

North American Time

I
When my dreams showed signs
of becoming
politically correct
no unruly images
escaping beyond border
when walking in the street I found my
themes cut out for me
knew what I would not report
for fear of enemies' usage
then I began to wonder 10

II
Everything we write
will be used against us
or against those we love.
These are the terms,
take them or leave them.
Poetry never stood a chance
of standing outside history.
One line typed twenty years ago
can be blazed on a wall in spraypaint
glorify art as detachment 20
or torture of those we
did not love but also
did not want to kill

We move but our words stand
become responsible
and this is verbal privilege

III
Try sitting at a typewriter
one calm summer evening
at a table by a window
in the country, try pretending 30
your time does not exist
that you are simply you
that the imagination simply strays
like a great moth, unintentional
try telling yourself
you are not accountable
to the life of your tribe
the breath of your planet

IV
It doesn't matter what you think.
Words are found responsible
all you can do is choose them
or choose
to remain silent. Or, you never had a choice,
which is why the words that do stand
are responsible
and this is verbal privilege

V
Suppose you want to write
of a woman braiding
another woman's hair—
straightdown, or with beads and shells
in three-strand plaits or corn-rows—
you had better know the thickness
the length the pattern
why she decides to braid her hair
how it is done to her
what country it happens in
what else happens in that country

You have to know these things

VI
Poet, sister: words—
whether we like it or not—
stand in a time of their own.
no use protesting I wrote that
before Kollontai was exiled
Rosa Luxembourg, Malcolm,
Anna Mae Aquash, murdered,
before Treblinka, Birkenau,
Hiroshima, before Sharpeville,
Biafra, Bangla Desh, Boston,
Atlanta, Soweto, Beirut, Assam
--those faces, names of places
sheared from the almanac
of North American time

VII
I am thinking this in a country
where words are stolen out of mouths
as bread is stolen out of mouths
where poets don't go to jail
for being poets, but for being
dark-skinned, female, poor.
I am writing this in a time

when anything we write 80
can be used against those we love
where the context is never given
though we try to explain, over and over
For the sake of poetry at least
I need to know these things

VIII

Sometimes, gliding at night
in a plane over New York City
I have felt like some messenger
called to enter, called to engage
this field of light and darkness. 90
A grandiose idea, born of flying.
But underneath the grandiose idea
is the thought that what I must engage
after the plane has rage onto the tarmac
after climbing my old stair, sitting down
at my old window
is meant to break my heart and reduce me to silence.

IX

In North America time stumbles on
without moving, only releasing
a certain North American pain. 100
Julia de Burgos wrote:
That my grandfather was a slave
is my grief; had he been a master
that would have been my shame.
A poet's words, hung over a door
in North America, in the year
nineteen-eighty-three.
The almost-full moon rises
timeless speaking of change
out of the Bronx, the Harlem River 110
the drowned towns of the Quabbin
the pilfered burial mounds
the toxic swamps, the testing-grounds
and I start to speak again.

1983