Verse: Amirah

November 1, 1998 By Laura Whitehorn

(Pamela Cooper, who died March 22, 1995)

You walked the earth deliberately,
solid-thighed,
heavy-treaded,
laden
with Koran, Langston Hughes
    and oranges,
gifts of work and words
for anyone in need.

Transplanted to DC,
you stayed rooted
in North Carolina soil,
something sweet,
aroma of molasses and sugar
hanging round your neck.

We talked endlessly
in your overheated cell
(sometimes without words),
reveled in remembering
Malcolm X, Myrlie Evers,
    Angela and Assata,
read our calendar every day,
shared what we knew,
tolled the births and deaths
    of heroes and heroines,
learned to celebrate
the women.

You were burdened
by the weight you always
    worried about,
never had time to lose.

(I wondered how you managed
    to gain,
always giving away your food
to anyone who was hungry.)

Ripped apart by prison transfers,
a year later you joked
on the phone
that AIDS had finally resolved
    your weight problem.

Your voice
grown thin and reedy
through the wires
while you lay wasting
still whispers in my memory
of your decision to die,
unable to love yourself
as well as you loved the rest of us.
“She won’t eat,”
the nurse complained.

Now the weight problem
is mine, my heart too heavy
for my chest to carry.
As usual, you were quite fearless,
capable of handling
    your own death,
while I,
two years later,
am still trying to lose
this stone of grief.

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