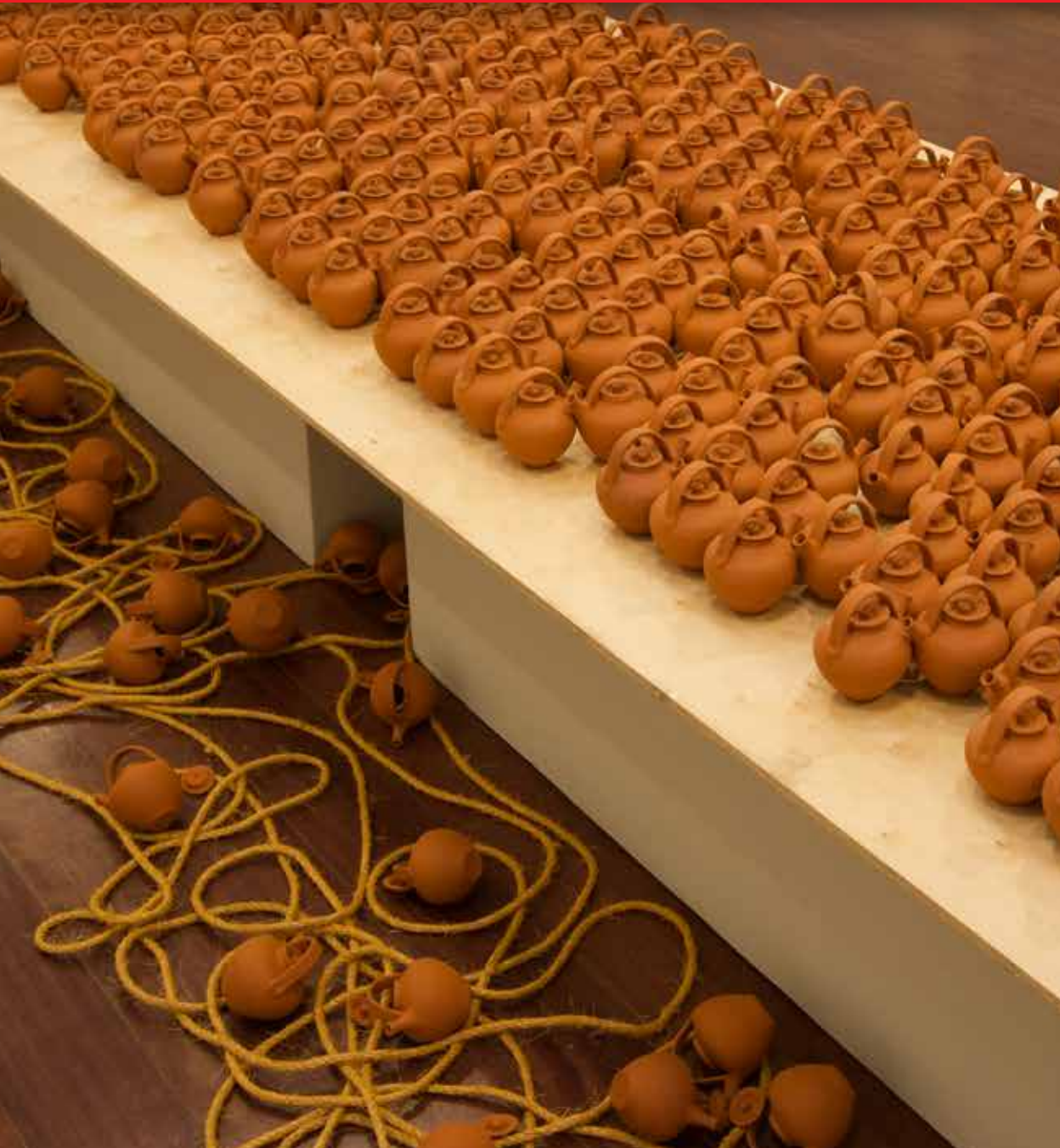


Binn

Arts for the 21st Century



Bim



***Ancestors* (2017) featured in *Other Lives*
exhibition by Nick Whittle at
Queen's Park Gallery, Barbados (2019)**

The large sculptural work, *Ancestors* consists of a vast installation of monkey pots, each one calling forth the image of a lost African genealogy. The spillover suggests the loss of histories as well as the literal loss of African souls drowned on the Middle Passage.

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Visual Arts



Middle Passage (2018)

Nick Whittle

featured in *Other Lives* exhibition by Nick Whittle
at Queen's Park Gallery, Barbados (2019)

Nick Whittle: Other Lives

Therese Hadchity

As Derek Walcott famously reminded us, the Caribbean has never primarily been noted for great monuments or magnificent ruins. Yet there are few regions of the world, where the imprint of history is more ubiquitous: it stares back at us through the way Caribbean people look, speak, eat and worship; it underpins our economies, global connections and invisible boundaries; it feeds our anxieties and informs our sense of place in the world.

Every Caribbean artist knows that a traumatic and turbulent history looms large over creative practices and demands tough choices: artists can try to re-tell, re-examine or embellish the past, they can ignore it or approach it indirectly by hinting at its ultimate un-representability. These choices can be uninformed, but they can never be innocent, and for the region's white artists, the dilemma is, needless to say, particularly thorny. Such artists may (as the saying goes) feel damned if they don't engage with history, and equally damned if they do: it is indeed questionable whether it is possible to ever get it 'right'.

Though Nick Whittle never shied away from these challenges, the centrality of history to his work has perhaps not been well understood. Infused with complex metaphors, intersecting personal and historical narratives and a high degree of self-reflexivity, his work has often been bracketed as 'difficult' and provocative. Though he trained and exhibited in England before settling here four decades ago, Whittle's artistic identity is, however, intrinsically tied to the Caribbean and Caribbean history. Successive bodies of work have ventured into the territory of historical culpability, victimization and angst; delved into the individual and collective crevices of mind and memory. More marked by depth than by a breadth of scope, the work has thus continually revolved around the perception, self-perception and possible role of the white person (and artist) in a postcolonial society.

Whittle knows as well as few others the pitfalls of entering this terrain, above all the irony of lucrative careers structured around white guilt and penitence - yet the

relatively inaccessible nature of his work has arguably safeguarded it from easy gains or moral tradeoffs. As the world is witnessing a shocking rise in racism and ethnic marginalization, excessive subtlety can, however, become untenable. As if compelled to remind audiences of the origins of the current world-order, Whittle's latest body of work registers a shift from a predominantly psychological perspective towards a more objective and material engagement with Caribbean-Scottish history and the 'new world' trajectory. While the new works continue to interweave personal and historical narratives, the former is therefore no longer key to their interpretation.

If the entry point to the present series – the Scotland to which the artist traces his maternal lineage - is personal after all, it serves as a reminder that each of us is situated *somewhere* in relation to this historical trajectory. Indicative of the formal and thematic approach in the works that follow, **Merchant City** (the earliest piece in the exhibition) thus concerns itself with the colonial exploits and accumulation that laid the foundation for the prosperity of a city like Glasgow. The five units laid out in the shape of a cross point to the hypocritical rationalization of the colonial project. Resembling ships ready to launch, the sardine cans are at once suggestive of the merchant fleet and of the terrifying conditions onboard during the Middle Passage. The stacked origami boats, which occupy the central unit, invoke the Amerindian canoe, but their vaginal shape is also tied to Whittle's previously established iconography, where male and female genitalia represent the colonial encounter as a rape. The female element is thus repeatedly linked to the new world, to fertility, protection and generosity, but also to subjugation and exploitation (while the (so often misunderstood) phallic shape has suggested white/male/colonial transgression and domination). Altogether, the four lower units gesture towards the material facts of the Scottish/Caribbean connection. More personal reflections on how this history continues to affect social relations today do, however, appear in the uppermost unit, which carries the opening line from one of Whittle's poems.

The exhibition's remaining works fall into two categories, one of which centers on the terrifying events leading up to the Middle Passage and on the passage itself, while the other reflects on the fate of the survivors and on the culture gradually fashioned by their descendants.

As the exhibition title suggests, the most important premise for an engagement with any traumatic history has to be the basic human identification with its victims. Displaying a simple humanoid shape with bottle-ends arranged on an unembellished, nondescript background, **Artefact** gestures towards the ethical and intellectual dilemmas of trying to reconstruct irretrievable histories, and encourages us to do so responsibly, always reaching for a shared humanity. Accordingly, works like **Captured** and **Family** take us back to those horrific moments, when African societies and families

were ripped apart by capture and abduction. To counter the imperial (sardine-can) fleet symbolically – while also gesturing towards the new world - Whittle employs the folded paper boats (with their simultaneous connotations of agility and vulnerability) as a symbol for the captured and subjugated. **Family** represents the forced separation with a simple blood-red dividing line, while **Captured** condenses the moment and after-effects of such an attack into one compelling symbolic composition. The long row of aluminium cans may thus be seen to represent the (seemingly unending) chain of abductors and abductees. The circle with the eroded red object at the centre conveys a sense of being surrounded and absorbed into the chain, and of a violated and decimated community. The slightly asymmetric arrangement of the cans underscores the sense of disruption and imbalance.

The Middle Passage that followed upon such raids is monumentalized in the **Ancestors** installation, arguably the pivot point for the entire exhibition. The piece features hundreds of hand-thrown monkey pots (representing the abducted) arranged on an elevated ‘ship’s deck’. Ropes coiled around the assemblage at once hint at high waves and capture, while the broken pots refer to those who perished and their individual and cultural knowledge.

Adopting a more cerebral approach, the piece titled **After William Elford** paraphrases a diagram used by abolitionists to expose conditions onboard the over-packed slave-ships. With its interlocking paper-boats, now also resembling coffins, it is a stark and simple reminder of the triangle trade’s cynical logistics. By contrast **My Son Slipped Into Darkness** - one of the most emotionally stirring pieces in the exhibition – reestablishes a basic human connection and, with its outstretched, downward-reaching empty hands, conveys an acute sense of loss and empathy.

Starting with the two closely related installations **Journey** and **Arrivants**, the exhibition’s remaining works are dedicated to the life that commenced in the new world. Alternating in tenor between elegy and hopefulness, they speak of extreme hardship and cruelty as well as of resilience and inventiveness. In their focus on the Middle Passage, **Journey** and **Arrivants** echo **Ancestors**, albeit with a slightly less mournful inflection. In lieu of the monkey pots, the baobab-flowers, which appear in both works, thus represent the newly arrived (or arriving), who will gradually throw down roots. **Journey**, where the flowers are connected through the cane lattice (alluding to the sugar production) with the blue ocean underneath, encapsulates the entire process from the transatlantic crossing to the sugarcane plantations. **Arrivants**, however, reminds us of the mercantile premise for the whole undertaking, and the reduction of human beings to mere commodities, as indicated by the coins and tokens separating the flowers.



Codrington College (2018)

Nick Whittle

Equally sinister, works like **Against Her Will** and **Castrated** acknowledge the (sexual and other) violence of the plantations. The former once again links the (vaginal) canoe-shape with the female, and hints (through buttons and curves with connotations of breasts and pregnant bellies) at the transgressions commonly visited on female slaves. **Castrated** echoes this from a male perspective, while suggesting a more general sense of emasculation.

Though the original presence and near-eradication of indigenous Amerindians tends to be somewhat overshadowed by the trauma of the triangle trade, they are continually referenced and acknowledged as joint casualties through the paper-boats. The deceptively simple piece titled **Evidence**, moreover, features a beautiful Amerindian food-cover set atop a piece of tartan-cloth (that of the MacLeod clan, connecting it to the artist's personal history). Underneath the cover, placed on a piece of mirror-glass and unseen by the viewer, however, is a groin protector punctured with copper nails. The piece therefore not only observes the dialectical relationship between cultural identity and resistance, but in its very configuration alludes to other narratives, rendered invisible in the history written by its putative 'victors'. Once seen, however, the mirror-glass implicates the viewer directly, as it draws us in and places us squarely within this narrative.

The craftsmanship and cultural practices invoked in this piece is contrasted with several works, which focus on the Christian church and its embarrassing implication in the colonial project. The sarcastic placement of a rosary against a jooking board in **Baptism** sets the tone and, in **Codrington College**, the cross of nails emblazoned against the cane inevitably points towards the victims of the sugar industry, rather than those of the faith. Taking a more nuanced approach, the warmly illuminated interior of **Confiteor** indicates the light of the faith, while the canoe-shape also becomes the all-seeing, yet (in the context of slavery) inexplicably blind eye of the Christian God. In the uppermost section, the mathematical signs for 'more than' and 'lesser than' (< >) thus hint at the elusiveness of the church on the matter of social hierarchies. This is followed up in **Black Pews** and **White Pews**, both of which are suggestive of racial segregation even within the church, but also, through the fine white lace, of still prevailing notions of decorum and respectability, and the generally complex role of the church in the Caribbean.

