

A Poem for Nelson Mandela

Here where I live it is Sunday.
From my room I hear black
children playing between houses
and the El at a Sabbath rattle.
I smell barbecue from every direction
and hear black hands tolling church bells,
hear wind hissing through elm trees
through dry grasses

On a rooftop of a prison
in South Africa Nelson Mandela
tends garden and has a birthday,
as my Jamaican grandfather in Harlem, New York
raises tomatoes and turns ninety-one.
I have taken touch for granted: my grandfather's hands,
his shoulders, his pajamas which smell of vitamin pills.
I have taken a lover's touch for granted,
recall my lover's touch from this morning
as Mandela's wife pulls memories through years
and years

my life is black and filled with fortune.
Nelson Mandela is with me because I believe
in symbols; symbols bear power; symbols demand
power; and that is how a nation
follows a man who leads from prison
and cannot speak to them. Nelson Mandela
is with me because I am a black girl
who honors her elders, who loves
her grandfather, who is a black daughter
as Mandela's daughters are black
daughters. This is Philadelphia
and I see this Sunday clean.