

POUI

CAVE HILL JOURNAL
OF CREATIVE WRITING

NUMBER XII, 2011

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Poui

*She don't put out for just anyone.
She waits for HIM
and in his high august heat
he takes her
and their celestial mating
is so intense
that for weeks her rose-gold dress
lies tangled around her feet
and she don't even notice.*

Lorna Goodison

Poui X11 Foreword

Welcome to *Poui* X11. As usual, it features some of the stalwarts – Obediah Smith, Dee Horne, Philip Nanton, Marina Soledad Rodriguez – who have been with us from the earliest editions, alongside new talents from across the region and beyond. Though we have contributors from Haiti, Puerto Rico, St Vincent, Belize, Antigua, Aruba, Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago, Canada and the USA, it's notable that the majority of contributors (seven each) are from two places. As you would expect, one is Barbados, the journal's home; the other, less obviously, is The Bahamas. This may partly be due to the influence of Obediah Smith, who as an experienced and much published writer himself, is no doubt mentoring younger writers and encouraging them to send in their work. But the picture it also suggests of a thriving Bahamian literary community is borne out by Helen Klonaris's 'Not-a-Manifesto' (52), written as 'a letter to a sister writer in a small place'. In it she describes how: 'We imagined there were other island gyalz scratching out weird incantations on appropriated walls' while 'we yearned for a tradition' and 'were looking for our own words'. So, says Klonaris, 'We made a book, called it *WomanSpeak*, found more of us than we thought existed...womanish island women who wanted to speak weave themselves into a new tradition.' She glosses *WomanSpeak* as '*A Bahamian Women's Literary Journal* (which) brought together Bahamian women writers and spawned a small but radical writing community in the 1990s.'

The glimpse this gives us of how writers have to work to create a community in the Caribbean is something I imagine most of us can identify with. Without prejudice, we would probably agree that in our region, the quieter literary arts are often drowned out by the loud and joyous noise of our musicians, who provide the soundtrack to the international tourism on which we all depend. In this context, writers have to struggle to be heard, and the best way to do that is to get together, organize, listen to each other, and grow together. Like The Bahamas, Barbados has its writers' groups, as well as its national writing competition, its awards and poetry jams. As a regional journal, *Poui* is part of the process of creating community through linking writers in the different territories. Instead of a Featured Writer, this issue is therefore dedicated to the writing community in The Bahamas and the many regional writers who have supported *Poui* over the years.

The issue is divided into sections whose titles are taken from within the section: 1) '**Gold fish on the floor**' features different manifestations of love, its creativity and its discontents, and humour as an antidote to life's many problems; 2) '**That map at the bottom of the drawer**' follows the theme of place and displacement; 3) '**Words that cry at night**' is emblematic of painful emotions and experiences like nostalgia, grief, loss and change; 4) '**Maybe it happened like that**' counterpoises unfaithfulness and betrayal with community and comfort; 5) '**Second cousins are not on the list**' explores survival in the face of death, accident, disaster and ageing; finally, 6) '**Slim Vinegar licks her fingers**' uses images from nature and the material world – animals, fruit, vegetables, spices, fish and fishing - to speak about the process of writing itself. As the poem by Mark McWatt that ends the collection puts it, 'when the poem is complete, packaged,/marketed, the fisherman of words is happy.' We hope you will be too.

From the editors: Jane Bryce, Mark McWatt and Hazel Simmons-McDonald.

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POUI XII

I

Gold fish on the floor ...

Obediah Smith

In Love Lips

for D.B.A.

something about lips and vulva lips
these two sets of twin sisters

want to be friends of the two who live upstairs
as well as the two who live down stairs

which of these two sets of twins
of my darling Dee, are prettier
want to examine them closely

kiss them together, kiss them apart
love them equally

love them until the moon was high and bright
and shining upon the sea

upon the rolling waves
rolling because I got them started
with licks, with kicks, with kisses

Suit Fit

for D.B.A.

hope you are not pulling out from me
or from under me

ease out if you have to say good night
even now I am wondering
about your going to bed, falling asleep
without saying good bye or good night
or sleep tight

slippin' love or are we slipping in and out
is that what we're up to, into

that would suit me, nothing else and nothing less

In This One Basket

for D.B.A.

if we are nothing if we have nothing
what is it at present
that we are bussing up, breaking up

what is it that we are so intent upon destroying

if we are nothing- if we have nothing
even if what we have is made of glass
it was a container

it did contain us, it was at least
as much as a vase for flowers

what is there to complain about
if we are nothing, were nothing, had nothing

why are you upset if it is nothing at all
that I am shattering or shredding
or smashing up with harsh words

if what we had, if what we were
is nothing at all, if nothing at all
existed between us

I am crying because you have this and that
that you have invested in

invested and go on investing
in this one, that one

but you, we, us, is all I have
I have no one else and nothing else

it is in this one basket
that I do put- that I had put-
that I had been putting
all my eggs

Bowl Fish *for D.B.A.*

is that as long as forever was for

what happened or is happening
to the container that she and I were in
to the thing we were in

is it not containing us anymore
has she let it drop or have I or have we
let it drop

has it shattered like a gold fish bowl
with a gold fish or two in it

what use is water, everywhere flowing
what use are gold fish
flapping on the floor

I can weep for us

will there be a funeral for our relationship
I was expecting a wedding
with guests, handsomely suited
prettily dressed

If Dogs Could Talk

What do you mean by *if you may come in*?

If I don't let you in, you will think I'm hiding something. What choice do I have, Constable Jackman?

That's what I have to call you now, correct? I don't think "Luncheon Meat Lips" would be appropriate anymore, you being an officer of the law and all.

Oh, why do you look so surprised? You didn't think I would remember? Just because my company made a few dollars, and I live in a big house now, you think that I have forgotten my childhood? Running through the gullies barefoot, stealing cheese and bread out of the kitchen, picnics in the half-built house at the bottom of the gap? I can even remember the rusty nails in the walls, Constable Jackman. I ain't forget where I come from.

Now come in-watch that step there cause it's a little unstable. I know you think I can afford to pay a doctor to fix that foot if you break it.

Who's your friend Constable?

Pretty rude of her to just hover there like a guilty child, saying nothing. Sweetie don't you know your rights? Women can speak in the presence of men now without permission.

I see.

I didn't think policemen were allowed to use that kind of language.

Oh? Only policewomen? Well damn. It's nice to meet you Constable Chandler. There's nothing more entertaining than a policewoman with a filthy mouth.

Ignore my dog, Constable Jackman. You seem to have offended him in some way. His bark is loud and rough but he could fit into those Goliath-sized hands you have there Constable Chandler.

Now I know you two didn't trek up this hill just to say hello. What can I do for you?

Constable Jackman, I have many cousins, the majority of whom you know. In fact, if I can remember clearly, you knew one of my cousins so well that-

Oh you mean Jalisa. Hmmm...Why do you want to know when I last saw her?

Listen, Georgina Jones did not give birth to an idiot! I know my rights! I don't have to answer any goddamn thing you're asking me. You're in my house because I gave you permission to come in, permission that I can take back at any time. Now what happen to Lisa?

You want to arrest her?! On what charge?

Now listen to me Constables...Jalisa and I never got along. She was a thief, a liar and a cheat. And you know what's worse? She was bossy! Just because she was two months older, she thought that she could tell me what to do. I don't know what my Auntie Joan was thinking, spreading her legs for the bastard from that ecky becky family, who up and left her when he heard she was pregnant. Some women would do anything just to get a light-skinned child with so-called good hair.

