***On Being Young—A Woman—and Colored***, Marita Bonner

You start out after you have gone from kindergarten to sheepskin covered with sundry Latin phrases. At least you know what you want life to give you. A career as fixed and as calmly brilliant as the North Star. The one real thing that money buys. Time. Time to do things. A house that can be as delectably out of order and as easily put in order as the doll-house of “playing-house” days. And of course a husband you can look up to without looking down on yourself.

Somehow you feel like a kitten in a sunny catnip field that sees sleek plump brown field mice and yellow baby chicks sitting coyly, side by side under each leaf. A desire to dash three or four ways seizes you.

That’s Youth.

But you know that things learned need testing – acid testing – to see if they are really after all, an interwoven part of you. All your life you have heard of the debt you owe “Your People” because you have managed to have the things they have not largely had.

So you find a spot where there are hordes of them – of course below the Line – to be your catnip field while you close your eyes to mice and chickens alike.

If you have never lived among your own, you feel prodigal. Some warm untouched current flows through them – through you – and drags you out into the deep waters of a new sea of human foibles and mannerisms; of a peculiar psychology and prejudices. And one day you find yourself entangled –enmeshed in the seaweed of a Black Ghetto.

Not a Ghetto, placid like the Strasse that flows, outwardly unperturbed and calm in a stream of religious belief, but a peculiar group. Cut off, flung together, shoved aside in a bundle because of color and with no more in common.

Unless color is, after all, the real bond.

Milling around like live fish in a basket Those at the bottom crushed into a sort of stupid apathy by the weight of those on top. Those on top leaping, leaping; leaping to scale the sides; to get out.

There are two “colored” movies, innumerable parties – and cards. Cards played so intensely that it fascinates and repulses at once. Movies. Movies worthy and worthless – but not even a low-caste spoken stage. Parties, plentiful. Music and dancing and much that is wit and color and gaiety. But they are like the richest chocolate; stuffed costly chocolates that make the taste go stale if you have too many of them. That make plain whole bread taste like ashes.

There are the all the earmarks of a group within a group. Cut off all around from ingress from or egress to other groups. A sameness of type. The smug self-satisfaction of an inner measurement; a measurement by standards known within a limited group and not those of an unlimited, seeing, world… Like the blind, blind mice. Mice whose eyes have been blinded.

Strange longing seizes hold of you. You decide the next train will take you there. You decide the next second that the train will not take you, nor the next --- nor the next for the some time to come. For you know that –being a woman—you cannot twice a month or twice a year, for that matter, break away to see or hear anything in a city that it is supposed to see and hear too much.

That’s being a woman. A woman of any color.

You decide that something is wrong with a world that stifles and chokes; that cuts off and stunts; hedging in, pressing down on eyes, ears. And throat. Somehow all wrong. You wonder how it happens there that Anglo Saxon intelligence is so warped and stunted. How judgment and discernment are bred out of the race. And what has become of discrimination? Discrimination of the right sort. Discrimination that the best minds have told you weighs shadows and nuances and spiritual differences before it catalogues. The kind they have taught you all of your life was best: that looks clearly past generalization and past appearance to dissect, to dig down to the real heart of matters. That casts aside rapid summary conclusion, drawn from primary inference, as Daniel did the spiced meats.

Why can’t they then perceive that there is a difference in the glance from a pair of eyes that look mildly docile at “white ladies” and those that impersonally and perceptively –aware of distinctions-see only women who happen to be white? Why do they see a colored woman only as a gross collection of desires, all uncontrolled with avid indiscrimintation?

Every part of you becomes bitter.

But in Heaven’s name, do not grow bitter. Be bigger than they are. Exhort white friends who have never had to draw breath in a Jim-Crow train. Who have never had petty putrid insult dragged over them-drawing blood-like pebbled sand on your body where the skin is tenderist. On your body where the skin is thinnest and tenderest.

You long to explode and hurt everything white; friendly; unfriendly. But you know that you cannot live with a chip on your shoulder even if you can manage a smile around your eyes – without getting steely and brittle and losing the softness that makes you a woman.

You must sit quietly without a chip. Not sodden – and weighted as if your feet were cast in the iron of your soul. Not wasting strength in enervation gestures as if two hundred years of bonds and whips had really tricked you into nervous uncertainty. But quiet; quiet. Like Buddha – who brown like I am—sat entirely at ease, entirely sure of himself; motionless and knowing, a thousand years before the white man knew there was so very much difference between feet and hands.

Silent.

So you too. Still; quiet; with a smile, ever so slight, at the eyes so that Life will flow into and not by you. And you can gather, as it passes the essences the overtone, the tints, the shadow, draw understanding to yourself.