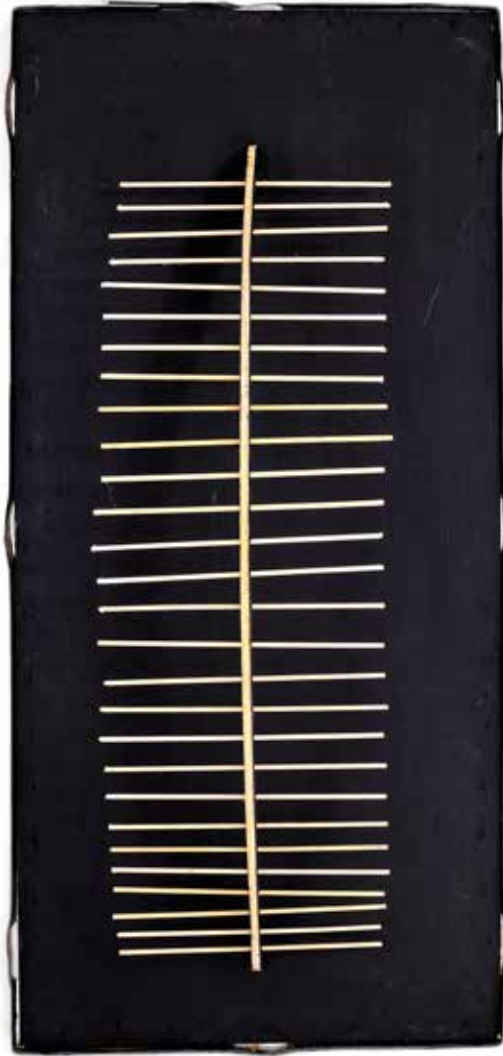
Yet another group of works draw attention to the physical and cultural resistance with which the colonizers were met, and the novel, hybrid forms that were born in the (violent) meeting between their divergent cultures and interests. As a reference to human stamina and fragility, the strikingly simple, piece titled **Backbone** is a compelling reminder of the integrity of the human body and its always-latent violation. **Drummers** and **Birth of Pan**, on the other hand, pays tribute to African retentions and

their translation into new forms of music and rhythms. With its ship-like connotations, drums, ‘steel-pans’ and red/green/yellow ribbon, **Drummers** acknowledges that this revival, which continues to the present through resistive movements like Rastafari and various other cultural expressions, may already have commenced during the Middle Passage. Creolization-processes are similarly referenced in the installation **Four Women at Three Houses Spring**, which at once returns to and transcends the personal starting-point for the series. The piece draws inspiration from stories (told by the artist’s mother-in-law) of Barbadian women gathering to wash clothes, but also to form bonds, tell stories and, inevitably, forge a cultural identity. The large spread of madras-fabric represents the innumerable intersecting narratives that converged in such locations. Notably, it also indicates the transformation of the simple Scottish tartan (representative of imperial power as seen in other works) into a sprawling, polyrhythmic texture, symbolizing the Caribbean at large. Capping this upbeat portrayal of fertile interculturalism, the two works titled **His Navel String Buried Here** and **Her Navel String Buried Here** hint at an emerging sense of belonging and self-determination.

However, in an overarching reflection on this historical trajectory, the small, but extremely poignant piece **Middle Passage** is far from celebratory. On the contrary, it points towards black diasporic history as one of *ongoing* vulnerability and victimization. The black boats inserted into the grooves of the jooking-board (a powerful symbol of hard and repetitious labor) thus speak to the past and the present at once – to a sense of repetition and sameness. Lest viewers move on with a sigh and a shrug, the piece called **Where were YOU?** moreover challenges us individually to own up to our inherited position vis-à-vis this legacy.

Opening and closing the exhibition are two pieces consisting of clay vessels with plants – *Sansevieria Trifasciata* (originally from West Africa) in **Memorial** and *Aloe Barbadosensis* in **Purification**. Neither is intended to offer closure or prospects of immanent healing, but rather to suggest that this history is living, embedded in our soil and still evolving.

POETRY



Backbone (2018)

Nick Whittle

Congo Ground

Edward Baugh

After slavery done, and after
the last bonfires had burned out
they looked around to realize
all the good land had gone
long time into backra massa
hand. They walked for miles
along the stone walls they
themselves had made and mended,
and not one *deggeh* square
of ground to raise a thatch
roof or stick a yam head. So
they moved on up the mountain.
The forest reminded them of home.
Next morning they awoke to a flute
of water-music, thinking
they still dreamed, to find
that they had slept near a spring
from out the earth, from under
a huge rock. They drank and washed
their faces and laughed. They thanked
Big Massa, and blessed the place.
They named it Congo Ground.



Birth of Pan (2018)

Nick Whittle

Considering Pan

Velma Pollard

Pan

god of the reeds by the river
god of all music, god of all sound
wind whistling through leaves
wind wailing casuarinas bending...

my mouth on a reed
torn from red banks
not really a river
my grandmother's stream
she fetched water
washed clothes watered plants

me I gathered white petals
picked green reeds to whistle
my young lips through reed lips...

Pan

sweet sound sublime
round rubber touch metal
Despers! I heard them before
Yes! Carifesta Cuba. Havana

sweet music sublime
under Laventille sky
pouring that sound
on the Port of Spain night

watch the drill master
yes him there bracing the mango tree
head cocked ears keen
for that one note not perfect

but me I cant hear it...

I keep the perfect note
deep in my heart
all the way down hill
grateful I climbed that road
grateful I heard it

great god Pan
god of all music
god of all sound

Giants

Michael Campbell

Dedicated to the service men, foundry men, labourers, farm hands, nurses: those Windrush generation giants.

1948 (i)

them big small-island people
congregating like hope
on a Sunday morning
them same one
bigger than any one story
is who I am:
a child born of them who
keep their mouth in quiet protest
their riot to one side,
their commitment to dignity, lifelong.—
even when hate stands up in an
english man like possession,
they walk in strides two generations wide
bigger than the Orishas when I see them.
a tribe. not quite Arawak or Ashanti
but far too mulatoed
to be a native of any one place.
now each uprooted colossus
in khaki, calico soft, gabardine—
puts roots down here
and walks like trees.

1958 (ii)

ten years since *Windrush*
and even Pakistanis turn Black, their
neighbours under the Raj turn Black,
they can see the Colour Bar exists:
a line cut across the nation, a thing
of white imagination
that black Britishers have been
limbo dancing ever since
John Blanke*, since Seacole.
We settlers never did settle good in
some people's stomach.
is why a people's ambition can turn
a teddy boy on a church sister, a black
family bedsit to kindle
for petrol bomb fire?
so them pulpit calypsonians,
swaying like Lord Kitchener
with a douse of Holy Spirit
preach hot coals of love
on the heads of idle white boys
singing about nigger hunting, with
sticks, knives, iron bars in accompaniment.
or second generation activists
who looked into the mirror of the Atlantic
seeing Montgomery, Alabama reflected
on British shores. The lilt of Malcolm
and Martin was heard in the call for the local
boycott of Bristol Omnibus Company,
in the fight against slum landlords who reduced
our existence to slumdogs.

1963 (iii)

72' and a flash of dreadlocks
a weeping prophet is cut from the hilly part
of Jamaica, like a flame
fireman goes out in the eighties
and the riffs of his scriptures still play
on the conscience of the radio.
Jimmy Cliff hymns *the harder they come*,
in a shifting, changing backdrop,
a *Windrush*, a Pentecost in the Motherland,
a rushing wind blowing over Eldorado,
an unfurling clove of hope
that sits atop the heads
of those who held close the hymn book,
the leather bound KJV.
I look at you as a child—
the roll of your walk, the broad of your shoulders
the sweet brawl of your talk.
If you can bless me with anything
give me the power to name,
to call out things that are not,
as though they were—
if that which sustained you
sustains me, I will be as you are,
not as giants, but as men
walking as men.

Meeting Point

Linda M. Deane

(A Bridgetown poem)

When the sun's
no longer a wrecking crew,
when he's wielding microscope
and precision tools, and presents
himself as an altogether different
class of brute

meet me
on the bridge.
We'll consider our pores
in the tempered reflection
of the waters
below

Join me
at my frayed edges
where I trouble the water;
laden it with ghosts muscling their sweat
from wharf to deck to cargo hold
and out to sea

where memory fans
like an installation of clay pots in the sun
(that brute baking them all over again);
the gallery walls, my writhing
Constitution.
Sense me
in my boarded-up doorways
my backstreet tragedies and
cluttered, rooftop dives

Roll with me
in the muddy gutter
of dark experiment, blood matter;
the stained cloth, splattered: Laboratory
and testing ground.

Feel me
as runaway dream. As cage
of lost, stolen and found. As bones
in the back of the closet, proof
the cursed thing could work
and testimony it could not survive.

Screw me
in my mediaeval maze,
in the claustrophobia
of my piss-soaked alleys
with the unsilent
sweating stone.

Meet me
at or near any of those shadows.
I might recognize my numberless parts yet—
up close, the shifting innards, layers,
lines—the comforting alienness
of the whole.

Calculus

Linda M. Deane

He grew the biggest pears in Buhbayduss. Full-bodied
affairs that everyone kept watch on
each season, calculating pale-yellow prize
in the purse or on the tongue.

This redbrick man with a mean streak
to his generosity. Who worked the land
but had the motion of tides on him; clouds and weather
patterns in his eye. Sniffing the air to say exactly how,
when and where rain gine fall. A man who named
all the cats and dogs he ever owned Peter, Mary...
Peter, Mary and/or...Peter, Mary. A sea-faring
land-lubber who X'd his wife but still sailed home
with sweets! Dresses! Stories! Trinkets tumbling
from mouth and pockets and arms half-held wide.

An ancient-and-modern man rolling 'bout de floor
wid he offspring; singing hymns, teaching them
the harmonies. Imparting joy and rivalries
with penny rewards per degree of difficulty –
the youngest raking in the money and praise
by tackling the bass.

This same man shows his *trildren* how to land
a punch, to fight with fists as words, words as fists.
(Words were always more important they say/he said.)
Never a man to mince his own long-talk
or admit he might have got it wrong,

my mother's father could drop 'sleep strong,
cutlass under the bed, keeping score
of everything and everyone: all deviations
from his song sheet—the humming in his head.
You'd need a new branch of Maths to fathom
a man who'd cut down a tree before losing
a few pears to thieves; who tore up a house
and all its contents. And me,
I was never any good with figures.



Baptism (2018)

Nick Whittle

Devant Jour

George Goddard

In the devant-jour quiet, before the sun comes over
the shoulder of the world
there is no prayer; I gave up the going down on knees
in the morning of a world in flower;
when a thousand flowers dared to blossom, and somewhere
in a field of disparate ideas
we sought to gather the colours that would paint
a brave new world.
But how the vision ages with us
to the same old sameness!

In the devant-jour hours on the cusp of a bleak day,
blown petals of hope ungathered,
vinous tears of a generation run profusely
on the sodden cheeks of earth, no fingered beads
repeat our sacrilegious faith
the world still waits
for a new greening, some other rhythm,
a blossoming beyond the algorithms
of those who have written
this future

In the devant-jour quiet, this frayed future
that despite the bombast of new paradigms
perpetuates the seasons of the past,
a strange drought of spirit, a welling of tears
dispersed like wine, like blood spilled
from this drought-cracked carafe this broken day.
in the devant-jour disquiet before the sun comes over
the shoulder of the world
there is no prayer,
there is no prayer...

Si Mwen té Kwè

George Goddard

I

Si mwen té kwè ou té kai alé si tèlman san pèsèpsyon mwen
si tèlman san konnésans mwen
mwen pitèt té pé kouté lanmou-ou, an lanmou kon mizik an flit
kon chason lé toutwèl adan
an pyès pyé zoranj ; mwen té kai kouté pli antantifman ;
mwen té kai soulajé-mwen pli alèz adan sé lawivyè-ou-la,
té kai savwé fwéché widé lanmen-ou asou lapo-mwen ;
mwen té kai resté domi an plenn apwémidi, pou lévé
pou kouté sé ti jwé chagwinan-an, kwiwak sé kayal-la
ki ka niché adan an pyès manng blé,
tèlman inyowan di choz « pwogwé » sala ki an déwoulan ;
mwen té kai pentiwé imotèlman an potwé
manmai ka benyen tou anvlopé adan an lapli klè
ka désann òd La Sorcière;
mé solèy ka plonjé antwé an swawé
Rouj èvèk lapousyè an van ki ka vanté
òd fasad solèy kouché. É mwen ka rimaké
kè nou ja boukanté vwa dous sé toutwèl-la,
plézi pi lapli asou lapo an ti zanfan,
nou ja boukanté tout sa, pou sa apwézan !

If I Had Thought

George Goddard

(Translation of « Si Mwen té Kwè » from Kwéyòl into English by author)

I

If I had thought you would have gone so imperceptibly
so almost-without-my-knowing

I might have listened to your fluted love, the touterelles
in the orange grove, more intently

I would have dipped more easily in your island streams
savouring the cool ripple of your fingers on my skin;

I would have slept late into an afternoon, to wake
to the banter and squawking of aigrettes mating

In a stand of blue mangroves
oblivious of this “progress” thing about to happen;
I would have painted immortally
children bathing, swathed in clear rain coming
down over La Sorcière.

But now the sun dips into an evening
red with the dust of the trades. And I note
that we have traded the soft tenor of touterelles,
the pure pleasure of rain on a child’s skin, for this!



Drummers (2018)

Nick Whittle

Domesticities – 1: *Tea*

Kendel Hippolyte

As a child, watching my mother cool the hot tea by pouring it
from one cup into another, then from the filled cup back
into the emptied one, and then again again,
the afternoon-or-evening-coloured liquid unfurling downward
like a ribbon from a spool, the sound of its unreeling
an ascending-then-descending octave ending in a burbling,
then a clustering of bubbles, and the vapour wisping
from and to my mother's hands rotating, gliding up, down, changing places,
partners in an intricate and courtly dance, separating finally
when she passed me the cup, the porcelain at just the hotness
to allow my other hand to support it at the rim as i raise to my lips
the tea – kannèl, Red Rose, lowanjèt – hotter than the cup, just
to the right sweetened heat for a child learning to sip, absorb
the ways of family, of neighbourhood, of town, of country, a child
wondering two generations later when precisely this ritual
became unnecessary, wondering how i learned to drink tea hot
and wondering whether the hands of any of us still dance
the caring choreography of this domestic rite,
wondering if they do not, why ...

.....
kannèl – cinnamon; referring here to cinnamon bark tea

lowanjèt – citrus leaf tea, made from the leaves of orange, grapefruit, lime ...

