

the missing manuscript of phillis wheatley

FAITH PARÉ

i.

soap suds cast iron fissured hands alive with rivers
 returning to an ocean of lye (in this one,
 the genius is a scullery maid.
 once, a party trick now, a biting joke) yet
 sonnets burst across biscuit saucers epics
 whispered into a stockpot's open ear
 self-portraits stolen from the brief mirror
 of a shined spoon & since that was no place for singing
 to babies a lullaby for your chilblains

ii.

all those words wasted when young gulped down
 adjectives homer aubades to drown the clangour
 below deck those recordless weeks no letter could describe
 except the burning field inside an O its enclosure
 a widening maw brimmed full of the king's
 grammar musings on a god who never answered
 your verses polished as silverware
 in this one, you loosen their boning pretty poems undone
 like hot soup you dropped at your feet (on purpose)
 & opened wide for your first language
 to flit into air but gagged on what's forgotten

iii.

in your final days did the poems buck? sputter hush
 like a nub of candlestick a week's ink gone (again)
 by midnight —that's the legend I've heard enough what of the times

joints throbbed too white hot to handle a quill? or colic
you cooed till dawn terrified to wake to quiet's blare?
I need your dragging hours towers of dirty dishes your dreams despite
scrubbing in cellars I need to know you outside the cell
of a stanza written for someone else's eyes (what did you call
your mother? do you remember how to pronounce it?)

iv.

we know how this goes we girls who study denouements
& final couplets of dead masters did you see your end
churning off the starboard side this shoreline an incisor?
did it surface from the dish basin? in this one,
you rise from the meagre cot cough up the water in your chest
walk backwards out of death (I don't care about history's
choke hold) in this one, you disappear into the mahogany
of your writing desk return to a sight without light's corrosion
(even when they stopped looking even with no language
of your own a poet
sees)



After the passing of Phillis Wheatley's master, she became destitute, encountering significant challenges attempting to publish a second volume of poetry despite the monumental success of her first, printed in 1773. Phillis died at thirty-one, in poverty, with her sole living child passing shortly afterwards. Her working manuscript was lost after her death. Wheatley's husband placed a newspaper advert asking for its return, likely having sold the volume to pay debts. Only one poem, "Ocean," has been found, yet some scholars believe the manuscript still exists.

gethsemane

FAITH PARÉ

for our Black street revolutionaries, unnamed, missing, forgotten.

before we were cloaked in too late, before
 the trees split open with torches, fear scorching
 its name across our faces, before our friends
 shattered onto pavement with the timbre of a city falling,
 before we cut off the ears of those who laughed at our poetry,
 before we cut off our own, cupped the folded dead
 things in our hands, before morning, before night, before another
 unsettled morning, before we donned the blue of sirens,
 before all we had to chew on was rubble, before it ended
 exactly as they said it would, our foreheads reacquainted
 with the dirt,

we ate together. we started there.
 we grew something in this stranger's soil.
 we grew something to share. we never needed names.
 we cursed, we spat, we bared our teeth.
 we came back for each other regardless. we laughed
 knowing there would be a time we'd forget its pulse.
 its airiness filled our bellies. we invented songs
 they never sang to us as children.
 we once were children. children who had nothing
 left to see except a way out. we lived when they refused
 to call it that. we still sweat blood,
 but someone had the pad of their thumb
 to wipe it away.

Summer 2020.