

Angela M. Thomas

BRONZE LIMBS AND CONCRETE DREAMS

A Poem in the Voice of Josephine Baker

I was born where the pavement sweats,
where the sun drapes its gold on the backs of brown girls
who learn to dance before they learn to dream.
Where the sirens wail like lost souls at midnight,
and the streetlights hum secrets only the stray dogs know.

Mama worked her fingers into threads of prayer,
stitched rent money into the seams of secondhand dresses.
She taught me how to smile with my whole body,
to move like joy had no cage,
like the world was an open stage waiting for my feet to claim it.

South Central taught me rhythm before love,
how to sway between cracked sidewalks and stolen glances,
how to spin away from hungry hands and whispering corners,
how to laugh in the face of a city that didn't always love me back.

The boys on the block called me trouble,
said my hips spoke a language they weren't old enough to understand.
I told them I was made of music,
of jazz notes and Sunday morning hallelujahs,
of the stories my grandmother carried from the Delta
and the freedom I knew was waiting somewhere past Crenshaw.

I dreamed in sequins, in feathers, in soft-lit stages
where the only bullets were the ones shot from cameras,
where the applause was louder than the police knocks.
Where my body belonged to movement, not survival.

So I danced.
On the pavement, on the bus stop benches, in the aisles of the corner store.
I danced until the city couldn't hold me anymore.
Until my name was more than a whisper.

And when I left—
when I flew over the cracked streets and neon liquor signs,
over the boys who swore they'd marry me someday,
over the prayers Mama stitched into my coat—
I carried South Central in the arch of my back,
in the tilt of my chin,
in the way I made the world watch me
without ever asking for permission.