*This poem was first published by Peepel Tree Press in Wordplanting (2019)
by Kendel Hippolyte.*

Mornin Neighbour

Jennifer Rahim

Mornin-mornin. How yuh do?
Now is good time for a little reasonin,
when day jus' beginin. Too besides is Sunday.
No rushin. Even God take day-off. Watch—
grass shinin, beach wash clean, an listen,
Kingfisher ramayin sweet on electric wire—
like is bran-new song he bringin.
We fresh as we could get. Yuh know how it is—
ozone depletin an' de world heavy-heavy
totin all dat beat-down history—but never min',
I believe we make for new-leaf restart.
Even stone could change to heart.

So mornin neighbs. Mornin.
I watchin dat wall yuh start buildin,
an how high it goin. What happen—
my face cause you upset? Doh fret,
I only stydyin all dat rough talk we hearin
over TV about walls. I feel we come too close
for puttin up fences. Yuh ever study:
borders doh mark a country,
an walls doh make us safe or free.
Neighbs, need a different kinda security.
Jus think: people-self, like you and me,
decide to bring dem down—cross lan' an sea
jus to reach a place dat is not a prison—
a place where dey could eat food
when day come and stop livin prodigal,
like dey not already home.

Neighbour, how I talk?
I know you didn't go weekend school
an I don't want to play bright—
though I do my reading on de side—
but I have to say, time never was
when fences make good neighbours.
Whatever is de *something* dat doh like wall
finally break ground, and it shiftin block,
openin crack, topplin Babels dat keep us apart.
Is people we have to thank—dem-self
wit no place to lie down when night come.
I not too religious, but if yuh ask me,
how dis world come—all kinda language
bounce up, like is a real Pentecost.

Doh get me wrong. Lawlessness
is no creed to live by, an borders have purpose;
but when Laws & Economy on any side
pay justice no min', and when Walls
make us less each other's keeper,
well, my frien, dat is recipe fuh disaster.
Right here in dis yard, one-one,
we have to make a tomorrow better.
What yuh say? I know. I know—
criminals thirsty for blood,
not to mention tief when zaboca
an mango season come,
but I swear my chirren well instruct
to only take up what fall natural.

Neighbs, I have to admit
yuh wall comin up nice and strong,
but to cut long story short,
measure down one-two block
so at least when mornin come,
I could see your face...

Pierrot – desperate notes

John Robert Lee

*“Take down the love letters from the bookshelf,
the photographs, the desperate notes,..” (Derek Walcott)*

1.

filthy feathers, that painted shoe, trampled headpiece, etcetera
choking drains down the route,
street-light blinking out, stale roti

baddening the guts, your eyes sharp for midnight bandit
or coke jumbie looking to make ole mas
with the unwary —

you clown prince, you celebratory idiot

you forget she was Coolie Devil original,
Jab-Jab Mistress, maker of scourges?

2.

sometimes, I’m naked in streets
or lost, anguished, in exit-less ghettos
or the road ends down a tangled ravine

or, confused, can’t find my hotel
room or a place to pee; recurrent anxieties
troubled sleep —

yeah, keep the not-so-subtle

psycho-babble, but why, you next to me, no more dancing
no more high tenor, can’t find you?

3.

they say he wrote something unheard
with blood from his slashed wrists
a final, absolute word

of realization, some profundity of the abyss
he was swallowing through his cold veins
his now-sober, emptying mind —
his best friend

recalls a sudden spurt of wind that whipped curtains
round his photograph which shattered unspeakably.

4.

I had bus fare, but chose to walk
through late Friday afternoon
fish grills waking

beer trucks delivering, inane
noise of sound systems battering down Babylon
young girls half-naked —
didn't look at none

but, like a crazy fool, watched your shut window for long
hours with the spy-glass of my filthy palms.

5.

how you didn't know me?
your old dresses made the strips of rags
busts came from your stained pillow

your mother's madras covered your self-same wigs
you painted the shoes that shade of yellow
your torn panties covered my crotch —
your bakanal heart make legs

in front my very eyes
and leave me a damn prancing fool.

6.

when this clown reach Sheol
you will see who is who
no masquerader and jester in hell

no Delilah nor gap-tooth Jezebel anywhere
no make-believe pardner
no ole mas performer —
I standing like a stripper

down from the pole-vault of my bare, secret privates
in front the Man who know all my grief.

Postcard 4

Sonia Williams

river water is clear so

stones flush from downhill rush in rainy season

glitter & how it bubble,

like young girl giggle falling over edge

racing innocently down-

hill hungry, tumbling

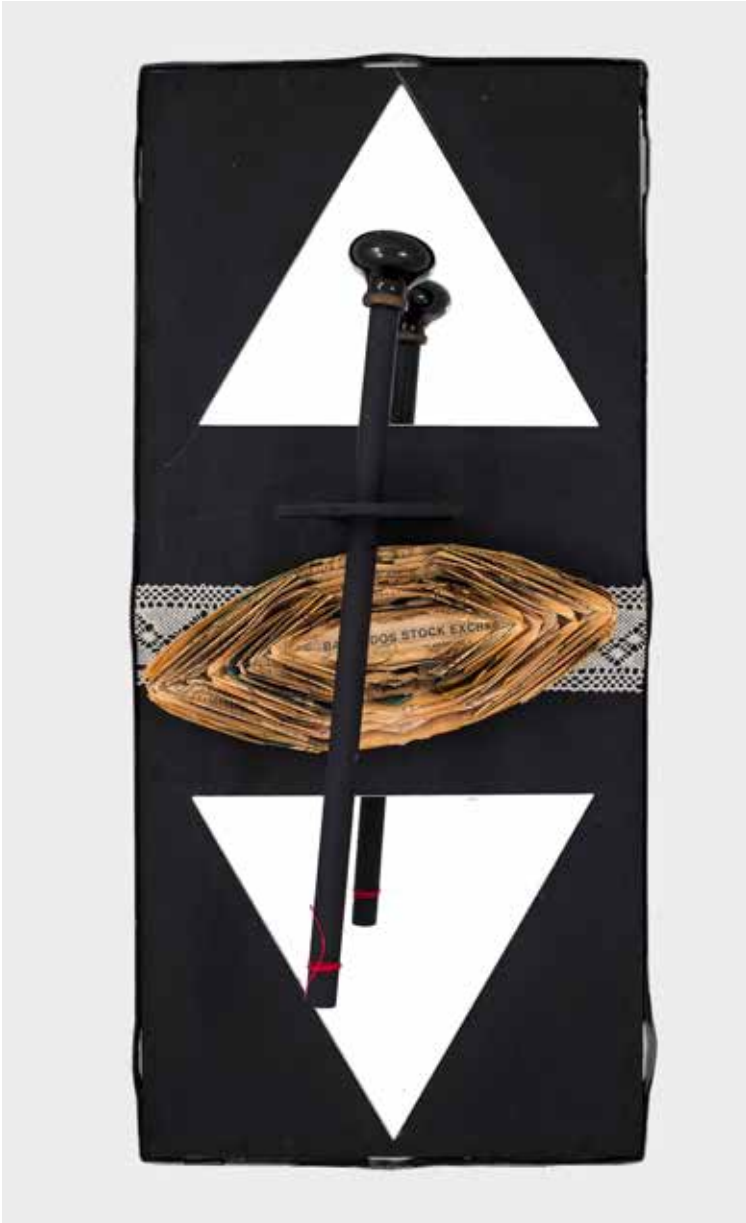
over trials to meet her sister

river mouth touch sea, tasting her brine

in repeating time along Salabia Bay

sisters embrace

bitter water for the healing



Spirit Wand (2018)

Nick Whittle

The Last Embrace

Sonia Williams

For Louise

You left in your time
it is enough, you said, it is enough.
You let go, of the sucking-long-heave to breathe
of bones, muscles-loose in hanging skin heavy
too heavy to lift but light enough to fly away.

You did not want to talk anymore the day before,
you rested. I sat guarding your body
while your spirit flew,
unaware you were not lying there
till you returned...

“It was peaceful,” you said,
You saw your mother and father.

Cold feet,
so cold your body, shivering,
covered with sheets... I crawl under
arms around you, holding onto hope.
If I had held onto you close enough
we could have conceived.
It would have been immaculate.

I would have carried you right here,
in the hurt of heart
to be born again.

The Man of Your Dreams

Vladimir Lucien

The man of your dreams has left the dream,
and left you so softly-stranded — he has risen
from the bed whose far corners you had stretched yourself
to, like a flat world whose ends you would go to with him,
each tucked corner of the sheet like a small commitment
made and kept. And then something lifted, and you felt heavier,
something weighed down on your side that made
you know that the bed of lovers is always a scale.

To balance things, you dream him, by sheer will
coming back to you one day in a profuse
apology of rain — there, outside your door, begging
like thunder, to be let in.

Let Us Call This Room “Enough”

Vladimir Lucien

This room should be called “enough”
with its sound of arrival, its fixed white sheets
like a new beginning. I have left
my shoes at the door with their dust
of other things and places, I have hung
the drooping shoulders of my coat. I have paid
my dues in the underworld to the man singing
love’s desperate songs, and the different languages
you hear in this city, sounding all like explanations
for leaving where they came from. I will have
to stare certain years in the face, Love, return
to places ravished of presences, so for now,
let us lie down on your immaculate bed,
let us breathe deeply, and let us call this room
“Enough”.

Where All Is Silence

Esther Phillips

You're quiet today, Daddy,
none of your usual defenses
I could repeat word for word;
nor your lengthy sermons eclipsing
all my efforts at some kind
of closeness.

We've been travelling wordlessly
across Brooklyn; these streets
familiar to you, far away from
barefoot tracks, gullies, cart-roads;
another world you left behind;
chose to forget.

I've been silent, too, on poems
I wrote but never showed you:
the one I called "His Holyness"
where, having made it into Heaven,
you choose the mansion farthest from us.

Or the poem I named "Da Da."
Skilled in woodwork,
artist in your own right,
you, like the Dadaists, carved
out your resistance against
the norms that tried to hold you,
you chose your art, your skill,
the freedom you felt they stood for
above your own (I will not say it!)

I abandoned those poems
not wanting to dishonor you.

We're here now, Daddy.
We've sung the last hymn
and the last prayers have been said.
They're lowering your coffin
into the grave where all is silence,
the earth complicit as it covers you.

I, too, have no wish to uncover
those spaces you tried filling
with words that kept falling
through.

Your silences were kinder.



Storying (2018)

Nick Whittle

The Reunion

Kwame Dawes

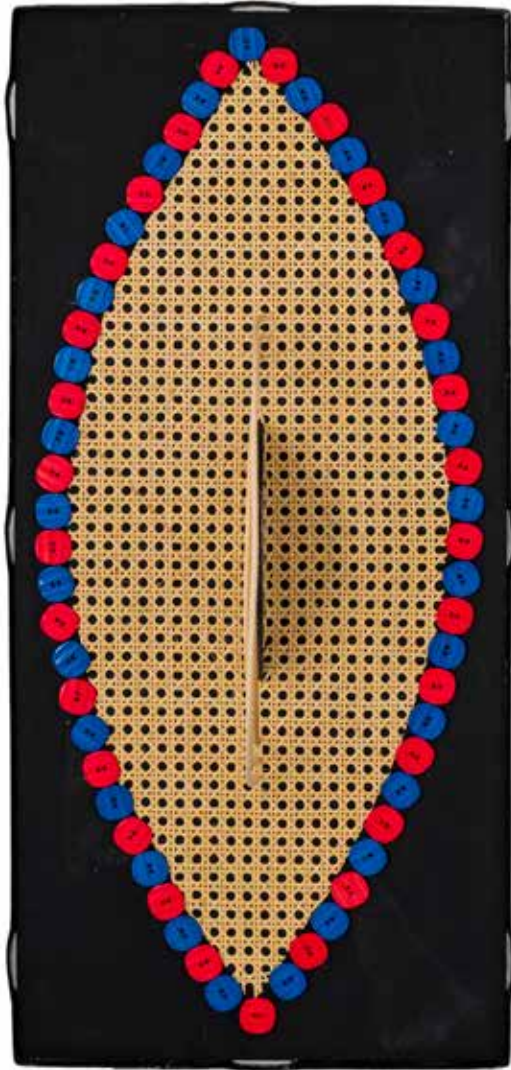
You will remember that last meeting before her death.
That November Jamaica had lost its petulance. The season of sorrel,
rum and bloody poinsettias was gathering strength; and in that hiatus,
in a house buried by trees in the hills overlooking the sea,
people whispered and laughed and she was there,
her skin warm with chocolate smoothness, her hair
alarmingly white, these heavy coils of plaits falling about her.
You talked of memory, but it was as if you were both forgetting
the wounds, the skin covered with fire ants, the long chasm
between you, the decades of sowing silence. So, you asked
for two secrets, and she promised a third after your two.
I hated you for a long time, she said. And I painted you as a fat
monstrosity full of pomposity and bile. This stopped
three years ago when I met your son; he said you sent your love.
The second: For thirty days I have fasted on lime juice
and scotch bonnet peppers so I could look beautiful.
I bought this dress for you. See my back, the muscles—look.
You told her that for years you have dreamed of a winter week,
snowed in, and both of you walking through the halls of your home
of glass; the room heated to 80 degrees—both of you naked,
you painting canvasses. Was I yours? She asked. No, you said.
We were both as we are and beautiful, and my paintings
were of our new bodies blue and wrinkled and graceful
and guiltless before the fall. I have never hated you.
I have only feared you. You smiled, both of you. Then she said,
I am dying. And she did. It was only a month.
You heard in January, on a slate gray day, the ground covered
with three-day old snow. You painted her back as if her hands
were bound at the wrist, and you wept with the memory
of what was lost. There is always, at the fore of all beauty,
a false art, that last of our bodies, as if we were ever anything
other than these pimped, sweaty, smelly pieces of meat, waiting
valiantly for the moment we give up and start to rot.

