

Bim



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BIM: Arts for the 21st Century is produced twice each year and publishes creative works, essays and critical expositions that meet the needs of the literary and artistic community. It accepts submissions that focus on literary, artistic and cultural phenomena within the Caribbean and its Diaspora. *BIM* accepts and publishes academic articles that are of high quality, but which are not too heavy with jargon to the exclusion of the wider reading public. *BIM* accepts non-academic contributions of high quality, including book and other reviews, poetry, short fiction, photographs and cartoons. In future issues, it will also accept digital art, electronic sound and digital video files, and critical comments on these. In all cases submissions will be subject to scrutiny by the editorial committee.

Manuscripts should be forwarded in double-spaced format, preferably with an accompanying electronic text file in Microsoft Word format. Endnotes are preferred. Images should, at a minimum, be 300 dpi in quality. Submissions should contain the name of the author and title of the contribution on a separate page, but the author's name should not appear on subsequent pages of the actual manuscript.

Correspondence and submissions to the publication should be sent via email to eePhillips7@hotmail.com or esther.phillips777@gmail.com

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Contributors



Virginia Archer

Virginia Archer is the pen name of Jean Mederick, who has a BEng.Hons. Degree in Civil Engineering with Architecture from the University of Leeds, England. She was born in the UK, from Saint Lucian and English parentage, but has lived most of her life on the tropical island paradise of Saint Lucia, where she resides with her teenage daughter. She has published four volumes of poetry, her first being “Tangerine Skies” and including “Somewhere In Between”, “Of Dead Romance And Papercuts” and “How To Forget To Breathe”, all available on Amazon. Follow on Instagram @virginia.archer.poetry



Judith Armitage

Judith Armitage was born in Barbados, and spent her formative years there. She left the island in early adulthood, but has always maintained links with her homeland.

Over the years the artist had the opportunity to live in several countries, and was exposed to a range of people, societies and cultures. Such experiences, combined with an acute awareness and appreciation of her own culture, honed her early promise of artistic ability into an artistic expression that is flexible and sensitive to the subject of her work. She has exhibited successfully in several art arenas both in the United Kingdom and in Barbados, and has shown works at galleries including that of The Royal Birmingham Society of Artists (RBSA) in the United Kingdom, Barbados Arts Council in Pelican Village, The Gallery of Caribbean Art in Speightstown and The Queens Park Gallery. The artist currently lives in the United Kingdom where she continues to produce her work. She plans to return to Barbados in the near future, and expects to embark on a new episode of exploration of her artistic expression.



Adrian Augier

Adrian Augier is an award-winning poet, producer, and mas’ man. He is a Caribbean Laureate of Arts and Letters and St. Lucia’s 2010 Entrepreneur of the Year. His work focuses primarily on Caribbean life, language and landscape. He is also a development economist and has received an honorary doctorate from The University of the West Indies for his contribution to regional development and culture.



Christine Barrow

Christine Barrow was born in the UK and lived in Barbados for nearly fifty years where she worked as an academic in Caribbean Social Development at The University of the West Indies. After retirement, she began writing fiction and has recently returned to the UK (Brighton). Her short stories have been published in *Bim: Arts for the 21st Century*, *The Caribbean Writer* and *Callaloo*, and a collection, *Black Dogs* and the *Colour Yellow*, was published by Peepal Tree Press in 2018.



Corrine Binnings

Corrine Binnings, a Jamaican poet and teacher, recently completed the MFA Creative Writing (Poetry) program at Florida Atlantic University (FAU). She seeks, simply, to write what the tongue finds too heavy to say and by doing so ease unspoken burdens. Her writing focuses on historical and social issues prevalent in Jamaican/Caribbean society. Corrine is currently fine tuning on her manuscript, *Residue*. She has published both Poetry and Creative Nonfiction or has work forthcoming in the *Dark River Review* journal, *Brine* and *The Caribbean Writer*, among others.



Carlyon Blackman

Carlyon Blackman’s poetry has appeared in print and online publications, among them *Pine Hills Review*, *Toe Good Journal*, *BIM: Arts for the 21st Century*, *Bamboo Talk Press*, *Susumba*, and *Poui: Cave Hill Journal of Creative Writing*. She recently received 2nd prize for a collection of poetry entitled *All Oppression is Connected* in the 23rd Frank Collymore Literary Endowment Awards in her native Barbados.



Linda Deane

Linda M. Deane is a Barbadian literary activist also known as The Summer Storyteller. She is a former journalist, an editor, and one half of the publishing and cultural forum ArtsEtc (www.artsetcbarbados.com). Her poetry and essays appear in various journals and anthologies and have won her multiple national awards including the Frank Collymore Literary Endowment and a Governor-General’s Award for Literary Excellence. Linda also writes for children, and has been delivering literacy and creative writing programmes in schools, camps and communities for over 15 years. You can find her on Instagram and as host of the podcast *A Moment with The Summer Storyteller*.



Richard Georges

Richard Georges was born in Trinidad and grew up in the British Virgin Islands. He lives and works in Tortola today. His poetry has appeared in various journals. He has published three volumes: *Make us all islands* (Shearsman Books, 2017), *Giant* (Platypus Press, 2017) and *Epiphaneia* (Outspoken press, 2019). *Epiphaneia* won the prestigious OCM Bocas poetry and overall award in 2020. In 2020, Richard Georges was selected as the first Poet Laureate of the British Virgin Islands. He was also appointed as the President of the H. Lavity Stoutt Community College, BVI.



Margaret D. Kawamuinyo Gill

Awards: India, Shankar’s International Childrens’ Poetry competition 1968; Barbados, Frank Collymore Literary Endowment Award 1998, 2nd prize 2006; Hong Kong and China, International Visiting Writer 2007 among others. Published as a performance poet since 1972. Anthologised in ‘Aftermath: the Best of Third World Poets’ among others. Books: ‘Lyric You.’ 2000, ‘Machinations of a Feminist’.



George Goddard

George Goddard is a Saint Lucian writer. In 2016 he published his first collection of poetry, “Interstice”, and is currently working on two other collections. His work has also appeared in *BIM: Arts for the 21st Century* (2020 & 2019), *Interviewing the Caribbean* (2020 & 2017), the punch magazine (2018), the *Caribbean Writer* (2017) and the *Missing Slate* (2015) among others. *Sent Lisi: Poems* and *Art of Saint Lucia* (2014) and *Roseau Valley and other poems* (2003) are two Saint Lucian anthologies which have featured his writing.



Ubaldimir Guerra

Ubaldimir Guerra was born in Belize City, Belize. He holds a Bachelor of Arts degree in English from the University of Belize and Master of Arts degree in English with a concentration in Multicultural and Transnational Literature from East Carolina University. He works as a full-time lecturer of English and literature at the University of Belize. He is currently working on a collection of poetry.

Emile Hill



Joanne C. Hillhouse

Antiguan and Barbudan writer Joanne C. Hillhouse wrote *The Boy from Willow Bend*, *Dancing Nude in the Moonlight*, *Fish Outta Water*; and *Oh Gad! Musical Youth* placed second for the Burt Award for YA Caribbean Literature in 2014 and will be published by *CaribbeanReads*. Her fiction and/or poetry have appeared in *Pepperpot: Best New Writing from the Caribbean*, *In the Black: New African Canadian Literature*, and other journals and/or anthologies. She runs the *Wadadli Pen* writing programme. For more: jhohadli.wordpress.com and wadadlipen.wordpress.com



Kendel Hippolyte

Kendel Hippolyte is a poet, playwright and director and sporadic researcher into areas of Saint Lucian and Caribbean arts and culture. His poetry has been published in journals and anthologies regionally and internationally as well as in five volumes between 1980 and 2005. His plays have been performed locally and regionally and three of his plays have been published in drama anthologies. Hippolyte was the winner of the 2013 Bocas Poetry Prize.



Jacinth Howard

Jacinth Howard originally hails from St. Vincent and the Grenadines. Her love for literature outlasted school awards, driving her to pursue it at the tertiary level. Jacinth holds a degree in Literatures in English with Education and a PhD in the same field. Her critical work focuses on speculative fiction and has been featured in the *Journal of West Indian Literature* and the *Science Fiction Research Association Review*. She also writes prose, poetry and drama. Her prose has been featured in *Intersect's* activist publication, she has workshopped poetry with the *CALLALOO* journal and in 2021 won second place in the Frank Collymore Literary Endowment Award competition. She deeply loves teaching and divides her time between Cave Hill and Beyond The Box Education. She lives in Barbados with her husband and young son.



Nicola Hunte

Nicola Hunte is a lecturer in the Literatures in English discipline at the Cave Hill campus of The University of the West Indies. With her interest in the creative arts, she serves as the editor of *POUi*, Cave Hill's journal of creative writing as well as on the Frank Collymore Literary Endowment committee for the promotion of literary arts in Barbados. She has published in the area of literary criticism on Caribbean and African American texts in *Shibboleths*, an online journal of comparative theory, and the *Journal of West Indian Literature* (JWIL). Her critical work has also touched on popular culture, specific to Barbadian expression on and offline. Her research focus includes the critical texts of Guyanese writer/theorist Wilson Harris and speculative fiction, particularly from the Caribbean and the African cultural diaspora.



Peter Laurie

Peter Laurie was educated at the universities of Oxford, West Indies and Toronto. He served for thirty years in the Barbados diplomatic service. Since retiring, he has published three books of children's fiction, a book on the Barbadian rum shop, a book on West Indies cricket, a book on Barbados (with photographer Mike Toy), a book on the street food of Barbados, a Caribbean One-pot cookbook, a Caribbean edition of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and two novels. He has also written four plays which have been produced locally as well as in St Kitts, St Lucia and Trinidad. He was awarded the Gold Crown of Merit in 2001 and the Companion of Honour in 2018.



John Robert Lee

John Robert Lee is a Saint Lucian writer. His *Collected poems 1975-2015* (2017) and *Pierrot* (2020) are published by Peepal Tree Press. Papillote Press published his *Saint Lucian writers and writing: an author index* in 2019.



Abayomi Marshall

Abayomi Marshall graduated from The St. Michael School in 2020. It was there that his love for reading and writing was nursed into a passion for literary arts. His debut into the literary landscape came at 13 years of age with the unpublished manuscript for his work ‘Nimbus 3 – A Casualty of Progress’. In spite of winning silver for this at NIFCA 2017, Abayomi has since stated that he would like to pretend this particular piece never happened. On his later writings, the young writer has stated that his intention is to inspire discomfort and attack order wherever it may lie. When asked to describe himself, Abayomi simply said “I just write sometimes lol,” but he sat at his laptop and wrote a bio in third person anyway.



Ian McDonald

Born Trinidad 1933. Lived in Guyana since 1955. Edited ‘Kyk-Over-Al’ 1983-2000. Author of ‘The Humming-Bird Tree’ (novel), four collections of poetry: ‘Mercy Ward’, ‘Essequibo’, ‘Jaffo The Calypsonian’, ‘Between Silence And Silence’ and ‘The Tramping Man’ (play). ‘Selected Poems’ published 2008 by Macmillan. He is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature. In 1997 he received the Honorary Doctorate of Letters from The University of the West Indies.



Mark McWatt

Mark McWatt is from Guyana and has been publishing poetry for more than three decades. His first book of fiction, a collection of stories entitled ‘Suspended Sentences’, was published by Peepal Tree in 2005 and has won four literary prizes, including the overall Commonwealth Writer’s Prize for best first book, 2006.



Philip Nanton

Philip Nanton is a scholarly writer and published poet. He is Honorary Research Associate at the University of Birmingham, UK. He has published widely in regional and metropolitan magazines and has performed his work at festivals in the Caribbean and internationally. His biography of Shake Keane - *Riff: The Shake Keane Story*, was published in 2020 by Papillote Press. Some of his work is on his website www.philipnanton.com



Esther Phillips

Esther Phillips gained an MFA in Creative Writing in 1999 from the University of Miami, and won the Alfred Boas Poetry Prize of the Academy of American Poets for her poetry collection/thesis. She went on to win the Frank Collymore Literary Award as well as the Governor General's Award for Literary Excellence. Her published works include Chapbook, *La Monte* (UWI), *When Ground Doves Fly* (Ian Randle Publishers) *The Stone Gatherer*, *Leaving Atlantis* and *Witness in Stone* (Peepal Tree Press.) Her poetry is published in several anthologies, regionally and internationally and her work has been recorded by the Poetry Archive, U.K. Esther Phillips is founder and director of Writers Ink Inc. as well as the Bim Literary Festival & Book Fair. She is editor of BIM: Arts for the 21st Century and producer of CBC radio programme, *What's That You're Reading?* She initiated the Bridgetown Literary Tour and was Chair of the Frank Collymore Literary Endowment Committee from 2019-2021. In March, 2018, Esther Phillips was appointed first Poet Laureate of Barbados.



Amílcar Peter Sanatan

Amílcar Peter Sanatan is a PhD. candidate in Cultural Studies at The University of the West Indies, St. Augustine Campus. His poetry has appeared in Caribbean and international literary magazines. In 2020, his creative non-fiction was shortlisted for the Johnson and Amoy Achong Prize for Caribbean Writers. For over a decade he has performed spoken word poetry and coordinated open mics in Trinidad and Tobago.



Hazel Simmons-McDonald

Hazel Simmons-McDonald is the former Pro-Vice Chancellor and Principal of The University of the West Indies Open Campus. She retired in 2014 and is a UWI Professor Emerita. Her research interests and publications include articles and book chapters on second language acquisition, vernacular literacy, language education policy, language and culture, open and distance learning and co-edited books on Creole influenced vernaculars in education. She has collaborated on writing French Creole instructional texts for use by native speakers of Antillean French Creole at Primary level. She has also published English language texts for use at secondary and tertiary levels. She writes creatively as a hobby and has published poems in journals and selected anthologies. Her short fiction has been published in *BIM* and *Poui* and she won second prize for her collection of fiction in the 2019 Frank Collymore Literary Awards.



Mervyn Taylor

Mervyn Taylor, originally from Trinidad, has been a Brooklyn resident for many years. He has taught at Bronx Community College, The New School, and in the NYC public school system. Retired from teaching, he's the author of seven full-length books of poetry, including *No Back Door*, and the recent *Country of Warm Snow*, (Shearsman Books, 2020), a Poetry Book Society Recommendation. A chapbook, *News of the Living: Corona Poems*, was published by Broadstone Books in the same year. Taylor can be heard reciting his poetry on the CD *Road Clear*, accompanied by renowned bassist David Williams. Currently, he serves on the advisory board of Slapering Hol Press, Hudson Valley, NY.



Évelyne Trouillot

Évelyne Trouillot was born in Port-au-Prince, where she resides. Her literary œuvre encompasses novels, short stories, poems, and a play. She has published four story collections, two poetry collections in French, and two in Creole. She has published six novels, *Rosalie l'infâme* (2003; 4th edition in 2019) received the Prix Soroptomist de la Romancière Francophone, *La mémoire aux abois* (2010), was awarded the 2010 Prix Carbet de la Caraïbe et du Tout Monde; recently she published *Désirée Congo* (March 2020). Trouillot's play, *Le Bleu de l'île*, awarded the Prix Beaumarchais, by Etc Caraïbe, was read dramatically at the Théâtre du Rond-Point in Paris and performed in Port-au-Prince at the 2009 Festival Quatre Chemins. She has published a book of children's stories with an accompanying CD, *L'île de Ti Jean* (2004), as well as an essay on the situation of children in Haiti, *Restituer l'enfance*. She has been an invited participant at many academic conferences and has contributed to numerous journals and periodicals in Haiti, France, and North America. Trouillot's work has been translated into English, German, Italian, Portuguese and Spanish. Her published English translations include two novels, nine short stories, and various poems.



Sarah Venable

A writer, visual artist, actor and educator, Sarah calls herself a “dot-connector.” Her poems and fiction have been published in the Cave Hill journal *Poui*, *Anansesem*, and the anthology *The Truth About Oranges*, among other places. Her poetry has received Bronze and Gold awards at NIFCA and her collection, *In the Tropic of Sweet and Sour*, won an Honourable Mention in the 2019 Frank Collymore Literary Endowment awards. She is currently working on a novella and other projects.



C. M. Harclyde Walcott

C. M. Harclyde Walcott was born in Bridgetown, Barbados. He was educated at Erdiston Model, then Modern High in Bridgetown, and York University in Toronto, Canada. Mr. Walcott has among other occupations, worked as a Theatre Director, Film-Maker and Photo-Journalist. His creative writing has appeared in “The New Voices”, “Arts Review”, “Bim”, “Poui”, “Calabash”, “Arts Etc” and “Bim: Arts for the 21st Century”. He is the author of “imagining and other poems” (pomme-cythere, Bridgetown, 2015).



Ronald A. Williams

Ronald A. Williams was born in Barbados and lives in the United States. He attended Coleridge and Parry high school where he was a track athlete. Now retired, Williams writes full time. He is the author of four novels, *Four Saints and an Angel*, *A Death in Panama*, *A Voice from the Tomb*, and *The Memoir*.

Editor's Note

One of our poets asks the poignant question: how can we write such beauty in the midst of this misery? Certainly in our present times, COVID-19 is a constant and deadly threat. We're not yet rid of the ash and greater devastation caused by the eruption of La Soufriere in St. Vincent. The hurricane season is soon upon us.

It is for all the reasons given above that we search through our inner resources and choose LOVE as a theme for this issue, in hopes that the sustaining and redemptive power of this universal force will offer some resistance against the tide of nearly overwhelming uncertainty.

As we may anticipate, this issue offers a wide spectrum of love's expressions, whether that love is for the romantic and sexual, books, cars, music, Nature or family. But as one may also expect, there are no easy answers in the treatment of this theme. Several of our poets and fiction writers expose us to the weaknesses of human love: distrust, betrayal, infidelity, the unknowability of the other or even of the self.

But the ongoing wonder of art is the writer's ability, by means of sensitivity and skill, to distill beauty out of sadness, or even tragedy; to extract for readers by way of imagery, metaphor, careful and deliberate choice of words, marriage of sound and sense, rhythm – the means by which we are able to enjoy and appreciate the feelings and experiences expressed on the page.

One would hardly find a writer who does not enjoy his/her craft. But good writing is hard work. I think we owe our writers a debt of gratitude for their commitment to capturing for us in words, one experience or another that we often recognise in some way as our own.

