

## What Would Gwendolyn Brooks Do

Parneshia Jones

Dawn oversees percolating coffee  
and the new wreckage of the world.

I stand before my routine reflection,  
button up my sanity,  
brush weary strands of hair with pomade  
and seal cracked lips of distrust  
with cocoa butter and matte rouge.

I ready myself once again  
for morning and mortify.  
Stacking poetry and bills in a knapsack;  
I bundle up hope (it's brutal out there).

For a moment, I stand with ghosts  
and the framed ancestors surrounding me.  
I call out, hoping she can hear me  
over the day-breaking sirens—  
hoping she's not far away,  
or right down the street,  
praying over another dead black boy.

How will we make it through this, Ms. Brooks?

*Hold On.*

When she held a body,  
she saw much worse than this.  
I know she was earshot and fingertip close to oppression.  
She saw how hateful hate could be.  
She raised babies, taught Stone Rangers,  
grew a natural and wrote around critics.

She won a Pulitzer in the dark.  
She justified our kitchenette dreams,  
and held on.  
She held on to all of us.

*Hold On, she whispers.*

Another day, when I have to tip-toe  
around the police and passive-aggressive emails  
from people who sit only a few feet away from me.  
Another day of fractured humans  
who decide how I will live and die,  
and I have to act like I like it  
so I can keep a job;  
be a team player, pay taxes on it;  
I have to act like I'm happy to be  
slammed, severed, and swindled.  
Otherwise, I'm just part of the problem—  
a rebel rouser and rude.

### *About This Poem*

“When Gwendolyn Brooks wrote *Hold On* at the bottom of a photograph she put in my hand, and red marks all over the three poems I had to my name, it anchored me in a real time of need. It was the first and only time we met and she anchored me. I see a world moving into uncertainty and I think about Ms. Brooks, those two anchor words she gave me, and I continue to *Hold On* for dear life.”

—Parneshia Jones

They want me to like it, or at least pretend,  
so the pretty veils that blanket who we really are—  
this complicated history, can stay pretty and veiled  
like some desert belly dancer  
who must be seen but not heard.

*Hold On.*

We are a world of lesions.  
Human has become hindrance.  
We must be stamped and have papers,  
and still, it's not enough.  
Ignorance has become powerful.  
The dice that rolls our futures is platinum  
but hollow inside.

Did you see that, Ms. Brooks?  
Do you see what we've become?  
They are skinning our histories,  
deporting our roots,  
detonating our very right to tell the truth.  
We are one step closer to annihilation.

*Hold On*, she says, two million light years away.

She's right.  
Hold On everybody.  
Hold On because the poets are still alive—and writing.  
Hold On to the last of the disappearing bees  
and that Great Barrier Reef.  
Hold On to the one sitting next to you,  
not masked behind some keyboard.  
The one right next to you.  
The ones who live and love right next to you.  
Hold On to them.

And when we bury another grandmother,  
or another black boy;  
when we stand in front of a pipeline,  
pour another glass of dirty drinking water  
and put it on the dining room table,  
next to the kreplach, bratwurst, tamales, collards,  
and dumplings  
that our foremothers and fathers—immigrants,  
brought with them so we all knew that we came  
from somewhere;  
somewhere that mattered.  
When we kneel on the rubbled mosques,  
sit in massacred prayer circles,  
Holding On is what gets us through.

We must remember who we are.  
We are worth fighting for.

We've seen beauty.  
We've birthed babies who've only known a black  
President.  
We've tasted empathy and paid it forward.  
We've Go-Funded from wrong to right.  
We've marched and made love.  
We haven't forgotten—even if they have—Karma is  
keeping watch.

Hold On.  
Hold On everybody.  
Even if all you have left  
is that middle finger around your God-given right  
to be free, to be heard, to be loved,  
and remembered...Hold On,  
and keep  
Holding

