

Our Grandmothers

She lay, skin down on the moist dirt,
the canebrake rustling
with the whispers of leaves, and
loud longing of hounds and
the ransack of hunters crackling the near branches.

She muttered, lifting her head a nod toward freedom,
I shall not, I shall not be moved.

She gathered her babies,
their tears slick as oil on black faces,
their young eyes canvassing mornings of madness.
Monna, is Master going to sell you
from us tomorrow?

Yes.
Unless you keep walking more
and talking less.
Yes.
Unless the keeper of our lives
releases me from all commandments.
Yes.
And your lives,
never mine to live,
will be executed upon the killing floor of innocents.
Unless you match my heart and words,
saying with me,

I shall not be moved.

In Virginia tobacco fields,
leaning into the curve
of Steinway
pianos, along Arkansas roads,
in the red hills of Georgia,
into the palms of her chained hands, she
cried against calamity,
You have tried to destroy me
and though I perish daily,

I shall not be moved.

Her universe, often
summarized into one black body
falling finally from the tree to her feet,
made her cry each time in a new voice,
All my past hastens to defeat,
and strangers claim the glory of my love,
Iniquity has bound me to his bed,

yet, I must not be moved.

She heard the names,
swirling ribbons in the wind of history:
nigger, nigger bitch, heifer,
mammy, property, creature, ape, baboon,
whore, hot tail, thing, it.
She said, But my description cannot
fit your tongue, for
I have a certain way of being in this world,

and I shall not, I shall not be moved.

No angel stretched protecting wings
above the heads of her children,
fluttering and urging the winds of reason

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into the confusion of their lives.
They sprouted like young weeds,
but she could not shield their growth
from the grinding blades of ignorance, nor
shape them into symbolic topiaries.
She sent them away,
underground, overland, in coaches and
shoeless.
When you learn, teach.
When you get, give.
As for me,

I shall not be moved.

She stood in midocean, seeking dry land.
She searched God's face.
Assured,
she placed her fire of service
on the altar, and though
clothed in the finery of faith,
when she appeared at the temple door,
no sign welcomed
Black Grandmother. Enter here.

Into the crashing sound,
into wickedness, she cried,
No one, no, nor no one million
ones dare deny me God. I go forth
alone, and stand as ten thousand.

The Divine upon my right
impels me to pull forever
at the latch on Freedom's gate.

The Holy Spirit upon my left leads my
feet without ceasing into the camp of the
righteous and into the tents of the free.

These momma faces, lemon-yellow, plum-purple,
honey-brown, have grimaced and twisted
down a pyramid of years.
She is Sheba and Sojourner,
Harriet and Zora,
Mary Bethune and Angela,
Annie to Zenobia.

She stands
before the abortion clinic,
confounded by the lack of choices.
In the Welfare line,
reduced to the pity of handouts.
Ordained in the pulpit, shielded
by the mysteries.
In the operating room,
husbanding life.
In the choir loft,
holding God in her throat.
On lonely street corners,
hawking her body.
In the classroom, loving the
children to understanding.

Centered on the world's stage,
she sings to her loves and beloveds,
to her foes and detractors:
However I am perceived and deceived,
however my ignorance and conceits,
lay aside your fears that I will be undone,

for I shall not be moved.

Maya Angelou: A Survivor

When obstacles are put in front of us, so is a choice: either to fight against the struggle or succumb to it. When Maya Angelou was faced with adversity in her life, she chose to fight. Never one to shy away from standing up for what she believed was right, she emphasized the importance of courage. In her poems, she expresses the idea of staying strong in the face of adversity. One poem that especially conveys this idea is “Our Grandmothers.” In this touching, powerful poem, she depicts black women and their struggles. Her poem is a testament that while their bodies can ache and break and bruise, their spirits will stay resilient through all the challenges they face. Angelou’s compelling poem shows that, though all the women face different obstacles, they fight hard just the same to stay strong, even when they feel their weakest.

The poem opens with a description of a woman who, along with her children, is running away from her master:

She gathered her babies,
their tears slick as oil on black faces,
their young eyes canvassing mornings of madness.
Momma, is Master going to sell you
from us tomorrow?

