On Poverty And Lost Scrolls

by

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Poverty—
Ran down ghetto-type houses,
paint peeling on the outside with the appearance
of a person with a skin disease
inside walls painted over soot
stained floors from uncaring tenants
smell of waste from room to room
a big bulky stove smack in the middle of the room
when lit was as red as fire in the eyes of a bull in rage
red as an apple I wished I had at school instead of a greasy leftover
piece of cornbread
uncovered, harden
because of no protection
I supposed that could happen to a heart
I awaken in the night to see rats in festivity of life
Celebration
dancing, prancing,
as if they were the only ones to share in this
small, cramped up place
one room
for ten children
small beds
stinky mattresses
the smell of urine
from a sister
not trained yet to control
herself,
or from her uncontrolled fear protruding from the inside
six human females
lying vertically across a horizontal plane
with circulation stopping at the knees
and the legs dangling
numb
to the floor
iron objects
bulging out
sticking up
forcing the skin
the surface of the flesh scratched,
and left sore
no privacy to be found while
boys becoming men look over from the other side
sleeping comfortably
with just four.
Heat
sweating heat
unbearable
no rest
clabberness
get up
stick my head out of the window, and
fall asleep on a
window seal,
rest,
cool rest, then
be awaked to start the cycle of misery all over again.
Is this poverty forever?

I will not try to deduce this subject to a philosophical debate, nor are my
intentions to dismantle the parts of the sum. For poverty has become to me a
personified entity. It consumes anyone in its path, destroying or possessing its being.
The concept then behind, The Lost Scrolls of Poverty, is profoundly embedded in the
dialogue of identity. What you see is not necessarily real, it is then a projected image
of a supposed reality, superimposed and fixed in time, but to what extent are we
engaging with truth? How then does this apparition of an image coincide with those
who have gone before us declaring the same rhythmic notions of space and distance?

This concept was not fabricated or birthed out of myth; rather it is the
offspring breed in such existence of poverty. As a child I don’t recall being told to
embrace this position, it was neither spoken of by my mother, nor acknowledged.
During the times where I stood in the midst of my condition, I was not aware of it, it
was when I stepped to the side, just enough to catch a glimpse that I saw, and heard,
and felt the malady, and I wept. I wept indeed for the loss of innocence that the child
had suffered.
She could not be fully conscious of her youth, for it was swallowed up in the beggary of her awareness, at all times regarding the sensitivity of lack. If she as the child could not define it, nor articulate it, she knew that in her present state, she was not completely surrounded by abundance in any capacity. For poverty is not just about the suffering of the body, it is the suffering of body, soul, and intellect, if you please.

But, this child knew not the full extent of her place, so she romped, and played, and smiled occasionally, as the piercing and gouging of the soul proceeded. She did not know that she was invisible, she didn't exist, she was alone, and she was in the dark. She was the rejected sum of all things that mattered most, and would matter for an eternity, as it pertains to the matter of life and living.

She played, even though the toys she played with would not socially enable, nor empower her, for they repeated the same offense of judgment. She would gain no access to another realm or dimension from the exercise thereof.

So, no she is no child of great magnitude and expectation, but limited resources, producing limited or no results, in this repetitive, cyclic ill-fated destiny. Was she to gain knowledge of this, it would rescue her from her frivolous thinking, but she would not, she is no genius. She is merely the child of social recluse. So she played not knowing that her games was reliving her inner most fears, and weaknesses. Her games were no games at all, but a reality deeply rooted, deeply seated. Those games would exhaust her with exhilaration and replace even for a short period the fear of a hopeless existence.

I have no pictures of childhood,
catalogued in some hand painted binder
conjuring up memories of happiness....
stilled...
captured...
a moment of sheer bliss
I had none of those
Any, which had resemblance of such, was muted
beneath the fear that laughter only escalated the coming sorrow
which waited in the wings to lash out at will
Still we laughed
between those barren walls,
those corridors of despair
those empty ceilings, no Sistine there
No chandelier
No cavalier
But near the cross my savior God
She sang and sang until she would weep
My faith looks up to thee
Oh lamb of Calvary
And mine, my faith to her
to me a god
I have no pictures, and the only
memories sweet to recall is that of her
My darling mother

Having lived in the very womb of dejection, I find myself unable to forget the profound effect poverty had on me. While years later, I'm no longer a child, the child still emerges from some distant place, some dark corner, some secret chamber, beckoning me to come closer, to observe some scars left opened.

I find the concept I embarked upon, The Lost Scrolls of Poverty, having that ability to perhaps close up the wounds of the child, if not it may reveal a source of discovery, leading the youth, and myself to a central place of catharsis.

Let's be honest, as it pertains to identity. I grew up with a very proud and militant mother who exercised her rights to freedom of speech, and even though she respected people and their places, she despised the bureaucracy of the established order, namely a white driven, and self-serving society. Yet, she offered to us not a substitution or a cultural identity for our spirituality, rather introduced into our lives the paradox of the white God, white hero. She authenticated their resounding
doctrine of being the chosen race, and that this was obviously sanctioned by God. In my youth as with many (African-Americans, which is the adopted and seemingly acceptable title of the black race), I emulated and embraced the heroes, Superman, Shirley Temple, Ginger Rogers, I loved Lucy, accepting all which they possessed, and my identity was intertwined, and interlocked in these.

Understand me when I say, not with the idea that I could ever be as they were, but I held them up as my mirror, as to connect with the world, with life, with politics, superficially, yes, but oh course, but coupled. I could not know that we were not equal, we were not kin, and even though I would convince myself of the heroic story of Adam and Eve, and one flesh, and one people, and one human race, I didn’t know that excluded me.

