

Enter Billie Wailing

It's funny, you know
we're not supposed to have feelings
Someone slaps you with a word
and it's okay to jump indignant
But someone rapes you and that
you must keep
 tucked away, perhaps
 in an envelope
 formed of your own breasts
Keep it and your little feelings
 locked away
And forever, I mean
isn't that what you learned
sort of the way you take that next
 breath
Yes, and it permeates, you know
 goes into all your cells
 vital as oxygen
We can't survive without our masks
an undisputed fact, deep-rooted
 as thousand-year old scars
 and six months of new growth

It is okay to feel an entombed, unbearable sadness
but not to speak it, not to wail it

We have no language to speak of voluminous
clouds streaked through with sunset rays
no language to speak our souls
 streaked through as the earth with riverbeds
We have no language to speak of the sturdy
fragility of orchids –

Enter Billie
Song and heroin couldn't take
 away the truth, not facts
 but the bare truth of woman
Flayed open like jack rabbit skin

Enter Billie Wailing - 2

Enter Billie
wailing
to break laws of the physics of jazz
to fly in the face of Jim Crow-
jailed minds

Enter Billie
wailing
to unearth secrets
buried in the graveyards of our hearts
long ago and deep as the dank
dungeons of slave ships

She has a voice that breaks
the bottle of tears
stored on the shelves of your ribcage

She has a voice that pierces
your weariness and sends it
flowing through your limbs like
Resurrection

She has a voice that is black
Lord, she has a voice
that is black and steady
leading you through the valleys of your soul
compelling you to look up to its mountaintops

She has a voice
Lord, she has a voice
you can enter into
the way a man enters a woman or the dead
enter heaven

Enter Billie
sweet orchid wearing gardenias in her hair
Don't you hear her
heart pounding, lungs struggling against
unbearable truths coursing through her veins
the way a lynched man trembles before he dies
Don't you feel the lump in her throat and
the one in yours

Enter Billie Wailing - 3

Enter Billie
wholly
exhultations and wounds
grinning like a fool and
weeping like the willow

Enter Billie
Wailing
is a bold and daring act
for Black faces unmasked

Enter Billie
aching
to give birth to us
a dangerous new nation unafraid
to utter the saw-toothed edges of rage
the hot-iron caresses of pain
and hell
make it pretty

Make it arresting
Make it something that has to be heard
like a young girl drops
the pillow she screams into
Like a young girl grows a voice
rare as orchids in Harlem
Like a young girl naturally becomes a woman
despite shackles to the contrary

You can't shackle a voice that insists on itself in the name of love

Enter Billie
crooning

Enter Billie
screaming

Enter Billie
nodding

Enter Billie
wailing

Enter Billie Wailing - 4

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