

Four Poems by Danielle Drake-Burnette

(Danielle read these in her inimitable spoken-word style at *Awakening the Energy for Change: the Black Madonna and the Womb of God*, a conference at the Pacific School of Religion, June 18, 2005)

Danielle Drake-Burnette is a Los Angeles born writer / spoken word artist currently residing in Oakland. She began writing in 1998 and performing poetry in 2001. Since then she has taken the world of spoken word by storm becoming a member of the 2002 Oakland Poetry Slam team and self-publishing a chapbook entitled "Parable of a Journey." In 2003 Danielle became the Oakland Poetry Slam Champion, and along with members of the 2003 Oakland Poetry Slam Team, went on to place 4th in the nation in the National Poetry Slam. She has been featured at poetry venues throughout the bay area, performed at the 2003 and 2004 Radical Performance Fest, the 2003 and 2004 Bioneers Conference and the Techno Cosmic Mass. She also participates with several community organizations, is pursuing an MFA in Creative Writing at SFSU and is working on a book of poems and essays

Fire She Is (*for Sandra Yvonne*)

In barely audible whispers she divulges secrets of womanhood
...uttered in language only fire and cast iron skillet speak.

Nurtures spirit with burnt flour and oil
we watch and wait

Wisdom comes in random spurts like
"Always go out like the disciples...two by two"
as she roasts jalapeno over open flame.

She has ways of calling you back home
olfactory messages that say:
"la comida esta lista" in southern tinged Spanish

...*the food is ready*...as we round the corner by the blue mailbox on sunny afternoons.

Prepares pie crusts with butter and cinnamon and sugar in old metal tops from jelly and mayonnaise jars.

Teaches fractions...
multiplication and division with 7UP Cake and chocolate chip cookies;
we half and double recipes we
learn and bake

Patience
she is ears of waiting for her turn traded for family.

Says she never wanted children
so instead becomes paradigm of contradiction
creating urban haven for young black ghetto girls.

Shards of heaven she is...
quilted in amusing patches of necessary responsibility...her choice,
was us over it.

...matured talents in earth tones

Says she doesn't remember teaching me how to read but I know...
her discernment passed to me as wealth I never had to earn.

Planting lines of tomato, marigold, greens and alyssum she grows self esteem between rows.

Eternally overprotective she barred ugly from our space
--a safe girls space.

Endowed keys to womanhood like "girls who keep dancing don't get pregnant"
so we Cabbage Patched and Wopped and Snaked and Pop-locked-our-way-through-puberty
unscathed.

The black Martha Stewart she is master of creating something out of nothing
except hers was out of necessity...lack of financial means.

Sparks words in me
and I could fill a thousand journals with words that describe her...
words that she taught with three volume dictionaries

could fill a thousand caverns with the drops of strength and imagination she doles in regular
intervals

Fire
she is explosive
ready to combust
at ignorance
lack of industriousness
lazy tongues
and she is always loathing change.

It took four girls to encompass her four corners of beauty
each only comprehending that one expansive corner bequeathed to us.

I could spend a thousand days and never come close to completely describing her.

For her practicality leaves no room for
flowery flights of frippery obscured by contorted poetic riff.

So instead I write simple haiku and say:
She tells me she does
not get poetry, I don't
tell her, that she is.

Found

I thought peace would come if you came,
only then could I breathe
releasing this anxiety...
make believing that my peace could be found
in ever daunting relationships with men
who never cared anything about...me see

Everyday we misunderstand it
manipulate it...

with a belief that avoidance of self inflicted circumstance sustains it
that officers placed in neighborhoods of color can keep it
that war can bring it.
that someone or something outside of ourselves holds it
...obliviously we misuse it.

Becoming played out, stripped of meaning
as it's left trailing behind parting goodbyes...
peace...
my brotha...
peace my sista I

searched hopelessly for it...seeking peace
in lying eyes & deceitful smiles
elevated career positions & shallow love transitions.

But like days lived in Norwegian winters I came up short.
Naively I was thinking it was as common as tongues in folks,
cause so easily it slips from the tongues of folks,
so easily we forget it comes NOT from the tongues
but souls of folks.

I searched peace in frenzied conversations,
surrounded constantly by people...anyone,
...erecting blinders
...concealing truth
...denying truth
somehow hopin' I could change the truth...
that I didn't like myself...
or more specifically, I didn't like the choices
I was making for myself.

I allowed my confidence to reside
in the comments of others...
allowed everyone to use their lives
as the gauge of what mine should be.

Repeating time, after time, after time
"Why does this always happen to me!"
Becoming a whining victim of circumstance
yet unwilling to conduct further investigation
into the patterns that took me to that place
...that moment.

And when you can't see the God in you,
you don't recognize there is good in you.

I couldn't see the creativity in me...
always studious, I was
that bookworm
that seven-year old dictionary reader
never imagining it would turn me into
a storytelling word dreamer...

But it came,
inevitably it comes, like...

pressin' combs after blow dryers.

And somehow diving from the depths of disillusioned dreams

I found it...

silently asking questions answered with strokes of a pen

I found it...

sitting quietly, listening

with yarn & hooks

and fabric & thread

and spaces between lines in pages of books

I found it...

in locked eyes & minds

I found it...

in hard conversations with ethereal home

& sonic vibrations of lonely moans found

first in fragmented pieces of peace...

then stretched long and wide like

impatient spaces.