No offence to you, Constable Chandler.

But Jalisa got all the special treatment because she was pretty. You see this scar here? Under my left eye? One day I found a Barbie doll with blonde hair in the bushes out by the play park. Jalisa try to take it away from me, and me we fought for hours, rolling all about the pavement and in the tunnels, just for that dolly. In the end, she shove my face in the ground, right in the middle of some shards of glass from a Ju-C bottle, and give me this scar here. And you know what happen to she? Nothing. She smile and tell my grandmother that I telling lies. And she believed her. Always got away with a lot of shit, that girl. Now who's she supposedly gone an' kill?

I see. And she said she was here?

Wait, you just give me a minute. Do you want anything to drink? Water? Coffee? I don't have any coffee. I've some peppermint tea that you can have, though.

Right, so where were we? Oh yes, you were telling me that my cousin could be charged for murdering Sylvester Maloney. How old is he now? Sorry how old *was* he? I think he was thirty or so years older than me, so about eighty-five then?

Doesn't matter. Jalisa could not have killed him yesterday because she was here with me. If my dog could talk, he would tell you the same thing.

Yes I know what I said earlier. Jalisa is a thief, a liar and a cheat. But I never said that she was a murderer. It's not in her to stab anybody with an ice pick- how many times you said- twenty one times?

Nope...not my cousin.

Why you suspect Jalisa? Sylvester Maloney had a lot of enemies. Sour old man who never give anybody anything.

How did I know him? You asking me that question for real, Constable Jackman?

I don't care if it is for official records. You're officially making yourself seem like an ass. Tell me something Constable Chandler. Do you know Sylvester Maloney?

No?! How could you not know him? Where did you grow up?

Well shit, I wonder how you ended up on this side of the island. City people don't normally move to the country. It's always the other way around. Consider yourself lucky though, Constable Chandler. How old are you? Twenty-five?

Ah close enough...twenty-six then. About twenty years ago you would have been Sylvester Maloney's type.

Caught you off guard didn't I, Constable Chandler? Everyone in Carters knows what type of man that son of a bitch is. Ask Constable Jackman here. Yet, hungry people who steal mangoes from a tree on private property are locked up and he is still walking the streets- oh wait- not anymore.

Forgive me for laughing. I've always had a poor sense of humour. So answer me that Constable Jackman. Why was he never *officially* investigated?

I know that's not a reason to kill anyone Constable Jackman. But you know that the police were not going to handle it. Maloney was just lucky that those coward mothers were too ashamed to press charges.

Jackman don't be stupid! I told you I don't forget! And my memory won't disappear just because yours did! Just because Sylvester Maloney lime on the block with the men and crack jokes, and would give the policemen some spare change for rum from he filthy pockets, he was never arrested for anything and you know it!

I can see it in your face, Constable Chandler...you don't seem so sorry for the bastard now. Think about if it was your daughter? Or from rumours I heard, your son?

No no no no no Jackman. I don't think that this interview is completely pointless at all. You now have the motive for about ten mothers, that is, ten potential murderers. Lisa could not have done it because she was here, and she has no motive.

You don't have to tell me that withholding evidence is a crime! I also know that child molestation and bribery are crimes as well!

What? Has your hearing gone along with your memory? Are you getting this down in that little black book? I said that Jalisa was here with me! I swear.

I see.

So if you already have solid evidence, then why did you come here questioning me?

Before you go to arrest her, there's something else you should know. Please, have a seat.

I keep telling you that I don't forget...but I do, well I did...at least once. You know the human mind is a funny thing. Well, you know this Constable Jackman, but people are just able to put things out of their mind...it's like they never happened. About sixteen years ago, back when I was studying at the University, I was hustling to catch the bus. You know how it is Jackman, running down that muddy hill as fast as you can, cause the next bus will be two hours later. I recognised a sweaty face man, carrying a bundle of bags on one shoulder, his muscles clenching under the weight, coming towards me. Those arms seemed so familiar but for the life of me I could not put a name to the face. We got closer and our eyes met, and he just smiled. A big rotten smile, exposing all his gums dark black from smoking Embassies.

I will never forget that feeling. I think the only person who would understand how I felt then would be a churchgoer feeling the spirit for the first time. He said "yea Lucy" and I said "yea Sylvester". The name roll off my tongue, like if I used to speak to him on the phone every day. And he just walk away, just like nothing had ever happened. Nothing had ever happened for trute...to him, and I stop there on the top of that hill, staring at his back, willing myself to shout something...do anything at all...besides say "yea Sylvester". I sit down in the mud, miss my bus, and just welcomed them memories...and I ain't forget nothing since then.

Don't you dare leave- thank you for holding him back Constable Chandler. I just want to tell my story.

I used to go to play Snakes and Ladders over at Auntie Joan's, though now I know it was really Sylvester's house, everyday with Jalisa. What can I say? I hated her but she was family. I was a tomboy then, racing and tumbling with the boys in the gap. Sound familiar Jackman?

Anyway, I used to leave Sylvester's house when it was dark, after he and Auntie Joan done let out the big black dog to guard the house. This dog used to go crazy trying to get close to me. I thought the thing was possessed! I was always so afraid of that dog, but when I think about it now, I think the dog just wanted to play. Auntie Joan would ask Sylvester to walk me outside. One night he held my hand and walked me out the back door, pass the excited dog and out through the gate. I let go of his hand and opened my mouth to say the normal goodbye. But that night, Sylvester did not let go of my hand.

That night, he just stood behind me and bent to kiss my neck. He whispered in my ear how sweet and cute I was and then he let his hand move lower, rotating his fingers in small circles outside my plaid jeans skirt. Soon, I felt my pubic hair that grew just about a month before, move around in that same clockwise rotation.

Yes, I could have moved Constable Chandler, but why did I stay there? I don't know. I stood there paralysed in shock...unable to move...unable to scream. The only noise, apart from the rough scraping of fabric, was the sound of the dog barking. Then he just let me go. I ran home, straight to my bed, and buried my face in the pillow, knowing what just happened was wrong.

That night I thought about what happened until the sun rose. And you know what I decided? I decided not to tell anyone, because Auntie Joan was poor, and she needed Sylvester to support her and Jalisa. I figured that out because they ate bakes all day long, for breakfast and lunch, with a glass of mauby. I ate along with them even though my mother had food waiting for me at home, and even I used to get excited when Sylvester came home, because he always brought three piece of flying fish to cook for food, along with a box of blackcurrant juice and teatime biscuits.

Don't push up your mouth Constable Jackman! After having bitter mauby and dry bakes all day long, that was like getting a Chefette Kids Meal!

Where was I? Oh right. I knew the conflict it would cause if I had to tell my mother what happened. There once was this man, who never used to do nothing but walk around collecting bottles and sleep under the big ackee tree. Sometimes he would come in my gallery and make little movements with his hand down his overalls, while I was playing Monopoly. Sometimes his hand moved fast, reminding me of the wings on a hummingbird, and once he moved so slow that I passed "Go", bought two hotels and went to jail about three times before his hand reappeared. I just mention it to my mother and she nearly went mad, and threw hot water on him the next time she saw him. He squeal, jump five feet in the air, and run down the road hollering blue murder, causing all the dogs in the gap to bark.