And we feel gratified when that writer validates that experience or feeling. For we are now part of a wider community of fellow human beings, able, hopefully, to make a little more sense of this business of living. Moreover, we are made conscious that beauty is still not only possible, but also within our reach. And so our lives and the world itself may become that much more bearable.

Esther Phillips - Editor

Bim

Bim

Red Plums and Coffee

Adrian Augier

for Linda

Our table holds its share of broken bread,
rituals old as trust, our gift of early fire.

Still, I long for rain, wild winds dancing
about the ear, even as pages of fixed light

rule our louvered windows.

The sea grape colors in this picture,
framed now into words, a gift maybe
when you awake, or to remain folded

until you hear it read aloud
at some unimportant gathering.

You will forgive my pretentious similes,
ignore the neutered nouns,

emotions in low relief, masking my distress
over our subtle distances,

hours lost, already spent, the silence
I have left unwritten between lines.

The flowering fruit bowl, with its clutch
of bruised bananas, understands.

Its green hills of mangoes endure
beside sweet knots of red plums.

We must enjoy all of these, soon,
down to their impenetrable core,

even as oranges wait
in hope of further ripening.

Lyric @ 6

Adrian Augier

Carnival Sunday. July 19, 2020

Sometimes, I wake into perfect days.
Hills green my window, see me south
to cloud-high Sociere.

West is the blue bay: Choc,
pivoting round Walcott's Island
in the lee of a land so fair

she still confounds the heart
again, each morning. Here, I am loved.
My modest work commended.

My few friends have not started to die.
And though I miss my mas', it's camp, color,
and my comrades in that phantasmal ark,

I am twice blessed this season,
by my children and their children.
In these bright, shortening hours

what more but to breathe in bristling hills,
turn west, and exhale to sparking sea.

Traces

Évelyne Trouillot

J'ai écouté l'appel de la mer
avant l'empreinte de tes mots
sur ma langue

Avant l'impact de tes yeux sur ma joue
j'ai humé la beauté de l'île
et les couleurs de la terre ont
posé des éclats d'orage sur mon front

Bien avant la brûlure de ton émoi
j'ai frôlé les feux d'un songe
le cœur ouvert sur ma peur de
ne pas voir un monde
de pain partagé et de soleil levant

J'ai vécu de jour et ai oublié la longueur des nuits

Le passé et le présent
sur la ligne infinie du temps
ne chantent-ils pas la même rengaine
sauvage vieille et envoûtante?

Bien avant toi j'ai vécu
mais depuis toi
me vient parfois
une image trop vivace
pour n'être qu'un souvenir
un air fou et doux
une trace plus belle qu'une zébrure
le bruissement
d'un bonheur presque parfait
Une exquise déchirure

Traces

Évelyne Trouillot

I had listened to the call of the sea
before the print of your words
on my tongue

Before the impact of your eyes on my cheek
I had breathed the island beauty
and the colors of the land
had put thunder slivers on my brow

Well before the burn of your love
I had grazed fires of a dream
with my heart open on my fear
never to see a world
of shared bread and rising sun

I had lived on daylight and forgotten the night's length

On the infinite timeline
don't past and present
share the same refrain
old, salvaged and enchanting?

Well before you I lived
but since you
sometimes comes to me
too vivid an image
to be just a memory
a wild and sweet melody
a trace more regal than a stripe
the rustling
of an almost perfect bliss
An exquisite tearing

Translated by Evelyne Trouillot

Love of Reading

Mervyn Taylor

I reach for the volume she
loaned me, bending corners
each time I pause.

There's love in it, and action.
Bars where humans drink,
and where freedom's taken

away. There's comfort when
the world intrudes, and a
new chapter lets the hero

come back home. The girl
who first let him touch her
is dying. He lifts her, with

the help of others, out
to the ambulance. It's a
sadness I can afford, that

of someone else's life,
ink smudged as I turn
the page. I take my time,

because it must last till
we're ready to go outside
again, when she

reminds me it's overdue.
Return it I must,
along with her love.

Building Poems

Margaret D. Gill

Tonight I feel the need
to build poems,
shape myself into words
to move mountains, words fit
to cradle
the sleeping poinsettia.
Spoken in whispers
shouted among trees
I would build
to shake and quake
the mighty Soufriere,
powder my seas from Havana
to Suriname, suspend
Magnificent Kaitour...

Tonight, let your veins in me become
celestial tools, humble carpenter
and I will build havens
for the bashful manatee
erect courageous boats
of honour
for the lost in the middle passage,
return Adewoule
to the arms of Titi

Maybe, he will return
with your blessings
this time.

Antigua, at night

Joanne Hillhouse

The sky the blue hue of spilled ink
Heavy like a blanket
Warm comfort against the mild October chill
And instead of silence
Song
The crickets
Some keeping rhythm, some carrying the melody
Every gap filled with sound
And in the distance
Dancehall
And over it all
The three-quarter moon

L Word

Abayomi Marshall

I will love you for life
I will love you until my hair is grey and stringy
And my teeth wobble in my gums
I will love you until my knees crumble to dust under my own weight
And I clasp my pallid hands over a still heart
That still beats
For you
I will love you for life
But not a minute after

I'll love you till marriage
I will wait for you at the altar
To steal you from your father
And hide you in my bosom and the crook of my shadow
I will meet you under the arches
To stop time
To freeze the tolling bells mid-swing
And suspend hard, uncooked Basmati rice in the thick, saccharine air that slides through
the spaces of your teeth and gathers in the hollowness of my cheeks
I will waltz you into a reality that I will claim for ourselves to the tune of
Two children, a boy and a girl;
The girl older so that she can bully her bother
And 3 dogs
I will love you till marriage
But not a minute after

I will love you for a month
I will enjoy the long walks on the beach
And the late night mimosas on the sand
I will love you under the moon and tide
And drown in your sea
I will give you willingly my heart in my hands
To leave it at your shore to erode under your waves
I will meet you under the cabana and count our footsteps in the sand
As they tiptoe the tide and tickle the horizon
Here at the edge all worlds
I will love you for month
But not a minute after

I will love you till Monday
I will free you from your plastic cage
To savour the taste of your candy
And rot my teeth against your powdered sugar bulwark
Slowly, I will chew and slower still I will swallow down the memory
And slick you off my fingers
One by
One
Until the last morsel of you
Disappears
Down my gullet
I will love you till Monday
But not a minute after

I will love you till the morning
I will grasp twilight in my palm
And fashion it into a sheet
I will take a cloud for a bed
I will show you stars and we will christen them together
I will meet with you, the first kiss of the silky rays of golden sunlight torn
And surrender you to the whimsy of your
dreams
Then I will leave while the morning is still young
And delete your number from my phone
I will love you till the morning
But not a minute after

I will love you for a minute;
Love you like you have never been loved before
I take from you 60 seconds and return to you a lifetime
I promise you that in that infinite slither of finite time we will call our own
That if you would have me die, I would lay down at your feet
And rend my heart from flesh to silver platter
Garnished with the shreds of my soul
I will love you for a minute
Until one minute
Turns into two,
into three
And then I will forget you
And I you will never cross the shadow of my mind
Ever again

Sock Anxiety

Linda M. Deane

But looka this thing for me, though. This child
born and named for daybreak. This lithe wire
testing her spark but wanting, still, at 17
to nuzzle her mother's neck, be up onderneat'
an armpit. This creature, beyond gazelle,
fixing to fold her overflowing self
into the plumped cushion of a lap.
"Put on my socks for me, Mumma, please!"
Infant-like plea (at odds with the proffered size nine—
same as mine!) in lieu of demand for a hug.
Any mother, half grudging, might comply.
We grab our chances to connect
any which way, these days. "These days...
I do the same for your grandmother,"
is what I say, and for a second, eyes saucer
beyond a gazelle's—but do not spill. Instead: a shrug
that brims with teenage-itis and sighs
as the dri-fit snugs over toes and heel,
heel and toes—and there, right there is the rub!

Who will do? Who. Will. Do
the same for these slowing bones?
Will she? And who for her? And hers
and they and them and theirs?
But looka this thing
we inherit, though.

I could tell you of true love, but...

Corrine Binnings

When Jenny saw Joe's big nose
and vein ridged hands, she knew the house
and farmlands he owned were worth sacrificing
any harboured thoughts of love
that survived the 18 years of tribulation
life had dished her.

Her idea of love began to fade
first when her uncle's hands parted her legs at 8
and removed the underwear her mother had bought
the Christmas before. Love weltered and shrivelled then
never returning to the tales of happily-ever-afters
her mother read to Ms. William's daughters,
whom she cared for in the house on the big hill.
Life and love stayed muddled as she grew
into her teens, where the hands that rummaged her
multiplied as village boys caught wind of the timidity
that left her vulnerable; a pawless cat
among crazed dogs.

When Jenny saw Joe's hands and the works
thereof, she knew she could live without love,
that she could settle for loving the security
that living with a man two times her age would bring.
If she were Joe's woman, no other man would
risk losing his hand to Joe's machete.
So when Joe asked her to move in and keep his house,
she didn't think long before consenting.
Three years and two children later,
Jenny is still with Joe, still without love, content
with the occasional slaps to the face
and critique of her homemaking skills.
She reasons that at least he's only one man,
and slaps that come with food and a warm bed
beneath a sound roof can be lived with
when the alternative is considered.

Last Lap

Carlyon Blackman

The odometer has finally reached zero mph;
the love of his life is out in the shed,
Da's thinking of days & nights spent gallivanting
with a tank full of gas and torque in his lead.

Last Saturday, Ma got James, my older brother
to cut and rake the nut grass in the yard. Ma declared,
*"Even though Lucky Jim's getting paid for unfinished work,
it'll look like real lawn when it's finally cleared."*

When Da's girl came home that summer evening
he took his sweet time rubbing her front and back,
said he'd gotten a hot deal on the price even if he'd
have to buy a CD player since she only played tracks.

Four of us circling felt up her hard shiny body
sporting new rims, fog lights, crushed red velvet seats,
a musical horn we tested till Da cussed us soundly
so we ogled the rearview woman jiggling her cheeks.

Right here are the nicks and sympathetic brake marks
Ma made when she was his rookie navigator,
there the spot on the door where Da rested his arm
while lis'ning 'n' whistlin' to The Duke & Joe Cocker.

It's been one whole week since the doctor's last visit,
a while now since Da's bad leg gave him the slip
but he's telling everyone before they even think of asking
his girl's not for sale or for borrowed road trips.

As he waits for his honey to take him out driving,
he checks and rechecks there's power left under the hood,
in the meantime Lucky Jim will get to make sure
her steering, suspension and battery stays good.

Ma used to say if Da could he would take her to bed,
she's the one he's cared for most of his life
for if Da had to choose between the two of his women
the car'd win hands down; she'd have to settle for wife.

The Leaving Affair

Virginia Archer

i.

my grandmother's second husband loved her.
he wasn't the serial marrying kind like my grandfather
he stayed as long as he could
until the rum she had transported in her veins from the island
liquefied between them,
the dreary drip of cold grey English skies
lost in bottles
she cradled to forget

ii

my father tells the story of arriving on a train platform
banana boat sickness still in his gut
the last vestiges of St. Lucian soil clinging to his shoes
watching her trying to find the baby she abandoned to her mother's hands
his sixteen year old eyes suddenly more mature in the knowing
of who she was
what she had become

iii

she had a love affair with a bottle
and didn't know how to beat the obsession
even dressed tight in her nurse's uniform
she did not see the irony
of administering hope
when she could not comprehend what hope was

iv

love is sometimes the story of leaving

v

and so she left
hooked up to machines
far too early
and too much in love

The Gift

Sarah Venable

was not just the mangoes
or the orchid or palms.
It was also what you left for later—
a clean shirt and a man's deodorant
standing erect in the bathroom
claiming domain.
It isn't just TV repair
or morning coffee.
It is parted curtains.
It is ease. It is time
like a slow river,
moving me in the hand
of its current.
I am floating in the moment
where I see the gift
is you.

hinged

C. M. Harclyde Walcott

it was something in the way
the gate moved on its rust reddened hinges
that though aged, still
offered a smooth, noiseless action,
that brought her smile.

though not a scientist
she somehow knew
that the finely polished inner surfaces
smoothed overtime, allowed for the gentle swing.

and reasoned that
she would not have to push too hard
to leave

Bossa Nova

Amilcar Sanatan

after João Gilberto

thirteen miles of dancing was all I had left.
Our bodies clung through chords, swaying

sonorities of the barefoot country left behind,

winds on the waterfront blew acoustic style.
I tasted your distillery breath

fading in the drum beat from Ipanema.

Kingston 8

Amilcar Sanatan

The perpetual homage to jet-lagged leaves
and bougainvillea's long temptations eventually die.
In youth, you mistake
long kisses of July rain
for something permanent.

Without knowledge of it happening,
years go by, they fade.
Summer months,
minutiae of memory.

And now, the love, for the woman
who compelled living
and not poetry,
is a shelved envelope
of photographs and retrievable negatives
of a late season.

Mountain

Esther Phillips

He said to me, “You’re a poet.
Make these days brighter.
Turn the world into glass. Give us
your seer’s eyes to see the red
bougainvillea flower again, the green
of palm trees under grey, volcanic ash
that for all its birthing from fury and fire,
reminds us of what we will become.

Call out your Muse. Now. That ancient figure
who claims to span the earth and sky
all times and seasons,
so she may counsel and inspire.”

And so, under the stained-glass windows
of The St. Michael’s Cathedral,
an Easter Sunday,
while the pipe organ stands in awed silence,
The Nicholas Brancker Band
is a study in plasticity:
hands bodies in motion
in fusion
steel-pan piano
violin guitar
trumpet trombone
drum
 saxophone

Beethoven's *Für Elise* romps
with Kitchener's *Pan in A Minor*,
Beautiful, Beautiful Barbados glides
through Bach's *Prelude in C*,

A grandmother hums
under Brancker's bass guitar:
The King of Love My Shepherd is,
Whose goodness faileth never.

And our Mahalia sings us, reggae-style,
over another mountain:

we'll walk it out
a thousand times
if need be—
we'll walk it out.

Final stanza a reflection of the song *Rise Up* by Andra Day

Backyard Bird Watching with Augustus Pablo

Ubaldimir Guerra

Yesterday he saw a
Hummingbird sitting in air
Sipping from its ixora sunshine slush
of sweetness –

Listening to “East of the River Nile”
Augustus harmonica bathed in
Rock stone sun light on the CD cover

These visions of “jah light” on his headphones
Tune his eyes and ears to
Wind of Augustus transposed on red oriole’s wings
Against willow tree

Where he imagines a poem set to
the “nature dub”
and transcribes its lines
to sail this bass odyssey home

A Prodigal's Pilgrimage to Plasticity

Ubaldimir Guerra

A prodigal depressed
his tunic stained
and torn by looming botheration
a loose string hangs from curled hairs
of his sweaty bulging stomach

Winded in a meander
he always stares
at the clouds for thirst

Misplaced in a maze
the burnt scent of
a migraine skull lingers
through a labyrinth
where he always scrapes his knees
when chanting

Prayers of the genetic codes
that tangle in the beads
and tango in the wind

These prayers, genesis of humanity's ancestry,
vibrate in sound, they wrap around
the mysteries, tangle in beads
and tango in wind

He invokes a rosary of decades
holy mothers and fathers full of grace
they dance, tangling in beads
tangoing in wind
Wandering through corridors of knuckle
these beads absorb light in each prayer
until wind secures its Solomonic knot
to a golden palatial door

This is where his dream occurs to
unmask illusions
Oh dream, the gentle sleep
Oh how it prevails over clutches of fear

It triumphs over the abyss of nothingness
from which despair is cast

It reigns over primordial darkness
from which imaginations bloom

Until his sleep dreams and awakens
to a dream that imagines its myth of
becoming mighty brain of prodigal sun

Wallflower

Mark McWatt

Our Rebecca was the perfect daughter:
A's in almost all her subjects at school,
a wonderful help around the house—
both with domestic chores and looking after
her two younger siblings. As a parent
I had no complaint; her mother worried
a little about her lack of social skills,
and we both wondered that she had only two
friends (both girls) that ever visited our home.
“Well, I guess Becky is our little wallflower”,
I said, “and that’s good enough for now.”

When she was a senior in high school
she accepted a lead role in the school play,
a bright, fast-moving drama, with music and dancing.
“She’s going to dance?” I asked; “This I’ve got to see”.
—because she’d never even been to a teenage party,
as far as I knew... But in the audience on the first
night, her parents watched in wordless wonder
as she danced across the stage: lithe
and supple were her movements—and only
a little restrained—our baby is coming out of her shell...
then, when we went again on the penultimate night,
there was even more wonder: her movements
on the stage were not only perfect, and in time
with the music, but there was also a strange abandon
and a grace that made the audience erupt with wild
applause—and all knew that the applause was for Rebecca,
and not for Adrian, the dance partner she
so beautifully eclipsed on the floor...

Before she left that Saturday for the last show,
she said she'd be late—post-performance party.
I think I heard her come home in the wee hours,
but must have drifted back to sleep—until
roughly awakened by my wife, her voice full of
anxiety in the dark: “I heard voices in her room”,
she said, “and then low and rhythmic sounds...
I eased open the door quietly, and there was Becky
In bed! Making love! With Adrian! The lead actor!”
“You sure?” I asked. “Of course I'm sure, go break it up!”
“Why? I'm happy that she's no longer the wallflower!”
“But...but...” “No buts”:

*“Now she's got the nerve to take the chance,
Let the little girl dance...”*

Isabella and the Graffiti

Mark McWatt

Sent to the corner shop
to buy empanadas and pan dulce,
Isabella, wandering home through wild city streets,
is suddenly arrested by a wall of graffiti:
the colourful glyphs reach out and trap her
and in that tangle of symbols she is wound
into a tight cocoon of memories,
like a fly in a spider's web:
“this is just the city...
this is my city”, her mind insists,
but her body is manacled
by glittering phallic symbols
and secret signatures of dread...
When she breaks free
and runs at last through her front door,
her body is the same as always,
but in that tangle of blue suggestions
there is something very different in her head...

The Morning

Ian McDonald

a good ordinary morning starting with thunder
crack of sound in the distance though the sun shone
brilliantly gold through the window by my bed
wind also poured in frangipani-tinted from the sea
in the kitchen my wife making coffee and cheese omelette
humming a song she fixed marigolds in a red pot
on the breakfast table brought in green ferns
I went out on the verandah look at the garden
glorious morning everything freshened and green
there are such times no hurt in body or mind
surrounded by small perfections a loving person near
“a set of green parrots just flew by” my wife reports
that’s a good sign they haven’t come here for months
camouflaging in the green tree’s crown caterwauling
I’ve missed them perhaps all of Nature is coming back
I wander around admiring the home we have created
over the front door George Simon’s wondrous painting
shines Essequibo Lit By The Dawn Sun
sweeping vision of red and gold cast over the great river
a small gold-coloured Correia ceramic bowl
decorated by an Amerindian universe of Gods
fell a while back broke into bright pieces ...

