

CHILD SLAVE

BY ANGELA THOMAS

I was a child slave.
Raised to serve and do only what I was told.
“Cook dinner,” they say.
“Wash clothes,” they say.
Do this, do that.
Every day for 15 years, I did what I was told.

Did I ever get paid or rewarded for this?
Yes.

By being beat with extension cords and paddles made of wood and leather belts.
Did my abusers ever care?
No, they laughed as they beat me.
Laughed at my pain, laughed at my tears, they laughed at me.
So, what does a child slave do?
Grow up into an adult slave.
“Hey, girl, do this.”
“Hey, bend over this way.”
“Hey, give me a kiss.”
They would say.
And I would do as I was told.

Because that's what love is, right?
A series of commands barked at you by people saying they love you, right?
"Yo, girl, come here. Let me feel on you."
"Shut up! Who told you to speak?"
"Come here, you don't have a say. You do as I say."
They yell at me as they slap me. Hit me. Rape me.
When do I have a say?
When does my voice become loud enough for them to hear it?
When do I take back what's mine?

Now.
The time to take back what is mine is now.
I wasn't made to be abused.
I wasn't made to be taken advantage of.
I was made to be loved.
Not through hate or abuse.
But through compassion, humility, and kindness
My body and mind were not made for you
It was made for me
Because only I know how to take care of me.

FOUR GENERATIONS REMOVED

BY ANGELA THOMAS

I was four generations removed from slavery
Four generations from my ancestors wanting the best for me

Four generations of a lineage they tried to erase.
A group of people they tried to replace

My mother is three generations removed
She did not take advantage of the opportunities presented to her
She let them slip through her fingers.

Grandma too.

Great-grandmother was one generation removed
One generation from being beaten to her tomb.

One generation from a beating she would catch
But not enough removed to remember the smell of burning flesh.

POEM #5

BY ANGELA THOMAS

The flower blooms in the sun and I know it's time to get up.
As I climb into my car, life waves hello to me in my missing rear view mirror.
I scream curses to the sky as if someone will fall from it and fix *it*.

But no one does, no one ever does.

I continue to make lemonade out of the lemons life keeps throwing at me.
But it comes out bitter/sweet.
But I keep drinking it as if it's my life blood.
As if every drink is good to the last drop, when it's not.
I keep smiling until it hurts. I wear the mask until it breaks. Until I break.

I try to pick up the pieces but they dissolve in my hand.
I can't hide anymore, I can't hide the ugly truth anymore.
That I am a black woman.
A Black American living in a world that hates and does not love.
That exploits but does not care.
A world that I can not escape.

BRONZE LIMBS AND CONCRETE DREAMS

A POEM IN THE VOICE OF JOSEPHINE BAKER

BY ANGELA THOMAS

I was born where the pavement sweats,
where the sun drapes its gold on the backs of brown girls
who learn to dance before they learn to dream.
Where the sirens wail like lost souls at midnight,
and the streetlights hum secrets only the stray dogs know.

Mama worked her fingers into threads of prayer,
stitched rent money into the seams of secondhand dresses.
She taught me how to smile with my whole body,
to move like joy had no cage,
like the world was an open stage waiting for my feet to claim it.

South Central taught me rhythm before love,
how to sway between cracked sidewalks and stolen glances,
how to spin away from hungry hands and whispering corners,
how to laugh in the face of a city that didn't always love me back.

The boys on the block called me trouble,
said my hips spoke a language they weren't old enough to understand.
I told them I was made of music,
of jazz notes and Sunday morning hallelujahs,
of the stories my grandmother carried from the Delta
and the freedom I knew was waiting somewhere past Crenshaw.

I dreamed in sequins, in feathers, in soft-lit stages
where the only bullets were the ones shot from cameras,
where the applause was louder than police knocks.
Where my body belonged to movement, not survival.

So I danced.
On the pavement, on the bus stop benches, in the aisles of the corner store.
I danced until the city couldn't hold me anymore.
Until my name was more than a whisper.

And when I left—
when I flew over the cracked streets and neon liquor signs,
over the boys who swore they'd marry me someday,
over the prayers Mama stitched into my coat—
I carried South Central in the arch of my back,
in the tilt of my chin,
in the way I made the world watch me
without ever asking for permission.