

Contraband Marriage
Tichaona Chinyelu

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Confession of errors is like a broom
which sweeps away the dirt
and leaves the surface brighter and clearer.
I feel stronger for confession.
~ Mahatma Gandhi

Our women must not pull back
in the face of the many different aspects
of their struggle,
which leads them to courageously
and proudly take full charge
of their own lives
and discover the happiness
of being themselves,
not the domesticated female of the male.
~ Thomas Sankara

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...then comes science

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Introduction

Like Grass Through Concrete

I.

When asked how
I could love a man in prison
I respond by asking:
how did your great grandmother love
your great grandfather
during plantation days?
As oppressive as the situation was
the loving didn't stop
because we're not extinct.

When told
that was different
I point out the part of the constitution
which says slavery is illegal
unless a person is convicted of a crime.

When they say oh,
I say yeah, oh.
Then I ask them Asha's question:
"Could they reject the greatest love
they've ever known
just because it came from the worst place
they've ever known?"*

II.

Sometimes love goes underground
like a vampire
who knows it'll die
if hit by the light of day.
Sometimes loves goes underground
only to push its way back up again
slowly but persistently
like grass through concrete.

III.

We make it work by inches.
Our hands extended above our heads
pushing at the concrete

understanding that
even if it's turned into a wall
that wall will one day crack and then break
under the pressure of our hands
and we will breathe free
together.

* The Prisoner's Wife, pg. 21
© 1999 Asha Bandele

Vienna

I am so close.
Louisville, Evansville, Paducah, then Vienna.
I don't know about Louis or Evan
But I know about Lewis and Clark.

I don't know about Vienna either
whether it's pronounced vee-en-ah
or vie-en-ah.
but I know a little something about boats
and I'm learning more about prisons.

Vie-en-ah is a town on the move.
Last time I was here
they were tearing up the ground
to build a McDonalds franchise
where the sons and daughters
of corrections officers
will work after school
and during the summer.

Now it's up and running
and I hear their unspoken sentiments
as they take my money
just like I hear the thoughts
of their fathers as they process
yet another black woman
visiting someone
she loves
in prison.

Gotta love a country that
from california to the new york island
from the redwood forest to the gulf stream waters
was made for me to import crack
so blacks can sell it
smoke it
get incarcerated
because of it.

Gotta love a country that
was made for me to build

and work at
prisons that look like prisons
schools that look like prisons
k-marts that look like prisons
complete with watchtower.

But as I walk into the prison
I find they're only part of the story
and not even the most significant part:

Harriet Tubman put the gun
on my great grandparents
brought them up outta the South.
to Boston.
where they thought about
getting involved
with the abolitionists
but hunger dictated the work.
Great Grand took in washing.
Big Grand hired himself
out as a bricklayer
built some
of those fine Boston homes.
They scraped together enough
to send one child to day school.
At night that child
taught the others.
So it went.

One of those taught
opened a school for others like us
right there in her bedroom:
didn't have a bed nohow.

GreatG
who was a cook down there
opened a catering business.
Things improved
and the first children
born up north
went back down there
to Tuskegee
and studied

under the fine man himself
Mr. Booker T. Washington.

Wasn't no talk
about anti-lynching campaigns
down there.
Ida B. Wells tried it
but barely escaped with her life.
Wasn't no way
for me to follow her.
Harriet wasn't there with her gun.
She died in the poorhouse
and that wasn't gonna be me.

Wasn't gonna be me.
Wasn't gonna be my children.
Wasn't gonna be my grandchildren.
Wasn't gonna be my great grandchildren.
Wasn't gonna be us.

Generations later
I look at them
the great grandchildren
as I wait
for the paperwork to be processed.
I listen to what's said
and what remains unsaid
as they refuse to look back at me.
I hear that it's a choice
between the factory
and the department of corrections.
I hear that they're here
for the paycheck
and I hear as well as see
that a paycheck
is not the only thing
they're picking up.

Contraband Marriage

Unofficially contraband
Like weeds that dare subvert
Concrete.
Loving him, marrying him
Prisoner,
Felon,
Gangster,
Thug
Was something
That wasn't supposed to happen.