Now- and remember I was nine years old- I was thinking if my mother get on so over a man making lil movements with his hand, what would she do if she realised Sylvester touch me? I imagine Auntie Joan breaking down crying, and having eat mauby and bakes all the time now, without even a little blackcurrant juice. And I was wondering where them would live when them had to move out.

By the next day I had almost forgotten about the incident. That's the beauty of childhood, you know? A little television, chase a few butterflies and you're happy all over again. That night Auntie Joan asked Sylvester to walk me pass the dog again. It happened again. Again I didn't scream or move. I just listened to the dog barking, wishing he could talk and scream a warning to Auntie Joan. After that, I decided to leave Sylvester's house early so that he would never have to walk me outside again. That seemed to work and I praised myself for outsmarting him...but it never crossed my mind that he could do it to someone else.

Some weeks later I overhear a neighbour telling my mother that Jalisa tell she teacher that Sylvester touch her in her private area. I sit and wait on the explosion. I wait on the hot water to come out. I wait for my mother to bring Joan and Jalisa to live with us. But all now I still waiting. My mother had replied that she don't believe it cause Sylvester is a good man who does take care of he family. I was horrified. I had thought since he couldn't have me, he would have stopped. I blamed myself. I blamed my mother. I blame Auntie Joan. I blame everyone, except Sylvester. I don't know what happened with that situation, but I do know that my mother still let me go over to Sylvester's, and I know that it took Auntie Joan another ten years to move out of that house.

Hear my words, and make sure you got ALL of this written down in that little black book. I didn't speak up then, when I was nine years old, but I will speak now.

I don't know what evidence you have against my cousin but I will not take back my statement that she was HERE in this house with me. And I will use whatever resources I have in my power to fight you in court. I would have dragged Sylvester to hell myself if my hands had the strength, no matter how much he beg and scream out to the Lord, or promise not to touch anybody ever again.

How do I know he said that?

The dog tell me!

Olivia Russell

At the Bar

There he is,
nonchalant
and ambiguous
alone
and unattached
the best kind.

Here I am,
watching,
observing,
waiting.

His gaze
lists lazily
around the room
as he effortlessly
strokes
the rim of his glass
working his way,
up and down
the silhouette
of the stem
before his gaze
finally rests
on me
and for one moment
the world is gone,
leaving nothing but
two sweaty bodies

entangled in lust and,
engulfed in the flames
of the kama sutra.
His fingers
crawl and dig;
stroking me,
like a wine glass,
plucking me
like a guitar that
once belonged to
Santana himself.
Sucking me
like the mouth of a babe
desperate for every ounce
of nourishment
that drips
from his mother's nipple.
And as I begin
to melt in his mouth
an ocean
of emotions
he looks away,
pays the bill
and walks out
on our tantric
love affair.

Carlyon Blackman

The Politics of I Love You

They made a bride's table
then laid her bare on it
a close fit but she was ever
accommodating.
As time stretched
into nothingness
her perfumed flesh would fold inwards
under the weight of confetti swirls.
She felt pretty today. And her prettiness
allowed her to ease into
tight spaces
running
parallel between empathy
and righteousness for his name's sake.
A lucky quarter dropped in
an old jukebox stirred suicidal thoughts

Stand by your man

*Give him two arms to cling to
And something warm to come to*

When nights are cold and lonely
but lonely is relative
cold an altered state
only temporarily.

That first day

she'd felt the seismic

shift

register 8.5 in her clitoris

He was fine.

She was fierce.

Mau Mau drums fused with hip-hop anthems

on the grave of Tutankhamen

Mama said 'keep your legs shut tight from them nasty boys'

but she never mentioned a thing about her heart

so when the hurricane/volcano/earthquake/tsunami erupted

her mind closed and her legs flew apart

Hallelujah!!

She never thought that half-moon fingers

could dig so deep into fear.

In her jailer's cot, he of the long eyelashes

and milk-soured breath

lay mapping boundaries:

brown skid marks in a trouser seat

ancestral aversion to select wild meat

pig knuckled fists programmed to defeat the enemy

nestled inside a lace bra and corset

with torture he had not made up yet

but was

contemplating.

The sign on her door read:

Do Not Disturb

women at work giving birth to sin.

It kept the do-gooders out
while the brave ones were busy
infiltrating
The way to a man's heart is through his stomach
Still no amount of diet, destiny or desire
conspired
to win a man's soul
the knowing
did not bring understanding
it just made her hungry for some thing
other.

It took a rebel diva a while
before she released the chords
and though she didn't get any claps
or win awards
All things bright and beautiful
All creatures great and small
All things bright and wonderful
The Lord God made them all
when she no longer heard 'I love you so'
her mouth started forming 'please God, no'
and in the way of all tender things
in need of rescuing
loving made her feel sinned against
rather than sinful
a stamped
self addressed envelope
escaping

to a tomorrow

just because.. .

From then on living got interesting.

A Fairy's Tale

I had not seen Bobby in many years, so the invitation to be his best man surprised me. I thought of him from time to time, and knew that he was now living in Miami, but we drifted somewhat after both of us took flight from the growing metropolis of Nassau in the Fall of '72.

The years that we ran around together were some exciting ones. The winds of change were sweeping the country then, transforming the landscape. In a flurry of hopefulness, new regimes were being born and old ones were crumbling. As I remember, Bobby came from Cat Island to live in Nassau in the winter of '67. Of course, I was a bona fide city boy by then, having come from Grand Bahama since '63.

Bobby was there the first time a group of us went to the Savoy Theater. In fact, that was one of the first times they allowed a group of little Black boys to enter. As we ambled through the foyer, past the concession stand, and then into the main theater, Bobby whispered: "Brothers we're not in Kansas anymore." Certainly, none of us understood what the hell he was talking about, because we were too busy trying to get our bearings.

Yes, times were changing all right, and for the better, especially for Bahamians Over-The-Hill. And most people were happy about this change. A notable exception, however, was the Editor of the *Tribune*. This writer felt that the new leaders were incompetent and lacked the necessary training to run the country. Many in the community believed that this assessment was predicated upon their ebony skin.

One day, Bobby and I were walking pass the government building on Shirley Street, under the fiery bloom of a Poinciana, when we saw this little Black boy wearing a blue jean lined with patches, a sweet water high-top tennis, and a dingy white t-shirt selling *Tribunes*. I convinced Bobby (which took some doing, by the way) that this was an ignorant little boy, because he was putting the nail in his own coffin. "To hell with him if he wants to kill his own dream," I said to Bobby, "but I'll be damn' if I'm gonna let him kill mine." I held the paper boy against the black, iron-gate along the street and took his papers from him. Further down the road, I threw them in a puddle of water and stepped on them. The water crept quickly through the folds, expanding, turning the papers dark and fragile. Bobby didn't speak to me for the remainder of the day. For a long time afterwards, I considered all Black people who worked for the *Tribune* Uncle Toms, from the paper boy to the news room. My views have changed since, but the daily, like a leopard, can't change its spots.

Still, the occasion of the invitation was a pleasant one. I was sitting beside a longtime friend, who had called me out of the blue to be his best man. I was happy. Few people in our neighborhood ever understood Bobby. Over the years, I always thought that in some small way, I did.

