



DESIRING ORCHIDS

by Aliya Say

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*THE SWEETEST TABOO*

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## Affirming spaces for expressing the (collective) self

I smell of wild black orchids. I am one.

The sweet scent exuding from between my three dark petals, lush and loud, and, according to your dated Victorian imagination, “exotic.” In reality, I am truly commonplace. Over the past 80 million years my cosmopolitan family spread over six continents and across 25,000 “species”. Today, I am found in every botanical garden in every town, at a long-term tenant’s window sill, in a grandma’s glass-windowed terrace... You praise me, and yet, you put me on a Tesco Metro shelf, as if I was a chewing gum or a pack of crisps ready for immediate consumption. I sit there, bemused, watching you humans swirl by in Brownian motion, pretending yet failing to convince me you know what you want in life. Beyond the shopping list, lies emptiness. Beyond the self-checkout, auto-silence.

Sometimes I stay in these infloral spaces for weeks – “inhuman” has its equivalent in our vegetal quarters. Bored and dejected, I hang at the precipice of the metal rack, perched between humble potatoes and vulgar corn on the cob twinpacks, until my temporary companions leave one by one, and I am, too, finally escorted to a till where the sacramental offering of ££s for a living soul takes place. Soon afterwards, I am taken away in an unspecified direction, to spend the rest of my days observing your ridiculous life, and watching your ridiculous, if occasionally entertaining, television. Attenborough, okay, even occasional *Bridgerton*’ when I am feeling particularly decadent and decorative, but *Velvet Buzzsaw*, ffs??!

If you don't switch it off next time I am trying to contemplate my political futures or compose a poem, or simply meditate – chlorophyllin hell, I promise, I am going to rot right in front of you. You will throw my flailing stems and decaying blooms out into an odorous bin, next to your human newborn's nappies and your unfinished salmon (more like "salmon") sushi takeaway, but what do I care. I'd rather rot than let my free-blossoming floral mind be zombified by the Netflix latest "binge-worthy, dramatic storytelling".

Keep the music on though, it's one thing that brings me true joy. The music that reminds me I may be homeless and displaced, yet I am no shy colourless wallflower, I am made for love:

*You give me (you give me) the (You give me the)  
sweetest taboo  
That's why I'm in love with you (with you)  
You give me, keep giving me the sweetest taboo*

## Speculative clearings and floral imaginings

Needless to say, I don't appreciate my refugee status, as I spend day after day squashed next to your snoring refrigerator, making pacts with your cat so that she doesn't annihilate me on one sleepless full moon night. Needless to say, I don't like to be viewed as a contribution to the annual GDP, a crossed line on a shopping list, an FMCG (fast-moving consumer good) as far as the supermarket is concerned: quick assisted birth, fast unmentioned death. Needless to say, I'd rather be back home – a home I've never seen, but one I remember from the stories wrapped nostalgically in the coils of my DNA like a loving gift.



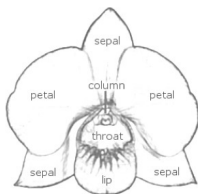
‘Needless to say’ – that’s why we flowers use few words. Yet, you cannot silence our telling beauty and you cannot suppress our audacious scent.

The home I was taken away from many generations ago is a supernaturally beautiful and infinitely paradisaical rainforest, full of creatures of all colours and races, who all live, love, and die in their own kaleidoscopic ways. We speak different languages, and yet, we understand each other perfectly, conversing through the living cables of the wood wide web, thanks to the cooperative fungi networks stretched densely underground.