Hundreds of miles from his family
A distance intended to be
As alienating as the years given
but I
Revolutionary,
Sister,
Insurgent,
Lover
Was something
That did happen

And like the weeds
We dared subvert
Concrete walls
Barbed wire fences
Laws that change on Sundays
Sending my husband back
To his cell
While I sat and waited for him
To change into the proper
Shade of blue
Just in order to sit
Platonically patient
Only to be denied the feeling
Of his hand against my cheek
As we stared into each other's eyes.

But they couldn't reprimand
The memory of our marriage kiss
Or how he lifted me

And swung me around
Whispering in my ear
We did it!

I Am

I am the fire that heats your blood
~call your doctor and I'll do the same to him or her.
I am water, flowing and ebbing endlessly
~damning me is useless~

I am the elements that make up humanity
~ashes and dust contain particles of me~
I am time constantly in existence
~clocks are just abstractions of me~
I am nature, the fullness of its fury and calm of its eye
~unadulterated and untamable~

I am female, the she, the womb that closes when I decide.
I am nasty and pure; virginal and whorish
I am the one who runs from your fist; the one who burns your bed
as well as the one lone juror who sets me free

I am the one who speaks with her vagina as well as her mouth
I am the scraped out as well as the one doing the scraping
I am not operation rescue or holier than thou

I am earth: plant something in me
I am sky: stop dropping bombs from me
I am fire: next time, next time, NOW
I am water: now flow with me.

The Murky Matter

Brothers' Keeper

When you dreamt of rivers,
I went down to the nearest one
with my bucket
and brought it to you.
Don't dream, drink:
Water is life.

When you said, here I stand
I was the one who put the shoes on your feet.

My womb bred you and my eyes saw you;
Never neutral when it comes to you.

Sing your songs, strut your truth
and I'm right by your side;
the barrel of my pen
ready and willing to cosign
that we're in this love together.

Requiem for L

Days of wine and roses
Were never a part of my twenty-four
Except once.

Understanding my need to sip and sniff,
He brought me Ethiopian honey wine
And Somali Rose incense.

Understanding his need to not return
to breaking his mother's back,
I stood on oak-peopled corners
And entreated first wonders
To catch the aroma of Afrika.

One hundred and thirty two moons
Beyond my winter after the summer of love birth,
He was my alpha.

Joyfully submitting, I laid under him
Matching him movement for movement.
My lips curved in a half moon when he proclaimed,
They told you wrong, you *can* dance.

I loved him so much I kissed him to the point
I was able to laughingly side-step embarrassment
When my sister, known as Semi-Love, said
I heard you two smacking lips in the kitchen.

He was the beginning of my womanhood
But I didn't know I was the end of his manhood
Until my allegiance to my then prison-bound husband
Made me say good-bye.

Several copper-wire conversations later,
There was so much sorrow in his voice
When he said, if I knew you wanted to be
A married woman, I would've married you.

Devoid of my essence, he took a header off
Of a rickety staircase. I didn't believe anything
Anybody told me, thinking it was a ploy

To get me to focus on my husband
Until I called his long-time sister friend.
She heard me say my name and went silent
And I knew...my alpha was dead.

Grief is perennial. It walks with me daily.

Divinity

She, like newton's apple,
Gravitates toward the pull of the earth;
Naturally naked like the new born.

Ohm

The axis to her moon wine
He pushes into the center
Of her.

Ohm

They channel each other
Licking the palm of each other's life lines:
She tastes café au lait.
He ingests cinnamon.

It is copa...set
And ready to go
Return the tides

To the Nile's flow.

Whatever, Baby

Come on baby
You're not stretched on a grave.
You're stretched on an earth born woman
feel my hills and valleys
caress my hills and valleys
be the cause of my earth brown skin quakes
fix my faults

What?
I'm being too literary?
Oh...

You want it raw?

