

The Concrete Jungle

Gillian Bowser

I grew up in a concrete jungle
My trees were made of steel
Their bones were taut with the
Laughter and sorrows
Of many long forgotten families.
Their leaves were the discarded papers
Of yesterday's news,
The canopies of each tree
Forming the tar paper beaches
We called home.

I grew up in a concrete jungle
Where our daily transportation
Was a city bus on a crowded corner.
The old bus driver would let
Me collect the tokens,
Enjoying my delight in feeding
The hungry bus.
Only the white folks had the fancy
Yellow buses, he would tell me,
Those buses actually took kids
Home door to school door so they didn't
have to
run through city puddles
In the grey rain.

In older years, we traveled to school by
subway,
in a haze of sweat
Crammed between doors
As the legendary A train
Danced its way to Harlem.
Doo do do ta do dah ... I would hum
As the train collected and disgorged

Suited business folks
Until only the black folk
Remained, bogging on into Harlem.

I grew up in a jungle of contradictions
Trees grew from small holes in the con-
crete
My father broke open for me.
Flowers grew in milk jugs
And once even a butterfly
Called in for a visit.
We could travel the subway
To the Coney Island beach
Eat hot dogs and
Lose them again whipping around the
Ancient rollercoaster,
And we cooled our feet in the waters of
Jamaica Bay
In the shadows of Steeplechase park.
My mother rode the same train,
Ate the same hot dogs
And sat in the same shadows
Giving me ownership to that patch of
Sand, generations old.

I grew up in a concrete jungle by a river
A deep mysterious river with
Unnamed unseen creatures chasing
Floating plastic bottles on the water's sur-
face.
In later years, I would tell my friends
About that river,
And watch them imagine a life
Of yachts and marinas,

Men in white shorts with crisp drinks in
their hands.
My river was home to the weary barges
and tugboats
Who would blow their horns as I dangled
My feet in my river while resting
at the ankles of the Brooklyn Bridge.

I went to school by subways under the
roots of
My concrete jungle.
Crammed between the businessmen
In suits, ladies fanning sweating faces,
A man mumbling in the corner,
I could do my homework
Between 59th street and 125th
As the A train rattled to Harlem...
“Who was Harriet Tubman and
describe the underground railroad”
the teacher had asked...
must be a version of this A train I would
think
rumbling slaves through smelly under-
ground tunnels
subdued sparks flashing from its wheels...
Hard to think how the men and their slave-
chasing dogs
Got past the token booth collector.

I grew up in the concrete forest,
And heard Nikki sing of negroes in the
south
Maya mourning our lost innocence, and
Watched Coltrane sway in a smoky haze.
Malcolm gone in a jangle of discord,
Proud black men stood tall and defiant,
And my father cried for Martin.
In that concrete jungle, men with hoods
Were far away, where fire hoses chased our
cousins
But we supped at tables with Caribbean
spices
Blessings muttered in many languages.
Matzo balls and barbeque mixed
On tacos...

I grew up in the concrete Jungle
And that jungle is always my home.
Yet that anchor in memories
Gives me my rope to explore
New jungles and compare their
Dusty depths to my home.
Yet always the concrete jungle calls me
And I hear her rumble in my sleep
Her restless lights tease my eyes
And her voice whispers
In tune to distant car alarms...

Welcome home.