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## IN THE DARK

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**Charlie Hope Dorsey** is a writer, performer, and spoken word artist from Southern Illinois. A queer single mother of two children, all her work is dedicated to them and lays at the intersection of performance, blackness, and sexuality. She is currently pursuing her M.A. in performance studies at Southern Illinois University, Carbondale.

**Abstract:** The artist's duty is to "reflect the times," said Nina Simone. Poets too, have this political duty. As a queer Black woman, I share my lived experience(s) as a political form of engagement and resistance, both in writing and onstage. Inspired by Audre Lorde's (1984) text *Sister Outsider*, this piece of personal performance poetry explores Della Pollock's notion that performative writing is citational. Blending references to white poets such as Emily Dickinson with allusions to writers, artists, and theorists of color, this piece makes space for black culture in the academy and recounts my return home after a period of self-imposed exile. It surveys the liminal space between the dark of writing and the light of performance and also critiques the hierarchal academic structures that subjugate knowledge, people, and spoken word poetry. It was originally written and performed in a show entitled *Greyscale: Performing Across Difference*, in the Marion Kleinau Theatre, in March 2017.

**Keywords:** poetry, performance, spoken word, politics, identity

From the text *Sister Outsider* (Lorde, 1984). In the essay entitled: “The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action,” Audre Lorde says, and I quote:

Within this country where racial difference creates a constant, if unspoken, distortion of vision, Black women have on one hand always been highly visible, and so, on the other hand, have been rendered invisible ... we have had to fight and still do, for that very visibility which also renders us most; vulnerable our Blackness. For to survive in the mouth of this dragon we call america, we have had to learn this first and most vital lesson - that we were never meant to survive. Not as human beings. And neither were most of you here today, Black or not. And that visibility which makes us most vulnerable is that which also is the source of our greatest strength. (42)

In the dark<sup>1</sup>  
and in the light,  
and in/between.  
Here,  
and  
not here.

*Can you hear me now?*

When I was young, growing up in the city by the bay, the one that was golden gated by keepers, I used to want to be a photographer. Capturing. Pretty. Little. Images. Developing the negative into positive.<sup>2</sup> I particularly enjoyed the solitude, most of all, of the dark room,  
process  
in  
progress.  
Under the red light,  
watching my art appear  
so sloooowly...  
turning the film into print  
like I. Turn. Everything. Into poems.

You see, I am, the epitome of esoteric,  
an enigma  
wrapped up and doubly bound<sup>3</sup>  
with spoken words I've been holding

like  
breath,  
so  
close to my chest.

*Did you miss my voice?*

I did.  
Here I go again,  
picking up the paper clipped page where I left off.  
Remembering why I came to poetry in the first place.  
Because. I, I, I was hurting,<sup>4</sup>  
and that memory always returns for a reason  
like remembered rapture:  
the writer at work,  
bell hooks chapter,  
“Dancing with Words,”  
she says:

“Experiencing language as a transformative force was not an awareness that I had arrived at through writing. But rather, I discovered through performance” (hooks, 1999, p. 35).

*So here I am again,  
but should I be?*

Suddenly, side-steppin’ onstage, a page,  
illuminated by a white hot spotlight.  
Fulfilling that introverted artist urge  
to be a part of a community  
then apart from the community.

It’s been years of coming out of hibernation,  
and I’ve been lost in translation  
with one foot in  
and one foot out of the academy.  
But in case you thought I lost it,  
I still got it.  
Don’t ever get it twisted,<sup>5</sup>  
I’m just trying to figure out the formation  
lookin’ to find, the right footing,  
in all my notes.

Alone

and long/ing

for some sort of spatial relationship, that just makes sense.

Searching for the ways

of working

with/in/slash/through

our shared anxieties,

as if this is “A

Theme

for English B”<sup>6</sup>.

Go home and write

a page tonight.

And let that page come out of you—

Then, it will be true (Hughes).

Breaking through lines,

resist, rebel, yell, “the poet is in the building!”

Like some Blackbird with a backpack, spillin’ a bottle full of hot sauce and all this Black girl magic, and just last week, I was only waiting for this moment.

So “Shine and rise Momma!”

like you tell your sons.