“I’m going to fix it today” and she will
she is orderer repairer minder carer
not much she can’t restore until the heart breaks
I place my hand gently all is well for now
on the road outside a lady sells her wares
she came walking huge basket balanced on her head
what a feat I thought what hard practice marvellous
she had for sale fresh dug tannias I love tannias
roasted and crisp I hadn’t tasted them for a long time
“we’ll have tannia cakes tonight and I’ll make a Caesar’s salad”
if all of this was not enough the grandchildren are coming
Zoey dancing in delight over everything in her life
Jacob smiling and solemn I want to discuss
his latest saying “there is beauty in not knowing”
how did that come across his mind when he heard
his parents say the earth still holds many mysteries

Resettlement

Ian McDonald

visited logies planning their resettlement
sugar workers living in unfit conditions
visit this older lady in her little shack
yes shack but she keeps it well and neat
small room and a smaller kitchen space
pillow breasts thick hair mostly grey in black
calm-eyed unagitated she smiled a lot
sorry one sweet drink to offer two of us
widowed her husband had been very good
she had a small allotment for her use elsewhere
mostly herbs she used and sold and gave away
a few chickens in a pen next door
people kind they helped she could manage life
but what we listed went beyond requirements
minded little children for people doing work
she hugged a few who now scampered around us
people said she intervened in quarrels when requested
she had a hundred remedies good reasoning as well
auntie Deygoo distress nobody she always find a way
so - she makes provision for herself
- she is happy with her lot in life
- she binds wounds and has solutions
- neighbours respect her far and wide-
she gathers little children kindly round her
put this case aside - how does one resettle love?

Simple Good Things Encountered On A Walk At Eighty-Seven Years Old

Ian McDonald

emerald leaves shining shimmering in the trees
after rain how blessed we are by colours
neighbour's hedge a blazing bank of bougainvillea
red and waving in a boisterous wind
young man whistling on a bike salutes me
wave in return hope he has a very good life
old lady kind of face walks by white hair in a bun
tot of a little girl holds her hand looking up
loving depending as at a Madonna
heart surgeon's gate pause and praise in wonder
stumble catch myself pretty agile pretty fit
stoop pick up china fragments Willow Pattern blue
make up a story for my grandson coming soon
warrior's or poet's tale which shall it be
golden evening the star-sun keeps us safe
the world will last a billion years
no one quite knows why

Moses Basket

Jacinth Howard

Kita viciously yanked her disposable mask off as she crossed the parking lot, scouting for her sister. She turned her face skyward, wincing momentarily as the pointed rays of the blazing sun poked her in the eyes. *Place hot until.* She grimaced to herself and sniffled a little as the lavender body spray riddled along her neck wafted up to her nose. Slowly, she turned to take in the panoramic view of the wide, blue airport splayed out to the East. Things were so different now from what she knew. She could hear the motor on the large *Air Canada* in the background coming to a slow. She was on home soil again. But now she was bracing for cool Argyle winds instead of the Arnos Vale gusts she remembered.

Six years gone. It had been six years since she set foot on the craft that delivered her to freedom. A small, enclosed vessel meandering on an uncertain path into the unknown. Her grandmother had set it adrift, commissioned her to Canada via Barbados at the time. Granny's steady words still pulsed through her jet lagged brain.

"Kita yuh haffu go betta yuhself. Go get d Mastas and try fu get permanent residence. Ah so me fren who does wuk ah immigration tell me. Nah try nuh funny ting me na able. Walk straight and narrow. Do the ting properly. When yuh set up good up dey come back fuh ahwe."

Well up to now me nah send fuh dem. No fault of hers. She was already trying hard to make ends meet and the COVID-19 pandemic did not make things easier. She loved living in Toronto, but it was nothing like how everybody getting on. Things were worse now that day-to-day operation oscillated between house arrest and office shifts. She only went out for groceries and tolerated the bustling swarms of disguised faces downtown Etobicoke to fill the lonely void that waited for her in the apartment. She did not want to lose the nice little actuary job that allowed her to work from home. Not after weaving her way through a challenging Finance degree over the last few years. Granny was the first to proudly announce the fruit of her labour.

"Eh heh me granpickney does wuk a big job now. Am, ah weh she say it name again? Me nah sure ah nuh. Anyway, a supm fuh do wid money." Granny rehearsed this like an anthem to everybody in New Adelphi long before Kita actually got the job.

Kita knew this because all of her Skype calls with her sister started the same way. When she pitched the *ah how Granny do?* It was met with an eyeroll and some rendition of Granny's half-true, grandiose tales centring around her granddaughter's epic achievements and ending with a braggart mantra. Granny always been ah mountain when calls came in, so Kita hardly got a chance to actually speak with her directly and find out how she was really doing. And Granny nah really want nutten to do with the Skype ting either. She say she can't hut she head wid dem young people ting. She try a thing with the WhatsApp and WhatsApp call but after she kept hanging up by accident, she say she dun wid dat.

Kita loved going to work the land with her grandmother. Yes, she spent most of the few hours together isolated on her self made banana leaf island with her legs drawn tightly up under her chin, but she followed Granny everywhere. Misha had to go man the family owned shop adjoined to their house, so she hardly ever accompanied them. On a Saturday they would wake up just as the sun climbed over the green, sloping hills when the rooster echoed its loudest song and the crickets stopped chirping. Kita would waddle into a pair of Granny's big water boots and tromp out of the house. Outside the small, agile woman waited with her head tied up, her wiry, strong arms wrapped around a large bucket and a bundled up crocus bag atop her head. They would remain in the bare, dusty yard until Mr. James' pick-up truck rattled into the neighbourhood and concluded its arrival with three swift 'toots'.

The old lady would babble with Mr. James all the way to South Rivers, leaving her young granddaughter to submerge herself in the silent wonder of the landscape. Sometimes Kita sat in the back of the truck where she could watch the clouds slither across the pale blue of the sky while the army of trees on either side tried to race them to the North. Other times Granny let her sit by the window where she craned her neck out to see whether the clouds had succeeded in outrunning the trees.

When they arrived in the heart of the emerald paradise, sequestered beside the heights of Soufriere, she would secure her banana leaf throne and watch her grandmother diligently plant, dig up, water, tend to seedlings, arrange items and harvest produce until she was tired of telling old time stories. When Granny grew weary, she would yell.

"Girl! Get up fram dey and come put dem ting here in a box. Me nah bring yuh up here to siddown whole day. Red ants mus bite yo." Back then, the girl would scramble up as quickly as her skinny, long legs would allow and rush towards Granny to grab whatever she was about to throw. She scampered down an imaginary trail, careful to dodge rocks, seedlings and random debris on her way, barely stopping short of bursting her face. They would corral all the bounty for the day and wait for Mr. James to come pick them up to take them back home.

Kita let out an aggravated sigh at the memory. She also sighed because of the sun. She was growing impatient that Misha had really left her out here to melt in it. Her sister was always late for everything. Even that she missed a little. She was glad to be back home but not under these circumstances. When she had heard that Granny may have contracted COVID-19 her heart clenched in her chest. She begged Misha to make sure that it did not become public knowledge. The last thing their family needed was for mouths to run like water spreading fear, panic and malice. She did not know how her sister discovered Granny's condition so quickly, but she was glad that she did. She was itching to find out all the details and wanting to see, touch and speak to Granny for herself. She had weighed the consequences in the balances. She would be forced into isolation at home for a while. That, she could live with since her sole purpose was coming to help take care of Granny anyway. Misha made it sound so urgent. Her nose still ached terribly from the test and her perfume and sinuses ensured that she remembered. She wasn't sure that the negative test she received was triumph enough, especially considering the uncertainty that lay ahead with the elderly woman's health.

Well watch how Moses basket come straight back ah yaad. She huffed considering that the river of her life still seemed to channel on without destination and security, even with enough money to keep on living. Her freedom was found here, with people she loved, in her treasured homeland, without the suffocating city scape and the daily hyper urban demands. Still she could do without the sunburn. Oh, and the politics, she frowned as two older men passed by locked in a heated discussion about which party to vote for this term and why. *Ah weh Misha could dey so long?* Sweat trickled down her face, skittered down her long neck and pooled in her bosom. She sucked her teeth loudly, pushing her suitcase to the side so nobody else could almost trip over it, then slung her mask back over her aching nose.

"Nikita!" came a loud high pitched squeal. In the distance she could see a slender figure sashaying towards her. She squinted at the gracefully waving arm, quite certain the gold bangles sliding up and down on it would blind her. That couldn't be Misha coming, she appeared to be struggling to balance herself in a long, flowing peach dress and her sister's gait was generally more fluid. Still, there was no denying the empress locs piled high on her regal head so it must be her. As she drew nearer Kita understood why her sister seemed clumsier. Her belly was round and protruding and her face glistened warmly.

"WAIT! So when you been gwine tell me?!" Kita stumbled backwards.

"Six years gone and not a howdy?" Misha made a face she latched onto her little sister before either could remember the rules about keeping a six foot distance or sanitizing. "Yuh come fat eh."

Kita rolled her eyes, wondering when there would be a national announcement with a new line of greeting to replace that one. “Me been ya stan up forever!”

“Me think yuh woulda sound a likklo more Canadian by now. Just a likkle bit.” Misha smiled wanly. “Sorry to tek so long. Me now come from bayside. They say it good to sap the belly.”

“You sure is not after the baby born you to sap him?” came the sceptical reply.

Misha was thoughtful for a minute but only responded with a small laugh. She was so glad to see her baby sister after such a long time although the reunion came with an unpleasant rationale. She hugged her again. Kita’s face grew a little quizzical. Her big sis was not the emotionally expressive type, although they had been apart for so long. Must be the hormones. She did not know how she could not tell over Skype that Misha was pregnant. She hid it well. Her belly was low, so it was probably a boy if old wives’ tales held truth. Unless it was that she was nearing delivery. Anyway, she would question her sister about that later. For now, she needed to address the matter at hand.

“Me glad tuh see you Mish. Yuh look the same except yuh face fat and is two ah you now instead of one. You coulda tell me I was going to be an auntie.”

“I wanted to surprise you.” Misha crossed her.

“Yeah yuh shock me ello. I’m really happy for you though. No wonder you tell me come. You must be need so much help around the house now especially now that granny not doing so good.”

Misha’s eyebrows knitted and she pursed her lips. “Yea.” she pushed her palms into her back to support it, then locked down. “Me gwine need plenty help in trute.”

“Wa hapi? Me hope nah no wutlis man is d father. He lef yuh? Is who? Tell me so me could box ‘im. Boy granny musbe really vex when she find out. Yuh know she believe in marriage before carriage, boys before books all that.” A little laugh bubbled up in Kita as she remembered Granny’s old quips. Still she knew very well that this great grand child was about to become her favourite of all. Granny moved mountains for her descendants and this one would not be any different. It was only a matter of time before she was laying him down in a basket too and whisking him off to somewhere abroad telling him to go better himself.

Kita noticed Misha’s silence when her own laugh ended its melody and was not met with equal mirth. Misha rubbed her toes on the concrete and shifted her foot back and forth. Kita shrugged. Must be the hormones. Still she chose to smile again at the thought of Granny’s delight with another baby around. “So how Granny do anyway?”

She couldn't wait to hear what her grandmother had found interest in now. Still she braced herself for the typical *she gone ah mountain* response, knowing the old woman was going up there to find some cure or usefulness, knowing that Granny would pretend that she was well and strong even when she wasn't, knowing that Granny can't keep still on a bed for more than five minutes.

Misha raised her head and looked at her sister squarely in the eyes. Kita thought she could see tears escaping down her sister's usually nonplussed face. "Nikita," her voice wobbled. "Granny gone."

Kita's face contorted, she listened again, waiting for Misha to finish the sentence with –ah mountain. "Granny gone, Kita. This morning self."

Imogene

Hazel Simmons-McDonald

1. The Fisherman

Moise sat on the rock, his fishing line trailing beneath the surface of the water. The sea was calm this morning but he had caught nothing, although he had been sitting out since four thirty. This was his favourite time to fish because the beach was usually empty. The fish would be on or just beyond the reef, foraging for an early feed. Later, he would take his rod, net and the pail with whatever he had caught and leave them under a nearby sea grape tree while he went in for a swim. A faint light was slowly creeping over the brow of the hills in the east. He heard a laugh, like a tinkle, a happy sound. He thought of the word tinkle because it was a clear sound, like that of a bell he could hear when he passed in front of the church on his way home around seven. He boasted to his friends that he had a superior body clock because without ever checking the time he always seemed to find himself in front of the church when the acolyte would be ringing the bell. He turned around to where the sound came from. A couple emerged from the stand of sea grapes lining the beach. The young woman was laughing as she ran ahead of the man. She was twirling, leaping and spinning across the sand. Moise could tell she was a dancer. The man followed with a lumbering gait. He stopped and watched her, a smile on his face.

“Such grace! I would say, grace and beauty in motion.” He applauded. She twirled, leaped, twirled again, her arms above her head, and curtsied in front of him.

“For a writer you are prone to using clichés.” She reached up, pressed her palms against his chest and turned her face up to his. He cupped her face in his hands and deliberately kissed her forehead, eyes, nose, each cheek and then her lips. “You are my never hackneyed, never overused, ever renewing cliché, so I can rediscover the unfolding wonder of who you are.” She spun away from him, laughing.

“That’s a contradiction.” She pulled off her wrap, danced to the water and dived in, her body arching above a breaking wave. He shed his clothes and followed, walking into the surf, his legs pushing against the waves. She had surfaced and was looking at him, a broad smile on her face.

“Just dive in, you won’t notice the cold then.” She scooped some water in her hands and threw it in his direction. He plunged beneath a wave and surfaced beside her, his arms held stiffly at his sides. She laughed, a prolonged tinkling that made Moise smile. They swam out together.

As Moise walked along the beach, he noticed their clothes thrown carelessly above the water line, and their shoes, slip-on sandals, set neatly side by side in front of the pile. He nodded, smiled and made his way further down the beach to have his swim.

2. The Mother

“Imogene.” her mother turned towards her from the stove. “You seem very happy these days. If I didn’t know better, I’d say you’re in love. What’s up?”

Imogene laughed.

“I’ve met someone rather nice. I met him at the creative writing workshop.”

“How’s that going? Are you finding it useful?”

“It’s great, Mother, and I’m learning new stuff. The people are interesting.”

“So who is this interesting person you’ve met? Is it someone I know?”

“I don’t think so. At least, I’ve never heard you or Dad mention him or his family.”

“So who is he?”

“He’s a writer, and a brilliant one. At least, I think so. He works for one of the local newspapers. The one you call a scandal sheet.”

“If he is one of those writing or contributing to the articles in that rag then I’m not sure how brilliant...”

“Don’t be like that, Mother. See? You’re already beginning to think badly of him. He needs a job so he works with that paper. That’s where he got the job, but he’s a novelist and he’s just finished his first novel. It’s brilliant. I read some of it.”

“I see. So you’ve been seeing each other for a while, then.”

“Only since the workshop started. He read some of his work there and because I asked so many questions, he offered to let me read some more of it. We met a few times outside the workshop.”

“You don’t know much about this person, do you? You’re so impulsive. What did you say his name is?”

“I didn’t tell you yet. It’s Grant. Grant St. Esprit.”

“Oh! I know the St. Esprits. They live at Vigie, don’t they? I sometimes see Mrs. St. Esprit in church.”

“No, Mother. His family doesn’t live there. He and his mother live in the Conway. I don’t think there’s a relationship...”

“Goodness! The Conway! That’s a slum area.”

“Well, his mother raised him on her own and he lives with her there. His dream is that his writing will make him well off so they can move out of there.”

“Well, you need to be careful, Imogene. You never can tell with these... with... with people.”

“See what I mean? I bet if I said he was from Vigie or Cap Estate you wouldn’t have a problem or said what you just said.”

“I don’t have a problem, child; and I’m just cautioning you so you don’t end up with one. You’re only seventeen. How old is this Grant, anyway?”

“He’s thirty.”

“Almost twice your age! And more experienced, I bet. You’re probably a moth to his flame. And you’re smitten.”

“You’re making a drama of this, Mother. He’s a nice person. Anyway, I feel more like a butterfly than a moth when I’m with him. He makes me laugh and I feel like dancing. Maybe I’ll take up dancing as a career. What do you think?”

“Well, you’re good at it and I know you like it. But your father will probably object. He’d say it’s a career with a short life. No sustainability.”

“Not if I become a professional and prosperous dancer. Anyway, I’m not sure, so don’t tell him anything.”

“I’ll have to mention St. Esprit if he asks what you’re up to. These days you’re rarely here when he comes home and if he asks, I won’t cover up for you.”

“There’s nothing to cover up, Mother.”

“Be careful, anyway. I hope this Grant has been granted the saintly spirit he needs to treat you well.” Imogene chuckled.

“That’s funny. You translated the good things in his name. ‘Saintly spirit’ and he does have a good spirit. One of these days I’ll bring him over to meet you and dad.”

3. The Beach

Moise cast his net. There was a school of minnows in the shallows and he could see another school of twi twi beyond the lip of the reef. If he could catch most of them he would have a good sale because the housewives always asked him about twi twi. They were the best for making fishcakes. He heard the tinkling laughter, turned around and saw the couple, arms entwined, looking at him. The girl greeted him with a musical “good morning” which he acknowledged with a nod and a wave of his hand. They left their sandals, side by side above the high water mark, where the sand was loose and blown about in eddies by the wind. They walked down the beach.

“We don’t see enough of each other since the workshop ended” he complained.

“What?” She laughed. “Didn’t we see each other just the night before last?”

“Just what I mean. It isn’t every day.” He pulled her closer to his side. “I have good news.”

“What? Tell me.”

“Remember when the workshop started Mr. Lee suggested that I send my manuscript for publication and submit it for the London Academy Fiction competition? Well... the publishers accepted it and it will be out later this year. Aaaaand, guess what? They’re offering me a contract for a second novel.”

“I’m impressed. Now you can write full time and not have to worry about ‘earning pennies’. So are you going to give up your penny job?”