Elegy

Kwame Dawes

Fidel is dead; his year of birth is a rhyming
one—the year of Elizabeth II’s birth,
the year my father was born in Warri.
Who remembers the names of the women
perched between thighs to enact the ordinary
act of gathering the slippery bloody flesh?
Their survival is another rhyming song;
to think that there in Cuba or England
or Nigeria, there may well have been
a cottage in the woods, abandoned suddenly—
a missionary leaving to follow a wife
back to her village in the North where
she preferred to die, or some veteran
pensioner succumbing to the shrapnel
in his skull and the madness of shell-
shock; or some landed gentry, rushing
to Havana to collect a child abandoned
by a man fleeing his demons. She will
never return to their cottage in the hills.
They all leave broken bread, two tumblers,
one half-full of bourbon, the other empty,
set on a table covered in cloth. It will
take decades for the ants to consume
this to nothing, decades before all
we will find in the dark cottage are two
musty tumblers, like a message of how
love dies, how the world continues on
its way. Come, December, the air grows sharp
as glass, and we think of our days
as our future. The living continue,
the dead do not care as much,
and we continue as we always have.

FICTION



Against Her Will (2018)

Nick Whittle

A Hand Came Through the Wall

Cherie Jones

A man's hand came through the wall behind our bed, made a web of cracks around it and shuddered a minute before it was still, bruises starting to set on the fingers. It was a left hand, with slightly curved fingers hanging loose and limp.

Geoff insisted I call the police. That's what you get for choosing a dinky hotel no decent tourist had ever heard of, he said, now, thanks to me, we'd be in the middle of a murder investigation. Who said the guy was dead, I wanted to know, and Geoff rolled his eyes like unjustified optimism was why we were there in the first place. Geoff hadn't wanted to come, 13 years or not.

I dialled in the shadow of that hand, my eyes on my ring. Geoff didn't wear his anymore. On our first night, we'd heard the fighting through the wall, instead of the ocean, and Geoff had used the noise to explain his lost erection, and I had kept my eyes on the pale band of skin where his ring used to be.

Of course he's dead, said Geoff, they really should refund you your money, for all this ruckus.

Geoff didn't notice when I replaced the receiver, he was busy dusting flakes of plaster from his hair, but he startled when I reached for the hand. This hand wore its ring, too, even with all that fighting.

You probably shouldn't touch it, Geoff began. He grumbled something about fingerprints but I held that cooling hand, intertwined its fingers with mine, and waited for us to be rescued.

-00-

Voice

Cherie Jones

My voice played musical chairs before leaving. It bounced apologies around the jogger who found me, the policeman, the nurse at the hospital – trying to find itself seated and steady when the music stopped. What it said was ‘sorry’. Sorry for not remembering the rule about offers of rides home, for failing to escape, for forgetting to say thanks when rescued, for shrinking at the sight of a speculum.

The speculum came closer, my mouth dropped open and my voice tumbled out, grew legs before my eyes and did not look sad to leave me. I wasn’t mad, I wouldn’t have wanted to stay with me either.

When you arrive at an end you never saw coming, everything is retrospect.

I last remember my voice echoing from the nurse. Sorry she said, this might hurt.

It didn’t hurt, but I couldn’t tell her. The music stopped and my voice made its escape: climbed blinds printed with birds, scaled the skater in the next cubicle getting stitched up, ducked a candy-striper coming with a change of clothes, skirted the social worker, made like a mare and bolted.

So when the boyfriend came in I could not apologise because it ran, or for allowing this to happen. I could not ask him please to run back down the long hospital corridor he had just raged through and look for a voice, the one he’d heard on me yesterday.

I couldn’t disagree if he said that, perhaps, it would no longer fit me anyway.

-00-

The Woman Whose Laugh Cracked The Sky

Sharma Taylor

When Myrna laughed, the sound rumbled from deep inside her belly. People would pause at this other-worldly eruption. Myrna's laughter sucked the air *dry-dry* like she was eating a mango seed, working it between her teeth, juice running down her chin as she devoured its flesh. I am older now and she is long dead but I still remember Myrna's laugh. As a child, I believed that after it came from her mouth, fully formed, her laughter became a separate thing that lingered after the wind carried away the sound. I tried to laugh like her but mine sounded like freshly-shelled red peas spilling into a tin bowl.

Yuh laugh and yuh word dem mus' have weight, she'd say.

I begged her to show me how to laugh until the earth shifted under its force. But she'd shake her head and say: *Girlie, mi cyaan teach yuh dat. It haffi jus' come.*

Villagers called her *Smiley* and the old folks said *har head touched*, meaning she was a little slow, maybe on account of being dropped on her head at birth by the district midwife, who was known for having fingers as slippery as hot butter.

But Mama said Myrna wasn't slow at all. Her wide-set eyes, the colour of burnt molasses, took you in, and despite the blank expression on her face, she was sizing you up. This soft, round woman carried loads of washing on her head to the river, with Baby Buck balanced on her back, his bigger sister Irene grasping one leg and her twin brother Derek the other...calves like good, strong mahogany...this must have been what Parson Brown, like all the men in the district, first saw when she marched her entire clan of children up the hill every Sunday to Sunday School, each child holding the hand of another smaller child, all struggling to keep pace with Myrna as she bounced up the

hill...the shape of those calves as she turned to check that her brood was still safely following her...those calves connected to sturdy legs, fleshy hips and a round bottom, which little Teresa loved to use as a pillow.

I remember her gaze too. She gazed a lot after it happened. Myrna could stare at you for a long time, slack-jawed, relaxing her whole face, just looking at you. But that was her way of taking in the world, trying to *pick sense from nonsense, playing fool to catch wise* as Mama used to say. Prodding out the truth by her silent, patient listening.

You're no fool Myrna, my mother would say to her. Mama would be wiping beads of sweat from her brow while ironing Dadda's uniform or his church shirt on a cloth-covered ironing board that seemed to reach the ceiling of our house. Or she would be stitching up the hem of a dress, sitting at her *Singer* sewing machine whirring away with the foot pedal as she and Myrna talked.

As a child I relished catching bits of "adult conversation", as tantalizing to me as forbidden fruit or raindrops running off ginger lilies. I'd slide into the space below our wooden house, braving *forty-legs*, scorpions or an ants' nest. I'd slip behind the bush or scrape up my skin and rip my skirt on the prickles of the *Sinkle-Bible* plant just to hear something juicy.

So how yuh mek so much man fool-fool yuh up and give yuh so much pickney?! Mama would ask, plunging straight into patois as the conversation deepened, Standard English (that she always urged me to use) set aside on these occasions.

Myrna would make a sharp sigh. That sigh, to me, was a splinter of cloud across a brazen sun.

But Elvie, she'd say, I'd imagine her parting lips the colour of pink bougainvilleas, *is not de man dem fault mi love de woody!*

The laugh would come then and our entire house, down to every plank, would shake – quaking, before settling down again, wearily, on its haunches.

Watch your mouth, Myrna! Mama would exclaim, suddenly proper again, her "School Teacher Smith" persona fully restored in this single rebuff. Although she said the words sternly, I knew she wasn't really angry. I could hear her own laughter underneath her voice – brimming at the surface but never quite bubbling over – like those times when she caught me hiding under the kitchen table licking the pan of Christmas cake batter or staining my new dress with curry, or stealing a gizzada she had just baked for Parson Brown. She'd tell me I was being bad but I could see she wanted to laugh.

I remember, Mama continued, *when we were in Ms. Olsie's class. Myrna, you were the brightest! Brighter than me. You could have gone to Teachers' College too!*

Remember how you knew your Times Tables up to 13?!

At this point in Mama's reminiscing, I'd lose interest and go play by the river with Myrna's oldest son, a shy, bookish boy named Kirk, my constant playmate. We'd attack the Julie mango tree or turn over rocks along the river bank looking for land crabs that seemed to me like miniature lopsided warriors, their oversized claws resembling shields.

Once, on the way to Mr. Chin's shop to buy *Blue* soap for Mama, Kirk and I passed the corner bar. The men inside would riotously laugh and cuss about politics, cricket and the economy. A man slurred:

Dat Myrna sweet like honey.

Another chimed: *Mi want ah taste.*

A third said: *Unno watch it! Silent river run deep.*

Later, I asked Myrna:

How come people chat behind other people back?

Taking a guinep from her skirt pocket, she said:

Chile, when yuh older yuh going learn dat people is like dis guinep, and held up its green hard skin between two fingers for my closer inspection.

Dem is one thing on the outside and something else inside...Bite it.

I did, my tongue enveloping the fleshy orange seed.

Myrna had eight children – five girls and three boys – with seven different men. A couple of the children would be parceled out to aunts, cousins and grandparents for safe-keeping and rearing whenever there were too many mouths to feed. Thinking back now, she couldn't have been older than 35. I was then eight and the only child of my parents. I never saw any of her children's fathers at Myrna's house when I went there to play or out with any of the children. It was only Myrna who showed up at school on Parents' Day or Sports Day or to speak with the teachers on the good or bad performance of any of her clan.

Kirk didn't know who his daddy was. That I didn't understand. My daddy was the district constable and an elder at the local church, *Ebenezer Sanctuary of the Innocent and Sacred Heart Deliverance Ministries*, a more grand-sounding name than the reality of the squat wooden structure with its gigantic white doors. *A church need a imposing*

name, Parson Brown used to say, de temple o' de Lord have to inspire awe and reverence!

Myrna earned a living from taking in washing. She'd scrub Nurse's uniform until it was white like Myrna's teeth or restore Principal's faded yellow shirt to brilliance. She even got work from the Chinese who took in washing from their rich clients in town and hired Myrna to do the job. Although she had been forced to drop out of school at 13 because her mother needed help on the farm, Myrna could read well. I'd see her reading pages from old *Gleaner* on the back step when Mama scaled parrot fish onto its pages.

You are a smart woman, Mama would say when she took a break from marking papers as she and Myrna drank coconut water on the verandah, or when Myrna would cane-row or flat-iron Mama's hair, dividing its forest of thickness with a fat black comb and smoothing it with liberal doses of castor oil.

Sometimes, I went to the river and watched Myrna wash. Kirk found this boring and wandered off on his own so it was always just Myrna and me. She pounded each trouser and shirt on massive rocks by the river-side, with vigour, as if exorcising evil or if the clothes had to pay penitence for every bad thought or deed of its wearer.

She didn't go to church on Sunday, like the rest of us did, though she brought her kids to Sunday School religiously. *Myrna living in sin*, according to Parson Brown, most recently with a man who had moved to our village from the neighbouring town. Though she never set foot in church, the flow of the river, sure and steady like heartbeats and heartache, egrets flying overhead, mangrove roots rising out of the water – this place was her cathedral. Her church where she sang her own hymns. With a reverential vigor, she belted out Johnny Cash's:

If I were a carpenter and you were a lady

Would you marry me anyway?

Would you have my baby?

Or in a slow and steady prayer, croon Bob Marley's:

I went downtown

I saw Miss Brown

She had brown sugar

all over her booga-wooga

Myrna intrigued my childish imagination in ways I didn't understand. Adults then had long faces, perpetually frowning or hissing their teeth *Cho!*, speaking in worried and upset tones about everything – things like Government, elections, the price of food, their low pay or finding *ah wuk* in town. Myrna seemed content and, to my childish mind, happy, because she never spoke about those things. She was fascinated by the *peenie-wallies* blinking their bodies at night, would squeal (but never tell Mama) when Kirk and I chased her with a dead frog, would hitch up her *skirt-tail* and run after Kirk and me, braying like a mule in one of our make-believe games, let me plait her hair with huge polka dot ribbons, and talk to my doll, Miss Amy, like she was a real person too, even though Mama said that was foolishness.

Yuh mummy nice, I'd tell Kirk and he'd shrug without saying anything, in the way boys his age do.

When I was around her, I didn't have to be quiet or sit still or pull up my socks, keep on my shoes or stop my skirt from *crushing up*.

Sometimes, I felt I could tell her my secret.

When I nearly told her, we were by the field on the river bank. On our backs on the grass by the guava tree, we were waiting for the clothes to dry on a makeshift clothes-line she'd strung between two trees. I'd been proud that Myrna, after some cajoling, had allowed me to rinse a dress. I felt grown up. Kirk was off in search of some marbles or a box we could stuff with newspaper to make a cricket ball to use with a dead tree branch as our bat. When I close my eyes I can see it still: the cobalt-blue sky...the river grey like *janga* shrimp.

Miss Myrna, I began cautiously, *what it mean when a man...* my voice trailed off. I looked away at some goats gobbling bushes in the distance.

I took so long to continue she propped up her massive body on one elbow to face me and waited. Finally, when I said nothing, she coaxed:

When a man do what?

Though said softly, her voice had a stiffness and strained pitch I'd never heard from her before.

I put my hands over my face. My mouth felt hot like I had eaten cornmeal pudding before it cooled. Gravel was on my tongue. I turned onto my belly and stroked a nearby *Shame-Old-Lady* plant and watched its tiny leaves close one after the other to my touch.

I was sorry I had started but was unable to pull the words back in:

Touch yuh...yuh know there, I didn't dare motion where, *and mek yuh touch him?*

Lawd Jesus! Her screech split the sky.

Tell mi ah who!

She was on her feet now, her huge body blocking out the sun. I wouldn't say another word.

That was the year we got a new pastor, Parson Brown, an import from Kingston. He had long but knobby fingers, a sloping forehead and barracuda-mouth and he was always sweating. Parson Brown was constantly mopping his brow with an enormous red handkerchief and then sweating some more in an endless cycle of dampness. Plus, he permanently smelled like *Vicks Vaporub*. His teeth were a Jackfruit-flesh yellow.