This will be the last time you get

stuck, stuck, stuuuck,

like a needle skipping on a record

so

I to record

this image

of trying to reach something just around the corner,

eluding me.<sup>7</sup>

A (Re) vision of a rebellious stone wall

falling down,

bridging gaps,

as if on our backs,<sup>8</sup> and

“Ain’t I am woman?,”<sup>9</sup>

Truth asked.

I can still feel

some shade of her

persistent presence in all of my absences.  
 I'm coming back to  
 face the audience,  
 Crafting a shadow of myself  
 moving, moving, moving,  
 in/between light and dark,  
 bearing as in witness that moment of  
 picking up the tempo  
 allegro, denouement, cacophony, crescendo,

I just put a spell on you!<sup>10</sup>

Like the pain of memory, how it returns for a reason... like my first semester in higher education a white male professor told a nigger joke and when he got to the punch line, I wanted to punch him in the face. He asked me after class "what are you so angry about?"

Or how on my son's 13<sup>th</sup> birthday on July 13<sup>th</sup>, 2013 we watched the nightly news and Zimmerman was acquitted for killing Trayvon Martin an unarmed Black boy. We blew out the candles and ate our white cake with chocolate icing, as if we haven't seen this scene before.<sup>11</sup>

But like Lorde said,  
 "whenever a conscious Black woman raises her voice  
 on issues central to her existence  
 somebody is going to call her strident  
 because they don't want to hear about it" (*Conversations* 197).

But I refuse to be silenced in this quality of light.  
 My favorite pictures were always the ones I had ruined.  
 The art teacher said my print work was damaged  
 from over exposure,  
 like my nervous writing<sup>12</sup> and voice,  
 trying so desperately to expand its reach.

*The sound of an image,  
 an outstretched hand,  
 that just wants to*

*hold*

*your heart,*

*your hand,  
you attention,*

*as you  
listen, listen, listen.*

*Listen,*

*This is the way this  
Philosopher-Stoned-Witchy-Black-Mother-Queer-Poet-Warrior-Woman speaks.*

*Listen,*

*this is the way I always  
talk back.*

*So listen,*

*this is theory.*

*And if ya don't know*

*now ya know,*

*baby,*

*baby.<sup>13</sup>*

As if Biggie Smalls mixed with Michel Foo-ko,<sup>14</sup>

haunting the halls of academe. And

I am afraid, sometimes, in this litany

of survival, ivory tower of babble,

hoping, like my love, struggling to make it

into language.

Then into idea.

Then into more tangible action.

Make it to the

shore

and walk / slanted,<sup>15</sup>

like truth is,

tippin' on a tight rope,<sup>16</sup>

anchored by eyes

across a stage, the threshold of this page,

*I will make it.*

Someday, somehow, someway, with

these poems entangled in

hopes and fears

cobbled  
and carved  
from the  
rock  
of our experiences  
because  
“poetry is  
not  
a luxury,”  
said Lorde,  
but a vital necessity of our existence.

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## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> As I begin to write, the record player in my mind scratches sultry Simone's voice "In the Dark" in a drowsy syncopated tune, I type until the song skips to

<sup>2</sup> "Everything is Everything." And suddenly, Lauryn Hill sings, "Now hear this mixture, where Hip Hop meets scripture/ Develop a negative into a positive picture," (Hill & Newton, 1998) the playlist continues as the night turns like a phrase into day,

<sup>3</sup> so I pick up, Craig Gingrich-Philbrook's (1998) essay. The one where he explains the potential of performance to overcome the binary thinking proposed by what Peterson and Langellier refer to as "creative double binds." It is here where I am tied up in/between the black and white, performance and writing, lived experience and academic language.

<sup>4</sup> bell hooks (1994) teaches me to try to sever these ties, to be willing to straddle these lines. In *Teaching to Transgress*, about "Theory as Liberatory Practice," she writes, "I came to theory because I was hurting" (59). I remember that my mentor shared her text with me under a tree and this was my same path to writing. I remember he was on top of me, in the dark, all 225 pounds, on top of me, with hands wrapped round my throat and I couldn't breathe. I got free though. I wrote my way out from underneath him. And memory returns for a reason...