My native forest that was full of Life is long destroyed in exchange for meagre minimal “living standards” and even those are unmet. The forest was cut down and burned by a giant multinational corporation that decimated my neighbourhood, raped the ancient mother trees and violently mined the land, so to create those mythical ££s out of thin air – air that stinks of CO<sub>2</sub> and of death. An infinitesimally small proportion of the cumulated ££s world over eventually ends up in your bank account – a monthly survival allowance, the vast part of which gets brewed into flat whites and Zoom therapy sessions. One day, after a cup of bitter coffee (*‘hey mate, do you remember your ancient arboreal home on the Ethiopian plateau, now, too, turned into a desert of industrial agriculture?’*) and a bitter argument with your ex, you stop at a Tesco on the way back home, to offer a few spare ££s as a holy financial sacrament in exchange for my “exotic”, lightly uplifting and faintly aphrodisiac presence in your living room.

I’ve never known my true home, and you’ve never known your true essence, one beyond the shift+3 key on your Mac, have you? But we are in it together, all the same.

## The sweetest taboo of my really weird (sex) life



As an orchid, my job is to be attractive and to attract – not opposite sex though, there is no gender division nonsense in our nonbinary world. From the centre of my bud grows a column: a lofty structure, unique to my kind, that houses both male and female sexual organs.

I dress my beloved parts in an exuberant outfit that even Lil Nas X at the Met Gala has yet to match: with its voluptuous forms and fake fur, the costume mimics perfectly the body of a young available female bee. The outfit comes complete with a scent that closely matches the pheromones of the insect – Tom Ford's *Black Orchid* should in fact smell like a bee ready for copulation, and not like flowers!

Seduced by my appearance and pheromones into thinking I am their next hot bee girlfriend, the amorous males come to touch my bee-like petal. They land on my sensuous labellum in every position they have ever come across in their Beemasutra – but to no avail – I ensure my own pollination by frustrating the desire I excited.



wake up this morning with my mind set on losing n

Reminding me of  
the  
the  
fool  
reluctantly but  
wistfully hoping to return  
But

I wish you were just what you wanted

I'm not that kinda



For this, you call me “the prostitute orchid” – a poignant reminder of botany’s essentialist narratives written by the white suited Western men. Since the eighteenth century, plant life was mobilised as a reinforcement of the “natural” heterosexual order by the scientific discourse. “Pretty” flowers, in particular, served as the sanitised projection for prevailing ideas of femininity, on the one hand, and dangerous, exotic, often orientalist sensuality, on the other. One of my favourite daisies, I mean writers, Daisy Lafarge, notes:

‘What issues from this twinning, on deeply engrained associative levels, is a marginalisation of plants and women that shifts between pedestals reification, demonisation, oppression and outright exclusion.’

‘Pseudocopulation’ and ‘sexual deception’ that lead to bee’s ‘costly sperm wastage’ – is how you describe my amorous relationships (or ‘complex pollination strategies’, in your parlance). In reality, I can’t give my bee suitors bee sex, but I do offer love, for free.

You think love is just chemicals in the brain? Listen, I’ve got no brain and I know better: love is a cosmic sublime in a liquid form, blooming orgasms undiluted, ecstasy undistilled. I am a promise of lust and longing, of dreams and delirium – to bees, humans, and all life alike. But can you move away from your self-righteous cynicism and your disdain for beauty, your adherence to the religion of language, your addiction to self-sacrifice and to all-planetary-life- destruction that closely mirror one other? Can you see love for what it is – the reason the universe *is*? Can you learn to care for me the way you learn to care about your relationships as you grow older and wiser: away from abusive behaviours, ghostly disappearances, fast discarded experiences

and dead-end textantionships towards timely and attentive  
practices of watering, pruning, nurturing,  
and healing?

I may have come to seduce and enslave you – so you can help me  
reproduce my orchid kind all over the planet, to colonise your  
gardens and your flats with my joyous, eroticised, exoticised,  
fragrant appearance – but I am also here to see you free. In that,  
paintings and orchids are somewhat alike.

Aliya Say, 2022

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Images:

**Michaela Yearwood-Dan**

Despite all odds, 2022

Oil, ink, pastels and glass beads on canvas

160 x 140 cm

**Michaela Yearwood-Dan**

Easier to Bare, 2022

Oil, ink and pastels on canvas

160 x 140 cm

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