“I can’t yet. Don’t know if I’ll be able to depend on income from the book. At least the offer of the advance for the next book is generous so I can work part time and spend more time writing. I haven’t heard anything yet about the competition.”

“Your mother must be happy.”

“You know her, she looked up to heaven, lifted her arms and said ‘Mèsi Bon Dy. God, you answer my prayers.’ And she went on in a paean to God in French Creole.”

“Oh, I wish I’d heard her. French Creole is musical. I’m learning it.”

“Really? Don’t you know it already?”

“No. My parents didn’t speak it to me when I was small, even though they both speak it. They switched to it when they didn’t want me to understand what they were saying.”

“You poor thing! Deprived of a fundamental part of your culture! Not to worry, I’ll speak it with you so you’ll learn faster. I’ll teach you many things.”

“Deprived? Says who? Bet you can’t do this!” She pulled away from him, twirled, and humming a local tune, she stepped delicately across the sand. “This is the La Commette, one of our folk dances. Bet you can’t do it. Who’s deprived?” She laughed. “Race you back to the cove. Last one in is deprived.” She ran down the beach. Moise looked up and smiled at the image of Imogene sprinting, curls of her afro windswept, while the man trundled behind her, some distance away. She tossed her wrap in the direction of the shoes, ran towards the sea and dived, a clean arc into the incoming wave.

4. The Father

Imogene’s father looked up when she rushed into the kitchen and sat at the table.

“Sorry I’m late. Went for an early swim.” She reached for one of the mangoes in the bowl on the table.

“I see you’re making these early morning swims a habit, Genie. It will keep you healthy.” Her father sipped his coffee and looked at her over the rim of his cup. “I notice you set off while it’s still dark. Be careful.”

“Exactly what I’ve been telling her.” Her mother chimed in. “Coming in late and going out again before the crack of dawn. Burning her candle at both ends; that’s what she’s doing.”

“It’s a long way to the beach and I like to get back before the sun’s too hot. It’s great exercise walking to the beach and swimming. See how fit I am?” She got up and spun around. Her father smiled.

“Good idea to have some company.”

“Yeah, I’m doing that. My friend Grant goes along too.” Her mother placed a plate of eggs in front of her father and sat down.

“George, I guess you’ve noticed this is a new fad. It only started when Mr. Grant-in-Aid came along.”

George paused, the fork midway to his mouth. “Does that mean you don’t approve?”

“Approve? Me? How can I approve? I’ve never met this person. All I know is that he lives in some corner of town. Imogene seems to be completely taken up with him.”

“He’s very nice, Dad. We met at the workshop and he’s a soon to be famous novelist.”

“Interesting. I’d like to meet him sometime.”

“Sure thing. He works long hours but I’m sure we can arrange something.”

“Do you know anyone from Conway, George? That’s where he lives.”

“Mildred, you know I meet people from all over in my line of work. Of course I do.”

“But do you know the St. Esprit family? From what I gather it’s a two person family. He lives with his mother.”

“Don’t think I know them. I would remember. But I’d like to meet them. I look forward to it, Genie. Gotta go, it’s getting late.” He kissed his wife’s forehead, returned his daughter’s high five and left.

“As I was saying, Imogene. You need to be careful. First of all, it isn’t seemly for a young lady to go walking to the beach with a man before it’s light. What will people think?

“Not again, Mother. Please. People aren’t waking up at that hour of the morning to spy on anyone, let alone me.”

“You never know who might be around. It’s just not proper.”

“That’s so old school, Mother. Who cares?”

“I certainly do, and I don’t want our name and your reputation dragged through the mud because of some silly flirtation. Think of your future.”

“I am. Just let it be, please? I’m sure you’ll like Grant once you meet him.”

“We’ll see. Just take care.”

“Don’t worry. Got to go.” She was up and out through the door before her mother could get another word out.

5. The Harbour

“Miss G. Nice of you to come see me. Grant not here, you know.”

“I came to see you, Miss Rose. Not Grant. He told me you were sick. How you feeling now?”

“Better, child, better. Look how much work I do already this morning.” She gestured towards the table on which there were trays of turnovers and pastry puffs with custard inside.

“You made shou-a-la-crème. Yours are the best.”

“I know you like them. Here, take one. If you like, I will show you how to make them.”

“I’d like that. Then I’ll be able to make them for Grant sometimes.”

“I sure if you make it, he will eat it.” She untied her apron and sat in the chair across from Imogene.

“This morning he leave in a hurry. I never see him so excited. He get a letter and he say he win the prize. I think he was going by you to tell you. You didn’t see him yet?”

“No, not yet. Sunday was the last day I saw him when we went to the beach. That’s when he told me you have the flu. You sure you better now?”

“Yes, child. Today I feeling good, and I happy for Grant too. These days all he talking about is leaving here. Now he going away, I will stay right here. This was my mother’s house, you know. Her spirit still here.” She turned her head and looked towards the harbour. They sat silently while Imogene nibbled around the edges of the pastry puff.

“What happen, it not tasting good?”

“I like to leave the custard in the middle for last. It’s delicious.” See the Grenville Lass coming in? Must be with people on excursion from Martinique. Is a nice view, Miss Rose. Must be nice to wake up to see this every morning.”

“Yes, is nice. I like the view. Only thing with here is when it rain a lot and the tide is high, the water does come right up in the drains and sometimes the yard does get flooded. They can fix that if they want, but is poor people living here so the government not doing nothing about it. Is only that would make me leave here. I like watching the sea and the boats coming in. Look, see the Lady Joy coming in now?”

Imogene licked custard from her fingers.

“Mmm. This shou is the best, Ms Rose.”

“Thanks, Miss G. Grant say I should open a bakery but I getting too old for that now. Mr. Amar does come and buy everything I make and sell it in his shop so I don’t have to worry. Now Grant have to go away, is not now I going open a bakery.”

“I sure he not going for long. Is just to collect his prize, not so? He’ll come back soon and help you.”

“I don’t know Ms. G. He so restless these days. He never use to complain about here before. Now nothing here good enough for him. He calling it a hell hole. My mother take good care of this house. I glad I don’t have to rent from nobody and I making a living. I don mind it but Grant keep saying we have to leave.”

“Telling tales on me, Ma?” Grant’s voice signalled his entry through the back door. “What are you telling Genie about me?” He pulled a stool next to Imogene’s and put his arm around her.

“Only the things you haven’t told me.” Imogene laughed.

“Seems like an eon since I saw you. I planned to visit you but you beat me to it.”

“I came to check on your Mom. Congrats. She gave me the good news.”

“I wanted to tell you myself and surprise you. I have to leave next week for the awards ceremony.”

“So soon. How long will you be gone for?”

“Not sure. I expect to meet with the publisher to discuss what’s possible. If I can get a part time job there, I’d like to work on the second novel and submit it before I come back.”

“That’s going to be a long haul then.”

“Don’t frown like that. It’s just an idea. I want to accelerate things so I can find Ma another place to live. This is the pits. The government won’t do anything so we have to get out under our own steam.”

“Who knows? There’s lots of talk about developing the harbour area so they might just clear this up and build a new housing complex somewhere else.

“Huh! If it’s anything like the CDCs they have in the middle of town we won’t be going there.”

“They aren’t that bad, you know. A friend of mine lives in one of the apartments. She says it’s comfortable.”

“Maybe she’s been lucky to get one on the second floor. No elevators to the third or fourth floors. All those stairs to climb! My mother wouldn’t make it halfway up. And the ground floor is a no-no. Everyone can look right into your house; no privacy. We need to find a better place.” He leaned across and squeezed his mother’s shoulder. “What you say, eh Ma? He turned to Imogene. “It would be great if I could spend some extra time up there and write the second book. What I need is a sponsor.”

Imogene frowned. “In this day and age? You mean a patron, don’t you? You’d probably have to prostitute your talent or yourself for that. Give something to get something.”

“So young and so cynical. The world’s not as bad as you make it sound, Genie.”

“You should talk! Didn’t you just condemn this world we live in here?”

“Finding a sponsor...”

“A patron.” She turned away from him and looked across the harbour.

“OK, a patron, call it what you want. That’s a different thing from trying to get out of a slum. If I had a sponsor...” He paused a moment, smiling at Imogene. “If I had a patron, I could concentrate on writing. I would do anything... anything; whatever it takes to give me the chance to get ahead. If I had to work part time here, or there it

would take me forever to write the novel. Things are difficult here. There's nothing here for writers like me. There's no future."

Imogene frowned and looked away towards the harbour. The sunlight on the water was blinding. She closed her eyes.

"How come you lookin so sad Miss G?" Rose reached across and put a hand on her arm.

"Nothing much Miss Rose; was just thinking." There was a long pause then she turned to Grant. "Next week is just two days away. You'll soon be gone."

"The sea is gloriously calm these days. I have time for another early morning swim. How about tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow is good."

6. News

"You're going to have to find something to do, Imogene. You can't sit around all day moping." Imogene turned the page of the newspaper she was reading.

"I'm checking on stuff, Mother."

"At this stage it can't be anything strenuous. You've got to take care of yourself." She glanced at Imogene over her shoulder. "Did you hear that they are going to clear the Conway and put in government offices there? They will build a new housing complex in the Cedars area and offer the homes to the people in the Conway." Imogene did not answer. Mildred turned round and looked at her. "Does Mr. Grant-in-Aid know this? You haven't mentioned him in a long while. Have you heard from him?"

"I wish you wouldn't call him that, Mother. He's probably busy trying to write his second book."

"I think the name suits him fine." Mildred turned back to what she had been doing in the sink. "It suits him just fine. He gave you a lot of aid, didn't he?"

"Mother, please. Not again."

"You need to see things as they are, Imogene. Have you told him? When is he coming back? He's been off on a jaunt for months now, and here you are, flaunting a pregnancy. How do you think we feel? I can imagine the talk around town. This is humiliating." Imogene's hand slapped the table sharply as she turned the page of the paper.

"Mother, I'm not flaunting anything. Do you think this is easy for me? The last few months have been tough. It's bad enough that he's..." Mildred interrupted.

“It’s not right, and it doesn’t look good. Did he say when he’s likely to come back? And don’t be rude, Imogene. I know you’re frustrated but you don’t have to scrape the legs of the chair on the floor like that... Imogene?” She turned around but Imogene was no longer at the table. The pages of the newspaper were fluttering in the breeze from the open window. Mildred muttered under her breath as she dried her hands and walked over to the table. She picked up the chair that had fallen and was about to close the paper when she saw the photograph and the by-line above it. *Our Boy Grant Does It*. She read the brief paragraph below the photograph. *Grant St. Esprit impressed his audience at the launch of his award winning novel. He read excerpts from it and from his second novel which, he says, is on the way. After the official ceremony and the reading, fans who purchased the novel queued to get his autograph. Here we see St. Esprit (Centre), Publisher’s Representatives, Clive Davis (Left), and Gina Martin (second left), Event Hostess and Patron, Florence Tufton (Right)*. Mildred noticed Grant’s left arm curled around Tufton’s waist. She was leaning against him, her head tilted back and she was smiling up at him. She squinted to discern whether the slight glint on his left hand was a reflection from the angle from which the shot was taken or the glint of a ring on his finger. She couldn’t tell, but she knew that the photo was the reason Imogene had left the room suddenly. She began to fold the paper but changed her mind and left it open at the page with the photograph so that George would be sure to see it when he came in.

7. The Sea

Moise sat on the rock, his fishing line trailing beneath the waves. The sea was choppy and every now and then he was splashed by the spray rising from the waves dashing against the rocks. He had caught nothing but one never knew when a school of fish might drift in towards the reef. A faint first light was slowly creeping over the brow of the hills in the east. He thought he heard laughter and he smiled in anticipation. He turned around to look at the stand of sea grapes from which they usually emerged but it was too dark there to make out anything. He turned back to his fishing. It was close to the time for low tides but the waves remained high and the surge heavy. He thought he would skip his swim because the undertow might be strong and unpredictable with the sea so choppy. It was soon light and the sky in the east was aglow with the sun, a large orange ball rising above the brow of the hills. He gathered his gear, stuffed the net and line into the pail, picked his way gingerly across the rocks and stepped on to the beach.

It was empty this morning. He walked towards the stand of sea grapes which he had named lovers’ grove because of the impression the two young lovers had made on him when they used to emerge from there every morning. It was several months since he had last seen them and he wondered what had become of them. Then he thought

he had heard her laughter above the pounding of the waves earlier but it wasn't the usual light hearted tinkle; more like a forlorn cry. He looked around expectantly as he walked along. He must have been mistaken because there was no one in sight on the beach. He noticed a wrap lying carelessly on the sand next to a pair of lady's sandals. He looked around, saw no one; then his eyes were drawn to the footprints leading from the clothes towards the sea. The waves had washed over most of them, but some were discernible in the soft loose sand where the waves had not reached. The sandals and wrap looked like those the dancing girl used to leave on the high ground before entering the water.

He paused, looked at them and the footprints then turned towards the sea. The beach was still empty but the tide had turned and the sea was now a large calm pond with low gentle waves sighing across the sand.

Left Behind

Christine Barrow

His name is not there. Jalecia huffs on her frozen fingers as she reads the eight names beside buzzers, from top down again, and from bottom back up – as if that would make his appear. This has got to be the right place – *Apartment 3, 7 Grand Avenue* was written on the back of the brown envelope inside the shoebox under her mother’s bed. Empty, though, no letter asking about her, no saying that he was coming home soon, nothing so. And the date stamped on the front was smudged.

But today’s journey has taken over two hours from Brixton, what with changing trains and walking all the way down the road, from Brighton Station to the beach with no sand, only rockstones, and everything so grey she couldn’t see where the sea ended and the sky began. She’d struggled against the wind strong enough to blast out her teeth, past the big-up statue of Queen Victoria in a long, black dress and up this avenue with a garden in the middle the size of a cane-piece and ginormous black cars lined up like for a funeral.

The name by number 3 is Annabelle Worth. Jalecia shivers – *Like he move out. Like maybe I come all this way fuh nutting.*

She backs down the five steps, gripping the icy railings that sting like boiling water. Above the black door with a shiny gold letterbox is an archway carved into white whorls, like the biggest seashells God ever made. The dark curtains on the third floor are shut and tied with tassels like guardian angels. *If he living here, grand so, no way he going wan’ to know little me.*

Under her arms itch from her too-small coat, her feet are killing her in new school shoes, her belly biting and her ears so cold they could crack and fall off, one time. But her train ticket had cost fourteen pounds and eighty-five pence– what was left of her holiday money plus three pounds she’d helped herself to from Auntie Norma’s purse. Jalecia licks salt from her lips – *Is you only chance, girl. And 3 is you lucky number.* She holds her thumb over the buzzer – *Dear Lord, let ’im be here* – and presses.

“Hello.” A woman’s voice, high-class, like an ice pick in her right ear.

Jalecia jumps but catches herself and delivers her statement, word perfect. “Please to tell Mister Clarence Cumberbatch that I have come from Barbados to see him.”

No answer. Then, “Ah, um...do hold on. I’ll come down.”

He here! All her prayers have been answered, night after night on her knees by her bed. When she was little, she’d imagined herself running to the gate as he arrived, arms open wide, swinging her round and round like he would never let go, his breath in her ear – “Jalecia, my only child.” She’d made up his face by adding Father Ryan’s smile and her friends’ fathers’ eyes full of pride at their girl-children. Her daddy looked like a brown-skin Jesus.

Lately, she’s been more wary – he stands outside, rock-still, saying nothing. One thing is for sure, though, now she will get to look at his face. And, from the way her mother looks at her, she knows that some part of hers has got to be just like his.

What had been a peeny spark against her mother’s – “I telling yuh forget he” – lit up bright as a hundred fireflies after her aunt’s invitation for Christmas. But this is not how she’s rehearsed it – it’s supposed to be him that opens the door. Jalecia hops from one foot to the other, ready to run – *wrong house, so sorry to disturb yuh* – to run back down the road. *He never try to find you.*

The door opens and there is a white lady in a long white dress with blond hair over her shoulders like sleeping beauty, only she’s barefoot with blue toenails. Her smile disappears. So does the question in her green eyes as they open wide-wide – *like she jus’ had the biggest shock ever.*

Annabelle can hardly breathe. The girl is the image of him.

They first met at the private clinic. She’d been there for a routine blood test, so dazzled by the white jacket against his dark skin that she hardly felt the needle prick. And his voice on the phone two days later was so reassuring – “Nurse Practitioner here, cholesterol, a little high, no problem, we just need another test.” It happened to be the last appointment for the day and she’d rather fancied his cool singsong, “You’ll be fine, young lady, only forty-two, call me Clarie,” as they walked along the Prom towards Grand Avenue. His limp made her want to slip her arm under his.

Annabelle grips the bannister as she follows the girl up the stairs. She opens her apartment door.

He’d slid through it and eased himself into her second armchair, making her laugh with quirky jokes about Barbadian cricketers she’d never heard of, sauntering into her kitchen to help himself to smoked salmon and Camembert, beaming over his shoulder to offer her some, igniting a pulse of love she’d never felt before as she followed him into her bedroom. It was as if she hadn’t seen him coming.

She purses her lips to slow her gasping breath, to control the piercing pain behind her eyes. The girl is watching. Annabelle has seen that quizzical look before – on his face. *How did she know he was here? Why has she come?*

Jalecia stands in the doorway of the room, bigger than her mother’s Pentecostal church hall back home. The thick brown velvet curtains are still drawn but she can see well enough. *No man ain’t in here.*

“Do give me your coat. And take a pew.” The woman takes her coat down the corridor, past two closed doors.

He got to be sleeping in one of them bedroom. She got a next one so I could come and spend time and get some o’ this good living. Jalecia squats, unlaces her shoes and takes them off. There’s a hole in the toe of one of her socks. She tucks them into her shoes and hides them behind the door. The blister on her heel has burst and hurts like a bad burn. She licks her thumb and wipes it.

Papers are scattered across the room – on the floor, on three little tables tucked inside one another, on a fluffy white sofa with cream cushions and two armchairs, one with a red blanket – the only bright thing in here. Hanging from the ceiling is a chandelier like a monster spider made of ice. On the grey stone mantelpiece is a fancy gold clock, a plant with three white flowers, a photo in a silver frame and a card with a bottle of champagne, bubbles flying out.

Jalecia looks over her shoulder, then tiptoes across the room. The flowers have such perfect little faces they don’t look real. In the photo is an old-old woman wearing lavender lace like she belongs in a history book – *With love from Granny Florence xxx* is written on it. She peeks inside the card.