Parson Brown used to keep some children back after Sunday School for extra lessons. Not everyone, just the bright ones, and mainly boys. Kirk, who had his mother's brains, was one of them.

When Kirk started to run behind the orange tree to hide rather than take off his shirt in one of our pretend games, even refusing to take it off when we went swimming in the river, I thought it strange. In a childish way, I instinctively knew something was amiss.

One time, I saw him rubbing his crotch and walking like he had something painful in his shorts. Another time we were playing hide and seek and I had grown tired of waiting for him to find me behind the chicken coop, so I'd sprung a sneak attack. When I touched him he nearly jumped out of his skin. My friend was changing.

Wah wrong wid yuh?! I confronted him.

When he told me I promised not to tell. Parson Brown had warned Kirk that if he told anyone Kirk would face certain Hell-Fire which we both knew, from Parson Brown's sermons, was *hotter-than-hot*, hotter than a little bit of oil splashing on your skin when sprats were frying.

His secret became my secret. His damnation was also mine.

So when Mount Myrna erupted, this time not in laughter but sheer anger, I still wasn't talking. I'd rather drink bitter cerasee tea or bissy or rub scotch bonnet peppers in my eyes.

I was dragged before my mother, who instantly went grey with panic when she saw the look on Myrna's face.

TELL HAR WHO TROUBLE YUH! Myrna thundered at me.

I was afraid because this was not the gentle Myrna I knew and loved. This was a

strange fire roaring. I shrank under its blaze.

Myrna was huffing and puffing like a bull and Mama's eyes were wide as saucers.

My words became boiled dumplings in my mouth. They were too heavy. In a tumble of tears, I finally broke. Thinking back on that moment now, I can see how I sagged under the bone-weariness of it all, and have sagged every time I've thought of it since.

My voice sounded like the ghost of something dead in my throat when I said:

Is Parson Brown. But is not wid me. Is Kirk.

What came next happened very fast. And it's like a puzzle I don't have all the pieces for.

I never saw it but I heard, we all did, and the story become more embellished in each re-telling.

What I do know is that on the verandah that day Myrna gave out a little moan, like a bird hit by a slingshot that falls to the grass with a thud. It was followed by a low *mi poor pickney* and then she disappeared in the direction of her house. Mama shouted to her retreating back that she was going to the police station to get my father to lock up Parson Brown so he couldn't hurt one more child.

The only people there when it happened were Myrna and Parson Brown. But that didn't stop everyone from giving detailed accounts of what Myrna did that day, including specific descriptions of:

how she kicked down the manse door (*she bring it right down with de force of one good kick from har left foot and lose har slipper same time*);

how she, unblinkingly, hauled a napping Parson Brown up off the bed by his genitals (*grab him up rough-rough wid har right hand, and hang on pon him wid de cold machete blade press pon him neck*); and

how no blood was spilled in the manse or on the church grounds (and this part was always said solemnly- *not one drop pon hallowed ground*)

There were also explanations and commentary on Myrna's mental state (*is not true she crazy or mi know she did mad from long time*).

There was speculation about the outcome and why Myrna never faced a single criminal charge: *Constable Smith close the case 'cause dem nuh find Parson Brown body all now; Is drown him drown - she neva murder him; or Him get wey and swim downstream and go straight back to town.*

The last thing seen of Parson Brown, according to one witness who swore she *did see it wid har own two yeye*, was him being dragged behind Myrna, *naked as de day him born*, in the direction of the river, like a heavy load of washing being brought there to be cleansed. Parson Brown was begging for mercy. Myrna responded with a snarl. *Har face like ah mad dog.*

Though I was not there, I could hear it from the verandah. Thundering across the valley. I ran into my room and put my head under the pillow. As long as I live I can never escape that sound.

Her laughter was almost maniacal. The force of a howl and a scream. Rising up like a single, giant wave lifting the roof off the sky.

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Tapestry

Hazel Simmons-McDonald

Felice sat hunched over her embroidery hoop, her glasses perched on the tip of her nose. She looked up occasionally over the rim to check a paper pattern that was spread on the table in front of her. A stretch of aida cloth with colourful images hung from one side of the hoop. Every once in a while she set the hoop on the table, spread the cloth out, her head tilted to one side as she surveyed the work. Then she picked up the hoop again and continued to work. Her hands moved quickly as she thrust the needle through one hole of a square of the aida cloth, pulled it up through the top part of the hoop and thrust it down diagonally through another hole to make a series of crosses and shape the stitches into the pattern she was creating. It was the image of a young woman, smiling, in graduation robes, the mortar board askew on her head and her arm raised, holding a scroll. Her feet and shoes were hidden by a flowering shrub which Felice was now working on quickly. She wanted to complete that section of the cloth before her granddaughter arrived later. It was her way of showing her that she was proud of her. When she began working the cloth she had intended it to be a runner for her dining table but she realised from the scenes and characters she had included it was inappropriate for that purpose. It was more like a tapestry, depicting scenes from her environment and events from her life. She had included them on a whim based on whatever her memory had tossed up as she worked. Now that she looked at them she realised that they were in some sort of chronological order with events from her childhood first. She looked up over the rim of her glasses as Adele, her caregiver, entered the room. She shook her head and gave Felice a disapproving look.

“You know you should be resting now. I didn’t come before because I thought you were sleeping but I see I have to check on you more. How you get the work basket?”

Felice smiled. “I went over there and got it.”

“Now suppose you had fall down. How you think I could explain that, eh?”

“Adele, I’m not an invalid. You worry too much. If I don’t move around I won’t be able to get up at all after a while. I’m ok.”

“So you been working all this time on this fine fine stitching you doing. What about your eyes, eh? And later you going ask me to rub your hands. You not so young now, you know. You overdoing things and I will get the blame.”

“Don’t be silly. Look! You like it? I finish the part with Eva so I can show her later. You like it?”

“It beautiful, oui! It really nice. All these small stitches and the colours. I don’t know how you doing all this.”

“My eyes and hands are still good and as long as they good, I’ll keep stitching. You think Eva will like it?”

“How you mean? She must like it oui. Is for her you doing it?”

“Yes. She’s the only one I have left. It has many stories, some secrets. I’ll have to tell her. Maybe Eva can keep a secret.”

You soon run out of cloth, you know. Now you finish the part with Miss Eva what you going to put in this last part? I see you start it already.”

“That’s a secret. You and Eva will find out when it’s finished.”

Adele started to put the floss into the work basket. “You need to put it away now, Miss Felice. You must get a rest before Miss Eva come. Here, let me fold this for you. Relax now, I’ll bring your tea and medicine. You have time for a little rest.”

“Thanks, Adele, but I don’t want to be drowsy. Let’s leave the medicine for later.”

Adele opened her mouth and pointed with her index finger as though she was about to reprimand Felice. She shook her head, picked up the work basket and put it in the centre of the table, out of Felice’s reach.

“As long as I don’t get blame if something happen to you. Rest a little and I’ll bring the tea.”

“Let’s leave the tea too, till Eva comes. We’ll have so much to talk about.”

Adele shook her head again and walked to the door. Felice smiled and looked at her as she walked away. As soon as Adele shut the door, she got up, shuffled around the table and pushed the work basket towards the end where she was sitting. She hummed a tune as she opened it and began taking out the needlework.

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Eva pulled her chair closer to her grandmother’s. Felice looked at her with a worried expression.

“I hope Martha doesn’t mind you’re going to stay with me for the rest of your vacation.”

“Oh no, she doesn’t. I already spent two weeks with her. Besides, she has other grandchildren and I’m the only one you have.”

“True. But I always remember how fussy she was when Denis and your mother had to live here for a few months after they got married; before they got their own place. But a lot of time has passed so I suppose it’s ok now.”

“I’m sure it is, Nanfie, and I’m looking forward to spending this time with you. Remember? You promised to teach me how to cross stitch so here’s your chance. I’ll be gone for quite a while when I go back to study.”

Felice leaned back in her chair and smiled.

“I so proud of you, Eva. Imagine my only grandchile a doctor. Your father would be proud of you too.”

“I know. But I think he’d be proud of me whatever career I chose.”

“That’s true. I wish he was here and your mother too.”

“Me too. I miss both of them.”

“The laws for drunk driving not strict enough. The person who slammed right into their car and killed them still alive and my only son and his wife gone. Life too hard.”

“It hurts to think about it Nanfie, but I’m sure they’d want us to remember the good times and the good things that have happened since. You and Grandma Martha are closer now, aren’t you? And they did change the law.”

“Yes, but it still not strict enough. Look! I stitched a pattern of them on their wedding day.” She reached into her basket, pulled out the cloth and put it on the table. Eva stood up and helped to spread it out.

“It’s lovely, Nanfie. So many images and so colourful. Yes, this part looks like Mama and Pa. How did you get it done?”

“You remember the website for creating patterns you told me about? I couldn’t work that out. Too old for all that but they had a mailing address so I sent the photographs I wanted designed and they sent back the patterns with suggestions for the colours of the floss. It didn’t cost much either. All these other images I made up the patters for them myself. See here? Look at this one of you on graduation day.”

“Oh yes! It does look like me too. Even the dress I was wearing. And that looks just like Mama and Pa too! It’s lovely, Nanfie.”

“I hoped you would like it because I’m going to give it to you. I’m working on the last part while you’re here so you can learn how to stitch using the counted method. You can work on something of your own too.”

“Ok, I’ll sit with you for an hour or so when you’re working so I can learn. What about all these other scenes? This is a lot of work!”

“Most of them are from my life; things that happened, mostly.”

“What about this one? That’s an image of the Virgin Mary, isn’t it?”

“Yes, and these little girls are flower girls. When I was small my mother used to send me to be a flower girl in the procession. We had baskets of petals and we used to throw them in front of the statue which older girls used to carry on a pallet on their shoulders. See? I put in two flower girls. I don’t think they do processions like that anymore.”

“I don’t remember them so they must have stopped. What about these two figures? This one is in bright red and surrounded by a shadow. How come?”

“His story not nice. I never told anyone but since the cloth will be yours, I’ll tell you.”

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Eva sat down while Felice folded the cloth, leaving the image with the two figures exposed.

“I was about ten at the time, preparing for confirmation. It was my first year in secondary school too. The nuns used to make us observe all the feasts as a school group. Once a month, every first Thursday, they would take all of us, the Catholics, that is, to the church for confession and then to the first Friday mass on the next day. Several priests would come to hear the confessions so we could get back to school by midday. This one in the sunshine is Father Benedict. I liked going to him for confession. He always told me a story that helped me to understand why it was important to avoid certain things. He was our chaplain and popular with everybody. He would come to the school to lead the retreats during lent. This other one, Pere Auguste was different. He had problems and he could hardly speak English at first. The first time I went to him for confession he asked me if I had pwèl. Can you imagine? I was shocked. I couldn’t say anything. I knelt there with my head down. He went on for a while asking foolish questions. Did my sister have pwèl, did I see it and what was it like. I didn’t have a sister but I didn’t bother to answer. After a while he stopped talking but I could hear him breathing through the lattice that separated the compartments. Then he said:

“Pardon, sorry. Allez. You ave to go. Stand up and I will give you absolution. Mind you, he was the one who had done all the talking and I hadn’t confessed anything. I stood up because I wanted to get out of there fast. I could see through the lattice and I couldn’t believe what I saw. He had exposed himself and was holding on to his penis. I ran out and went to the pews where we had to sit when we were finished with

confession. I looked around but no one else seemed to be upset. I knew I was not the first or the only girl who had gone to that confessional but no one seemed to be distracted. I leaned back against the seat of the pew looking around, then I felt a hard slap on my back which pitched me forward. I heard the principal's voice saying "Sit up and don't slouch." She hit so hard I almost swallowed my tongue.

I didn't tell anyone about this. I couldn't. I thought if he had done this to other girls they would have said something and the Bishop would have sent him away but he stayed and was in that same confessional for years. I tried to avoid him by going to the section where Father Benedict was but I couldn't always manage it. I would let others take my turn and then I would go to the after confession pews sometimes without having gone to confession. That way I avoided him but I also missed confession and I would worry because I would have to go to communion without having confessed. I thought I was done for, thought it was all my fault; that I had done something wrong to make him say the things he said and behave in the way he did. It had to be my fault because no one else seemed upset. A few times I got away with pretending to be sick on the first Thursday so I wouldn't have to go to school. Why didn't I tell my mother? I was blaming myself and thinking it was my fault. I thought she wouldn't believe me. I couldn't tell the nuns either because if they were so quick to slap our backs for what they called slouching I was sure they wouldn't want to hear anything like that. I wouldn't know how to approach them anyway. So I kept it all to myself and I avoided him as much as I could. I had almost forgotten about this but the recent news about the scandals in the church brought it all back. I should have said something at the time but I didn't and I thought perhaps that by not speaking up others may have had to go through what I did. That's why I stitched this. To recognise Father Benedict's goodness and it was my small way of showing up Pere Auguste. That's why he's in shadow and has a leering look. It sets him apart from Father Benedict. It's my way of getting a little revenge."

Felice leaned back in her chair and closed her eyes. Eva went and sat on the arm of her chair. She reached out and took Felice's hand.

"Are you ok, Nanfie? You look a little pale." Felice opened her eyes, sighed and closed them again.

"It's the palpitations." She put her free hand over her heart. "Telling you about this upset me all over again. Just think of how many might have been hurt because of Pere Auguste. I should have said something."

"Nanfie, you were only ten. You shouldn't blame yourself. There were probably other victims like you. You must forget it now. Did Miss Adele give you your medicine? You know you must take it every day. Did you?" Felice pointed to a side table with a small tray and a glass of water.

“It’s over there.”

