

DAWOUD BEY

American, born New York, NY, 1953

Untitled #17 (Forest) from the series *Night Coming Tenderly, Black*, 2017

Gelatin silver print, 44 x 55 inches

Purchase funds provided by Susan and Richard Rieser, 2019.4

When I was just starting to write, my father suggested I write a poem about nature. By "nature" I think he had in mind the trees because he had been teaching me their names since I was a little girl. Often, on long walks, he'd linger to stare up into the branches of the sycamores, the outer layer of rough brown bark peeling away, revealing another layer beneath it, smooth and white as bone.

As with those sycamores, there was always something else lurking beneath the surface when I tried to write a nature poem, something more sinister, as in Lucille Clifton's, "surely i am able to write poems." These lines echoed my own difficult knowledge of and fraught relationship with—as a Black Mississippian—my native geography:

... but whenever i begin
"the trees wave their knotted branches
and..." why
is there under that poem always
an other poem?

Is it the specter of lynching, the terror of the woods at night in Mississippi? Contemplating Dawoud Bey's photograph *Untitled #17 (Forest)*, and summoning Langston Hughes's poem "Dream Variations"—from which the series title comes—I am reminded of the transformative power of metaphor, of words and visual language. One afternoon, when I was very small, I was in the kitchen with my father. He had been entertaining me with a hand puppet—a wolf in a bonnet from the story of Little Red Riding Hood. "See that wolf out there?" he asked. At that moment I saw my great-aunt Sugar, transformed: a wolf in a day dress and hat walking through the woods behind my grandmother's house. I am reminded now of seeing those woods in a different way, and of the happiness of that place and time, the tenderness embodied in the darkness and deep shade of those trees rooted in the landscape of my home—both a physical and psychological geography. I can hear the crickets that sang me to sleep.

"The woods are lovely, dark and deep," Robert Frost wrote. And in my mind's eye, night at the house of my childhood settles around us, as in Hughes's poem, "*tenderly/Black like me.*"

—Natasha Trethewey
Board of Trustees Professor of English