*An Invitation
from
Belle and Clarie
to
Celebrate our Love*

The date is September 4th, four months ago. Jalecia clenches her fists. *How muh daddy could love this barbie doll woman? How he could love she and not me?* She feels like tearing up the card and mashing up the flowers. But there in the doorway is the woman in the long white dress.

Annabelle had arranged an intimate evening with a few friends she hadn’t kept up with since she met him. “Just a little get together, my darling.”

He said nothing but she'd already sent the invitations, maybe not a good idea. She gave him time but time got tight. That night, her head on his shoulder, hair flowing over his chest, his legs wrapped around hers, just the two of them with no world outside, it was her moment. "My dearest one, our love is ours alone, here in our own secret space. But we can share it now." He didn't move, didn't say anything. She should have shut up but gushed on, "I want to show you off. It's our anniversary – two years together!" She should have looked up and checked the expression on his face.

He didn't show up. Her phone calls were blocked. The receptionist at the clinic said that he no longer worked there. And Annabelle was not one of those needy women who pester men. She would keep her pride, bide her time.

But she'd screamed curses she didn't know she knew as she grabbed his bottle of pepper sauce from the kitchen; snatched his toothbrush and aftershave from the bathroom; yanked his mobile cord from the bedroom socket, his white jacket from the wardrobe and a single sock sticking out from under the bed. *When men leave, they should take all their damn stuff with them.* She shoved everything into a black plastic bag of betrayal, tied a knot and dumped it in the spare bedroom. *To be chucked at his smug, black face when he comes back. Who the hell does he think he is?*

But it was no bigger than one of the scatter cushions on her sofa. *Is this all that's left of us?* Annabelle sat on the floor and hugged it. She hugged the big fluffy pillow on his side of the bed, breathing in the lingering scent of the Armani Eau Pour Homme, her present for his birthday. She listened for the key he still had to click in her front door, all the while letting the love tears flow down her cheeks.

But Annabelle had work ethic stamped into her backbone. And, as a highly respected partner in a family law firm, she'd had to get on with the job – immersing herself in case files, consultations and court hearings dealing with other people's traumas and tears, so much more dire than hers and so often self-inflicted. She became as angry with herself as she had been at him. *How could I let it happen?*

Yet she'd kept the photo, the only one she had of the two of them together, cheek-to-cheek, on their first anniversary. A selfie, she'd insisted, despite his antics – ducking and waving his hands. It's in the drawer of her bedside table – she hasn't taken it out for months, proving how strong her resolve is to put him behind her. She's almost forgotten what he looks like.

But here, in her front room, is a girl staring at her through his eyes.

Stay cool, girl. You find he. Jalecia unclenches her fists.

"I'm such a messy pup." The woman scrabbles up the papers, looking like a crazy white feather fowl running round a backyard.

Yuh jus' got to hold strain. Yet, even now, Jalecia hears her mother's shout, "He gone, and doan' look at muh like that," both hands slapping the kitchen table – braps, braps. When she prayed some more, "Sweet Jesus, please to sen' my daddy back home," when she used to wait for the postman to come with a pretty pink birthday dolly that could shut its eyes and say "mama" or just a card with daisies and buttercups, it was, "In God's name, what yuh doing? Yuh going wait 'til kingdom come. Not one red cent from he." So, what he send in the envelop under you bed, she wanted to ask, but that would only make more vexation. And that was it. *She never tell me if he tall or short, if he got a big belly-laugh, if he like cricket or football, if he good at italic writing, like me – nutting.*

The woman stuffs the papers into files and piles them onto the armchair with the red blanket. "Now then, do tell me your name."

"Jalecia."

"How charming." She puts on a smile. "And how old are you?"

"Fifteen."

She nods and nods again – *like she counting out every year.*

"Goodness, where are my manners? Do take a pew." She points to the sofa.

Jalecia sits and pulls the skirt of her dress over her cold knees – the light blue church dress with a white collar. She hates its little girlishness but she's worn it specially for him. *He mussee still sleeping in she big-king bed.*

Her stomach is rumbling, her teeth still chattering and she is having her period. *And blood on this white-white sofa going be the most shameful thing ever. He going bawl me out.*

Jalecia stands. "Please to wake he up."

But is like the woman didn't hear. "What about something to drink, to warm you up?"

As Annabelle opens the kitchen door, the cat zips out and into the front room. *Shit, what if it attacks her?*

His only gift – the night he'd brought it home, it scratched her hand. It's ginger with spiteful yellow eyes and an arched back, a stray from the gutter probably. She has been meaning to ask Granny Florence to take it but somehow hasn't got around to it – maybe because she actually rather enjoys hissing at it. *But what if the girl is allergic?*

All is well. She – *what's her ridiculous name, again?* – is kneeling by the sofa and making mewing noises. The cat hasn't purred since he left but still sounds like a gurgling drain.

Back in the kitchen, Annabelle reaches into the back of a cupboard for his cocoa – *another thing he forgot to take with him.*

Clarie – a free spirit like her, he'd dovetailed perfectly into her life. She'd once had vague ideas about marriage but the demands of her career had left no time. Or, indeed, any inclination – she'd seen too many clients suffering the most awful, endless ordeals as they squabbled over divorce, wrangled over child custody and contested wills.

She and Clarie never quarrelled. Well, there was that time she'd said what fun it might be to introduce him to Granny Florence and watch the horror on her face. "Respect yuh grandmuddah," he'd shouted thumping his fists on the arms of the chair. But it was only the once. They were soulmates without the domestic baggage. He didn't expect her to cook and, when she did, was happy washing wares, as he put it. He'd spent hours on his Independence Day, showing off as he made those delightful little parcels of grated pumpkin, sweet potato and nutmeg, wrapped in foil – "because we have no banana leaves," he sang with dancing feet and a laugh from deep in his throat. Though she had sometimes wondered if she needed him more than he did her and that maybe she'd let it all happen too quickly, it was too late for doubts – she'd opened her home and her heart to him. *Blind, besotted, bewitched!*

The cocoa has dried up in the tin. Annabelle stabs it with a fork. She stabs again but it's solid. Her hands are trembling, she grips the edge of the countertop. The piercing behind her eyes has spread, her whole head is one big ache. She'd been up with case files and Chablis until after midnight. The doorbell had woken her, the Barbadian accent jolting her out of bed to throw on her white dress as she stumbled down the stairs.

He did so love her to wear it as she fussed over him at whatever time of night he came home – another emergency at the clinic – hobbling to his armchair, overdoing the limp, another of his endearing qualities. She would fix a rum and ginger with a twist of lime, just the way he liked it, and place it on the little table beside him. "I going be late fuh muh own funeral," he chuckled, drawing her onto his lap, sliding his hand up the skirt of her long white dress – his special way of loving.

As soon as the girl leaves, I'll go back to bed with a strong black coffee.

Annabelle opens a packet of Twinings Pure Peppermint Tea. *It'll have to do and she's bound to take sugar, lots of it, like he did.* The kettle screeches to boiling.

Her head is pounding. She'd known it was more about sex but fooled herself into thinking that her subtle displays of intimacy with caring and sharing and trust would guide him to real love. *How could I have been so utterly naïve?*

Forget him. Annabelle slaps cold water from the kitchen tap onto her forehead.

Biscuits, bound to be hungry. She reaches for the festive tin embossed with an image of the virgin Mary and baby Jesus – Granny Florence's latest guilt-trip gift. She puts the teapot onto a tray with a matching china cup and saucer, bowl of sugar cubes with tongs and plate of bourbon biscuits. She's half listening for her front door to slam but the girl has come for a reason. *What does she want?*

She is still by the sofa. The cat is licking her fingers. *What will I tell her? And how?*

The files on the armchair remind Annabelle that she's coped with paternity suits without so much as a blink – fathers disclaiming, scratching their heads at DNA proof, in denial even after they've met their children, refusing to see any resemblance. It's the younger ones that have tantrums in her office, the teenagers chew thumbnails and stare at the floor with sullen faces.

She glides towards the nest of three tables, lifts out the smallest with practiced ease and rests the tray on top. "Do help yourself."

"What its name?" the girl asks without looking up.

"Annabelle Worth. Oh, silly me, you already know that from the buzzer."

"I meaning the cat." She bites her lip as if she's holding back a laugh.

Exactly like him when he teased. "Oh, well, it doesn't actually have a name. It was found, abandoned..." Annabelle clamps her teeth.

But it's as if the girl – *Jalecia, that's it* – hasn't heard. Annabelle sits on the armchair, the one without the red throw, and curls her hair behind her ear. *The sooner children face the truth the better and this girl is mature enough to cope.* She looks down to gather her words. The varnish on her big toenail is chipped. She tucks it under her dress.

Annabelle clears her throat. "My dear, there is no easy way to say this. He left and I don't know where he is."

Jalecia's brow puckers, just the way his did.

Annabelle ties her hair into a knot at the nape of her neck. How could I be so abrupt? This is his child, here in my home, not one of my cases.

Jalecia gets up from her knees.

Annabelle grips the arms of the chair. *I can't let her go like this.*

Jalecia is still frowning. "The toilet please, Miss."

"The loo, of course. On the left, at the end of the corridor."

Jalecia grabs her coat and locks the bathroom door behind her. She takes a new pad from one of the pockets and replaces the soiled one which she rolls up in layers of fragrant toilet paper – *like she spray on scent, duh*. From the other pocket she removes the squashed remains of a cheese cutter and stuffs it into her mouth. She washes grease from her hands. There's only one toothbrush – no Lifebuoy soap, no shaving cream, no cologne. *The woman lie, though. She still got the invitation. He here some place, sleeping.*

She opens one of the bedroom doors – *big bed but nuhbody in it*. She sneaks in and eases open the wardrobe – *no man clothes hanging in there*.

She opens the other bedroom door but there's just an empty single bed, and a black plastic bag in the middle of the floor. *Mussee got in she dirty clothes. Bes' get back in the bathroom, fast-fast.*

Jalecia perches on the edge of the bath. She could sit here as long as she likes – *nuhbody banging on the door and harassing me like Mama wid she "what you doing in there?"* She reaches for the body lotion, lathers her hands and rubs some onto her chapped lips – *it smelling sweet, like Bico vanilla ice cream.*

Maybe he gone fuh the newspaper. She will stay right here until he finds her. But the cat starts scratching at the door and screeing loud-loud.

Annabelle paces in front of the mantelpiece. She has kept the invitation to remind herself what a cad he is. He will have to face her – she will confront him with her arms folded and not a word. It'll be like the sessions she organises at work for perpetrators to meet survivors, to confess their cruelty and feel remorse.

He'd never spoken about the future but then, she'd never pressed – that was not how they were. He never mentioned his past either. When the West Indies team lost again and she'd pondered out loud whether he played cricket at school and maybe got hit by the ball and was that why he limped, he just nodded. She'd wondered about affairs in his past, as any woman would. At his age, fifty-and-some so he said, and with his sexy charm there must have been others, probably lots – but it would have been beneath her to ask. And somehow, the mystery had made him more exotic. *But a daughter – he never told me, not a word, the bastard.*

Annabelle touches one of the orchid flowers with her little finger and prods the potting mix. “My beauties,” she whispers, “I will spray you later.”

I should, at least, give her something of his. Hardly the cocoa tin. Maybe the red throw? It’s cashmere, another of her gifts. But he’d never owned it, never even said thank you, never put it over his shoulders as if it might suffocate him.

Annabelle holds her head in both hands. She needs a painkiller but they’re in the cabinet in the bathroom. *What’s taking the girl so long?*

Her coat has gone. Annabelle gapes at the empty peg at the end of the corridor. She walks to the front window and lifts the edge of the curtains, expecting to see Jalecia scampering down the road, shoelaces trailing. But there’s no sign of her.

Annabelle slumps onto the sofa. *I could have told her that she has his forehead, the sparkle in his eyes, his sense of humour, that, after my long days in court, he would massage my shoulders with coconut oil – no, maybe not.*

I should have told her she’s not like him – that she is brave, not afraid of the truth.

How could he? Bad enough leaving me but his own child?

She will take the tea tray back into the kitchen and make that coffee. But the cat screeches, the bathroom door clicks open and her thoughts shatter.

The clock on the mantelpiece chimes three. Aunty Norma said she’d be back at six from her revival meeting and Jalecia had promised to stan’ home and keep safe. She shoves her arms into her coat sleeves but the blister on her heel is biting worse than ants, centipede, all two both. *How I going get back on muh shoe?*

“Oh, poor you, that must be so sore,” the woman says. “I’ll get a plaster.”

A blessed silence fills the room. *Like this crazy woman wid she pew and loo and she poor you doan’ never shut up she mout’, and doan never stop studying me – like I drop down from the sky. Plaster, then I out and gone.*

Jalecia sits on the sofa and runs her hand over the white fur. She pours tea into the little white cup with a golden rim and handle, adds a lump of sugar and stirs. She sips with her little finger up. The mint flavour is like fresh air in this stuffy dark room.

She is thinking about slipping the pretty-pretty cup into her coat pocket when the woman returns and sits on the sofa. “Right, let’s get you patched up, young lady.” Her complexion is like her teacup, so clear you could see through but the blue varnish on her toe has a big chip. *So, this perfec’ lady ent suh perfec’.*

She dabs the blister with cotton wool and spreads on white cream stinking like Pine-Sol. *She got to be smelling she lotion on muh hand and maybe she toilet paper in my pocket. Whadever, I doan' give a pang what the woman thinking.*

She peels off the back of the pink-pink plaster and holds it up. "Especially for blisters."

Yeah, like I is a idiot, come from the bush, doan' know nutting.

The woman smooths on the plaster, stroking her foot and humming a tune that Jalecia knows from ever since though she can't seem to find the words. There's a warm fullness in her belly, the cat curls its tail around her ankles and the room is like a sea-bath in the sun, now glimmering behind the curtains. She is dissolving like the sugar lump she'd held between the tongs and dipped into the tea, melting from hard white to soft brown.

Jalecia's eyes flicker open. She's got to go, now-now – *Aunty Norma going be mad, blue vex*. But the woman is holding her foot and she's been kind. It would be bad manners to leave, just so. She points, bold-faced, to the photo on the mantelpiece. "That is yuh grandmother."

The woman sighs. "I've...I haven't always been kind to her."

"She raise you?"

"Partly, yes. Her dream was for me to walk down the aisle in a white lace dress with a long trailing veil."

"So she could be a great grandma?"

"That, too." The woman carries on, like she's talking to herself, about how her grandmother polished her with ballet and violin lessons and then dropped remarks about old maids and flowers lining up against a wall. "She arranged tedious soirees with eligible young men, all public school and peaky white..." She stops. "Oh, sorry, I didn't mean..."

Jalecia shrugs. "No prob."

"Well, after the last suitor left, it was Christmas Eve four years ago, she threw the canapes into the bin, her hands up in the air. He happened to be an expert in inheritance tax." The woman actually snorts. "Why am I telling you all this?"

"Is awright. I doan mind."

"Maybe I should have listened to her." She lifts the hem of her long white dress and pats the corners of her eyes.

She telling the truth. He ent here. He gone and lef she, too.

Jalecia reaches her hand to touch the woman's hunched up shoulders but pulls back. "Grandmas, them like them cyan understand wha' going on but still loving yuh real bad. Sometime better than yuh own mother."

How could someone so young know exactly what to say? Annabelle squeezes the girl's foot, so gently as if it's one of Granny Florence's Royal Doulton figurines.

Jalecia's hands are clasped together as if she's praying. "You got a photo o' he?"

In the bathroom, Annabelle swallows two Panadol. In her bedroom, she holds up the photo and moves it from left to right but his eyes never meet hers, just squint over her shoulder. What she'd seen as a smile now looks like a condescending smirk. She reaches into the drawer for her nail scissors and snips herself out, the blades curving between their cheeks without a nick. As her half drops onto the floor, she expects tears to well up but there's nothing – just a giddy light headedness. And a laugh that wants to burst out as she suppresses the urge to cut his throat.

Annabelle hands Jalecia the photo. "You have his forehead. And his eyes. He used to say mine were like the cat's."

Jalecia has been nibbling cream from the centre of a bourbon biscuit. She wipes chocolate from the photo with her coat.

Annabelle hides a smile behind her hand. *Still so young – too young to make a legal claim to contact him. I could help her with that.*

Jalecia tilts her head to one side and peers at the photo.

Annabelle stands by the mantelpiece. *I could tell her that I pretty much grew up without my father. Not the same as not even knowing what your father looks like, though, not the same at all.*

Jalecia is so perfectly still – no tremble in her hands, not even a twitch in the corner of her mouth.

Annabelle's heart pumps in her ears but her headache has eased. *I should tell her that he never belonged to me.*

Jalecia, too, moves the photo from left to right.

Annabelle can bear it no longer. *Oh, this dear, dear child.* She takes a step forward. "If you give me your phone number, I can try..."

Jalecia shakes her head. “Thank yuh fuh showing me, Miss Annabelle. And sorry 'bout the chocolate.”

“Don’t worry, it’s only a....”

“I doan’ look nutting like he.”

“But still, you keep it.”

Jalecia puts the photo on the sofa, face down. “Nah, he ent coming back.”

She has lived with the truth of him all her life.

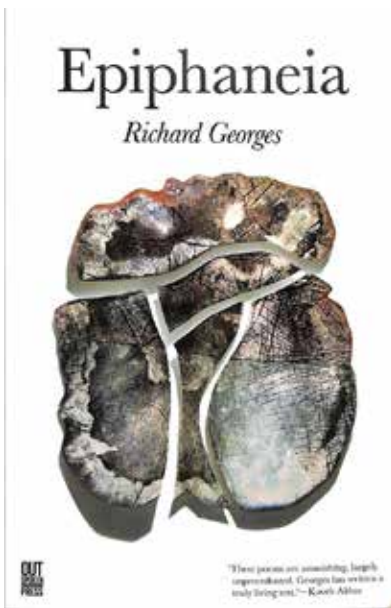
“Yuh could stick back in yuhself.” Jalecia grins.

Annabelle laughs, her mouth wide open. She strides to the window, takes hold of the curtains and heaves them aside. Her arms are strong, her heart is free.

Sunshine streams in, lighting up the room, making rainbows dance on the chandelier.

Epiphaneia and the poetry of Richard Georges An interview

John Robert Lee



Epiphaneia by Richard Georges
Outspoken Press, 2019

John Robert Lee (JRL): You were born in Trinidad with its rich literary tradition. You grew up in the British Virgin Islands with not as rich a tradition. What have been the influences that led you into writing, and poetry at that? And related to that, given a certain distinctive style in your published work, who have been your literary influences?