Eva went across to the table to get the pills. By the time she went back to give them to Felice she had drifted off to sleep.

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“Look at this, Nanfie. What do you think?” Felice took the square of aida cloth that Eva gave her.

“You getting good at this, Miss Eva. You preparing for the neat stitching you have to do on bodies when you become a surgeon.”

Eva laughed. “I’m not even sure what I want to specialise in yet. But this stitching is relaxing. It will calm me when I get stressed.”

“Stressed my foot.” Felice sucked her teeth, making a loud steups sound. “If you take after your grandpa you ain’t going get stress.”

Eva laughed. “If I take after Grandma Martha I’ll definitely get stressed. If she were here she’d be frowning and tut tutting because you steupsed just now. If I did that she would say ‘Stop it! That’s rude!’” They laughed.

“Not even someone like Martha could make Lionel feel stress. He was laid back, cool like you’d say. And he liked to dance. That’s how we met. I went to this party and he asked me to dance and we ended up dancing together whole night. After that he was my best dancing partner and then we became life partners. After I met him no one else could interest me. We had a good life but he died too young. Denis was only five. Lionel liked fishing as much as he liked dancing. Spear fishing. I used to go with him to the beach and wait while he went diving and spear fishing. After Denis was born I couldn’t go as often and I was at home on the day he didn’t come back. It was cloudy that day and I don’t like the beach on cloudy days. I asked him not to go but he said it was snapper season and he wanted to catch a few. It’s my favourite and Lionel always tried to get them for me. He usually came home by six so we could spend time with Denis and then the evening together.

I knew something was wrong when he didn’t come home. I called his fishing partner, Ralph, but he said he hadn’t gone because he had the flu and the weather hadn’t been good. He went out to the beach where they usually fished and he called me to say there was no sign of Lionel but he found his clothes and slippers under the sea grape tree where they usually left their things. Ralph said he had alerted the coast guard right away but I knew that something bad had happened. I dressed Denis early next morning and went to the beach. Ralph was already there. A coast guard boat was out on the water a short distance from the shore and two divers were looking for him.

When they brought him up he was still clutching his spear and he looked just as if he was coming in from a swim except that a fish or something had nibbled his upper lip and there was a raw white spot of flesh. Up to today I'm still not sure what happened. He was a good swimmer. The autopsy report said he drowned but something must have happened to cause that. I don't know if they checked everything. I worried about it until one night I dreamt that we were at the beach and he came out of the sea all wet and smiling. He knelt in the sand in front of me and Denis and he said "I'm ok, don't worry." He picked Denis up and lifted him high in the air as he used to do. I woke up crying. See? I stitched this scene here – Denis laughing while Lionel lifts him high in the air. The dream seemed so real; but I had to carry on and raise Denis on my own. He grew up to be a good man, like his father. I miss both of them. Sometimes you only realise how deeply you love after the loved one is gone.

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Eva sat on a chair close to the bed. Felice slept fitfully and she opened her eyes occasionally and muttered. Eva could only make out some words if she bent close to Felice. There were moments when Felice was lucid and had snatches of conversation but these were few. Adele came into the room and handed Eva a cup of tea.

"How she doing, Miss Eva?"

"So, so, Miss Adele. Sometimes she's wide awake and we talk, but she drifts off and talks about all sorts of things. Most times I don't know what she's talking about but I know her mind must be on grandpa because she says his name often."

"She travelling, Miss Eva. That's what they call travelling. The old people say when somebody dying their spirit does travel and they seeing all sort of thing that happen in their life and other things too."

"She has trouble breathing so sometimes it's hard to make out what she says."

"I don understand how she take a turn so sudden."

"The doctor said it's the heart causing fluid to build up in her chest and her lungs. Best we can do is make sure we give her the medication and keep her comfortable. She's a little brighter today."

"Like she was waiting for you to come."

"I wish we had more time together. The month went by so quickly. I was enjoying my time with her."

"Before you come, Miss Felice push herself too hard with all that stitching. I tell she so but she didn't listen. Like she know she didn have much time and she did want

to finish the cloth she give you.”

Eva handed the teacup to Adele.

“Thanks for the tea. Maybe we can get Nanfie to drink a little broth today. You can make some light chicken broth for her?”

“Yes, I start to make it already. Call me when you ready.”

“Thanks, Miss Adele.”

Felice opened her eyes and looked at Eva who reached out and held her hand. She motioned to Adele who helped her lift Felice into a sitting position. They puffed up her pillows and propped her back against them.

“I’ll bring the soup quick, Miss Eva.” Adele hurried out of the room.”

“Lionel was here. He brought some snapper for supper. Did you see him?”

“No, Nanfie. You must have been dreaming.”

“No, no. He was here. Saw him clear as day.”

“Have a sip of water.” Eva put a straw into her grandmother’s mouth and held the glass as she sipped.”

“Enough... what’s today?”

“Thursday, Nanfie. You got sick on Tuesday. Doctor says you must rest to avoid getting palpitations.”

“The old heart tired, Eva...”

They sat in silence for a while. Felice closed her eyes. Eva pulled the blanket up under her chin and tucked her arm under it. Felice turned her head to look at Eva.

“Thursday... today is confession... If is Pere Auguste I not going...” Her voice trailed off. She closed her eyes. After a while she spoke softly with her eyes closed. “I didn’t tell you all the story...” Her voice trailed off again and Eva leaned closer to hear her. She spoke in snatches with pauses in between as she seemed to drift into deep thought. “Didn’t tell you how he opened the lattice ... when I stood up... he grabbed my hand and made me touch him... touched me too, all over... felt dirty...I ran when he let go my hand.”

“You must let this go now, Nanfie. Wasn’t your fault.” Eva patted her grandmother’s hand.

“Couldn’t confess that...lost faith...lost all... Call Fr Benedict...”

“He’s not here, Nanfie. He died a long time ago. Both of them. Try to forget. Do you want me to call Father John? He’s kind and understanding. I can ask him to hear

your confession and give you a blessing with the holy oils. May I?”

There was a long silence then Felice looked at Eva and nodded.

While Adele fed Felice some broth, Eva went to arrange for the priest to visit. He went back with her to the house and she sat outside the door while he went in, holding a small vial of oil.

“I’ll speak with her for a while to hear her confession and you can come in when I do the anointing and blessing.”

Eva witnessed her grandmother receiving the last rites and she sat at her bedside after Father John left. Felice seemed more peaceful. She had drifted off to sleep but her breathing was shallow. It was getting dark outside. Eva turned on the bedside lamp. Felice opened her eyes.

“Is late, but Lionel coming. See him down the street?”

Eva got up to close the window and draw the curtains. She went back to sit beside the bed and she pulled up the blanket to tuck it over her grandmother’s shoulders. Felice gave a deep sigh and was quiet.

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Eva and her grandmother walked slowly, stopping to examine each exhibit.

“How did you manage this?” Martha turned to look at Eva. “I never knew Felice had done so much work.”

“I asked the people I knew she had given samplers as gifts and they were happy to loan them when I explained I wanted to exhibit her work.”

“Impressive, I must say!” Martha stepped back, her back tilted at a slight angle, her grey hair in layered curls around her head. She removed her glasses, shut one eye and looked through one of the lenses with the other. She put the glasses back on, leaned forward, squinted then stood upright. “This is really remarkable, Eva. Why didn’t she do anything with all this before?”

“She was happy working them and giving them away as birthday and anniversary gifts.”

“Hmph!” Martha clicked her tongue. Eva glanced at her quickly.

“It’s a pity you two didn’t get to know each other better, Grandma. I’m sure you would have enjoyed her company and she would have created something special for you.”

“Hmm. I don’t know. Felice Fevrier kept to herself; anyway, we always moved in

different circles. I sometimes wondered whether she had any social circle at all. At least there's the piece she gave your parents for their wedding. The two hands holding white doves. Didn't you find it in the trunk?"

"Yes, it's over there." They walked along and stopped in front of another exhibit. "See? Fresh and perfect as though she stitched it yesterday."

They looked at the piece with a hand of the groom and bride each holding a white dove and the names Maria and Denis with the date of the wedding stitched in below.

"That belonged to your parents so it's yours now, Martha said.

"Can you keep it for me while I'm away? It would look good on the wall where you have the family pictures. I have a large piece she gave me and I want to take it with me. I can't take both. Let me show you the other piece. It's the main attraction of the exhibition."

They walked across the room and stopped in front of the wall which was covered almost from one end to the other with an elaborate sampler.

"This is the one she gave me."

"A tapestry. So detailed..."

"And colourful. Isn't it exquisite? This is me on graduation day." Eva pointed to the image of herself in robes, holding a scroll aloft.

"This one looks like your parents on their wedding day. Who would have thought... How did she do this?"

"Nanfie was gifted, grandma."

"This looks like two priests who were in our parish a long time ago. That's Father Benedict for sure and this one... this must be Pere Auguste." She chuckled.

"We used to call him Pere Perv. He shouldn't have been a priest at all. He was closer to a pervert. We used to avoid him and laugh at the things he used to say."

"Didn't you or anyone ever report him?"

"Ha! Who would we have reported him to? And who would have listened? They wouldn't have believed us anyhow. All of them were considered beyond reproach. We just made fun of it. Felice must have known something because the contrast between the two images is stark. They sent him away and that was good. He wasn't around by the time we got to sixth form. This last bit is fascinating. Looks like Felice herself walking away and waving goodbye."

"Yes it is. This is how she captured her death. She's smiling so she must have been happy to go. I think of Nanfie and Grandpa together somewhere; dancing and happy".

NON-
FICTION

The Horseshoe Crab

Robert Edison Sandiford

My Dad used to leave us for long hours when we went to the beach, any beach, we could be in the States or another Caribbean island. It was as if he was forever seeking a way Back Home, the sands of Barbados on other shores. We'd be on vacation, in the sea, and his body and head would disappear. Or he'd walk away, his dark back and swim trunks growing smaller and smaller against the skyline. He looked like a superhero, a black Namor for sure, in his red and blue Speedos. Mistrustful of the sunny surface world. More at home in the murkiness of the deep.

Two or three hours later, he'd return, resurface. The prodigal submariner. He'd be holding, in both hands, like an offering, sea urchins or sand dollars or unusual coloured shells.

He loved sea egg—*Tripneustes ventricosus*. A Bajan delicacy, it is illegal to harvest them out of season in the island. He was allergic to lobster and shrimp. They made him vomit wretchedly. Crab apples, too; saw it once as a seven-year-old kid: filmy, bubbly, red and white chunks in a topsy my Mom, back-rubbing, held beneath his towelled neck. But those were crab apples. If it came from the sea, and he wasn't vulnerable to it, my Dad invited intimate knowledge of it.

This time, in Wildwood—we had driven from Montreal to New Jersey, to the popular family resort on the barrier island—it was a horseshoe crab. And it was already half-dead.

The trip was a working vacation for my Dad that summer of 1984. Because the province or school board was reevaluating its grading of teachers, he had to do a makeup course at the university. Or risk losing his seniority, which meant less pay and a reduced pension. He had brought books to read and had a paper to write. Between wandering the boardwalk and learning to water ski, Mom, my sister and I gave him space to study. My Dad was pissed, though he hardly would have used that word, nor was the word then used so popularly to express a disgusted kind of anger. To his mind, *they* were telling him that his position as head of the Geography department and senior teacher wasn't good enough. *They* were telling him his two degrees and years of service weren't good enough. His master's, completed a decade-plus ago, filled a large frame on the wood-panelled wall beside the TV in our basement. *McGill University. Montreal.*

We, the Governors, Principal and Fellows. Testify that Marcus Evelyn Sandiford. Having diligently completed. Master of Education. Honours, Privileges, and Prerogatives. 8th day. June. 1973.

I always looked upon the text as if it was handwritten in Latin. For all I knew as a boy, the document may have been hung from the time of the Romans, which was part of the point of its positioning.

Dad's outrage occupied our motel room like something ancient and relentless.

He had worked overtime as a black man, first in colonial Barbados then again as an immigrant to Canada in the late 1950s, to get ahead in his profession. Trained Back Home at Erdiston college, he started out at prep schools when he came to Montreal. He began to teach at high schools once he earned his first degree in Geography. My Dad felt he shouldn't have been doing any makeup course. He almost surely felt a little embarrassed. How are such decisions made in the interest of our education system? Who makes them, and are the students any better served by staff at the end of the day? He couldn't say.

What we didn't know at the time was that there were many things my Dad would be increasingly unable to articulate. He was, at the age of 58, 59, in the early stages of Alzheimer's. This, we later understood, would have made him untypically edgy, very unlike himself. A couple years later, home from work after taking early retirement, he sometimes wondered to us if that final course of study, the readings and the writing of papers and exams, somehow overloaded his brain. Maybe, we allowed. As we learned more about the disease, we doubted it. Whatever was coming to steal my Dad's memories and rob us of his person was coming no matter how many all-nighters his gummed-up brain was spared.

He sat the final exam for the course twice. He passed with average marks. Surprisingly, that was good enough for him. Finishing top of his class or in one walk-through was no longer the goal. (It couldn't be, anyway.) Like most men his age, like most old boys on vacation, he preferred to be at the beach.

Hunting horseshoe crab.

It was a clayish brown and still had parts of its guts. He found it washed up; he must have, I never asked. It stank of the Atlantic's raw saltiness. My Dad wrapped it in newspaper and put it in a garbage bag in our trunk. We took it home. For him to paint.

He was always doing that, too: making some kind of craft, creating some kind of art, whenever there was the opportunity. Most men satisfy themselves with a T-shirt or mug made in China that says *I Was Here*, wherever that was. Not my Dad. He had to gut, scrape, clean, sanitize, dry, plaster, prime, and paint his own souvenir.

The horseshoe crab. Transformed in our Montreal basement at his laundry-room workbench, it was and still is a green and gold marvel, with brilliant blue eyes.