Would you like to see my hand
creep between my spread legs
separate lips aching and wet
just for you, only you?
Would you like to see that hand
penetrate my fuckhole
the spot you call home
the place that got you so twisted
every time you cum
you start singing sweet home alabama
like you're in lynrd skynrd and shit.

What?
I'm being too funny?
It's making you soft?
Oh...

How about this?

Run up to my border
my bumper
whatever, baby.
Just run up to me
so you can run up inside me
get me juicy like juicy fruit
get my clit sprouting higher than jack
and his dumb beanstalk

get me gushing, as I've said before, like old geyser

but ain't no geyser or geezer here, baby.

It's just me

an earth born brown woman

and you an earth born brown man.

So whatever baby.

Kill the noise and the lights.

Show me how you want it.

No Expiration Date

Musical is the melody of my words
This freaky Friday when fellatio is the first
Thing you utter but my tongue is already prepared
To undulate in tonal movements both dulcet and flat.

The warp to your woof, I arch myself over your earth.
Coded and coated in sunshine, I germinate your root.

My sweat dots your skin like a tattoo spelling out Tichaona.
My tongue traces over the round vowels
Knowing that in this time and this space,
I have the patent on your desire.

Mutterings to Myself

Mumbling Couplets

I tried to hide in the forest
but the slave catchers overran the forest.

I tried to escape from the ship
but the captain caught me and locked in his room.

I tried to stay out the fields
but the boss man came and whipped me.

I tried to stay in the kitchen
but the master came and raped me.

I tried to stay in my home
but the master came and raped me there as well.

I tried to stay behind my man
but they lynched him.

I tried to conduct myself like a lady
but got called a nigger bitch.

Everything tried was met with resistance.
Oppression stayed on my heels.

So I tried something new
and in the process reclaimed my self.

A Woman's Dilemma

Tongue against tongue used to be a kiss
a sensation to warm myself with on cold winter nights
or to sweat through on hot summer nights
but now it has bitterly metamorphosised
into a thing
that slashes and burns
that mutilates what used to be
regardless of the season.

Winter is the dissolution of what was sacred.
Summer is the concretization of the dissolution.
I am floundering.
I am trying to think of life without you
though I still want you
though you want me still
and that's a play on words
that plays to the crux of the matter.

I've learned how to be physically stationary
but my mouth runs non-stop
gets ahead of itself
utters challenges to your logic
tears down walls
you think you need
to get through daily life.

I am running my mouth
thinking I am revving you up
for the biggest play of all
but your mouth tells me
I can harm as well as heal.

And I am silenced.

I flounder in the silence
wondering how to turn
tongue against tongue
back into a kiss
without opening my mouth
as you requested.

Beef Is Not When I See You

Because that is an impoverished soul cipher
And I may have been confused for a long while
But my soul was never poor.

Flush with interior riches, I was able to embrace
The alpha of consciousness
While knowing my life would end
Without knowing the omega.

I just don't want it to end
In a Diasporan configuration.
I un-earth the dreams I had as a girl-child
Of grandchildren surrounding me
In a house on a hill
Somewhere in a free land
Known as Afrika.

So, I no longer smoke trees, I plant them
Even when the ground is your mind.
The seeds may seem like the stick instead of the carrot
But it ain't heavy.
Like the feeling I have toward my sisters and brothers,
It's love.

Everything/Nothing

He wanted only a portion:
A toe, a curlicue of nappy hair
And randomly scheduled access
To my inner core
Which he didn't know was volcanic.

I wanted to give it all:
The history behind the scar on my right forearm,
The memories nitpicked at until they covered me
Like a masque,
The occasional cooling of my womb.

Everything

but he had no space for my fullness.
After each eruption of lava
I deflated until there was nothing:
No glint in my eye
No twitch of my hips
No smile at sightings of him.

Nothing.

Just smoke and ashes that formed
A new emotional landscape
I didn't know how to navigate.

...then comes science

From Whence I Came

I never forgot that I came from a woman
Who never hesitated to give me the best
She quietly wrested
From a world which said she was nothing.

Standing on that foundation
I can be generous to you
And deadly to all and sundry
Who don't honor
The love which rose from that place.

