

## THE POETRY OF COURAGE

### Class FOUR: THE COURAGE TO SURVIVE

#### COLD TILES

By Marcy Heidish

If you are raped  
when you are raped  
your mind floats away  
on a silent journey  
entirely on its own

It rises to the curtains  
breathing gently  
in a summer breeze  
there your mind rests  
in the cloth's safety

Then skims the ceiling,  
your weightless mind,  
above the man's heaving  
back, sweat-stained,  
erasing your body

Crushing its lovely ribs  
leaving untouched  
its slender white feet  
its arms flung wide  
as an open umbrella

Once he lumbers off  
a slim instant later  
only then your mind  
like a silk scarf  
floats back into you

Under your back  
you feel the cold tiles  
of the bathroom floor  
where you had to  
leave your body behind

You lie there how long?  
No one can tell you  
not your winged mind  
the knobs of your spine

those curtains that saw

You rise and leave  
noticing new light  
as life fills you again  
and you now know  
you are a survivor.

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#### LIFE ON HER STREET

"Get the hell off my grate," shouts Meg,  
then grins when she recognizes me.  
We always talk whenever I pass by.

For Meg this subway grate is home:  
It's sunny, safe, and warm on cold days.  
A strong tarp serves if there 'is rain.

Sixty, tough, with one long silver braid,  
she scoffs at homeless women's shelters.  
Any word of them, turns her gaze to steel..

"I'll never leave, quit, give in." she spits.  
"I've got freedom, my terms, no boss."  
Her eyes gleam like two bright coins

I think of Meg and her squatters rights,  
but they don't tempt me all the same.  
"Women are so vulnerable, " I tell her.

"You with your big words, college girl,"  
Meg winks now, teasing, with a laugh.  
"Vulnerable? Shit! Maybe you. Not me."

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#### SHALL I RISE

By Maya Angelou

You may write me down in history  
With your bitter, twisted lies,  
You may trod me in the very dirt  
But still, like dust, I'll rise.

Does my sassiness upset you?

Why are you beset with gloom?  
'Cause I walk like I've got oil wells  
Pumping in my living room.

Just like moons and like suns,  
With the certainty of tides,  
Just like hopes springing high,  
Still I'll rise.

Did you want to see me broken?  
Bowed head and lowered eyes?  
Shoulders falling down like teardrops,  
Weakened by my soulful cries?

Does my haughtiness offend you?  
Don't you take it awful hard  
'Cause I laugh like I've got gold mines  
Diggin' in my own backyard.

You may shoot me with your words,  
You may cut me with your eyes,  
You may kill me with your hatefulness,  
But still, like air, I'll rise.

Does my sexiness upset you?  
Does it come as a surprise  
That I dance like I've got diamonds  
At the meeting of my thighs?

Out of the huts of history's shame  
I rise  
Up from a past that's rooted in pain  
I rise  
I'm a black ocean, leaping and wide,  
Welling and swelling I bear in the tide.

Leaving behind nights of terror and fear  
I rise  
Into a daybreak that's wondrously clear  
I rise  
Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave,  
I am the dream and the hope of the slave.  
I rise  
I rise  
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## CLASS FOUR: THE COURAGE TO GO ON

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"Vulnerable? Shit! Maybe you. Not me."

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#### PLACE

By W.S. Merwin

On the last day of the world  
I would want to plant a tree  
what for  
not for the fruit  
the tree that bears the fruit  
is not the one that was planted  
I want the tree that stands

in the earth for the first time  
with the sun already  
going down  
and the water  
touching its roots  
in the earth full of the dead  
and the clouds passing  
one by one  
over its leaves

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#### WHEN DEATH COMES

---Mary Oliver

When death comes  
like the hungry bear in autumn;  
when death comes and takes all the bright coins from his purse

to buy me, and snaps the purse shut;  
when death comes  
like the measles-pox;

when death comes  
like an iceberg between the shoulder blades,

I want to step through the door full of curiosity, wondering  
what is it going to be like, that cottage of darkness?

When it's over I want to say all my life  
I was a bride married to amazement  
I was the bridegroom taking the world into my arms.

When it's over, I don't want to wonder  
If I have made of my life something particular  
And real.

I don't want to find myself sighing and frightened,  
Or full of argument.

I don't want to end up simply to have visited this world.

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#### LET EVENING COME

Jane Kenyon

Let the light of late afternoon  
shine through the chinks in the barn, moving  
up the bales as the sun moves down.

Let the crickets take up chafing  
as a woman takes up her needles  
and her yarn. Let evening come.

Let dew collect on the hoe abandoned  
in long grass. Let the stars appear  
and the moon disclose her silver horn.

Let the fox go back to its sandy den.  
Let the wind die down. Let the shed  
go black inside. Let evening come.

To the bottle in the ditch, to the scoop  
in the oats, to air in the lungs  
Let evening come.

Let it come as it will and don't  
be afraid. God does not leave us  
comfortless, so let evening come.

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AND YET THE BOOKS  
By Czesław Miłosz

And yet the books will be there on the shelves, separate beings,  
That appeared once, still wet  
As shining chestnuts under a tree in autumn,  
And, touched, coddled, began to live  
In spite of fires on the horizon, castles blown up,  
Tribes on the march, planets in motion.  
"We are," they said, even as their pages  
Were being torn out, or a buzzing flame



Licked away their letters. So much more durable  
Than we are, whose frail warmth  
Cools down with memory, disperses, perishes.  
I imagine the earth when I am no more:  
Nothing happens, no loss, it's still a strange pageant,  
Women's dresses, dewy lilacs, a song in the valley.  
Yet the books will be there on the shelves, well born,  
Derived from people, but also from radiance, heights

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