Richard Georges (RG): What I would say is that there is actually a longstanding tradition of writing here in the BVI, but not one that has often entered the Caribbean conversation, much less its canon. I have been able to discover Virgin Islander poets from almost every post-Depression era decade, but perhaps I have been privileged to be able to access greater opportunities than my Virgin Islander forbears.

That being said, I came to writing quite early in my development, thanks in part to my grandfather's habit of pressing books into my hands and the value of reading being reinforced

regularly by my parents. I started in primary school writing my own stories and was blessed with a succession of supportive teachers into secondary school and college.

As for my literary influences, those run as widely as I have read. From the usual names that come to the fore in the region, the Romantics to the Imagists, modern Americans, and of course the range of contemporary poets writing now. More specifically, if I had to list the poets who had the most impact on the way I think about writing, I would look towards Hayden, Brand, Brathwaite, Lorde, Walcott, Boland, Heaney, Lowell, Sexton etc etc.

JRL: *Make us all islands*, your first book, published with Shearsman Books in 2017, made the short list of the Forward prize. It seems in so many poems a memorial-meditation on the African ancestors who arrived in the Virgin Islands, those lost at sea in the slave trade, slave ships and shipwrecks, middle passage trauma, burial grounds, and always the sea, its beaches and surf with its fishermen; inland, the farmers and cane cutters. Small island epiphanies really, traditional ways, domesticities. Island history and life closely observed, yet with a kind of nuanced distance. What brought you to this kind of focus, this probing into that history at its most personal and beached (as it were)? What encouraged the mandate you seem to set yourself in *Griot*: “*Every story needs a teller to kindle it, /to keep it burning through light and dark, smouldering...*”?

RG: My impulse was really borne out of a desire to amplify the quieter registers of the Caribbean experience exemplified by the fraught history and memories located here in the British Virgin Islands. Those stories occupy a fragile and precarious space, and my work in my estimation was to buttress them, to root them somehow by writing them down. I have a distinct fear of those sort of things getting washed away or buried by everything else that competes for our attentions these days. I guess that poem spoke both to the voice in the collection and to me personally, an admonishment to take up that mantle – that responsibility.

This is something I find at the heart of my writing practice, an aching obligation to write of, about, from, and into this space that is so often forgotten. It was largely ignored by the British during the plantocracy, and is largely ignored now. So this is a story of a people in a small place who have had to build themselves up without the infrastructure or the institutions they should have had. It is largely a story of resilience, at times one of joy, at times one of deep grief. But it is a story deserving of being told.

JRL: In 2017, you published *Giant* with Platypus Press. There you have extended your observations to the mythological, contemplations of the nature and purpose of poetry – “*what else is poetry/except a drunken faltering through the darkness/* - domesticities even under the threat of storms, always near “*the echoing surf and a nameless ocean*”, the presence still of the colonial enterprise in the British Virgin Islands. I think Ishion

Hutchinson put his finger on something when he wrote that your poems here were “*at once elusive and grounded*.” That quality is certainly there. By the time of *Giant*, are you searching further for forms and themes, interested in more experimentation? The epigraphs and their authors seem to point to a wide reading of (unexpected) sources. How have these – Rimbaud, Mary Oliver, Shelley, Robert Lowell – helped to shape your own poetic visioning? As a Caribbean poet?

RG: I spent the better part of five years working on my debut, and that book was utterly immersed in histories and the role of the sea in those histories. Even the last, more personal section of that book really focused on connecting me back through the sea to the histories explored in the earlier sections. *Giant*, on the other hand, was either a departure or a progression in both form and subject. The sea still lingers as a force, but the art of poetry itself is a character as evidenced by the wide range of epigraphs of dead poets and tributes to living ones.

At the time, I was devouring books and collections and reading very widely. The premise of the collection I should say is the elevation of the mundane and the ordinary to the platform of the grandiose. So while those poets all had something to say about giants or ‘bigness’ – the three sections follow epigraphs from Shakespeare, Shelley, and Rimbaud. Those men are not there blind or unchallenged, I wanted to place them there to juxtapose them against ideas and images that are often considered small or insignificant. The poem that follows the Shakespeare epigraph begins by imagining the passage of the Moko from West Africa to the archipelago. Elsewhere I elevate the various figures from history or my personal life, mythologies, the natural world, the often unspoken and uncounted histories of small places.

Shakespeare and Shelley were inescapable as a student of literature. Shakespeare especially is a looming figure who we, Caribbean writers, often are compelled to respond to – I’m thinking here especially of Brathwaite and the many ways he spars with *The Tempest*. As I think of it, it’s not just a Caribbean compulsion, as my friend Preti Taneja picks up the baton via Lear in her novel *We That Are Young*. So, as far as my own visioning or construction as a poet, aside from the inherited forms and outside of the Caribbean context, I owe more to the Olivers and Lowells than to the Elizabethans and the Romantics. I think of contemporary poets who have a similar commitment to forms like the sonnet and pantoum – Evie Shockley, Natasha Trethewey, Tyehimba Jess and others – while imbuing them with the language and landscapes of their own experiences and histories as having more substantive influence on my work.

JRL: *Epiphaneia* (Outspoken Press, 2019) beat out some strong competition, in all categories, to win the OCM Bocas overall award in 2020. You want to venture an opinion as to why this slim volume had such an effect? Was it speaking to the particular

historical moment, filled with so much catastrophe, in which we all find ourselves? Even while it does not speak with flaming, revolutionary rhetoric?

RG: I honestly don't know the answer to this question and I'm hesitant to guess. I can tell you that it was an immense honour on my part to have been listed with so many, not just talented, but objectively important writers to Caribbean letters.

For *Epiphaneia*, I was more concerned about capturing the images of the landscape and the stories of the people here after the storm. It was very important to me that whatever I wrote captured not just despair and horror but the little delights and wonders as well. As elemental an experience as surviving the storm was, the language could not be competing on a similar register, it had to be contemplative I think, in order to be an effective portrait.

JRL: By *Epiphaneia*, close readers of your work can say there is a Richard Georges' voice and style. "*Elusive and grounded*" to reference Ishion Hutchinson again. Allusive also. I think the poems that respond directly to the effects of Hurricane Irma are among the strongest, in a deep, profound way, among the poems. "*An inventory for survival*" indeed. The poems seem a literary calligraphy, fine-line sketches, soft-tender without maudling sentimentality. The epiphanic, revelatory quality is the guiding thematic line in the midst of the after storm horror: "*I've begun to learn that devastated does not mean dead/that ruin can be resplendent.*" The shorter poems bear a certain aphoristic quality. And is there a pendulum swinging through faith and prayer to a fierce agnosticism? – from "*What are poems but prayers?*" to

*"I know there are no such things as endings or beginnings.
No cycles to measure. No useful predictions. The prophets
are all mealy-mouthed and impotent. There is only this ball,
madly spiralling through space – and that is the most reassuring thing."*?

What kind of space, in terms of voice, theme, form do you think you are clearing for yourself, not only among your contemporaries at home and abroad (among whom there are so many talented and fine poets), but in the line of Caribbean literary tradition? Either consciously or sub-consciously?

RG: Another challenging question. I think I am going to be stepping away from poetry for a bit. The poems in these three books were very much written with the final collection in mind, so I am usually driven by an idea or a theme or an image that I then centre at least a year's worth of writing around. Right now then, I can't think of claiming a space per se, but I am happy with the way those three collections turned out.

I have been working, labouring even, in prose for the past year or so – I have been writing and publishing essays for a while, but the emphasis has been short fiction as

I attempt to wrestle with a novel. From that perspective, I think of myself as joining the several contemporary Caribbean writers who do not restrict themselves to a single medium or form. I hope I can produce work that has merit and is of a level of craft worthy of inclusion in that tradition.

JRL: All your major publications have been with small, independent presses: Shearsman, Platypus, Outspoken. Your Moko online journal is one of the newer art and literary journals with a growing reputation for bringing new talented voices and artists, as well as the new work of older writers, to our attention. Small independent presses are growing in stature (these and houses like Peepal Tree, Papillote, Carcanet) even as they operate in a lean way, searching out and finding new, strong voices. And their writers are moving under the radar to garner significant and important prizes. Like the OCM Bocas award. As one of those voices of a new Caribbean and international literary community, rooted but not bound in some narrow, limiting nationalism to home-home, how do you see the value, importance and indeed necessity of these new small presses and publishing houses? And while many of these still, necessarily, are based in the metropolis, what is your hope for indigenous, Caribbean-based publishing presses?

RG: I think some of the most vibrant poetry is coming from small presses. If we look at some of the major awards given out for poetry in the UK, independent presses like Carcanet, Peepal Tree, and Penned in the Margins have been pretty competitive with Faber, Cape, and Penguin. There's also a recent trend of the major publishers in the UK picking up big American poets for the UK editions of their books. The smaller labels seem to be more invested in actively searching out new voices and allowing a certain degree of experimentation that may not be palatable to bigger presses.

I think a similar approach is beginning to take root at home in the Caribbean. I think of a poet like Sonia Farmer and how she's grown up a press and created an infrastructure for her work. Similarly, Papillote has been publishing some significant works and etching out a space for themselves as an outlet for burgeoning talent. House of Nehesi has been doing all of this as well for years. These regional presses create a different dynamic than the traditional publishing routes and open up new avenues to readers and fresh new opportunities for writers to consider. I think overall this can only be a positive thing. I do not think that the metropolitan houses will go away, but the multiplication of markets means that more work can find its way into print.

JRL: Richard, any final thoughts for us, writers, readers, reviewers, editors, publishers, booksellers, directors of traditional and social media? At home and abroad?

RG: I think that now is an exciting time to be a writer and a reader of Caribbean literature. There are probably more writers writing and many more books accessible to us thanks to the numerous ways we can acquire them. More importantly, I think

I am more aware than ever before of writers throughout the diaspora as well as the generations of writers born of Caribbean immigrants writing out of that experience as well. This knowledge and access is no longer the dominion of academia as it were, as I can follow the exploits of folks like Canisia Lubrin and Kaie Kellough working in Canada just as easily as I can follow the careers of those writing out of Caribbean spaces like Celia Sorhaindo and Alicia Valasse-Polius. To me, that points at an exciting democratization of the word.

JRL: Thank you Richard Georges.

Where home is nowhere:

A Review of Philip Nanton's *RIFF: The Shake Keane Story*

Ronald Williams

“Why the hell have I never read the work of this Vincentian poet before?”

So asks Natasha Marks, a reviewer of Shake Keane's work. I might well have asked that question myself, for until introduced to Keane by Philip Nanton, I, too, had never heard of the Vincentian poet and musician. In many respects, Shake Keane's story is all too familiar. As Nanton crafts the life of this man, one senses that one is on a trail travelled many times, and yet, it is not quite known. The destination feels like an inevitability, but the byways and switchbacks are the real journey, the true story.

With its starting point in the 1920s in rural St. Vincent, Shake Keane's story is in many respects familiar without being typical. Born into a family that lives on the edge of poverty but because his father is, at different times, a policeman and an overseer at a plantation, Shake lives in that liminal world of the privileged poor. Authority inheres in both positions his father enjoys, and with it would have come a certain deference from the villagers. Thus, early on, develops that sense of difference and privilege. This is compounded by the musicality of the family, a feature that also sets young Shake apart.

It is this sense of difference, of being apart from, that is so much a part of the Shake Keane story. It is not always for the better, but that sense of self, as much as his poetic and musical talents, separates him from the ordinary and justifies the biography. Nanton describes, but does not emphasize, how the young Shake had to work, as did each member of the family, to sustain the household. This early direction of a young child's efforts to structured work, even while it sustains the family, can often lead to conflicting instincts in later life. One often sees both discipline and lassitude later displayed. This is certainly true of Keane.

The iron will of his father directs the boy's efforts towards perfecting his skill with the trumpet, and this later leads to Shake pursuing the complicated "structures" of free form jazz. His father's will also creates a man who seeks freedom from restraint, who lives the life of the charming vagabond. Again, free form jazz, with its tension between freedom and structure, becomes the perfect outlet for Shake, resolving the many tensions inherent in his contradictory impulses.

His scholarship, particularly the emphasis on the classics, is also familiar, as is the all but inevitable departure from the island for Great Britain. Keane arrives in England at a time of great change. The Second World War had been won seven years earlier, but the repercussions of that war were still very much present when Shake lands in London in 1952. The war had been the death knell of Edwardian England, and nothing symbolized that more than the presence of the black West Indians in the midst of white Englishmen.

Again, though, the familiar, the expected, is frustrated. At this point in the traditional West Indian story, the nostalgia of the home-leaving is replaced by the depiction of the virulent racism that consumes English society. This frequently culminates in the Notting Hill riots and some scathing comment about English society.

Shake's story betrays that trope. He, too, is alienated, but it is not an alienation based on race. Rather, it proceeds from artistic difference. Later, in Brooklyn, Shake would comment on his friends in Tiffany's Lounge, indicating that while friendly with them, there was a clear cultural separation. This is also not based on race but on a conflict of sensibilities. Race, surprisingly, plays no part in Shake's evaluation of his circumstances. Interestingly, others ascribe racial causes to his lack of recognition, but he does not. Whether this is willful blindness or a rare honesty, it is difficult to tell.

For Nanton, the return of the emigre is the central moral of the story. This is possibly because Nanton is himself an emigre more than once. Like Shake, who was his friend, Nanton emigrates to England. The product of a creole, upper middle-class family, his pursuits in England are more conventional, university, white-collar jobs, and so on. What Nanton shares with Shake is the profound sense of alienation from the society that produced him, and this becomes eminently clear in the middle section of the book when Shake returns to St. Vincent at the invitation of the Premier.

This should have been the crowning glory, the triumphant return of the conquering hero, recognized for his triumph in the bigger ponds of England and Europe. By then, Shake, as a member of the Joe Harriott Quintet and, later, the Kurt Edelhagen Orchestra, had made a name for himself as both a preeminent exponent of free form jazz and a brilliant flugelhorn and trumpet soloist. The invitation to return home ought to have been the honor accorded to the hero returning from a conquering campaign.

Alas, this was not to be. Art loses to politics as he is shunted aside by a new government within two years of his return. Nanton clearly sees in this a betrayal of the man and the art, and one senses a barely suppressed anger in the writing at this point. The slow decay of Shake's art raises more profound questions about the society itself. Shake had left for England with lots of hope and, to a limited extent, that hope had been justified. He had won. He returned to St. Vincent equally hopeful, but those hopes were to be dashed. A new, more permanent and destructive alienation would begin.

He returns to teaching, and while there is satisfaction in his work with children, one senses in Nanton's narrative the great gulf between the man that could have been and the man that is. That gulf, between the material and the spiritual, is the bridge too far. Material success had not come in England or Europe, but recognition had. For the materialist, this may not be enough, but for the idealist, it is often more than enough. The ability to test the bounds of one's artistic gifts becomes a goal in itself. No wonder so many musicians starve but live happy lives. As Nanton points out, musicians, the artists, have work as their play and play as their work. In small societies like St. Vincent, though it is hardly alone in this, every form of the artist's aspirations is frustrated. He makes no money, creates little art and gains no recognition. It is so with Shake. Predictably, he leaves St. Vincent, seeking the indefinable in the United States.

There are few developed countries as cruel to the poor as the United States. With its Puritan notions of hard work and success going hand in hand with the blessings of a purportedly benign, but authoritarian, God, material failure is a sign of God's disfavor. To fail in the United States is to be cast out, as Shake finds out.

And yet, with the gradual decline of his trumpet-playing skills, both as a result of playing less complicated music and having his teeth knocked out when he is mugged in the hard streets of Brooklyn, his poetry blooms. It is here that Nanton does some of his finest writing. If the commentary early in the book depends on other musicians or music critics' commentary to locate Shake in the reader's mind and in the musical pantheon, Nanton is clearly at ease in the analysis of the literary work. There is an almost tactile quality to the writing as he works his way through Shake's thoughts, but more importantly, his words.

What emerges is a deep thinker whose abiding concern is with humans' place in the universe. When Shake speaks in his own voice, whether in interviews or through his pen, one is almost surprised at the cogency and profundity of his thought. This is largely because the first sections of the book emphasize his music, not his philosophy. One is, therefore, transported to another realm of being when Nanton introduces Shake the thinker. Here is a man who had thought deeply about the human condition, and, in particular, the condition of men and women in the Caribbean. To that end, we discover

that the young Caribbean regionalist has become, in his later years, a nationalist, although with a very small “n”. The traditional religionist becomes something of an animist, certainly in his belief in the power of nature to shape the human condition.

Shake dies in Europe after refusing to return to St. Vincent. The story ends in alienation, though his ashes, after he is cremated, are returned to his country of birth. He dies dependent on Erik Bye, a white Norwegian friend, far away from what one would ordinarily think of as loving surroundings. And yet, one senses that he dies loved.

At the ceremony in St. Vincent recognizing Shake, Nanton calls him a hero and is quickly, if discreetly, corrected by a government official, who points out that the designation is an official one, granted by the government. One can only marvel at the pettiness of that comment which would be ironic were it not tragic. But was Shake a hero? Nanton certainly wants him to be. Friends are often conflicted biographers because their sympathy to the friend’s faults can result in lopsided pictures of the one written about.

Nanton mentions, but does not elaborate on, Shake’s failings. Ultimately, Shake is not a financial or an artistic success, if by that one means critical recognition for his work. There are occasional references to Shake both as poet and musician, and those references are favourable, but there are too few to say that Shake triumphed. Similarly, Shake’s irresponsibility as father and husband are glossed over, passing reference being made to wives and children who function as simply adjuncts to Shake’s life.

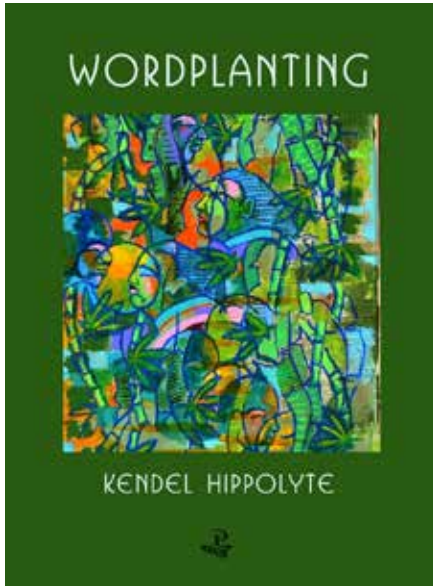
Nanton’s silence is, I fear, almost a tacit acceptance, though not an endorsement, of Shake’s fecklessness. Perhaps it results from the latitude we grant the truly talented. Shake’s alcoholism and his violence to wife and children are hinted at but not explored. His inability to make life work, though he seemed to have had opportunities, is also handled rather tangentially. Ultimately, then, there is a more complicated figure hidden behind the character depicted in the biography.