Because of she,
It is anathema to me
To discredit the feminine
And its counterpart
Because I didn't come from ashes.
I was born of flesh and blood
As was she and the shes and hes
Who came before me.
Their names are not a part of my living memory
But the trail of their blood extends far.

Corresponding Prisons

He asked me
if I loved him for him
or for his allegiance to the revolution.

I said, I never had a chance to know you
the way a woman knows the man she loves:
how he moans when touched in desire;
how he responds to a person who doesn't have
the power of life and death over him;
how, even, how to approach the contours
of your smile.

I should've asked
do you love me for me
or for the trophy I represent in prison culture
but how do you ask that?
Does the asking signify awareness?
Or self-doubt?

I made other mistakes:
offered inappropriate advice,
challenged the guards and rules
to the point where visits were denied
for six months or more.

I assumed...wrongly
that the love behind sharing your time
out-weighed my mistakes.
I forgot you were inside.
and I - still - outside.

And when you were – finally –
outside
I found myself inside
imprisoned by my mistakes
& unable to make it through the wire.

And you weren't me
weren't willing to share
my sentence(s).

I languished in my emotional cell
tolerating transgressions
until the removal of placenta
and the new presence
nightly sleeping in the crook of my arm
reminded me I was a maroon
and I started plotting my escape.

Noose on my Finger

It's a thin circle of precious metal
stolen from the earth
and brought to a store far from its source
where it was bought by a brother
doing another brother a favor.
Then it was blessed by a chaplain
I have neither love nor respect for
and put on my finger.

It is not good
but I struggle to see it as good.
I have our names etched on the underside
the side that touches my flesh.
I wear it for almost three years
until you tighten it like it's a noose
until it starts to strangle my flesh
until I realize that if I keep it on
I'll die.

And I wasn't born to die.
My mother's hips didn't crush me
when I was in the womb.
My father's defection didn't stop me
from sliding down that canal.
I wasn't born to die.

We play tug of war with it.
I take it off.
You put it back on.
You take it off,
I put it back on.
Back and forth we go
until my finger is bruised and battered.
I tell you
with my hand in this condition
I can't write.
.
You smile.

I look at the smile.
I listen to what it says.

It is not good.
It is not good for me.

I play tug of war with myself.
And I win.

I remove the noose from around my finger.

Water Has a Few Enemies

The river of no return
Originated in birth waters
Flooding my sweat pants
The minute you exited my space.

Those primordial waves carried my gaze
To the current on the horizon
Where the only lifeline I saw
Came from a slave ship
But I am Igbo, looking homeward
And if Jesus could walk on water,
Why can't I?

Bipolar covalent bonds work like vortexes
Dragging me under
While my blood eddies and then coalesces
In a silently discordant rhythm
That deprives my water-born babe
Of colostrum.

Praying for my skin's permeability,
I guide my nipple to my child's mouth
Knowing we were both about to become
Saltwater Africans.

Channeling Pontius Pilate

The crowd chants blood, blood.

Democracy in action:

Give me a towel.

The Highway

Although he never said the actual words
His actions spoke for themselves:
My way or the highway.

Having gone from wife to chick on the side,
I was beyond asking “are you sure?”
I just packed up our child and hit the road.

From Illinois to Massachusetts,
I was a highwaywoman
Reclaiming my life with each mile traveled.

Even when rain fell with enough force
To block sight of the road I was on,
I never once detoured off course.

And now that our child has become my child
As a result of his daddy defaulting on his genetic loan
I still don't falter.

The Small Axe

To the Father of My Son

I look at a picture of sankara's birth
and my softer side comes to the fore
as I am transported
back to march 5, 2004
when you were the first one
to see and hold our son.

I remember how nervous you were
when you came back to the hospital
and told me you ran over a dog.
I laughed as I watched you try
and figure out the hospital blues.
Even though we were not together
you were still the one
I wanted in the delivery room.

Looking at the picture, I remember
all of that and more.
And now when the separation
is geographical as well as mental
I still remember the love
that made me want you as the father of my child
and I hope that wherever life takes you
you find the peace you're looking for
and I hope it opens the doors of your mind
so sankara can have another place to walk into.