The hall was small, but cozy and stylish. A light pink and white colored the room. Balloons and ribbons were everywhere. The white, metal arch in front of the podium was decorated with pink Hibiscus. A golden runner trailed from the arch to the entrance door. Bobby was tall and elegant, with his immaculate high-top hair cut, and his white suit, with pink bandanna and bow tie. People were chatting softly and anxiously waiting—waiting for the familiar music and the grand entrance. I observed the excited anticipation on their faces as I gazed around the room. I had seen this happy scene played out so many times before. At times like these, minutes can turn into lifetimes.

Sitting there, I reflected upon how much I owed Bobby. He transformed my mind from a tiny stream into a mighty river. I looked up at him and there, like always, was that eternal sadness in his eyes, but he was smiling.

"They didn't come," he whispered, "but I'm okay." I reached out and held his hand. From the way he squeezed mine, I knew that he was holding back the tears. "I still love them very much, Buddy, and not one of them showed up to the happiest occasion of my life."

"Continue to be, Bobby," I whispered.

He smiled. It was a saying I had borrowed from him. I have spoken it to myself in many difficult circumstances. Repeating it then called up the memory of when it was first heard: the spring of '68. I came home one afternoon and met my mother crying (And if my mother cries, the person who troubled her dies—period).

"What happened, Mummy?" I asked.

My pressure had already gone up. As I was asking, I was walking, full speed, through the front door to the bedroom. I knew that my mother's boyfriend kept a gun in the bottom drawer, because I had played with it many times while they were not at home. Immediately, I returned to the porch with the gun in my hand. My mother was crying so much that I don't think she ever saw the gun.

"What happened, Mummy?" I asked again, just so I would know in which direction to proceed.

"Das exactly wha' dey guh do tuh Mr. Pindling," she said. "Das how dose bastards does do it now."

"Do what, Mummy?"

"Boy yuh didn' hear? Dey kill Martin Luther King!"

I froze. King and Jesus were one. This is it! The whole godforsaken world is rotten, I thought. I dashed into the street, still holding the gun, heading toward Collins Wall. Rage had captured my soul. I fired a shot into the air, partly hoping that one of those indifferent angels would fall, but most of all as a warning to the brothers that the end had come. It was all for one, or one for all. All along the sidewalk young men were joining me with baseball bats and crowbars in their hands, anger on their faces, and rage in their souls, heading toward the wall. They had heard. Mothers were hollering and shouting and screaming and crying, but we paid little attention to them, because our souls were compelled by a destiny that awaited us beyond the wall.

From out of nowhere, it seemed, Bobby jumped on the sidewalk in front of me.

"Where are you going?" he asked.

"Out of my way Bobby!" I said. I did not break my stride in the least so he was back-pedaling as we walked.

"What are you going to do man? Kill someone!?"

"Yes!"

"Who?"

"Them."

"Them Who?"

"Them!"

"Which ones?"

"All!"

"And what will that get you, tell me?"

"Freedom!"

"What kind of freedom?"

"Freedom from them! That'll be the last damn dream they kill!"

"You can't ever get freedom, Buddy, until you learn to be."

He struck a cord in my soul that released me from the clutches of that unholy rage, even though I didn't fully understand what he was saying. So the mission was aborted because of Bobby's words and the fact that just then we heard the police siren. We scattered. You wouldn't

see that uprising in any history books though, but it lives in the memory of the people who experienced it.

Bobby and I became bosom buddies from that day. But I don't mind telling you that at the beginning he annoyed me considerably. We were constantly arguing because he was always trying to tell me what to do. When I would tell him to leave me the hell alone, he would say: "I'm only trying to correct your behavior." I would ask him who the hell he thought he was; he would only smile, and that would really set hell up in me.

But more than tell me what to do, he told me how to think, and awakened my consciousness. For instance, one Halloween night the corner boys were out, as usual, snatching candy bags from children. One of the boys would walk alongside someone and snatch a bag and run. There were so many people on the streets trick-or-treating in those days, you could easily lose yourself in the crowd. On this particular night, a young fellow was holding to his bag a little tight so when Tom tried to snatch it, it wouldn't leave the boy's hand. Tom saw this as an affront to his god-given right, since he was bigger and stronger, to take advantage of the weak. All of us present felt as Tom did, except for Bobby. Tom started slapping the boy, and punching him in the face and head, telling him to give up the bag, which the boy—in fear for his life perhaps—finally did. All of us watch this with great satisfaction, except, of course, for Bobby.

As we sauntered along laughing and making ready to share our bounty, we heard a familiar, but firm and agitated voice from behind us.

"Are you morons satisfied now?"

I am convinced to this day that if our vocabularies had been just a little more keen, Bobby would have gotten the shit beat out of him that night. All of us stopped laughing. We turned. Slowly.

"What the hell is a moron, Bobby?" I asked.

Bobby was an astute young man. He could size-up a situation in a second. He saw the anger in our eyes, lurking behind our tainted curiosity. So he didn't go to the dictionary that night, which would have caused him pain; he went to our souls for a definition, and caused us pain instead.

"A moron, my friends, is any Black person who realizes that he has so little under the white man's rule that he puts bread on his table by stealing from little Black children." He put his pointing finger on his bottom lip, and looking into the moonless night continued; "no, no that's not a precise definition. A moron is any Black person who is so tired of having his dreams deferred, he decides that dreams are too painful to have so he starts killing the dreams of little Black children. Hmmmmmmmmmm, let's see. To put it simply, a moron is any Black person who, knowing the history of Black people in this world, takes advantage of another Black person."

By the time he got to his simple definition, those candies that tasted so sweet in our mouths were very bitter in our stomachs. He knew what he had done and he didn't want to rub it in. He gave his famous parting words—"continue to be brothers"—and left.

From that night, all of us boys began to suppress any other feelings we had about Bobby. We knew, no matter what people said about him, that he was someone special. We would listen when he talked to us. When we would get angry with the police for chasing us from sitting on the wall late into the night, he would tell us to control ourselves. "After all," he would say, "the policeman doesn't understand that to keep your sanity, you have to stay out until sleep comes so when you get home you could find your place on the floor and go straight to sleep so those four walls wouldn't send your senses running." Bobby had this uncanny ability to put his finger on the problem, and then articulate it well. All of us boys knew that the crowded rooms our families lived in kept us out at night, but we couldn't say it like Bobby. "Send your senses running"—I laughed in my mind.

Bobby gave all of us hope in those final months of the decade of the sixties. He told us that all that stealing and fighting we had done under the old rule would have to stop. We had to change our attitudes he said, to assist the new government in rebuilding the nation for all Bahamians. Yes, our attitudes did change—everything did.

When the turning universe gave birth to the new decade, it also allowed our dreams to be reincarnated. The future of our nation was moving Over-The-Hill, and over Collins Wall. The future was in our hands and we loved it. We knew that we could create a better society than the one into which we had been born. Bobby told us that if we wanted to expand our minds we would have to read. In those days I read my first real books, *Manchild in the Promise Land*, by Claude Brown, and *No More Lies*, by Dick Gregory. We were excited. There was only one thing that disturbed us in those days: not seeing much of Bobby. It was as if he were saying by his absence, “I have taught you all I can; now I must go, and you must learn on your own.”

In reflection, I suppose that in Bobby’s frequent absences from us he was trying to live out his motto—trying to be. God knows, that is a difficult task in this world, because even before you are born people have decided what and who and how you should be, and if you come here trying to be you, it is usually unacceptable.

