. except for what our breathing took and what it bought you. you are not small even slightly. we are telling you this for the depth of what you might be. you are not small unless your own breathing shrinks you. and you need not do that now. don't take it lightly.³

Notes

1. Wynter, 1994, 70. “the price paid for *our* well-being.”
2. Wynter, “Human Being,” 18. “rigorously abductive.”
3. Wynter, 1992, 238. “must constrain.”

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