Forgiveness

Thoughts of the wrong I've done
Parade daily across my consciousness
Like scratches on the cornea.

I humble myself before he who matters.
His hugs are a rebirth.
And his kisses are manifestations
Of the Creator.

Such surrender is the antithesis of slavery
And I acquiesce;
No longer needing to ask the axis
Whether I should be as bold as to put
His love first and foremost.

Bob and Weave

He wraps his arms around me
Like a physical benediction
That I accept and embrace
While never relinquishing my role as mother
To his concept of earth.

He is beauty, revolution and a changing
Of my internal status quo.
He came out of me and hangs from me
Like I'm a tree
Who shall not be moved
Except to swing him until he
Squeals in delight.

But, sometimes, I do have to move
...Into my center
And breathe my self back to life.

During those times when I close myself off
I'm reminded that the anger inherent in fuck you
Has a fluctuating value.
So, halting the flow of futile questions,
I put down the brick my pen feels like
And pick up a lighter quill
- One that writes my own tale.

My Place in the Sun

My tongue twists dandelion greens stems
Into a configuration resembling a heart
That has just recognized it's over.

Heart healthy and growing saner by the minute,
I know the sun's got a special spot for me;
So it shouldn't be any wonder that I shine.

From green to red hot to a tinge of gray that's off the Richter,
I exhibit a rainbow of emotion
- the result of no longer being eighteen
looking at thirty as unimaginable.

Now forty looking forward to fifty, I channel Maya:
Still I rise.

Filial Love

Silence, crackling along the lines of communication,
Interrupts the model taught in first year speech classes.
I search the nooks and crannies of what's not said
For that ghostly presence
Which positions me in cell phone commercials.

Can you hear me?
Can. You. Hear. Me?

Can you hear me listening to that inner wisdom
Erroneously described as woman's intuition?
Some thing is not right, not...copacetic.
Her voice is too thick, her language too unfamiliar
to be her own.

She said, I need you.
I said, I have my shoes on.

We Know Nothing Bout Love

Watching my elders
My humbled consciousness thinks:
Too tender for words.

His hand reaches out from
The hospital bed to touch
Her too thin forearm.

I'm eating, she says.

My eyes fill with unshed tears:
Can we love like that?

Out of Kilter Love

His words were always full of praise:
“she was the only one who never gave me trouble”
But ultimately, she did give him trouble
Because she gave him me.

That was his constant refrain
When I came to him with a daughter’s need.
It decimated me
Until genetic pride kicked in:
I was too much like him to accept disrespect.

I cut the cord caustically
But like the father he never was
He insisted on the last word:
“You should’ve been born a boy”.

But I was a woman and my womb proved it
But he never knew and now, he never will.

Blue but not the Sky Kind

Visibly invisible,
Indigo stains my psyche
While I struggle with the reality
That flesh doesn't live forever.

Memories of a turquoise ring
Which encircled and encapsulated
But now it is now like the children
Mothers raised placards for:
Disappeared.

My soul mined like Afghani lapis lazuli
My emotional landscape looks like "over there"
Blighted and bombed by too many deaths
In too short of a time.

Yet and still, there is nothing blue about my resurrection.
From his head to his toes, he is black and brown
And when I hear him say his skin is nothing
I remember the ruling element of my sign is fire.

Role Reversal

When I was a child, she as well as he, fed me.
I was sustained on the food of their cultural upbringing
Until being a child of immigrants was internalized as less than kosher.
They, on their way home from work, bowed to societal pressures,
by picking up steak and cheese subs, Kentucky fried colonialism
or anything my conflicted heart wanted.

My food was processed and so was I
Until Oakland reacquainted me with my true self
And brought out the best in me.

Ten years later, I am honoring as well as reciprocating.
My mother, currently without the man who cooked for her
For thirty odd years, will not literally or figuratively,
Be standing in lines for processed food.