<sup>5</sup> I step away from the screen and scribble in my notebook as Beyoncé Knowles' song "\*\*\*\*Flawless" plays and I turned the volume way up. "Respect that, bow down bitches ... Don't get it twisted, get it twisted" (Knowles et al., 2013).

<sup>6</sup> My mind drifts back to my first poetry class in college. We only read the work of Black authors in the Harlem Renaissance section. Poems like Langston Hughes (1959), "A Theme for English B" were the only exposure I had to Black poetry. I had to find Black voices like mine on my own time, voices like Audre Lorde.

<sup>7</sup> In the text *Sister Outsider*, Lorde (1984) documents her experience in the classroom. She says, "And if I read things that were assigned I didn't read them the way we were supposed to be. Everything was like a poem, with different curves, different levels. So I always felt that the way I took things in were different from the ways other people took them in... I had an image of trying to reach something around a corner, that it was just eluding me" (45). I was reaching, trying to find other women of color to read, with stories like mine, I found

<sup>8</sup> *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, edited by Cherrie Moraga and Gloria E. Anzaldúa (1983). Reading the experiences of women of color shared on these pages, I felt a connection, like I wasn't alone, something missing from reading the works of T.S. Eliot and Wordsworth. I felt like I had something to grasp onto that was true. Rebellious women like Angela Davis, Patricia Smith, Asate Shakur, and

<sup>9</sup> Sojourner Truth, ask me to reflect, "Ain't I a woman?." These words, first spoken by Truth at the 1851 Women's Convention, are echoed in the works of other feminist women of color. Casting a vision, insisting on being heard.

<sup>10</sup> I hear again the High Priestess of Soul, Nina Simone sing, "I love you anyhow and I don't care if you don't want me. I'm yours right now. You hear me? I put a spell on you" (Hawkins, 1965). She casts a spell, this is a skill I too am learning. When I did my first one-woman show, this was the title I chose, "I Put a Spell on You." The words and works of these women echo in me and resound in my poetry and performance. They shape my writing, evoke my voice, and they gently remind me that history changes things, but so much remains the same.

<sup>11</sup> "I have seen this scene before." More specifically, I have performed in it. This phrase was spray painted on the wall of one of my early performances. In this performance called "Bat on a Wyre," I played a mystic, who saw the future, the apocalypse, but these days it seems like this performance is becoming a reality. There is an escalation of racism, sexism, and violence toward people of color, history repeating itself. I stay up at night worrying about my teenage sons.

<sup>12</sup> The anxiety rises in my body, my leg begins to tap, as I type trying to find the right words, at three o' clock in the morning. I write best at night when my boys are asleep, but my writing seems so nervous. Della Pollock (1998) argues that nervousness is a characteristic of performative writing. *Nervous* refers to the transitive nature of performative writing, the way it "crosses various stories, theories, texts, intertexts, and spheres of practice, unable to settle into a clear, linear course..." (90). In this poem, my mind moves rather quickly between my lived experiences, popular culture, theoretical frameworks, it paces like I do when I perform.

<sup>13</sup> from the lyrics of The Notorious B.I.G.'s song "Juicy" (Wallace, McIntosh, Combs, Rock, Olivier, & Barnes, 1994) to

<sup>14</sup> Michel Foucault (Foo-ko). This is no misspelling but rather noting my challenge in learning to say the name of Michel Foucault, correctly. You see, because as poets we make choices about how we share our truths and

<sup>15</sup> like Emily Dickinson writes, "Tell all the truth, but tell it slant" (Dickinson, 1998). In these footnotes I have tried to tell you a bit more of mine, to offer you a little more about this queer Black woman who lives the truth of these lines and to let you in on some of the little secrets tucked beneath these pages, move you from the light of the page into the dark by my side. Whispering secrets like that slant reference was only half about Dickinson, really more of a wink to my lover at the time and her solo show *Slant* based on that line. And here I go again

<sup>16</sup> walking that "Tightrope," like that Janelle Monáe's song (Irvin, Joseph, Patton, & Monáe, 2010) that I love to dance to, blending my performance experience from another show, *The Carnival*, where I first teetered this line of light.