At the time, I was just impressed by my Dad's artistry and ingenuity: that he still had it, or managed to find it in Wildwood. He had created similar marine pieces out of shell, clay, oil paint, postcards, and other castoffs. He did a floral mural for my sister's bedroom using potato stamps of leaves, roses, poppies, and daffodils. A faux Xmas fireplace with light-up log and wallpapered bricks was his idea of a homemade decoration. All of this had been years ago, leagues from the horseshoe crab and what skills we would now have to conjure.

When Dad showed me the finished piece a week after our return home, he held it like a toy ship at its base. Smiling...all the edginess in his face smoothed and softened. The horseshoe crab's rich greens, gold and blues made me think that how the creature looked in his hand (and still looks to this day) was how it must have looked underwater. In certain light, at certain depths. It was remarkably, impossibly, restored. Given a new wholeness. So was my Dad, for the time it took him to remake the crab.

He always reminded us we are only here for a time.

When my sister's room was to be repainted during the expansion of the family home, nine years later, we told the workmen the flower mural was not to be touched. At all. After a brief explanation, and sympathetic comments about eccentric Italian relatives and their marbled homes, they understood. They taped it off and worked around it. The mural has never been painted over or altered. The horseshoe crab sits in my mother's living room display cabinet along with other family trophies. On its side, in a most complimentary white script, are the words *Wildwood NJ*. The horseshoe crab has only one flaw: a smudged line where my father's paintbrush must have slipped, or his hand grazed it before the paint had fully dried. He neither tried to mask the defect nor explain it away. He may not have even noticed it.

Imagining and Other Poems by C.M Harclyde Walcott

Review by Esther Phillips

Enigmatic. Cryptic. C. M. Harclyde’s poetic structure is one that may best be described as minimalist: just the right amount of paint on the tip of the brush, followed by the deft stroke, so that nothing other than what is intended leaks past the precise feeling. But then, so much seems intended; more than is stated in Walcott’s select shading and the deliberate slant of his thought as expressed on the page

Among the poet’s concerns are love and Nature. The element of Time, implicit in the repeated use of two simple words “now” and “back,” is the touchstone by which he addresses both concerns. Notably, love is as transitory as it is intense. Indeed love is felt more keenly with the absence of the lover or her imminent departure; the “promised prize” is often just beyond reach.

Nature, too, in one of its facets, is used to record the fleeting quality of life. The grandfather in the poem *granpa* cannot resist for too long “nature’s pull” (34). Like the late grandmother, each season moves him “a notch closer/ to the warm earth” (34). It is this sense of something fleeting that permeates many of the poet’s natural images. We’re given only glimpses of the fireflies’ flickering flame (37), the butterflies’ “ribboned tapestries” (30), the hummingbird’s flight” (38).

Walcott’s poetry, however, is at its richest where he feels safest; where his delicacy of feeling and perhaps a not so surprising sensuousness combine to produce the beautifully crafted and deeply nuanced poem, *Salt*. Language and rhythm synchronise so that the reader moves willingly:

[on] every wave
the crest and the eddies and the trough
and the flow back...

out to the “middle-blue” where time stops

and there is no sound, only
the silence of the shudder
and the suck
of the surge (23).

When we can breathe again, every sense is fully and deeply satiated.

Another passionate engagement is with Erzulie, summoned by the poet’s imagination. Here there is a headiness enhanced by the night wind, moonlight, ocean and sky (not to mention the influence of the El Dorado rum and cohiba smoke) and all that is left is for the African goddess Erzulie, in her full sensuousness, to appear. In the end, though, there is “no trace, but memory,” no one to bed, but a dream (28).

Overall, and in spite of his passionate moments, much of Walcott’s poetry gives the impression of something held back, a reluctance to give full rein to what is deeply felt. That he has the eye and sensitivity of the artist is not in question. This we see not only in his responses to the beauty of the natural world, but also in the reflective poems such as *this parliament*, in which the poet muses on the question of power with its attendant hypocrisies and often its emptiness:

...red carpets
cushion
foot falls, callous
and elegantly precise dialogue, vacuous... (54)

But is reticence a part of the poet’s style, where even mourning happens in “faint tone,” or are we observing passion under control? Does the poet believe that the sketch says what is necessary for him, since he is seeking to share only his part of what he trusts to be the wider human experience? Is he teasing us?

C.M. Walcott’s poetry reveals a poetic engagement with emotion and experience that he will undertake only on his terms. For example, his avoidance of capital letters as they are used traditionally (e.g his titles of book and poems), is noticeable. Is this some kind of modesty unwilling to attract attention to itself? For surely, this break in custom does the exact opposite.

Moreover, Walcott’s negative response to the question: “Are you a poet?” is not surprising, given the enigmatic quality of his work. There may be some self-doubt, but the assertions that follow in the same poem (*she asked if I was a poet* (57)) suggest that Walcott is very sure of his capacity for feeling, an essential component for any artist, and that the classification of himself as a poet will fit the mould that he himself chooses.

Addressing Clinical Depression Through Young Adult Fiction: Lisa Allen-Agostini Discusses her Novel *Home Home*

*Ari Alannah Hernández, José Rivera Belaval,
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and Loretta Collins Klobah*

Question (Q): Lisa, your YA novel *Home Home* (Papillote Press, 2018) tells the story of fourteen-year-old Trinidadian Kayla, who struggles with depression and anxiety, as well as with her mother’s personal and cultural inability to understand that these conditions are biological. The girl’s circumstances and health journey require that she leave her mother’s home (as well as her island) in order to obtain the type of services and loving family care that she needs. What inspired you to create such a character, and how did you inform yourself in preparation to write the book?

Lisa Allen-Agostini (LAA): The *Home Home* protagonist is based on a combination of my own experiences and the experiences of a friend of mine whose family sent her to Canada after her mental health problems resulted in a breakdown.

I’ve been a print journalist for decades and I covered mental health, writing features about suicide and depression in Trinidad and Tobago. I was diagnosed with persistent depressive disorder and social anxiety disorder in my 30s, but had experienced symptoms for most of my life, I think. I’ve always been interested in mental health as a topic, and started writing about it in newspaper columns as far back as 1995.

In Trinidad Creole the expression “home home” encapsulates the idea of a true home vs a temporary home. It’s a main question running through the story, precisely because where the character is from is not necessarily where she is most comfortable or at home.

Q: We watched your TED Talk and were impressed by your varied projects as a writer. You have delved into several genres (poetry, journalism, speculative fiction, and more). When did you become aware that you also wanted to write for young adults? Has interacting with teenagers during the writing workshops that you facilitate been one of the motivators?

LAA: My occasional work as a teacher and in writing workshops for children and teens exposes me to how young people think and see the world. I also have two daughters, now aged 25 and 18. But I really came to writing for teens through Trinidadian children’s writer and editor Joanne Johnson.

I love reading young adult literature. And since we write what we read (the GIGO principle) I suppose it’s natural that I’d be comfortable writing in the genre. But I’d never tried it until Joanne worked with Macmillan Caribbean on a series called Island Fiction. She issued a call for submissions of Caribbean speculative fiction novels for “tweens” – aged 11- 15 – and I successfully submitted a short sci-fi novel called *The Chalice Project*, which Macmillan Caribbean published in 2008. Joanne was exceptionally helpful in getting it into shape for young adult readers, particularly giving me guidance about how to write technical information for young readers and making the writing more cinematic.

Q: *Home Home* has a hopeful thread woven through it. It educates the younger generation about the important issue of mental illness, for it identifies it for what it is, another chronic condition that is manageable, like asthma, or diabetes. It is a novel that encapsulates the promise of a better future, the hope of self empowerment, and a glimpse at provisional reconciliation based on understanding. How do you foresee the novel inspiring young readers to realize they could be going through a similar situation as the protagonist and seek help? Or to understand and support their friends during a psychological crisis?

LAA: I hope the reader can see that depression and anxiety, which the protagonist is diagnosed with, are real illnesses with real treatment available. And that the conditions should be taken seriously. In the region, parents often dismiss teen mental illness as willfulness, laziness or spiritual affliction, and a mental health diagnosis is regarded with suspicion. I want teens to be able to see past our cultural biases to consider mental illness like any other medical condition that can be affected by medication, diet, exercise and lifestyle.

Q: In *Home Home*, you tackle another vital topic, homosexuality. Homosexuality is presented through likable, well-defined characters with unique personalities, interests and senses of personal style, the narrator's aunt, Jillian, and her girlfriend, Julie. In Canada, their healthy partnership is out in the open, leaving no room to doubt the nature of their relationship. At the same time, you address the expected secrecy of homosexuality in the Caribbean space, bringing to mind Rosamond S. King's description of "El secreto abierto." Have you seen a positive response to this frank representation of homosexuality from YA Caribbean readers?

LAA: I read Rosamond's work, and it is spot on regarding el secreto abierto. There is a way Trinidadians are happy to pretend that queerness doesn't exist, or to code it as a part of someone's life that is widely known but never openly spoken of. Many, if not most, queer couples operate like good friends or business partners in public, and when I do readings and it comes up, kids always recognize it as a familiar evasion. Mostly readers have been open-minded about the queer characters in *Home Home*, but in a few cases young people have been very angry when it came up in a reading, insisting that homosexuality is a sin, an aberration, not to be spoken of or encouraged in any way.

Q: In the novel, the protagonist explains her mother's inability to understand her illness by saying, "It was clinical depression, I tried to tell her, the doctors tried to tell her, Aunt Jillian tried to tell her. Depression is an illness. It had nothing to do with her. It was inside of me, like some kind of glitch in my basic programming." Some parents take it personally, seeing their child's mental illness as "deliberate bad behavior" (67)

and a commentary on their own bad parenting (44), instead of trying to understand the biological roots or other factors. Why did you decide to present these parental reactions to mental illness?

LAA: When I was a teen, in late secondary school, I took an overdose of cold medication in a suicide attempt. It made me vomit, but my mother refused to even consider taking me to the hospital and never mentioned it again. When a teen I know was hospitalized a few years ago for a similar attempt, many, a number of adults told me she was being overdramatic and that they would never have taken their child seriously if they had done the same thing.

Trying to kill yourself is not normal and should always be treated seriously, but parents here very often don't see it like that. There is such stigma around it; and it's made worse by the prevailing attitude that children are faking or looking for attention, and that parents should be firm and not "let the child have their own way". I'd say mental illness in children and teens is more commonly ignored by Caribbean parents than treated as a possibly serious condition.

Q: Is the protagonist's mental condition solely biological? Or have the other social and familial issues presented in the novel (historical, geographical, political aspects of the Caribbean or school and family life) influenced this young woman's health?

LAA: I don't know. Possibly all are influences. Though the book talks about brain chemistry as a separate thing, you're right: environment and history play a huge part in our mental health.

Q: *Home Home* is also about a daughter's relationship with her mother, a mother whose love, according to Julie, "comes out as criticism" (84). We've seen this kind of troubled mother-daughter relationship in other works of Caribbean fiction. Jamaica Kincaid, Michelle Cliff, Makeda Silvera, and Edwidge Danticat, to mention some examples, have in one way or another represented Caribbean mothers as controlling, difficult, indifferent, or sharp. Do you think this is an accurate representation of Caribbean motherhood and intergenerational relations? When writing your mother character Cynthia, did you have any other Caribbean literary mothers in mind?

LAA: Not really. As I said, aspects of the protagonist's experience are based on my own story. I had a difficult relationship with my own mother, and my "mommy issues" show up in my work quite a bit: there's a whole section of my book of poetry *Swallowing the Sky* that explores the generational relationships between my grandmother, my mother, myself and my daughters. The mother-child bond is one of the most important of human relationships and can affect all subsequent relationships we form.

But though my mother and I always seemed to be in different keys, I know people with wonderful relationships with their mothers, so it's not a universal thing in the Caribbean. Perhaps the mothers in our fiction are presented that way because they make for good conflict. Perfect moms don't make good fiction. If you're being very cynical, you could say bad mothers have birthed some good writers.

Q: In *Home Home*, the Here vs. There theme is presented as Trinidad vs. Canada, and ultimately as Caribbean vs. the Metropolis. That is Jillian's case, as she leaves Trinidad to go to school and stays, perhaps, because of the challenges of being an openly lesbian woman in her country. There's also the protagonist's situation; she is sent to Canada by the mother to recover, as well as to draw public attention away from her attempted suicide (7). The text seems to suggest that both Jillian and the protagonist have better chances of "progressing" and living improved, comfortable lives outside of the Caribbean. Would you say that the Caribbean can be a difficult space for some people in terms of their "becoming" or "progressing"?

LAA: A small place will always be cozy for some people and claustrophobic for others. For those who don't want to live *el secreto abierto*, the Caribbean can be a closet they can't wait to escape. And though they are improving, community mental health resources (in Trinidad, at least) are not easily accessed by working class people. I know some people who have sought treatment abroad they never would have sought here.

Jillian didn't leave because she was a lesbian; she left to go to university, as many, many young Caribbean people do. While she was abroad studying, she came out. In the book, she acknowledges that she does not have a dream life. And Josh's mother still struggles with mental illness even though she, a Jamaican, lives in New York. Leaving the Caribbean for the metropolis is no magic bullet to happiness.

Q: The places and spaces in the novel are very significant, and they communicate. For example, Kayla's pink girly room, Julie's clean neat house, Jillian's barbecues in the back garden, the touristy places they visit, all speak volumes. Especially in the section of the novel in which Cynthia comes to visit, and there are clear and marked contrasts between Trinidad and Edmonton, Canada. Can you tell us about how you tried to create these spaces in a way that would move the story forward and reflect the characters?