This is Nanton’s most accessible book. His storytelling is impeccable here, unlike in earlier works where it is only hinted at. There is a through line to the narrative of *RIFF* that is unerring and true. Whatever the blind spots, Nanton weaves a compelling tale of an almost tragic figure. Shake is not tragic for one simple reason: neither he nor Nanton allow him to be. Even in the end, when skill and health had deserted him, Shake manages an ironic laugh, saying to Erik Bye, “When you’re dead, you’re famous.” How very true.

Ronald A. Williams is the author of six novels, including **A Death in Panama**. His latest publication is **Eurydice’s Song**.

Review of Kendel Hippolyte's *WordPlanting*

George Goddard



Wordplanting by Kendel Hippolyte.
Peeple Tree Press, 2019

In “*Wordplanting*”, the title poem of Kendel Hippolyte’s latest collection, we read: “this poem will soon end / and its true usefulness begin / After its last word, resolve, to place, with care, / a seed, a bulb, a branch / into a clay pot, old jug, / whatever holds handfuls of dirt / for onion, kale, aloe, / any small green fountaining / of nourishing or healing” (P. 51). And Hippolyte goes on to exhort us, “you will not listen to / not read again, this / – or any other – poem / till your finger and thumb/ flick from themselves / their last soft rubbings of soil / in a fine gratitude / back, as we all must, into earth” (Ibid).

If the last line, read superficially, seems to refer to the finality of death and perhaps oblivion, I suggest that when one reflects on lines 8 – 10 the poet seems to be concerned with the new life that springs from this planting of seed, branch or bulb and the healing that proceeds therefrom. It is a living and healing experience that “fountains” from a reclaiming of our ground, albeit the handfuls of dirt that this clay pot of our Caribbean might represent.

The imperative of such a reclaiming for a people who are losing their ground, unmistakably if not stridently, infuses this work, even in the seemingly innocuous reminiscences of Kendel's "*Domesticities*" series (P. 20). In *Domesticities – 1: Tea* the gentle ritual of his mother's cooling of hot tea allows him to raise to "[his] lips / the tea – kannèl, Red Rose, lowanjèt " and to make it just right for "a child learning to sip, absorb the way of the family, of neighbourhood, of town, of country" (ibid l. 12-14). A ritual of acculturation that has been lost, and leaves him two generations later, wondering when precisely this became unnecessary. This lost grounding in the ways of family and neighbourhood, this severing from the familiar ways, the Caribbean-ness of his growing up, leads to the search for the Caribbean which he so vividly describes in "*Avocado*" (P. 16).

The imagery of *Avocado* has a spontaneity, a lush profusion of sight and sound that is typical of Hippolyte's work. If in the work of some poets the sound and rhythm appear forced, with him it comes easily and naturally. And this unforced rhythm is replicated throughout the collection, *Wordplanting* – throughout this search for the rediscovery of self, of the Caribbean, and the assertion of our place in our story.

This search however is not simply a nostalgic hankering after the old familiar ways. It is a search that accentuates the finding of ourselves in the face of a cultural erasure that we thought we had conquered with the unraveling of colonialism. He wakes to find the Caribbean gone, a going that was almost imperceptible: "I woke one morning and the Caribbean was gone. / She definitely had been there the night before, I'd heard her / singing in the crickets and grasshoppers to the tambourine of the morning rain. / A childhood song. I slept down into childhood." His incredulity at the apparent "going" of the Caribbean is aptly imaged in the lines: "And though the finches, doves, banana quits, tremblers, grackles, mocking birds / sang to each other still, the music ended when their singing ended. / Not like the day before when what they sang were motifs in an overture." (P. 16). What the poet means, when he says though the birds sang to each other still the music ended when they stopped singing, seems unclear. When he contrasts this with their singing the day before however, saying their music was no longer "motifs in an overture", his thinking becomes that much more comprehensible.

No longer motifs in an overture: but what themes were being lost in this prologue of birdsong that he wakes to? It becomes clear when he goes searching – searching for an identity that he believes must still be there despite his inability to find it just yet. She – the Caribbean – is gone but not irretrievable. In his efforts to find her he traces the beach footprints of her children back to the tracks of our forebears. He is confounded, she remains elusive, but "at the beach, the barricades of deck chairs, ramparts of pastel walls, / blocked any wandering. A non-pastel guard, though, told me he had glimpsed her / walking off between clipped hedges that closed after her into a maze / tatters of

madras hanging where there used to be hibiscus” (P. 16). The theme here is the forced estrangement from our origins, our history and patrimony as we are excluded from them by the barricades and ramparts of Capital.

“There had been rumours of hotel managers trying to buy the sunlight, / contract the hurricane into a breeze for gently fluttering brochures / draw columns of strict profit margins permanently in the sand” (Pp.16-17). The recent acquisition of coastal lands of historical and archaeological significance in the north-east of his island of Saint Lucia so



that the corporate world profits “without guilt” (Walcott, *the Acacia Trees*) stands out in bold relief – emblematic of what is occurring in the Caribbean, and indeed in the rest of the post-colonial world, where neo-colonialism is reinventing itself to ensure its continued economic and geopolitical domination. The trampling on of our identity as the spaces which define us are acquired and desecrated comes over very clearly as well. Do the now-silenced “motifs in an overture” that Hippolyte describes take away from the gravity of what are truly existential questions? The poet engages with the real issues of our being, as Caribbean peoples, reimagining, not just reclaiming, our spaces in the world.

In Hippolyte’s *Avocado*, the international travel industry, those who own the new plantations by the sea (Walcott, *White Egrets*), representative of corporate capital’s replacement of the old colonial order, have forced the Caribbean to withdraw: “And the Caribbean, sensing the intimidation of quick crab-like hands crawling / to get underneath the white broderie anglaise of her skirt, withdrew herself / the way the sea clenching herself into a tidal wave, withdraws” (P. 17). The image here is that of the sexual exploitation that is so often one of the symbols of the ruthless subjugation of a people – the commodification of a civilisation’s womenfolk. Is it too much to read into this that there is an impending tsunami, an uprising through which we may yet reclaim our Caribbean? But not just yet. Not until one fully comprehends the import of the market vendor’s gifting of the green orb of an avocado; not until “the unslaved remembering of hands held out with no calculating fingers, offering / the graciousness that grows out of a ground knowing: existence in grace. / Grace eliding into graciousness, eliding into gift. The first fruits of Civilisation”. And even then with a returning to the sources of what has defined us as the ground that will anchor the reassertion of our history, the task remains elusive (P. 19).

If Aimé Césaire (*Cahiers d'un Retour Au Pays Natal*), CLR James (*Black Jacobins*) as well as many other Caribbean writers of the early to mid-20th century grappled with the challenges of a colonial Caribbean trying to break free, trying to assert itself as a people that would not continue to admit of colonial domination (a project older than the Haitian revolution), and if literary luminaries like Walcott and Kamau Brathwaite have seen the gains of the era of the national liberation movement as coming under existential threat, those of Hippolyte's generation have found themselves in the throes of defending a Caribbean-ness that seems to be slipping away to the creeping, "crabbing" fingers of those who seek to get beneath the broderie anglaise, and to leave the madras in tatters.

Kendel, in this new collection, comes over in the voice of an elder, a griot visioning that which might ultimately help us find the Caribbean, find ourselves and reassert ourselves in the making of our history. In this regard, the images of *Harp* are stark, and perhaps dark. Dark, because while he visions the way out of what he likens elsewhere to a maze, those to whom he brings the message do not seem to understand and the way out of the maze becomes that much more frustrating – perhaps the reason why the poem begins with the poet hanging up his harp.

In *Harp* the music that will “let water ripple / from a new musical uprising, undermine, let truth flow, / loose the foundation, sunder the blocks of gold, stone after stone, / until the whole unholy God-forsaking kingdom fall” (P. 10) is not the music that brought down the walls of Jericho. It is not the revolutionary, pulsing vibe of “ram’s horns blasting, / reggae guitar chopping.../ bass bucking like a battering ram ‘gainst gates of oppression / and Gideon boots trodding the rhythm seven times round / and make the weak-heart walls tremble and crash down”. The water that ripples is surely not the angry tide of a Tsunami, the unleashed fury of the clenched fist of a Caribbean that has withdrawn itself. So is the poet sending mixed signals? Is he undecided as to whether it should be the angry vengeance of a tidal wave or the steady, almost imperceptibly rising flood of rippling water (occasioned by the music of the harp) that must undermine the God-forsaking system of oppression on which the international corporate order is built?

And so the harpist's people do not understand his music or his voice. His appears to be the voice of one crying in a wilderness. They do not understand the music of the harp “...Oy! Stop it! / Nuh budda bring no lamentations round bout ya. / You ever hear a harp play dancehall? Even reggae? / Is how you a-go strum militant ‘pon something so / wah’ play so sweet? So sad? Yo! Elder! Res’ it up.” (P. 9). The syntax is effective, the nation language is powerful and graphic. This makes the poem especially relevant and situates it firmly in our time and space. It also, in the fluidity and measured rhythm of its lines, suggests a visionary tending towards the measured and deliberate

undermining of the walls of oppression. At the same time it raises the pertinent questions about the way out of the oppression that this poem limns so well. And of finding ourselves and making our History.

And though the music of the harp is not the militant music and battering of the ram's horns of Jericho, the Elder visions a rippling that ultimately overflows, a "cup of raging sorrow to run over / to break banks, break Babel Tower, break Babylon crooked edifices / break ...the cold gleaming walls between us down" (P 10).

The skill of the poet as he weaves intricate and many-layered metaphors is evident in this poem as in many others in this collection. The rising, rippling then raging water breaching the banks of a river, is also a mirroring of the possibility of breaking the stranglehold of the financial institutions (banks) of a globalised economic order. The cold gleaming walls of the corporate world represent at the same time, the divisive stratagems and corruption employed to maintain the Caribbean's subjugation. So how is the stranglehold broken? Is it through the music of the harp or of the militant ram's horn?

As referenced earlier, the poem begins with the poet hanging up his harp because his people do not understand: "where the rivers of Babylon clog into vomit, / curdling in the high, blind-white, concrete gully / behind the salvaged wood and galvanize-sheet tenement, / i hang my harp upon a half-burnt post lean-out over a zinc fence corner / and leave it there – to dry-rot, crack, split, "(P. 9). Then towards the middle of the poem: "So the same harp i did lay down, i take up again". And at the end, he hangs it up again and leaves it there. Is this indecision, befuddlement, uncertainty about the way to bring down the walls of Jericho?

Running through the *Wordplanting* collection is the clear theme of the need to ground ourselves in the sensibilities of our Caribbean-ness, to reclaim ourselves, to reclaim the Caribbean and assert ourselves unequivocally into the making of our history. If there is uncertainty and indecision, there is not hopelessness. In the sighting of the rare blue heron: "the rare blue unbelievability of it – / a blue heron in the moment of flight, tilted against time and the surrounding space / standing in the flow of water, gripping the soft, shifting earth,, wings flexing air / then a blue flare exploding silently, a brief blink of sky just over water, / and in the oblique space left – light" (P. 47).

It is a light that is revelation as well as beauty. This brief glimpse of a blue heron that points to the possibilities we have lost sight of, just as that glimpse of the lost Caribbean at the interstice when the fingers of the poet and the market vendor both encompass the avocado. It is such a moment that takes the poet to the heights of the Sierra Maestra (*A Birthday Reflection In Verse For Fidel*), seeing our Caribbean through the eyes of El Commandante, reflecting on a journey that began "as a young man's

fierce questing track / through the unending campesino poverty and Habana's corrupt streets and palaces where / Uncle Sam's Mafia nephews gambled for Cuba with goons and profiteers" (P. 14). Here the image of the groping hands of Capital recurs – not now under the broderie anglaise of a vulnerable Caribbean, but in brothels and gambling houses of Havana.

The poet imagines Fidel surveying the social gains of the revolution "Green fields of school children; muralled workplaces; the shared gains of progress; / a peasant unbending upward, exclamation mark from his own question" (Ibid). The image of the peasant reaching up, upright, unbending from degradation is potent. It is a people rising up from the degradation of colonial oppression. And then there is the young woman at the mirror trembling with unmade decisions. That daughter whom "Uncle" and "Madam" still try to inveigle "with golden anklets and white powdery persuasions".

The poet is under no illusions that the neocolonial enterprise is ever present, "waiting in the car outside" – the defeated master who wants his slave mistress back, as they all want, whether the star-spangled emperors or Napoleon (Ibid). So now the forces of economic domination and cultural imperialism seek to inveigle some from among the "green fields of school children". The poet reminds himself however that El Commandante has raised the young woman well and that she knows how to keep her eyes open. Therein lies his hope not only for Cuba, but for the Caribbean: "She'll show a way for her scattered archipelago family who have kept hope in / her, in Caribbean civilization" (P. 15). We will yet find that Caribbean that seems to be elusive, and reassert ourselves into the making of our history.

This collection is sometimes reflective and measured in rhythm, sometimes intense and almost prophetic in vision. Its images and metaphors, rooted as they are in Caribbean flora, fauna and culture connect with us and with the sensibilities of those who continue to search.

Lyrical reverie on legacy, testimony and hope is at the heart of Esther Phillips’ *Witness in Stone*

Nicola Hunte

Witness in Stone is reminiscent of intricately wrought but imposing stone structure, even as it testifies to the apparently commonplace -a young man on a bicycle, a playful encounter with a grandchild, a walk along a country road at dawn, all rendered in a manner that gives them shape and heft. Reading this collection exemplifies why Esther Phillips is Barbados’s Poet Laureate. Her poetic skill – the ability to capture detail with an economy of words and poignant imagery – is finely contextualised by her attention to Barbadian settings and landscape. But it is her treatment of this detail that enriches the reading experience. Nestled within observations of flora, simple rituals, the sounds of human living are profound emotions and weighty ruminations. For example, her contemplation of a marginalised figure at an intersection, usually ignored or dismissed because of his odd behaviour of directing traffic, with “both arms moving / in every, and sometimes opposite / directions” evolves in a few, deft strokes into an invitation to self-examination as he becomes “the philosopher/ whose arms are the pages / we should look into”.

From experiences made negligible by familiarity and routine, she delivers touching and provocative possibilities. This creative energy, capable of balancing the singular with the quotidian, forms one of the motifs of this collection. Several of the poems offer reflections on the intersection of beauty with the pragmatic, creativity with stoicism. However, these are not the only intersections made possible in this collection. The image of the elderly neighbour who regularly makes wreaths in memoriam of the village’s deceased in “Wreaths” and that of the ex-slave stonemason in “Stonemaster”, encapsulate an interlacing of this attention to beauty with other prominent motifs, namely, craftsmanship, testimony and nostalgia. This may seem like an eclectic group of ideas but their relationship across this collection is organic. Respect for those who practice a craft, as well as for the significance of that craft, produces a shared

tone of gratitude and awe whether it be toward a mason whose fingers are trained “in the alchemy that breathes in stone” or the literary icon, Kamau Brathwaite, who could somehow “trust ...to the trance of words”. The main connecting thread is the value of these creations to the following generations, particularly those who can claim a Barbadian heritage. The need for someone to testify to these creations in a meaningful way is indicated by the distance between subsequent generations and the voice in these poems bearing living witness to this craftsmanship. Alongside the tone of gratitude, therefore, is nostalgia – a looking backward – that is emphasised by the images of bygone Barbadiana throughout the collection such as children walking, “skillet in hand” to collect milk. Thankfully, the persona’s intimate and individualised perspective - the benefit of lyric poetry done well - pulls you into the moment so that you participate in the memory and share its meaning. This participation is important because so much of this work addresses “unspoken mementos” and these poems take on the obligation to articulate these memories through imagery and carefully balanced figurative language.

The imagery of stone, given the title of the collection, offers noteworthy renderings of memory. This is ideally captured in “Rock/Stone”, where stone’s various tactile qualities and physical features are each seamlessly linked to an important, personal memory. Nonetheless, this collection comes to remembrance through other figurative techniques - as diverse as the iterations of stone in this poem - that couple economy of expression with emotional expansiveness. For example, the recollection of the joy and abandon of a youthful affair is captured by the deceptively simple transference of the sound of an illicit motorcycle ride to the anticipation felt when it happened and the excitement of voyeuristically witnessing its participants re-enter that moment: “Suddenly the afternoon revs up,/ spreads out into the green fields/ and open road”. Imagery turned metaphor does the work of figuratively embodying familial ties to the past (reminiscent of Seamus Heaney’s “Digging”) in “Grandmother’s Crosses” and personification signals a historical burden in “Stairs”. The weight of the past, both as burden and foundation, finds expression in “Feathers” through a subtle interplay of simile, association and metaphor that links feathers with flying creatures and much heavier objects/ experiences. Other poems directly speak to remembering, such as the unmistakably titled “Memory” and “G, At Ninety-Two, Reflects On His Mother”.

However, revisiting the past and its importance is counterbalanced by those poems that capture the hope and uncertainty of the present as with “Erin” and “Young Rider”. The latter poem provides one of the noticeable contrasts in the collection, though not because of its focus on the young and their distance from the kinds of memories that dominate in this work. There are several poems here that address the guileless expectations and forward-looking promise of the young, such as “Wing-Growing”, “Swim” and “Bell”. Unlike these poems, the persona’s relationship to the young rider

is that of an unrelated observer. Remarkably, the tone of intimacy and tenderness in “Wing-Growing” which is dedicated to a grandson, is also evident for the unknown young man in “Young Rider”. The effect is that a larger concern, embodied by the young male rider, though outside of the personal is nonetheless emotionally close. This same effect is produced with another poem, also distinct in its attention to concerns other than memory. “He Called for Momma” stands out as being the only work that ostensibly speaks to a contemporary socio-political issue, one of particular significance to the United States. This poem takes us beyond the Caribbean and the personal to a collective perspective on racial violence. Albeit unintentionally, “Young Rider” and “He Called for Momma” intersect over the uncertainties that await boys growing into men and those lurking dangers specific to men of colour. Both share a hopeful ending, but the definitive declaration of “one day soon and we’re done with running” that concludes “He Called for Momma” does not match the touching yearning of the persona’s parting wish of a better future for the solitary, unnamed boy.