In any case, things die in winter, and even though we lived in a tropical climate, the early weeks of the winter of ‘72 brought no exceptions to this unyielding rule. I awoke early one Saturday morning determined that I was going to find Bobby, whose shadow I had not even seen in two weeks. I looked everywhere—at least I thought I did—but I couldn’t find him. Against my nature, I decided that I would give up. As I was walking across the yard, going no place in particular, I noticed that old Mr. Banister was standing on his porch watching me. He never said much, not even hello or good morning most of the time. In fact, he only spoke to a passerby if you caught him while he was about to sit down, just before he put his pipe in his mouth. If, however, he got his pipe in his mouth first, he wasn’t going to interrupt his only pleasure to speak to some idle human; but this morning, he spoke.

“You lookin for Bobby aint yuh?”

I was so accustomed to him not speaking, I was almost past him when I responded quickly: “Yes sir!”

“You Bobby friend aint yuh?”

“Yes sir.”

“You know, sometime best fuh one friend tuh let another friend be.”

“Yes sir,” I answered, as if what he said was a question.

“But if yuh really his friend, I t’ink he over at Howard place.”

“Thank you Mr. Banister, sir.”

I started towards Howard’s place. He lived next to a yard that had many fruit trees, but the people didn’t like us boys taking them. I had discovered the previous day though that they had gone away. So I decided to climb a Dilly tree and get a few dillies before going on my way. I positioned myself behind leaves and limbs so as not to be easily detected by someone passing. As I bit into the fleshy meat, the sweet juices, like a clear and thin caramel, drained down the corners of my mouth and collected under my chin. “Naseberry! Naseberry!” insisted the Trinidadian man who asked us to pick some from his tree on Thompson Lane. But at that moment of bliss, on that strange day, it didn’t matter to me what name they called them; they would still be cotton candy from a tree.

As I reached over for another, my eyes caught Howard’s bedroom window. The gentle breeze pushed the curtain aside and there was Howard and Bobby naked, embracing each other. Then they kissed. The slimy sweetness and the grainy texture of the earthy brown fruit rushed from my stomach and splattered the dark-green leaves, discoloring the bell-like white blossoms of the tree.

That was the day my foundations shook. But I decided a long time ago not to recall the feelings I had that day. I am ashamed of those feelings now. In the years since, I have seen men who raped and murdered women and children, who dropped bombs indiscriminately, mangling bodies and cities, decorated with medals of honor for bravery and valor; I have seen persons who maintain the flow of drugs in a community, devastating the delicate fabric of the family, hailed as outstanding, law-abiding citizens and heroes; I have seen individuals who were supposed to be servants of the people become servants of themselves; so Bobby standing naked embracing Howard isn't repulsive anymore.

I didn't say anything to anyone that day. I just went home and peered at the four woods. The night was restless. I kept waking up every time that devious mind that roams at night tried to take me up that Dilly tree. The next morning brought no reprieve. I got the news that during the night "persons unknown" entered Howard's house and beat him to death with a baseball bat, and that Bobby was hospitalized with four broken ribs, a broken leg, collarbone and multiple bruises.

Bobby was in a coma for three days. After about two weeks I finally decided to visit him. When I strolled into the open ward, towards Bobby's bed, every eye was on me.

"Be careful, Buddy," he whispered. "If you talk to me they will call you Sissy."

I didn't respond. I just eased into the chair.

"How are you doing?" I asked, finally, trying to shatter the unbearable silence.

"I am not doing anything, but I am feeling sick—sick of this world."

I didn't respond.

"Not once in my life, not once have I hurt anyone," he whispered, with tears rolling down his cheeks. "I care about people, but they wouldn't let me be, Buddy, they wouldn't let me be."

I always thought that Bobby was too strong to cry, too strong to be broken. It was only later that I began to realize all the internal struggles he must have had. He had triple jeopardy. We only had to struggle with being Black and poor. I sat there quite bewildered, not knowing what to say.

"You are the only one who came to see me, Buddy, not even my mother came. Since I woke up I have felt so alone."

"How did this happen to you, Bobby?" I found the courage to ask.

"How did what happen, Buddy? You mean how did I wind up in this bed beaten half to death, or do you mean how I came to be me? I believe, Buddy, that this is the only time 'why' might be easier to answer than 'how'. I am here in this bed because I love Howard."

His last statement bothered me and impulsively I blurted out: "Why?"

From behind a vacant stare, he asked: "Why do birds fly, Buddy?"

I was becoming increasingly annoyed so I shouted, "Because God made them that way, Bobby!"

He didn't respond. He merely gazed at the ceiling with tears still sliding from the corner of his eyes . . . just as it was happening in the pink and white hall, I noticed, my thoughts being interrupted by the bridal march. I patted his face with my hanky. He offered a signature Bobby smile—always radiant. We both got up to face his entering partner.

John was handsome, too, in his pink smock and white turban, which appeared as a halo around his dark forehead, as he approached the altar. He and Booby held hands. The minister asked: "Do you promise to love and cherish each other till death parts you?"

"We do."

Donnya Piggott

I'm Sprung

I'm...sprung
Picking up a pen
Every now and again
Just
So
I can write
Your name ...
Nothing is the same
Now that you came
I give you the blame
For you are the reason
That I'm always absent ...
Breezin' on cloud nine
'Cause I study you all de time
I spend more time prayin fuh you
Than I do
For myself ...
You are my wealth
My riches untold
My silver, my gold.
De sugar in my koolaid
and de coldness to my Gatorade
Cause
it
doan
taste
good
without
it.
and I gine sit here and write shite
Cause within de darkness you're de light
You're de sheet on my bed.
de hair produce in my head
Caw you does mek me look good, den
Better than I should, den
And if I had de world
If I had de entire world

I would ...
Teef de rest of de universe
So
You
Could
Just
Get
All ...

But I better breeze ...
Take a ease, right
Cuz aftah all I jes say ...
I only meet u yesterday ...

Shani Oliphant

Insatiable Desire

Come slowly friend
My night needs you
Touch every sensation
My story-weaver
Tickle senses dead to day
I desire you desperately
Your magic
Your truth
Amaze me
Kiss me lightly
Your dusty breath chokes me
And I like it
Play the scenes I long to see
Spin your hypnotics on me
I fall willingly to your spell
Tomorrow by the light of the moon
I'll wait to do it again.

II

That map at the bottom of the drawer

Carlyon Blackman

Dispatches

Anna Pucci wrapped her long straight flaxen hair
like a sarong round her limpid throat
stuck a red hibiscus behind her ear
marooned her hat with the tortoise shell pin
she bought for a song from the hawker
with the missing incisor teeth lining Cheapside
market early Friday morning preparing to chase
down polenta for her new Charlie to eat.

Her mother, god rest her soul, would have muttered
the whole time it took customs to clear her luggage.
Last Monday she had nothing left to declare. All
her good intentions traded in for foreign currency,
a tourist map and Ray-Bans bought specially for the
unveiling. *Bella Bella*, be careful of the men of war
on the beach, have fun snorkeling but wear sunscreen
like a religion - swear on your daughter's grave.

And after she hurt her foot walking on the shoal
stuck with a stray fishbone left over from a gutting
three rum and cokes and plenty fishcakes made up for
the back home news she edited whilst convalescing.
Paolo was sweet enough but his touch was too polite
seeking damages in her eyes. Snatches of calypso made her
feel restless and limited. The shock of the omnipresent
sun already diffused the heat of her new imagination.

