

BESS, YOU IS MY WOMAN NOW

Jewelle Gomez

for film star Dorothy Dandridge (1922–1965)

"If I had been there . . ." has been a famous lesbian lament.
. . . could I have saved you from dying naked and alone?
In my dream I do. You are luminous,
a bronze star with magnificent gravitational pull;
drawing me toward you like
Newton's apple to the ground.

And there I am earthbound, standing just
outside the studio shot framed so professionally.
I check that no straps are showing, no secret revealed.

We laugh together every time we open Jet magazine,
now well-worn by our gaze. The picture says more
because we know what is not there.

He captures the provocative cross of your legs
that have danced clad in silk and flowers, grass
and leopard skin. Legs that ache from the hours of jetes,
tap combinations, mambos and
the million miles they've traveled,
outrunning Hollywood white men
and their pathologies about you.

We share the secret of that famous photograph:
you smiling not at the intrusion of the press
but at me your sistah woman just beyond
the parameters of what he wants to see.

In that dream I would be the seamstress,
grateful to my grandmother for giving me the gift
of fine, even stitches. There is no feather, animal skin
or lace I can't make grateful to serve you.
Every day I measure your small waist
and marvel at the flare of your hip; perfectly made to sashay.

I drape fabric across your brown shoulders
so it both clings and moves toward freedom.
Perspiration always gathers at the sweetwater wells
created by your collar bones—an oasis.

I sew you into the rayon skirt leaving just enough room
for those legs to cross with the illusion of ease.
The muscle of your calf is a silent tension
contrasting with your smile. Every stitch and seam
declares how hard you work.

At the end of each day you giggle
as I use a tiny scissor to snip the stitches
freeing you from their demands. When I see each film
I note it can't capture your magic, only hint at it
like a match foretells a blaze.

Or I could be the artist who blends the creamy
browns that highlight your skin, dark
by their standards. My stroke is so smooth
I easily hide any path left by tears.
Just before he snaps his shutter
I could hand you a powder puff
to take down the shine we all have in common.

Or I might be your driver, precise and adept;
never letting you wander onto a dangerous road;

peering into the rearview to avoid all the needy suitors;
speeding us away before the octopus of white desire
can crush you.

If I were there to hold you, wonder child,
you would not have died alone or naked.

* 'Dis life is jes' begun

*Song from Porgy and Bess