



Understudies

(1)

Cara

we know too much

nothing is impaired
and everything still works on us
our breasts still number four
our hair a few years still from gray
no one has pulled our insides out
plopped us into alcohol jars
peeled or flushed any part of us away lucky
we can still run and jump and dodge
still we do not take kindly
to needing

our voices dim naturally
when there's more than one in the room
if we have to ask
if it really needs doing
it gets done
quietly finished
we know too much
remember
nothing is impaired
and everything still works

the kitchen
a magic shop
holding our mother's worktables
merely the steam from there
brings Chocolate Genies around
to the doors
of private kilns
we daughters baked in
fingers feets legs lips
brown-n-serve 'till done
feeded off their knowingness
we know too much

~ HEEL-TOE ~

we come
the sweet of the berry
the juice
the primary pulp

the best of toasted womens
who lingered long in the kitchen
who watched long
at the hot stove glass
ten padded toothpicks touching
their breadfruit
their okra pies
rising

(2)

Cara Cara
we know too too much
have sat up too many nights
trying to make it all sense out
just to know even more by morning
enough to always leave the saturday party early
enough to go home and cut and carve
some teeth some words out
from stored vats of mama wax
make something into something
just to know some come sunday more

we have seen them
something always wrapped around their hair
in case of hurricane
in lieu of quake
tornadoes roost there calmly
waiting out some insolence
waiting on some disrespect
just in case it comes
tropical storms could twist out anytime
get loose
through their eyes
on occasion
and claim any territory they please
when we come roun'

~ RICE ~

they settle back easylike
they know we know too much
on them nothing is impaired
and everything still works

we have heard them up
up before anything else dare move
seen our mamas
out early before their menfolks
talking cross the fence
pinning money to airing mattresses
nailing rocking chairs
to a tipping porch
saving early in their lives
what they know they'll need
later on

(3)

Cara
we know what we saw
cliffs were delivered
when our mothers ordered harbors
Sears catalogue #1269
pristine white trucks
with their engines still running
dropped them on the back steps
alongside
the mail the milk
we know too much
to ever return anything
make some use of it
all our other mothers say
before we are anything
while we are everything
whether we are tooth doctor
whether word grower
we are teachers
in any world
instructing
from any board
in kinte intonations

~ HEEL·TOE ~

in sepia equations
teachers come from teachers
we fall from lesson planners legs
we stoke the air for fat arms
toting a Webster
or Cornbread bound in code

who learn as we go
who always go
back to the attic
where the hiding is fine
where the gathering up great

the paint by numbers
the oil sets
Frances overlooked
Doris stepped across
no time in their lives for such foolishness
we connect their dots
we draw strong black lines
that will help us bare some pictures
like they bore some pictures
set in chestnut antique handmedown frames

we are Understudies
who have learned our own lines
and for backup
have learned theirs too
damn Cara damn
we know too much

(4)

How must we go on Cara
do we tow the line or throw it
how far from land are we
how far from shore might it hit
if we do
how much longer is the road
and when do the potholes start
my hands hurt more these days
and your cussing is worse

~ RICE ~

knowing what we know
other than their girls
just what are we
what will they know us for
and will anyone be able to see them through us
and when it's time
how do we move them over
onto their backs

push them out to sea
without being bone struck to stone
by their bolting back-up eyes

everytime they say
come home
we know they know
we are not coffee table daughters
even though
the catalogue still rests there
even though
cordially
daughterfully
dutifully
we know they will open it
and they will point and
will want us to look through it with them
right to something
somebody has told them they need
to live better to be better
but no such better
catalogued
anywhere

(5)

Until hot nights take back over
the reins from these cold ones

~ HEEL-TOE ~

and the catalogues go back up with the quilts
and we can all stumble back outside with no help
out through the screen door
back out with the lightning bugs
out onto some old secondhand and abandoned floor
that juts off just like another windy cliff

where they are the only women in town
who preserve their chairs
who dare Cakewalk
around and inbetween the squeaking boards
streamed still
with mail with milk
until then
we are sentries listening out
as they spin out for our sake

we are careful
obediently clumsy
girls
with shoulders naturally bent
like sea walls
built to hold back anything

Cara Cara
We know too much

even now we roll
with each other's help
right to the delivered edge
where we peer over
holding hands
to keep from falling

~ RICE ~

to keep from believing
what we see there
we peep over the side
unlike them
we know we love too hard
we stay too long
we look when we shouldn't even lean
the wall is our evidence
long broken off fingernails
stuck in rocks
glimmer out at us
but we know too much
to ever jump
where they have already been
and back

we know too much

we are impaired
we know it