

OILS

By Niama Leslie Williams

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i steal time.
and while,
kalamu,
i am grateful for
the guardian
altnet
portside
seeingblack.com,
there is a deeper hunger:

i have no time for literature
for books that cause the self to splinter, shatter, disintegrate
reassemble inside the story
as intimate
engaged
as the bookworm.

my reading
my devotion to the page
is the eating
the slow chewing,
with no mouth teeth tongue gums,
the tales spun by an elevator operator
a south carolinian turned farmer--
i murmur here kalamu
because hip hop is not my missive
the iraq war not my immediate concern
it is the art
what novels poems stories
will make those iraqis
human to us

truth?
have we become so complacent
so consumerist
that we have lost the magic of story
can we feel yet
the cohesiveness
the leaning in around a campfire
the breathless pause before a burst of fear horror giggles?
"art prepares us" rukeyser says
i teach this over and over and over

but do i teach the magic of story
how calvino is sexy
his opening a striptease of the most seductive sort?
and the necessary background
oh kalamu! i have lost time for the necessary background!
i want to teach birkerts' essay having read calvino in totality
want to teach wright's "the library card" knowing intimately mencken's
bilious nature
oh god kalamu
i want all of the backstory
all of the foretelling
and the latest news,
the latest news,
no matter how important
cannot sate this hunger

i am a bookworm who's been on a starvation diet
not enough words under my fingernails
life for me
proceeds in a book, kalamu,
proceeds in a book.

(2)

the answers come, don't they?
it was not the absence of background
so much as the absence of myself:
i must teach them how to see
show them what lies beneath the pages
what hides in the spaces between the words
what is ironic about the Negro porter mopping
his inability at nineteen
to pronounce "preface"
my sharing of what i see
how i see
brings fire

we need time
time to gaze into nothingness
let the meaning form from the nebula
that is us
our lives, our understandings
and what the author may never have intended
but is there.

i withdraw as an artist does from watercolors
to pause
sketch

pick up oils.

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