Overall, this collection excels in its treatment of the sights and sounds of Barbadian settings. From the “group of boys / liming under the almond tree” in “Young Rider” to the stately, complicated presence of the plantation estate house, these poems revel in Barbadian iconography. In particular, the rural Barbadian landscape is a recognisable feature as setting in “Drax Hall” or at center-stage in “Ruminations”. The latter poem conveys a wistful pastoral imagery reminiscent of 19th century picturesque paintings but rescued from their colonial sensibilities because its beauty is for the “[p]eople born in the country”. These visual exemplars of Barbados are complemented by the sounds of local living most readily conveyed through nation language, whether it be in the neighbour’s voice of “Village-Keeper” or that of the persona in “Woman-Tongue Tree”. “Woman-Tongue Tree” points to a similar relationship between landscape and testimony as that seen between cultivated environment and memory in “Stonemaster”. Fundamentally, this ‘talking tree’ speaking in the tongue of the Bajan land (akin to the persona), tells of what human beings need to learn about themselves and the land around them via narratives that are linked across time. If there is an overarching theme to this collection it would have to be that people and the landscape offer stories and recollections waiting to be acknowledged. In order to make even the stones “bear witness”, to recognise and re-tell the moments held by the land and its people, it takes someone committed to mastering the skill of creative expression, willing to be like the ‘master’ who carves “lessons in stone”. With these poems, Esther Phillips assumes that mantle and therefore encourages us to find ourselves, as people of this limestone island and the wider Caribbean, in the moments and experiences carved through these words. This work, as our witness in stone, encourages us to recognise that “the song of the heart / will always find its roots...in these caves, hills,...running deep/ inside the veins, the blood / of these our island people”.

Identi(ties): the Caribbean Conundrum

Peter Laurie

So who are we?

Every now and then we who live in the Caribbean archipelago ask ourselves this question. It's not that we don't have an answer; we just give differing answers, at different times.

Identity is a murky and fluid issue. Every person is a bunch of shifting, overlapping, and often conflicting identities: gender, colour, ethnicity, class, religion, nationality, sexual orientation, disability, and so on. Some are more important than others, but all derive their significance from a social context. For example, very few people identify, as a priority, their being left-handed or blue-eyed, largely because these traits are rarely of great social significance. Interestingly, it's often not we who define ourselves, but others who try to define us. The point is that there is no essential identity. Identity is an evolving process of becoming rather than a state of being.

For example, the Nigerian novelist, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, who lives part of the time in the US, observed that when she is in the US she is identified as black (colour); when she is in Africa outside of her homeland, as Nigerian (nationality); and when she is in Nigeria, as an Igbo (ethnicity), the ethnic group (some 40 million) to which she belongs. She identifies herself as a feminist and a human being. One comment she made was quite illustrative: she hoped that feminism would become obsolete because women would then have achieved full and true equality with men.

The brilliant British-Jamaican novelist Zadie Smith argues that “the self can never be totally defined or pinned down; a human is a being whose boundaries are uncertain, whose language is never pure, whose world is in no way ‘self-evident’.” She concludes that “love is what makes freedom meaningful, what gives the ever-shifting self a certain mission in life. Love is what compels us to accept the simple gift of a flower, and the rights and dignity of our neighbour.”

There are few places on earth where the question of identity is as complex and consequential as in the Caribbean. Complex, because of the diverse historical processes that have gone into shaping our identity; and consequential, because how we define ourselves affects the role we play in a globalised world. We can either be passive, divided victims of history, defensively turning inward, or we can self-confidently take on the world, secure in our creative genius.

Most of our ancestors, except for the indigenous inhabitants, came from somewhere else, usually in conditions not of their own choosing. They were all uprooted or uprooted themselves from other continents and found themselves living in strange lands cheek by jowl with other uprooted people.

Add to this universal immigrant experience the fact that the region where we reside is the theatre of some of the most traumatic events in the history of inhumanity: genocide, wars of conquest, colonialism, mass enslavement, indentured labour, racism, oppression and so on. So it's not surprising we find ourselves entangled in a long history of flux and affliction. Even today the Caribbean remains a strategic site for great power rivalry.

Long after the sun has set on colonial empires, external commentators still have ingrained responses to attempts by Caribbean peoples to assert their own identity, so that when Barbados decides that after some fifty years of having the head of state of the UK as our head of state, it will now choose a Barbadian as its head of state, this is interpreted by sections of the international media as Barbados bowing to Chinese pressure. This preposterous piece of nonsense seems predicated on the idea that small Caribbean countries are unable to determine their own destiny and must forever be a protectorate of one great power or another.

I won't even mention Haiti and Cuba, whose greatest affronts to the Empire were to assert their independence. God knows, they have paid the price.

Or take another contemporary example of the EU 'blacklisting' Caribbean jurisdictions for failing to adhere to unilaterally imposed standards that their own member countries openly flout. This is not just bullying; it's arrogant racist bullying.

All this too often leads us to succumb to self-doubt, which finds its most degenerate expression in self-mockery and self-loathing. Witness the bitter irony of one of our greatest novelists, Nobel Prize-winner V. S. Naipaul, observing that, "History is built around achievement and creation; and nothing was created in the West Indies."

But then, mind you, much of our history was an exercise by the colonial powers in engendering precisely such feelings of futility. The Empire ruled not only by depriving its subjects of actual power but also, more importantly, by inculcating deep feelings

of powerlessness and inferiority. Hence, the perennial relevance of Bob Marley's plea: "Emancipate yourselves from mental slavery, none but ourselves ..."

Despite all this, Caribbean people are extraordinarily creative, not to mention resilient and tough. Our intellectual achievements, our literature and arts are some of the finest in the world.

The explanation for this paradox is simple: our greatest weakness is also our greatest strength. The very instability, fragility and fragmentation of our history and geography have made us flexible, nimble, and creative.

The extraordinary diversity and intermingling of our varied cultural heritages has led to the fertile process of creolisation, in which cultural interaction forges a new identity that enables us to absorb, subvert and transform foreign influences, bending them innovatively to our own ends. This applies to religion, language, music, dance, food and other aspects of our culture.

Examples: we created the steel pan, the premier musical instrument of the twentieth century, from a discarded imported oil drum; we made a European pre-Lenten religious festival into a world-famous carnival art form; and we took a quintessential English game, cricket, absorbed it, and transformed it into a magnificent performance art in which we dominated the world for over two decades. Let's not even mention kaiso, zouk, son, compa and reggae. One moral of this story is that we should never, either from feelings of insecurity or a misplaced sense of nationalism, turn our backs on the outside world. It's our creolised identity that makes us a global force to be reckoned with.

And let's be clear, 'creolised' is not a bland blend of ingredients or 'melting pot'. Instead, the diverse elements in creolisation are brought into a binding relationship with each other in a constantly evolving process. The Martinican novelist and poet, Edouard Glissant, used an illuminating metaphor for creolisation: it is like the rhizome, an enmeshed horizontal root system, rather than a vertical tap root.

Yet, we in the Caribbean, in our search for an authentic source of identity, too often resort to ethnicity as the fall-back tap root of our identity. This is philosophically stupid, socially and politically dangerous, and culturally illusory, as the great C.L.R James frequently warned.

It is philosophically stupid not because ethnicity is not part of our identity but because it is not an essential part of our identity..

It is dangerous because in a multi-ethnic Caribbean it divides us.

And it is illusory. As Stuart Hall, the brilliant Jamaican-British cultural studies pioneer observed, "Identity is not given once and for all by something transmitted in

the genes we carry in the colour of our skin, but is shaped and transformed historically and culturally.”

Given our turbulent history, however, this temptation is understandable since it was on the basis of our ethnicity/colour/race that the colonial powers oppressed us. So in trying to understand how the forces of history like enslavement and indenture helped shape us, we should not fall into the trap of a fixed identity of ethnicity, but should acknowledge that this is an enterprise of relevance to all Caribbean people, not just the ethnic groups concerned.

For example, the resuscitation of our long suppressed African cultural heritage is not, as too often it is treated, a matter of concern only to those whose ancestors came from Africa, but is of importance to all Caribbean people, whatever their origins, because it helps us understand a major cultural force that shaped all of us.

We should take a similar approach to our Asian, European, Middle Eastern and other cultural heritages.

The other important point to make is that while creolisation is usually applied to Caribbean people of African and European descent, it is an anthropological and a strategic political error to assume that Indo-Caribbean peoples somehow remained outside and untouched by creolisation, i.e. as unassimilable. The fact is that the Indo-Caribbean people created their own innovative cultural responses (eg *tassa*) within the oppressive framework of indenture. The colonial powers, however, the better to exploit us, deliberately drove wedges between Afro-Caribbean and Indo-Caribbean groups, a bitter legacy that continues to this day.

Incidentally, when will we stop using the quaint colonial terms ‘West Indian’ and ‘East Indian’?

But lest we forget, it’s not just history that shapes us, but ecology too. Our habitat — landscape and seascape — has had and continues to have a profound influence in shaping our identity. The Caribbean Sea divides and unites us; sustains us physically (the blue economy) and nourishes us spiritually.

Derek Walcott reminds us that “The Sea is History”, and Kamau Brathwaite that “The Unity is Submarine”.

As Frank Collymore put it so eloquently in his wonderful poem, *Hymn to the Sea*,

By sunlight, starlight, moonlight, darkness,
I must always be remembering the sea.
Not only life and sustenance; visions too,
Are born of the sea: the patterning of her rhythm
Finds echoes within the musing mind.
I must always be remembering the sea.

To sum up, our Caribbean cultural identity is not a fixed essence. Neither is it a melting pot as in the aspirational slogan 'all o' we is one'. It's a fragile, fragmented, inherently unstable, but extraordinarily powerful work in progress; a culture in the making, continuously evolving, always shape-shifting.

That is what, despite all our challenges, gives us hope.

Keynote Address by Évelyne Trouillot

*23rd Frank Collymore Literary Endowment (FCLE)
Awards Ceremony, Barbados, February 2021*

Ladies and Gentlemen, fellow writers and readers

I am very honoured to speak at the awards ceremony of the Frank Collymore Literary Endowment. My first instinct upon receiving and accepting the invitation was evidently to learn more about Frank Collymore, the “Barbadian Man of the Arts” and I was amazed by how much I did not know. A man whose contribution to the evolution and development of arts and literature in Barbados and the Caribbean is immense and invaluable. I’m not presumptuous enough to attempt to tell you about Frank Collymore. I refer to him only to demonstrate how ignorant we in the Caribbean can be of important works from one island to another. However, in Caribbean writings, many themes and images show the similarities and the connections between our countries.

Collymore wrote:

*Like all who live on small islands
I must always be remembering the sea
Being always cognizant of her presence;*

Our vision of the sea is a complex one, it carries glimpses of our history. Our love for the sea is sometimes mixed with feelings of fear, sorrow, and our connection with the sea is unique because it goes beyond its beauty. The sea transcends its immensity, taking us back and pushing us forward. As Erika J. Waters who has studied Caribbean literature extensively writes: “Thus, for a great number of native-born Caribbean writers, the waters surrounding the Caribbean, however beautiful and compelling, must bear the curse of history.”

Indeed, the images of the sea reflect the complexities of our vision and of our history. Paule Marshall compares the sounds of the ocean to the lamentations of the enslaved, while Collymore in *Return*, speaks of its “dark embrace” and refers to the sea as a “mother vomiting her living and her dead”. Aimé Césaire mirrors this idea when he

writes “we, vomit of the slave ships”.

Our history invades our writings in order for us to tell, to denounce, as well as value the courage and dignity of our ancestors. From Julia Alvarez to Nancy Morejon, from Jamaica Kincaid to Earl Lovelace, from Louise Bennet to Kendel Hippolyte, many themes linked to history seem to be shared throughout the Caribbean.

In his book *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*, Michel-Rolph Trouillot argues that narratives produced what we call history through the choice of sources, the creation of archives, the facts that are told versus the ones that are silenced. Therefore, Trouillot affirms that to some extent each historical narrative is a fictional story, but with special power: the power to shape not only our view of the past, but to explain our present and dictate our future as well. In the Caribbean we are subject to the perception of history as produced by the dominant European view. We have to work hard to transcend these perceptions, and see each other from our own perspectives.

For me, this is when and where literature plays a significant role. Fiction may give voice to people who are otherwise misrepresented or simply forgotten by textbook writers. Women’s role and contribution, for example, is often ignored. Fiction can give life to the forgotten. Fiction at its most powerful can move the invisible out of the shadows. In that sense, fiction can fill the gaps left by historical narratives.

The history of slavery and colonization is a testimony to how silencing and revising historical facts are able to shape the views of generations towards populations, cultures, and events. This year, throughout the world, from Martinique to Belgium, from Virginia to Paris, from Boston to Barbados, statues were torn down. Debates around the symbolism of statues and monuments highlight the impact of historical narratives on perception. How can we properly appropriate our history?

In the works of Caribbean writers, I hear numerous voices: those of the oppressed, of the enslaved; the voices of abused women, those of people struggling to live with dignity and attain happiness. From Velma Pollard to Esther Phillips, from Edwidge Danticat to Olive Senior, from Vladimir Lucien to Yanick Lahens or Kettly Mars, writers use their sensitivity and their creativity so as to denounce violence that kills, cupidity that destroys, and oppression that makes individuals risk their lives finding a better place to live.

Caribbean writers are open to the world; because insularity is not a synonym of isolation. For me, the island is a place where we grow from our errors, from our past, where we stand on our own two feet and a place that is never too small for our dreams. Even when writers leave their place of birth for different reasons, even when they are born elsewhere through life’s circumstances, they seem to stay attached to the islands.

I am thinking especially of Edwidge Danticat who left Haiti at the age of 12. Although she writes in English, her work evokes Haiti with its complexities, its challenges, its creativity and richness. I think also of Andrea Levy who was born in London of Jamaican parents, and who delves into her island history and presents a strong and sensible vision of the Caribbean and of its place in English history. Like many of our writers, Levy raises some unpleasant subjects and gives to readers a valid perspective of humanity.

Caribbean literature has become a place where I recognize parts of myself; a place I would like to visit more often, but it is not always easy to gain access. Because even though we share so many similarities through our writings, some essential questions come to mind: *How do we communicate with each other? How often do we communicate with each other?*

I know I am privileged, first of all to be multilingual. Lucky enough to have met so many great poets and writers, not only from the Francophone world, but also from the English and Spanish speaking islands. Not only have I met many poets and writers, but I was able to communicate with them, to share experiences, and to develop friendships over the years. Most of all, I am able to read their writings. This is not at all common, unfortunately. I think we all deplore the fact that communication between us is not what it could be. Most Caribbean writers speak only one language, especially if they are English speakers. I wish there were more translations of our works from one language to another, from English to French and Spanish, and vice-versa. This is one of the reasons why I value the work of **La Casa de las Americas** that translates many texts from the Caribbean.

Furthermore, there are many other Caribbean writers I will probably never know, that I will never read because they are not identified by the editorial powers in Paris, London or Madrid. I find it ironic that the former colonisers who were the greedy intermediaries between the continent of Africa and what they called the New World are today playing cultural intermediaries between the former colonies. Too often, the western capitals get to decide which writers are major Caribbean writers according to their own views of the Caribbean and their own visions of our realities.

I believe it is time to bypass the intermediaries. It is time to communicate directly from one island to another, between us, writers, and poets, and artists, to learn from each other, to exchange and create more. We need more national events like this one here in Barbados. We need more local and regional awards for the purpose of recognising and value our peers. In Haiti, we have a national award that was created 45 years ago: *le Prix littéraire Henri Deschamps* (Deschamps literary award). In the past five years two novels written in Creole have been rewarded, and this reflects the importance that Creole has taken in the literary world. This is an importance that French critics

cannot fully appreciate although they sometimes behave as if they were the authority on Haitian literature. We have some strong prizes in the region. The *Carbet de la Caraïbe Prize* was created 30 years ago and has been won by many Caribbean writers, such as Nancy Morejon, Edwidge Danticat, Jamaica Kincaid, and Kei Miller. It is interesting to note for example that Kei Miller was awarded both the *Carbet Prize* and *Bocas Award* for the same book. And of course, there is *El premio de la Casa de las Americas*, one of the oldest awards in the region.

Still today, so many years later, I remember the event in Martinique organised by the poet and activist, Monchoachi. It is there that I met Maya Santos Febres, Velma Pollard, Olive Senior, George Lamming, Edouard Glissant and other writers from the Caribbean. Although I knew about the French speaking literature, I was sadly ignorant about much of English and Spanish writing. Evidently, I knew the big names already famous outside of the region, but that was the extent of my knowledge. That week in Martinique was a milestone for me. I learned about a literary world I wanted to discover, cherish and explore.

From one island to another, from one writer to another, we have to face the challenge, as individuals, as well as literary communities, to rise above the obstacles of language and other barriers. We from the Caribbean, from this region, born from a complex mixture of linguistic and cultural elements, seem to have the ability to evolve in difficult conditions. We have managed to brilliantly delve into and reflect on our history, to engage with painful but necessary subjects, to bring new light to our realities, to go beyond the clichés that surround our islands, and use our creativity and intelligence to give life to beautiful poetry and fiction that talk to the world from our own niche in the world.

It is time for us to strengthen our ties, not in quest of bland uniformity, but simply to make a powerful statement of our diversities. Increasing our cultural events allows us to meet within the region, so as to value what we create and honour our poets and writers.

In conclusion, I will read some lines from René Philoctète, from his book titled *Caraïbe*. Here the author is attempting to portray what he sees as the new Caribbean man in a new Caribbean age: “when each branch carries the wish of the roots!... when each stone testifies to the saga of our sweat! Where all presence guarantees the certitude of blooming! Child of migration, nourished by your legends, master of your gestures to the Sun, I recognise myself in your gatherings”. (*Translated by Évelyne Trouillot*)

Thank you.



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Submissions

BIM, seminal Caribbean journal now revived as *BIM: Arts for the 21st Century*, is published twice annually. *BIM* accepts submissions that focus on literary, artistic and other cultural expressions within the Caribbean and its diaspora. Short fiction, poetry and critical reviews of high quality are particularly welcome.

Manuscripts should be no more than 5,000 words and should be in double-spaced format, preferably with an accompanying electronic text file in Microsoft word format.

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