LAA: The spaces weren't consciously mapped out. I planned only a few points of the story when I started writing and wrote the whole thing over an Easter vacation when my brother, God bless him, took my kids for the holidays. The story and most of the settings just tumbled out.

I do use details to tell a story or explain a character concisely. I've been told I write cinematically and clinically; what I aim to do is show how environment and character are expressed in the details. The protagonist wouldn't have decorated her room that way. It was someone else's idea of what a teen girl's room should look like. Or, in another scene, having her go shopping at the mall and be asked to make decisions when she had explained how hard making decisions was for her. So that when she is able to choose something, the reader can see that there is a disconnect between the observable reality and her self-perception; this girl thinks she is ugly, and she is stupid and she cannot be loved. The observable reality is that she is none of those things, and quite the opposite.

I spent some time in Edmonton on an exchange programme in the mid-1990s and was housed by a lesbian couple in the suburbs. Jillian and Julie's house in *Home Home* is very much like their house. Cheri and Joanne, the couple on whom Jillian and Julie are very loosely based, also took me to Banff, although we didn't do the activities described in *Home Home*. It's a top tourist attraction in that part of Alberta and almost a required trip for visitors. I added the scene at the request of my editor at Papillote Press, publisher Polly Patullo. The manuscript was very short and she asked for a bit more at certain parts. I thought, what better way to prolong family discomfort than by sitting in a car for a four-hour drive to turn around and sit for another four hours. Really classic family awkwardness, that is.

Q: You use music as the first significant connection between Kayla and her Jamaican-Canadian-US romantic interest, Joshua. When the teenagers meet, Kayla describes Joshua's playlist as "old and romantic" as opposed to "young and urban." Why did you choose for them to find common ground in a playlist of "old and romantic" music rather than other interests? Can you say something about the chosen songs and what they evoke for you as the writer of these scenes?

LAA: The old songs mentioned are some of my own favourites – I confess I am both old and a romantic – and the newer artistes are ones my daughter and nephew, both 18 now, were listening to during my edits a couple years ago. I guess I chose music I'm familiar with.

I love music. It is one of the easiest things for people to bond over. I think when a person discovers another with the same taste in music, it's an instant connection, a point of reference that isn't just intellectual. Music is spiritual, music is biological, and the way the vibrations affect you is tangible. When you share music with someone, you share something profound. There is an intimacy in selecting music together for a party, even if it's just choosing a playlist.

Q: Kayla and her closest friend back in Trinidad, Akilah, use Skype as their main means of communication, over other social network platforms. How might the real-time, face-to-face contact with Akilah and the visual fragments of Trinidad that Kayla can see through the computer screen contribute to supporting her in the healing and recovery process that she faces?

LAA: Kids in my country don't use Skype so much these days and they don't use it in the same way they use other social media platforms with VOIP. If they have to use it, they sign on, use it, and sign off. With platforms like WhatsApp and Facebook Messenger, two popular VOIP platforms for young people in Trinidad, they are on the app all day, and communication tends to be ongoing throughout the day. Skype allows the *Home Home* protagonist to control who she talks to and when.

The calls help her. Just having supportive friends and family helps in recovery. When you're homesick seeing something from home can make a difference too, even if the sensation is bittersweet, as it is for the protagonist.

Q: When Kayla and Josh Skype Akilah, they discuss many of the social issues that exist in Trinidad. They talk about the daily murder rate, overall crime, power outages, lack of water availability and the kidnapping of girls for the sex trade. The narrator also describes to Josh how school in Trinidad is violent, with "some girls getting into fights... they stab each other over boyfriends and stuff" (63). She answers Josh's concerns with dismissive responses claiming "those schools are where the majority of kids end up in our country. It's normal..." (64). Do the statements of the fictional characters mirror the reality of Trinidad?

LAA: Yes. It sounds outrageous, but it's true. Last year in Trinidad and Tobago there were 462 murders in a population of 1.3 million. There is crime of all kinds, from political corruption to financial crime by local conglomerates to rape and robbery among schoolchildren. There are normalised scheduled widespread power outages for repairs. The violence epidemic among secondary school students is well reported in the media and has received government attention. And the majority of secondary school students do attend government schools, as opposed to the often more prestigious denominational colleges.

(To be perfectly fair, the human trafficking trends in Trinidad and Tobago are not well understood or documented, but many girls and women do go missing every year, and there are some who think they are being trafficked. Either way girls and women are not encouraged to be out alone at night. I didn't mention the ridiculously high rates of GBV-related murders of women and children. Last year 52 women were killed in such situations here.)

Q: Kayla discloses her mental health condition in a private conversation with Josh, after he casually comments that his mother suffers from depression. He also discusses with her his father's alcohol consumption and dating life. Would you consider this disclosure on her part a turning point for her in terms of recovery and personal growth?

LAA: The first time you hear someone mention a mental illness as an offhand thing, like it is a normal thing, it automatically makes you feel more comfortable discussing your own condition. It's so stigmatized in the Caribbean that the difference is electric. Yes, I'd say it was a turning point for her in her growth. Making a new friend is also good for her growth.

Q: Fatherhood is another subject that comes up various times in the novel. What would you like to say about how the novel presents fathers?

LAA: Josh's dad is a drunk, and the protagonist's dad is absent. Fathers have it hard in this book. Unfortunately, there are many kids who have similar experiences of fathers in the region. In one group I read to, I asked them to raise their hands if they lived with their dads. Fewer than half did.

Q: Referring to his mother's depression, Josh talks about how she makes things harder for herself, and for him, because she chooses not to take her medication. He also lists all of the stuff that is actually good for her, which leads to the protagonist opening up about how people in Trinidad would never understand depression. Are you trying to break this taboo by discussing the subject openly in a text for YA readers?

LAA: Definitely. I think the more people are able to talk about it, the more confident they are in seeking help where it's available. You won't fix a problem you don't consider serious. There's also a lot of isolation in mental illness, wherein people feel they are alone in what they are going through. Building community can be an important part of healing, too.

Q: When you have been able to present your novel *Home Home* in front of a YA audience, how has it been received? Have any of the YA comments caught your attention and stayed with you?

LAA: I've been on a tour of Trinidad schools co-ordinated by CODE and the Bocas Lit Fest with the Ministry of Education and the National Libraries. (CODE is a Canadian NGO that gives the annual Burt Award for Caribbean Young Adult Literature; my manuscript for *Home Home* was awarded third place in 2017.) CODE has given copies of the book to

school libraries, and one school has put *Home Home* as required reading for an English literature class. We visited 12 schools in October 2018.

Most of the groups responded positively to the book. After some readings, individuals confided that they were depressed or suicidal. I encouraged them to talk to guidance officers, teachers or other adults who could point them to resources and counselling.

A number of adult readers have sent me private messages saying they wished they had read this when they were teens. Teachers and librarians have also told me they identified with the character and her illness. There is a longstanding need to open this discussion. I'm glad my book is helping do that.

For the Sake of Brighter Tomorrows: Danielle Boodoo- Fortuné's *Doe Songs*

Review by Jennifer Rahim

Doe Songs (2018), Danielle Boodoo-Fortuné's debut collection, is not a book to be read and digested in one sitting. The poems invite rumination and stretch the reader at all levels of heart and imagination—the surest signs that one has encountered a poet of significant power—and Boodoo-Fortuné has only just begun to exercise hers. The themes are familiar in that they largely belong to the broad canvas of concerns with the labyrinthine world familial relationships, mothers and mothering, daughters and parents, the intricacies of love, the relationship to place, the natural and spirit worlds. Their treatment, however, is far from commonplace. In fact, there is an unforced originality about this poet.

Among the most powerful poems are those that engage family and love. Boodoo-Fortuné does not spare us their difficulties. She shuns romanticism and bravely confronts the sometimes harsh realities of our imperfect human garden. A mature wisdom informs lines that refrain from easy didacticism while remaining soberly engaged with human weakness and the need to garner strategies for healthy flourishing. There are, for instance, toxic familial pasts and patterns she must overcome to make her own full living possible. She writes, “In my mother’s house, blue as bruise and dry / as tinder, there are rooms / I am too tall to enter” (7). Considering her father, the fisherman’s son, in the masterful poem, “My Father as a Grouper,” she writes of “weight” that

“is too much to carry, even underwater” (17).

At the core of the collection is an intergenerational web of women stories that tell almost parabolically of the damage of dysfunctional loving that leaves a trail of disappointment, grief and brokenness as in “Book Of Nights,” “A Poem Of The World’s Last Night,” the mock “Novena For A Wounded Mother and “Last Postcard From New Grace” which opens with the sorrowful lines, “The nets drowned my mother’s great heart / long before I learned how to weep” (65). The poet, herself married and a new mother to a son, mines the traumatized family histories across entangled generational lines, as if to warn herself against walking those destructive paths, even as she seeks a vital connection. This collection is a deeply studied reflection on “hurt” that ultimately questions the nature of love. Images of “glass” “dry bones” “fire” “nets” speak doubly of the suffering carried in “buttoned-up hurricane hearts” (70), and of the unmanageable danger of women whose “love” can be like her great grandmother, Petra, an “unsheathed claw” (77).

Boodoo-Fortuné does not trade in stereotypes. The women of her family line are broken, but at the same time the poet ponders their possession of untameable, even mystical qualities, that align them with the elemental forces of earth, wind, water and light, like the supposedly “mad” great grandmother who has “a forest in her bones” (77). Foremost in these songs, which are many times laments, is the narrow divide between passion and obsession, surrender and subjugation. In such a world, “love” or its distortions can be a brutal game for women, and men alike. The poem, “A Hammer To Love With,” for instance, cryptically unravels the harsh but pragmatic maternal legacy bequeathed the poet. It cautions against naïveté and weakness, for “a heart too soft / will fail” (75). The female relation is portrayed rapaciously dragging home her catch, the hammer “between her bone sharp teeth” (74). She is as dangerous as she is vulnerable.

Women are not simply victims. They can appear as wounded hunters and insatiable lovers. There is too certain kind of beauty and strength in vulnerability which the poet touches in her moving poem, “Mother in the Morning.” Consciously unshackled from domestic work, her mother digs without gloves “not afraid of the damp, dark earth / with its shards of buried glass and crawling creatures” (55), suggesting a learnt openness to the possibility that life will wound. The poet’s personal stance, however, is to find in herself the capacity to be vulnerable without being defeated, not clad like her mother in the “colour of hurt” (8). Power in the context of male-female relations and mothering is interrogated in its many aspects by Boodoo-Fortuné’s complicated, multifarious engagement with the feminine, from which she attempts to draw life lessons.

In this age of growing concern with environmental and ecological destruction, Boodoo-Fortuné is a voice that reminds us of the interconnectedness of the cosmos,

connections that are as material as they are spiritual. Hers is sensibility is enrapt with place: land, seascapes, and their creatures. All inform the imaginative lens through which she sees and know. One is always left with the knowing that the nature is not just neighbour, but as in Wilson Harris' all "living landscapes", intelligences, life-forms—the common DNA to which we are indelibly bound. The poems navigate the unstable borders between the human and animal worlds, between reason and nature, power and vulnerability.

Her tragic but tender doe poems, for instance, move seamlessly through an engagement with the vulnerability of wildlife to destruction by human beings to the power of nature as a ready teacher as well as its own source of nemesis. In the poem, "Dream OF My Daughter As A Fawn," for instance, the likeness invoked between daughter and fawn, mother and doe, skillfully navigates the crossroads between dream and reality, animals and humans. The daughter is the fawn, the dream is the reality, so the fawn's vulnerability and strength are the daughter's: "See my hooves, mother, she whispers. / The beginnings / of my antlers. See how I am fiercely made" (13). The oneness or shared habitation of forms and spaces that is the poet's objective thereby collapsing our limited and ultimately damaging anthropocentric view of the world.

While in time Boodoo-Fortuné's concerns will expand and change, I believe that what she achieved with theme and form in this first collection poems will remain the foundation of her work. She tries, as in allegorical story-telling, to move us out of compartmentalized comparative thinking to a fresh engagement with what the image, the nature of things or what is simply there but is often beneath our seeing. This technique is perfectly rendered in the poem, "Portrait of My Father as a Grouper." A self-destructive, toxic death in life disposition is amazingly recreated. The function of "as" in the title is key. I think the usage here is more prepositional, which appeals to the character, the *is-ness* of the subject, than adverbial where the mobilization of a comparative analysts would, in my view, undermine the remarkable symbiosis the poet creates between the slovenly, deep-water dweller and the father's physical deterioration and interior paralysis: "You lie in a bed of silt and algae / wait for the lord of sunken things / to call your name and raise you home" (17).

The reader is gently weaned off any tendency to simplistically dichotomize the differences between beings/ things. Almost like the way concentrated seeing finally becomes sacramental, she attempts a poetic holding in tension of the fragile and volatile unity or totality of our being in the world. At her best, she achieves a marriage of vision and artistry, one that balances and moves unflinchingly through beauty and threat, tenderness and brutality, vulnerability and strength, brokenness and wholeness. What she is after, and these poems do not pretend to have arrived, is the human possibility of transcending all that can "undo," every "weight" that keeps one

under. Beauty, tenderness, fecundity and possibility cohabit with the inevitable arrival of threat. In “Dream Of My Daughter As A Turtle” the same life sustaining ocean can be the agent that “floods” the “just-opening mouth” (4). There are no guarantees; she knows though that the way is through.

What the reader can trust with Boodoo-Fortuné’s is her capacity to meet the page with unflinching honesty and brave perceptiveness. *Doe Songs* confront dark histories for the sake of brighter tomorrows with magical lyricism and captivating myth-making. Moreover, the canvases of these “blue” and “bruised” poems are the labour of one who has consciously chosen “only the bright things” (17), one who ritualistically blows cleansing “smoke” at the past, grateful that “A tree still lives here / somehow” (64).



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