Maria Soledad Rodriguez

The Great White Way

When theater takes over my Broadway,
breaking a leg doesn't exactly mean
the production requires all the paraphernalia
of a smooth operator and next-morning reviews.
I lived there as a child, had gone up from
the West Indies with a family that broke a leg
as we put running away on the map and running back
on another we kept at the bottom of a drawer.
So I slept with my head pointed towards that part
of Broadway that ran through the Heights,
the Hudson River just beyond us,
the Half Moon still trawling in books
about the drama of islands.

I used to walk through rooms of tapestries
in the Cloisters, with unicorns and Gregorian chant
the balm that kept me from noticing each stone
imported from some place in Europe where wealth
depended on my area of the world. Repeat performances
in a land where youth was the order of the day
and letters home celebrated we did not have
to board up our homes against hurricanes
nor stab at whatever future was left over
from their passing. Instead we secured the boards
under our feet on that great white way,
the Hudson River always around the corner,
until we broke a leg as we unfolded
that map at the bottom of the drawer.

Dreaming of Flying

1.

Thelma had a dream. Many people have dreams. Many people have hopes and fears and missing memories that visit them at night and leave before morning. But Thelma had only one. The same one every night.

In her dream the sky was the purest of blues. The only clouds were the ones that were scattered by her arms, outstretched to her sides, as the wind folded obediently under them, creating lift. The wind carried her like the twiggy thing with too-long legs that she was.

Below her the sea flew by. Waves ran and leaped, but could not keep up. Not with *her* speed. Below her the land grew out of the water, and the trees grew out of the land, and the animals ran from the trees and the forests. Below her the island swelled and circled, and the village on the island craned its head, and the many hands reached up.

Below her the school that was always there sprouted from a patch of corrugated roofs, and her schoolmates sprouted from its classrooms and her class mates broke off from among them. The sisters shook their heads as the girls held the hems of their skirts in their hands. But it was only to free their knees. Only to let their legs move loose and free, so that they could be fast, like Thelma. So that they could chase after her, arms and eyes straining to reach her, begging *take me with you*. But they couldn't go with her. They couldn't even fly. Their feet would never leave the land.

Below her she did not see her mother. Below her she saw her cousins spotting her against a blue backdrop and slicing her with their eyes. She saw them turn immediately to her aunt, saw them point skyward. Thelma was flying. How dare she? Who told her she could fly? And who told her she could fly before them? If there was anyone in that house, anyone in the village, if there was anyone in the whole entire world who deserved to fly it certainly wasn't Thelma. The nerve of some people. Think they can just walk into other people's families and just get whatever they want?

Below her the men in town crept out of their wives' houses and their sweethearts' houses, out of their pool halls and their rum shops. Below her the men abandoned their cards and their dominoes and came out too look up at her as her body crossed over the face of the sun. She saw their dark skin gleaming as brightly as their gold teeth and the reflection of the sun winking with their eyes as they too reached up. Their finger tips wanted so badly to touch her perfect skin.

But if wanting could make it so, we would never feel that earthly heaviness that comes with waking from such dreams.

2.

"You have such perfect skin" he whispered. Thelma could see why he would think that. His skin was rough, like his hands, but not like his voice. Nothing in the waking world was anything like his voice. His voice told her sweet things, and did so smoothly. His laugh made her clever, rewarding the things she said, even the things she was unsure of. His coaxing made her tantrums justified and not a thing a child does, as she'd sometimes thought of herself. His voice made her pretty.

His hands were made pretty by the glinting metal that choked his swollen fingers. A high school ring from some place she'd never heard of, a place you had to cross the sea to get to. And as if that achievement wasn't enough, there was his college ring, with more stones in it, and an even stranger name. Though she was sure she'd read it somewhere. A magazine or something. The third was a championship ring. It was the first one she'd noticed.

"So you a baller then?" she asked as he followed her out of the club, away from the loud noise and all the excitement. He only laughed. He put his hands around her making her warm compared to the night air. She pointed out the stars and their names and he kissed her ears. They never spoke of it again.

His skin might have been nice if she ever saw him in any kind of light aside from the street lamp or the club lights that danced while they did...something else. It was something too slow to be called dancing, and a little part of her was jealous of the other girls her age, with boyfriends their age. Thelma would peek at them, gleaming faces covered in sweat and turned red and blue and green by the light. She wanted to dance like them, with abandon. Dance with her entire body. Dance until she was dripping with sweat and her legs and arms and back and whatever else ached. But years from now, those girls would still be here. They would still be dancing to the same songs, their feet only shuffling as age set into their hardening joints. Meanwhile, Thelma would be in Paris or Japan or New York. All she had to do was move slow and sexy. It wasn't really dancing. It wasn't really anything.

The many orange hairs on his arms and chest might look handsome in the sunlight of a beach somewhere. He could look like — like who? Like Brad Pitt. Yes. He could be her Brad Pitt, only with rougher hands. And a smoother talk, if not a gentler voice.

3.

He had such a gentle voice. Thelma usually heard babies crying and crying to no end, they sounded like they could shatter glass. The ones she babysat for, or the ones she even held for a few minutes would bawl for no reason. Just to drive her crazy, probably. She wasn't cut out for this mother business, that was for sure.

But this one was different. This one was hers. This wasn't what she thought it would be like. He had the gentlest voice a baby ever had. He was so quiet for a baby. Too quiet, in fact. So quiet that sometimes she would lay him on his back in the bed and stare at him. Waiting for him to make a peep. And in the minutes that it took him to sense that there was anything wrong, she would wonder...

...She'd thought none of it had worked, but what if it had? The bitters, the bad medicine, what if she'd tied her belly too tight in the final months? What if she'd tried so hard to make it go away,

to keep it all a secret, that now that he was out he was continuing the lie for her. Or what if his being here at all was the lie. The real pain was in the waiting. And the wondering. Would he...could he learn to speak? Could he walk?

She could hide him when anyone came around. If they didn't know, they didn't have to find out. He was quiet. So quiet for a baby. The gentlest voice a baby ever had.

4.

"Come baby. Can't you walk? Walk for mommy. We not far now. Come, you could walk. You're a big boy now. A big boy. Come, come – No, mommy can't back yuh. Because mommy too tired, that's why. And you too heavy, baby. You're a big boy now, come. No man...Shhh...don't cry. Nuh cry, we soon reach. Just a little bit further. But you have to walk. Mommy can't back you, baby. Mommy can't carry you everywhere. Okay man...Ay, this chile. Ay, mi back. Ay, mi legs. Its okay, we soon reach. And good thing, because mommy can't carry you, baby. Nuh fi too long. You too, *too*, heavy. *This baby just too heavy.*

5.

"Nuh too long now. Good thing we reach here early though. Ay, yuh see how much di baby like di plane them? Watch him, so excited, di run all bout. Oh, leff di chile, ih nuh di bother anybody. So what if ih fall down, ih could get back up. Your mother never fuss over you like that, and you turn out just fine.

Now, when you reach, you know how fi get which paat you going? Hmph. If you ask me, I nuh see how a man can send a plane ticket for you but not have the decency fi pick you up from the airport. I mean anything could happen to you on the way there! But Thelma, he nuh own a car? Well ih cyant at least pay for a taxi? If you could get somebody to take you to the airport in a car when you here, why you have to ketch a bus when you reach – Oh. Oh, honey, don't look at me that way. I know, I know. You da your own woman now. Woman by law and woman by nature. No way I could argue that. But that nuh mean yuh aunty cyant worry bout you.