Then by changing the lonely time

to spending time, I made friends

...with myself.

And ya'll, I found out that if you can't spend time

by yourself, you probably don't like yourself.

And I know some of you may not understand this

but I do not miss the crowds and parties

relishing instead my peace time

I found it...

And I abundantly experience it when praise it

consistently giving thanks for it.

I understand a peace...

surpassing human understanding

And it's the peace that I found while writing this piece

that I share with you...

so...

peace...

Revolutionary Mama

Out of the corner of my eye I saw her sitting on a wooden stool

fingers deftly moving across something brilliantly colored rust, wine and sage.

I believed she was crocheting...

swift / hands / moving / gracefully

I could barely see them.

As she weaved I tried to focus

but the gentle repetitious movement

drew me into her,

felt myself slipping away

breathing became rhythmic

my heart a steady drumbeat like palms on dried skin.

Melancholy, majestic wails pierce the cloudy fog
bodies moving in circles becoming clear
hips and arms sway
neck rolls into shoulders
arms follow in syncopated flight.
Low moans rumble from collective lips
come together in one voice
hum spirituals
shout freedom
ask me:

*Where are the old revolution songs?
Melody hidden in struggle
rebellion rhythm carried with babies in lapas
wrapped on backs and slung across shoulders?*

WHERE ARE MY BABIES

*children and grandchildren of you urban warriors?
We revolution mamas never cease fighting.*

*Each molecule of truth
kiss on scarred cheek
midnight tear wiped away...*

*We are nurturing our soldiers
building armies of reminiscence
we cannot forget
we must not forget.*

They ask:

Where are the revolutionary papas?

Our men have gone to do battle
kidnapped over time
incarcerated and drugged
they do battle in faraway places.

*Then you revolutionary daughters must protect home
must be ready to bear arms
hide machetes carved of love & wisdom.
Pick up ammunition
books and remembrance.
Educate your babies
instill truth like:
 *Keep ya head up. Won't nobody
 respect you unless you respect yourself.*
Ladle spoonfuls of courage between
work to home home to work routine.
Feed rebellion into hungry mouths chile,
complacent spirits only go where they have always gone.*

And I saw myself in her eyes
see the determination mirrored in you

revolutionary sista.

See it as I stand on stages
lone woman in faraway places
with our men...
poets and
gangstas and blue & white collars and
dealers who have forgotten the road home.
Now I have been sent out using machete tongue
to slice through memory extracting forgotten paths.

For we need you at home revolutionary brotha.
We need you at home to fight by your women.
We need you at home to fight for your children.
The battle is escalating and we need
your strength to win!
WE NEED YOU!
We need you
We / need / you...

Then nothing but light
turning into brightly colored
yarn smoothly running across
deft fingers of a woman with
ebony skin; weathered sheer and velvety
wrapped in white linen
draped long with silver natty locks
sitting on a wooden stool

I peer into eyes
glazed onyx pupils
reflecting me

Who are you? She replies:
revolutionary mama
Have I pleased you?
You are beginning to remember me...

Those With Ears

now, mama said go out like the disciples two by two
'cept she didn't know about the true intention of two
of sista-wife and brotha-husband
of Mary Mack and Jay C

and I wonder what life would be like for girls and boys
if they hadn't told that lie on Mary
... 'bout her being a ho an all
if theyda told the truth about the divinity inherent in us all

let every Mary and Maria shine
like they supposed to
'steada shrouding her wisdom undaneath
that dirty shame ---- that filthy blame

kept us underfoot and out of harms way
cause some folks cain't understand
this feminity ain't just about sexuality

kinda dropped the sacred from feminine
and separated this innate beauty of womb and re-creation
from it's intuitive spirit-filled nature

separated the pleasure from the love
the intensity from the sincerity
the connectedness from the empathy

so let all with ears, let them hear

told us there was a path the righteous walked
lined with rows of pews
decked in bright peacock headdresses
praisin' Jesus and sangin Hallelujah

this multicolored array of masculinity
white squares anchored with bobbing adam's apple
peeking out of black collars like
the color of powerful voice streaming out of throat
white light

perched atop pulpits
what they make taboo and
there is no vocabulary
for the pull
of bliss against belief

and I wonder what life would be
if the church had accepted Mary's propagation
of the Christianity that she and Jesus knew

where folks were taught to go into the Silence
to develop these gifts of soul and spirit
to make greater connections to an energy deity
...the source

now let all with ears let them hear

imagine 1000 Jesus and Mary couples teaching together
on pulpits, in dance halls, under palm trees,
...breathing concrete examples of balanced masculine and feminine

What of no longer struggling with this desire
for fingers against skin
of beating hearts and
want of lips
and breath and
let all with ears let them hear

what of women lining pulpits instead of just pews
what of you and your partner learning divinity through one another
what of peace within ourselves and the world
what of not waging war

what of a deeper understanding of being one with all life
what of allowing sacred teachings to permeate the consciousness
what of giving us ears
...that we may all hear