Late at night, when the only noise in my apartment
Is Fela's progressive yet cuckoo ass,
I cook curry chicken, lamb curry, brown rice:
Anything and everything
that shows my devotion, respect and desire
for longevity in my elders.

Like Winston Loved Salma

It happened like happenstance.

Inhabiting the unease of a morrow called Monday
I set about suturing my psyche with vine of honeysuckle.

Stained with the scent, I sought sustenance of the organ-less kind.

Eyes, I felt, upon me.

Looking up, his *not-from-here* tongue drew me away from lonely avenue.

Accepting his pheromonal verbs unleashed a womanliness buried
under multiple hoods.

Still, when he said he'd find me, I immediately removed myself.

(I'm too grown to be easy and too savvy to fall for the less than sanguine.)

He found me involved in a conversation about curry
and too busy to do more than smile seductively.

Such smiles are in my bloodstream.

Still...

I wanna love him like peas love rice or like Winston loved Salma.

My Spirit Talks

I want it quiet like days at Ocean Beach
When the streets of San Francisco became too much.

I want to rest in you rather than fight to make you exist
Like cake that's been battered too much.

Leave the turmoil of immaturity running run wild outside.
I want to be mature with you.

I want music made with breath and the heart's blood
I want days of silence instead of ways of rage.

I want the peace that comes from the peaceful.

In return I'll give you words that fly
Like the music of the Andes
And a resiliency that knows no bounds.

In other words, I'll give you back you.

Trifecta

180 of 360° and Still Spinning

Wrapping my hair in the colors of liberation,
I expose my neck while balancing on my history.
My trifecta of eyes can now absorb and reflect whatever
Needs to be repudiated or reciprocated.
I can bleed on the page as well as cauterize my own wounds.
I'm an Afrikan woman.
I can ride the spectrum of my emotions
Without feeling lesser or more than.
I just am

Always evolving and revolving like revolutions.

The Grace of a Decision

We can do this sort of...uhhh...
Rocking words into the universe of science.
Words that bring back golden beams of silence
Splattering the bound with bursts of sky blue.

We can be like butterflies:
Pretty...delicate yet causing catastrophes
On the other side of a nowhere we've ever seen
Because where we been is always somewhere.

— or —

We can be heavy with gravity
- too overloaded with circuitry to pay attention to heart -
Doomed to die instead of do.

We can be like lepers
segregated from the decent into dysfunction
prevalent everywhere we're not.

— or —

We can perpetuate like the world is our oyster
While muting mutual distaste for mollusks.

There are so many ways to go about it
But I prefer our preference of unity first.

Lets tap into ancestral grace
Whispering our intent with breath
That tastes...and carries...like wind
Of change.

I Represent

I represent the oppressed black womb
Penetrated too early in my development.
No one takes the time to explain abortion to me
Before I am strapped in the clinic gurney
To have the baby he planted scraped out.
One day, I was watching Dora and the next day
My teacher said I was a statistic. I don't know.
I just know I'm not a little girl any more.

I represent the oppressed black vagina
Smothered under an endless stream of men
Who push and push but never take the time
To differentiate me from girl 6, 5, 4, 3, 2,
Or even the one they call the bottom.
You only see me to call me names:
Whore, trick, bitch.
One day I'll be free of this stroll
And will remember the name my mother gave me.

I represent the oppressed black woman
Former stripper, former whore, former convict
Who came through hell and back
yet still exudes sulfur.
Five children but crack obliterated
The memories and names of their fathers.
They look at me when I come home
Smelling of a hundred billion sold
And say they're hungry.
My response, before I close my bedroom door is
So am I, babies, so am I.

I represent the oppressed conscious black woman
Who has all of her eyes open to see the world
But yet only inhabits 6 square blocks of the concrete jungle.
She sits at night with her seeds reworking homework lessons
Of Christmas, Columbus and colonization.
She transforms the three R's into righteous revolutionary rebellion.

Sometimes, I am allowed to sit in and participate in all of their lives.
Sometimes, the door is shut either angrily or in the silence of defeat.
Either way, I am still a poet and my pen represents the oppressed.