So as sublime as it may seem, my poverty, was connected to my naivety, and that to a real sense of the broader scope of who I was. My poverty necessitated that, so on every possible level as I can conclude I had no identity. I could not hold claim to an economic group of empowerment, nor a cultural group of empowerment, nor a religious group of empowerment, seeing that the state of poverty was meshed with my religion, and cultural identity, and the only individuals empowered was those which lay claim to empowerment in all of those areas, and which then I sought to become. Every story started the same, and ended the same.

During the seventies, after much struggling with false identity, and assumed identity, after the radical years of the early seventies, with the Angela Davis’s and the catch phrase, “I’m Black and I’m Proud,” I lost my identity to the movement. I gave up on being identified at all. Because for me it was a vicious cycle, for to be black was to be poor, was to be culturally subservient and never having a real sense of the notion of whom you was or could become. These were not proud times, and I don’t necessarily say they are now; rather we have accepted the mingling of the blood.
As for me, I was just in the world, neither male nor female, bond nor free, black nor white, and the only identifying mark left that I was certain of was that of being poor. An identity questioned, rejected, or fabricated is no identity at all.

So she grew up, even though only physical, for she has no real sense of the herself, seeing her identity was attached to her deception of identity. One cannot embrace something that one does not fully understand, agree with, anticipate or possess. Throughout my youth there were sightings of identity, which when observed closely was nothing but a façade and noted as mirages.

I am certain that it is my lifelong obsession with poverty and the impact it had my family, and I that has brought me here, to this body of work. This work has an empowering element, which I did not have as a child to change my circumstances. The condition of poverty breed’s depravity, which gives way to hopelessness, and hopelessness to fear, and fear, has no place in a growing society. The concept behind this work, The Lost Scrolls of Poverty, speaks to empowerment, which is released through access of knowledge. Information and knowledge is ever present, but the ability to rise to the level of consciousness to receive it is quite different. The scrolls are documents, hidden, veiled, contained, depriving many generations entrance to higher apparatus of social endowment. These documents contain the hidden agenda, the truth behind the birth of poverty, which if exposed could release the psychological hold poverty has on its victims, and propel them into a more influent habitation.

These scrolls represent a dialogue, which was started epochs before. They are multi-layered, and reveal to us the full scope of the mind of the poor, the burden of poverty. The cryptic writings, symbols, and material used bring us closer to understanding the wear and weight and estrangement stemming from a life of poverty.

The layers unfold the tears, fears, the jubilation, salvation, the prayers, the faith, the hopelessness, all intertwined, some by way of a prayer, or a song, or a story.
I spent years in silence, denial, and in false hope. The scrolls are a way of speaking that which I could not or did not say as a child. I have created the concept as to give rise to heroes, and give voice to ancestors, and prolific notions of spirituality and cultural awareness not attached to someone else's experience, nor heritage.

Journals, diaries, notebooks, letters-sealed, unsealed, preserved, stopping time, frame for frame, fragmented sentences, hanging participles, cryptic messages from the past, from darkness, from unknown people claiming lineage, kinship, wanting to be heard, needing to explore the notion of immortality. They write with craggy instruments of flesh, broken hearts, graphite, feverish temperament, unstable souls, ink running down the fingers, as libation for passage to the under world. Uncontrolled oration of a mad man, whose recalls are a myriad of wounded words, disillusionments, and unfound realities of a darker truth, trading their days for a new forever, extracted from faded tomorrows, yet they compose, erasing some, lest misunderstood, marking out
undisputable certainties for forbearance sake. Their lives, empty yet bearable, uneventful as it pertains to what constitutes worth—for some. In her bosom suckling from her breast of abundance, the universe contained us all. We were here, in all our disappointments, and disregard, our irreconcilable contentions. And, so they write, even though they know they belong to a lesser god, but they must speak, and they do.

The scrolls then are the scratched illiteracy of my father, the incessant prayers of my mother, the hollowed out confusion, bordering insanity of my sisters and brothers who stood in dark places, which had no resemblance of light. A darkness, which if one could surpass, that individual could procure their own destiny, write their own history, assumes their own identity.

The concept included returning to the place of my youth symbolic as to retrieve that which was lost, and to establish a precedent of prosperity for the generations to come, as to lift the cyclic entrenchment of poverty. It was necessary for me to make this a site-specific pilgrimage as to the spiritual, psychological, and emotional impact it would have on the participants, the viewers and the body work.

Images flooded in, as four generations stood and declared a new mark for their lives and their children. We had left Wilson, North Carolina when I was ten years old, a broken family in a borrowed station wagon; hopeless. But upon returning we have made some markings in stone. Nine of eleven children have received a higher education at institutions of good repute, Georgetown University, Union University, University of Virginia, American University, Emory, Virginia PolyTechnical Institute, and University of Georgia. Nine out of eleven children became ministers. My mother returned to receive her G.E.D., after my baby sister entered Georgetown University. She then went on to receive her associate degree from Northern Virginia Community College, was accepted into a program of studies at Howard University, and is presently matriculating at Spelman College in Atlanta at the age of seventy-four.
We marched down Manchester Street, held a ceremony in the house across the street where the proprietor then, sent us plates of slop, disguising it as food, not fit for the pigs she raised. She is now deceased, and the house boarded up (as is over fifty percent of the neighborhood) with a ‘No Trespassing’ sign posted.

Speeches were delivered, choreographers danced, and we sang, mother and child, niece and nephew, young and old. I never imagine then, when I lie on a pile of clothes for a bed at night, and rummage through the same pile to find an outfit for school the next day, that there would ever be anything different. I stand here as a witness that there was, and there is something worth looking to, worth fighting for, but, the impregnable mark in which poverty left, shall not easily be removed by some notion that I have arrived.