Now when you reach you must call and mek we know you alright. Well all of us will be worried about you of course; not just me but your cousins, your friends. And you have to mek the baby hear yuh voice so he nuh miss you too much. You di listen? Well answer me then? I swear, sometimes you act just like your mother.

First chance you get you start saving up, hear? Don't depend on any man for too long, you hear? Take it from somebody who knows, honey! Anyway, maybe in about six months you can send for the baby? A year then? A child needs his mother, Thelma. And you must call regular so he know your voice. You hearing me, Thelma? Well answer me then! Come on girl, I'm trying to talk to you and you not even paying attention. I swear, you acting like you already miles away.

Jane Bryce

Neighbours

For Eduardo and Mariana

In the house, boxes signal departure
The things all packed, ready for transportation
To their distant destination.
Blue glasses, empty of wine
Spinning-wheel lamp, neither spinning nor shining
Mirror with carved border
Bandaged against breakages like a blinded eye.
Walls gape bare where pictures hung
and postcards and photographs,
illustrations of other lives,
are missing.
Somewhere in the boxes, I presume,
Are stowed the radio that woke me with the World Service,
the tapes of Zorba's Dance and Peruvian pipe music
and the ornaments of painted bread that enlivened the kitchen.

But where have they packed the sound of voices
discussing in quickfire Spanish
the merits of a pot of beans?
The smell of cooking that drew me down the stairs
the ever-ready offers of something good to taste
from somewhere far away?
The invitation to sit down,
share what we have,
to stay?

In which box is that deep laugh that vibrated my floorboards?
Or those light footsteps at my door, high voice calling olá! Come
meet someone, come
try something, come
join us. Where are the stories, the shared jokes, the laughter?

You brought so much, must you take it all away?
Can't you leave us something?
Must nothing stay?
Go then. Take your things with you.
But unpack carefully,
Don't let anything break.
I want to know that, somewhere,
someone is telling a story in Spanish, someone is laughing
and someone is stirring a pot of beans
while someone else sits at the kitchen table
drinking red wine from a blue glass.

Vecinos

Para Mariana y Eduardo

(Translated by Mariana Valenzuela-Chadwick)

En la casa, cajas en señal de partida
Las cosas... todo empacado, pronto para el transporte
A su destino distante.

Vasos azules, vacíos de vino
Lámpara con rueda de hilar, ni hilando ni brillando
Espejo con esculpido borde
fajado contra frenazos como un ojo cegado
Muros atónitos, desnudos, donde colgaron cuadros
Y tarjetas postales y fotografías,
Ilustraciones de otras vidas,
Están perdidas.

En algun lugar en las cajas, presumo,
Están almacenadas la radio que me despertaba con el Servicio Mundial,
Las cintas con la danza de Zorba y la música peruana de caña y tambor
Y los adornos de pan pintado que vitalizaban la cocina.

Pero donde empacaron el sonido de las voces
Discutiendo en rápido español
¿Los méritos de una cacerola de porotos?
El aroma de cocina que me arrastraba escalera abajo
El siempre listo ofrecimiento de algo bueno para probar
¿Desde algún lugar lejano?
La invitación a sentarse,
compartir lo que tenemos,
¿quedarse?

¿En cual caja está aquella risa profunda que hacía vibrar mi piso entablado?
¡O aquellas suaves pisadas aquí en mi puerta, altas voces llamando olá! Ven a conocer a alguien,
ven
únete a nosotros. ¿Donde están las historias, las compartidas, bromas, el reidor?

Ustedes trajeron tanto. ¿Deben llevarse todo?
¿Pueden ustedes dejarnos algo?
¿Nada puede quedar?
Váyanse entonces. Llévense con ustedes sus cosas.
Pero desempaquen con cuidado,
No dejen que nada se rompa.
Quiero saber que, en algún lugar,
Alguien está contando historias en español, alguien se está riendo
Y alguien está revolviendo la cacerola con frijoles
Mientras otro alguien se sienta en la mesa de la cocina
Bebiendo vino tinto de un vaso azul.

LOOKING AT A MILLIPEDE

The millipede feasts on fallen fruit and flowers
imbibing its shiny beauty from their putrefaction,
like men who take nourishment from all the hours
of ingesting the dead ideas of whichever faction
of the world's ideological divide they think empowers
and justifies their chosen course of action...

And each individual in his fervour shines
with the feeding millipede's beauty and perfection,
as he treads the exciting tight-rope of his times,
expressing ideas he's sure will give direction
to a faltering human race... While the heady wines
fermenting in his veins mature towards selection

by creatures not unlike the millipede—the sublime
and wriggling embodiment of his resurrection...



Millipede feeding on the floor of Welchman Hall gully

III

words that cry at night

Jay Healy

Floating Islands

If islands could float
Would they ever be found?
Or would they wander the world,
All the way round?

If islands could float,
Would they ride with the waves?
Or sink like heavy stones,
To a watery grave?

If islands could float,
Would they all float together?
Like sheep in a flock,
Or birds of a feather?

If islands could float,
Would they know where they be?
Or would they float like jellyfish,
Aimlessly 'round the sea?

If islands could float,
Yet chose not to roam,
Could they root to the earth and call that their home?

Helen Klouaris

Not-A-Manifesto

This is not a manifesto. This is a letter to a sister writer¹ in a small place.

Sister, they want to know why I write. How can I tell them that if I don't tell them about you too? About the us that made the writing possible, on the so many days when we thought we were crazy, couldn't be real, island gypsies surviving you a crooked leg white grits gyal me a greek daughter who liked woman and sometimes man surviving in a small place that is hardly believable, in a place that didn't believe in us.

This is not a manifesto. This is words in a small place that cry at night like a baby you didn't want, couldn't take care of, forgot you had.

Remember how we said we needed a newsletter, some piece of paper with words on it, our words, to connect us to each other and other women? So we wouldn't feel alone. We were in your kitchen, sitting on the floor scheming. We were ex reporters, exiles from the word of our churches, exiles from the love of our mothers, trying to snake our ways back home, at home, still.