These lines address the fact that for rest of their lives, this family must live with the worry that they could be punished simply for wanting to live a free life. But even in freedom, they are shackled to their fear of the white man. The mother in the poem responds to her children’s heartbreaking question:

Yes.

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Unless you keep walking more
and talking less.

Yes.

Unless the keeper of our lives
release me from all commandments.

Yes.

And your lives,
never mine to live,
will be executed upon the killing floor of innocence.

Angelou then describes a woman who must face the violation of her body: “All my past hastens to defeat, / and strangers claim the glory of my love, / Iniquity has bound me to his bed.” Though the woman’s sense of self and body is invaded in the most unimaginable way, she continues to stay strong because she knows she must. Angelou then provides a catalog of the demeaning names that black women have been called: “heifer / mammy, property, creature, ape, baboon, / whore, hot tail, thing, it.” While these names are dehumanizing, the woman in the poem simply responds, “But my description cannot / fit your tongue, for / I have a certain way of being in this world.” These hateful words do not cut her as deeply as the name callers mean them to; she rises above the hate and recognizes her own worth. Angelou goes on to describe a woman agonizing over the heart-breaking truth that she cannot protect her children.

They sprouted like young weeds,
but she could not shield their growth
from the grinding blades of ignorance, nor
shape them into symbolic topiaries.”

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The mother sent her children away to keep them safe, but the reality of the matter is, she cannot save them. Angelou gives a nod to all the women of color who are the foundation upon which even she stands. “These momma faces, lemon-yellow, plum-purple, / honey-brown, have grimaced and twisted / down a pyramid of years.” Finally, Angelou writes of the modern woman standing before an abortion clinic and the welfare line, a woman who is put in difficult and humiliating situations. Though all the women described in the poem are going through struggling, hard times, it ends with these parting words: “However I am perceived and deceived, / however my ignorance and conceits, / lay aside your fears that I will be undone.” Angelou’s poem pays homage to all the black women who have looked adversity in the face and said, “I shall not be moved.” This line is repeated many times within the poem and is in fact, the last line. Angelou is making a powerful statement that the women will not go quietly when told, that they will not allow themselves to be pushed down without the intention to get back up again and again and again.

Maya Angelou wrote this poem for the black women who didn’t have a voice. She did this in hope that people would maybe be able to understand the women and their struggles. One of the most important steps toward improving race relations in the U.S. is to acknowledge the struggles that people of color have been trying to express. Once that is acknowledged, then both sides can try to come up with a solution or plan to help minimize those struggles. Currently, both sides seem to be too defensive to have a productive conversation about race relations or even to come close to doing so. Though most think that race relations are at an all-time low, in this time of tension and uncertainty, it is most important to stay strong and united as Americans. We must work together to strengthen race relations. Without cooperation from both parties, no change will ever be made. If we learn to listen to each other, hear of the struggles, human to human, that each

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of us is going through—if we learn to understand each other, then maybe black people will not feel that they have to scream to be heard. When African Americans scream, white people, many of whom feel that they didn't have anything to do with what black people are screaming about, start to feel attacked and get defensive. Then both sides are screaming at each other, and neither side is being heard. No one is trying to understand or listen, no one is being productive, and nothing is getting done. When both sides finally decide to hear what the other side has to say, then a conversation can happen. To have change happen, we must fight for it; we must fight *for* each other, not *with* each other. That would be first step in the right direction toward improving race relations in the U.S.

Maya Angelou dealt with her fair share of struggles in life. When she was seven, her mother's boyfriend raped her. He was beaten in the parking lot upon being released from jail a day later. Because of this, Angelou thought that her voice could kill, and she stopped speaking. For five years, she was silent, but when she finally spoke again, she refused to be silenced ever again. She was a fierce, courageous woman who never let herself give up in the face of adversity. The refrain in her poem, "I shall not be moved," alludes to the bible and perfectly describes how Angelou dealt with her personal struggles. It portrays how the women, by being strong in their belief in God, cannot be moved by the struggles of life. Angelou suggests that like the women in her poem, we must cling to each other in times of anger and uproar and draw our strength from each other. Race is a sensitive subject in the U.S., but change will happen only if we fight for it together as human beings and try to understand each other's perspective.