(I dream of an infant being
raped she dies and still
no one knows
Who did this to you? you ask
as I weep telling you my dream
we rescue each other in your
kitchen we open our doors
and the dreams spill out
so do the angers the fears
the memories we tell
poems and speak sermons
we could not speak anywhere
else your heresy
salves my dry scars
wets them to flower we
are sisters together in a town
where our lives are at risk
but my desires don't offend you
we talk into the night and years
about my lovers women's hands and lips
and the yearning that fills me still
you speak of your mother, your lover,
your newborn child, who is a miracle,
as you are
in this place of death
where trees and birds and lizards

are disappearing
you still dream wild gardens
and tend hummingbirds)

We schemed of words of our own. We imagined there were other island gyals scratching out weird incantations on appropriated walls, writing pads, notebooks, scraps of paper, napkins, bookmarks. We yearned for a tradition couldn't see it in the brokendown gaze of our mothers, their voices echoing the Father-Uncle-Brother-Husband-Gods/Devils warning us not to stray we did anyway found some kind of kinship courage in each other's hungriness for words for community we are still after all island women find it hard to survive in isolation don't believe in separation as the onliest path to independence that's not where we come from Sister, there are and ever will be practices older than American feminism we were looking for our own words, borrowed what we could till we could born something truer to the textures, stories, complications of our own lives. So we made a book, called it WomanSpeak², found more of us than we thought existed: Asha and Marion, Nicolette and Audrey, Aurora and Dianne, womanish island women who wanted to speak weave themselves into a new tradition out of everything that came before what else could we do except not speak and I had read what Audre Lorde had to say about that passed on her words to you you said Yes, yes, yes and we held readings candlelit casting old circles in new places public places conjured Alice Walker and then too looked for our own Mothers in the gardens and yards and mangrove swamps they waded through kept and swept and hardly knew at all till we could feel their hands touching ours again, feel their glazed eyes opening inside us. We turned our new eyes on each other wanted each other as badly as those words we were trembling for ah, and I am remembering Cherríe Moraga talking about how hard it is to love another woman when you yourself, a woman, are taught to hate womanishness, both of you unworthy

This is not a manifesto. This is testimony. This is how night came on fast in our 21 by 7 world, and we made words in between the walls of Government House and the churches we grew up in, Orthodox and Anglican, between courthouses and school houses, the blue and white, green and white stripes of English school uniforms meant to keep us in line. This is how we found each other in those in between places, and every day fought to remember who we could be there. Every day the sun came up, the tide went out, and the in between places disappeared.

And so we moved into a time of separation against our wills, each of us fighting to survive at home or in the public eye wanting to love and pushing against a shame so deep sometimes we had to pull each other out of poisonous beds stranger beds beds soaked with grief or alcohol you with your addictions, me with mine once when you were drunk and we were sitting in Tamarind Hill on Village Road after dark, you said, "Maybe you and I should live together, love each other the way we're trying to love men..." You said, "Why can I tell you everything I can't say to him?" We laughed too nervously, I can still hear the ice clink against the glass, the smell of Dewar's, how you said, "Anyhow, we won't talk about this after tonight." And we never did. Girl, funny how our words seemed to disappear into cracks between night and day, always combing the beach for them after a storm, how I'd leave Nassau for Boston, New York, San Francisco, and call you crying 'cause here, in this place, I'd say, I can't find us. I forget what I know, need to be someone else. You always tell me, we're still right here. Waiting for you to come home.

This is not a manifesto. This is remembering who I write for, who I write from. How where I come from chooses the words, shapes them, needs more than one kind of sentence followed by another, more than one genre, more than one voice:

words
like whispers, gossip, sub-story
underneath words
like prayers hissed, hauntings
and the lines in between the lines the spaces between the words
(what I haven't said yet the fragments that survive)
parenthetical sentences
(what I'm scared to say but need to)
the sentences outside them what I want you to see

How memoir and poetry are story and fiction is mythos and breath and tides are constant
circular *show me yuh motion* is how the song goes *tra la la la la* and she look like a sugar in a
plum plum plum

And the truth is, I am always leaving and coming home, forgetting and coming to, finding more ways of speaking and writing and living in both worlds, between them, at the cross currents where the words/worlds are under pressure where cool air and warm air meet up and clouds form, build, break open, transformation of air into water it's what we said so long ago, how we are changers, believing in the snake and the fire and the blood. (I am Odysseus and Calypso). Because we knew for us writing has always been a force; it was never glamorous, it was survival. It was how we came to know ourselves, stuck in our bodies (this island), rooted in them (this island), rooting inside (this island) them, inside memories and out of silences we taught ourselves to move, in between definitions imposed, in between languages, the Queen's English and Raw Bone Bahamian, Conchy Joe English and Greek Bahamian English, and the way we learned to speak in front of teachers from England and tourists from North America, the word of God, the word on the street. We snaked through these, weaved a way between them, not untouched. Of course touched. Of course pining after new languages. How we would born them from our own bodies, out of dirt, mangrove swamp, dusty limestone track roads, the steaming hot tar roads and the jonsin' rectangular boxes of our parents' striving middle class desires. The history books that grew us. The so many gaps inside them, on every white page.

This is words in between manifestos

I will tell them, then, this is how we sustained each other, like breath, like fire, like blood. Poetry on our tongues making a way. I will tell them, this is how words in our fingers became lifelines. Evenings I would call you and read my latest sermon, rant, poem and you would read me yours. I will tell them we did it because we were afraid of dying in a small place at the bottom of America, an ocean away from England, an impossible veil between us and our Caribbean sistren and brethren to the east. And yes, poetry was the closest thing to God. And when we grew rageful of Him, we wrote new poems, erratic ones, making long love to womanish gods then hiding the words inside yellow legal pads till again we forgot and grew withered and brittle and remembered ourselves to each other all over again. We understood that on the ground and in our bodies seasons come and go. You said, Sister, the wheel is turning. I said, I wish the rains would come; it is hard to grow things in this dry dirt. You said, they are coming. You said, forget what you learned up north, here the seasons are many, and indiscernible to the first world eye.

I will tell them we are writing, even though they can hardly hear us. I will tell them, Sister, when hurricane season comes, even people in big places need to be watchful.

¹“Sister writer” refers to Lynn Sweeting, co-founder and current editor of the Bahamian literary journal ‘*WomanSpeak*’.

²*WomanSpeak: A Bahamian Women’s Literary Journal*’ brought together Bahamian women writers and spawned a small but radical writing community in the 1990s.

Bianca Thorne

Morning Gas

Quick fixes of scratch cards and Mega 6 tickets
School kids picking snacks so sugar cravings are nixed
The foreman starts the morning with a large cup of Joe
Munching in the air-conditioning of his truck before he goes
Tourists and their potato chips, water and beer
Beggars on the corner want money to spare.
Street sweepers clean the place up in no time flat.
Limers line the outside watching ladies' backs.
Like the young girl on her cell phone who likes to be seen
High heels pitch her forward in a permanent lean
Retired men in tailored shorts grab newspapers first.
Seamoss and sweet drinks quench labourers' thirsts
Patties, cutters, cakes, pizza and quiche
Last minute breakfasts fortified with grease.
For the overnight security guard with excess weight
Whose fact between his legs has hindered his gait
No slumps at the pumps, whatever the price
Older attendants daydream "Retirement would be nice"
Young attendant blasting music from this cheap stereo.
For drivers who should have been there 10 minutes ago.
Some filling out entry forms in their car as they wait
For the shiny new vehicle propped at the front as bait
And for all those who say we've lost the culture of yore
This place has replaced the corner shop for sure!

Jane Bryce

Rasta at the Cross-road.

Every day he standing there
Rain or shine.

Grey locks mat-up like bindweed in roadside cane,
Eyes far-off, don't see the cars
Stop and idle at the junction
Choose a direction
Move on.

Rasta-man stands at the cross-road
Where signs point east -
Hunte's Gardens, Edgewater, Bathsheba,
South-east to Redland and Lemon Arbour,
Up to Orchid World and down Gun Hill
to where they play cricket on the Glebe.

At the point where progress halts at the stop sign
Checks right and left
Indicates an intention,
There he stays.
Eyes grey as Bathsheba waves
Facing all ways at once, like Esu,
He pays the cross-road god his due.

The Rains Set Up Early This Year

The rains set up early this year in Maracas Valley,
where the pom ceetay and the silk cotton,
stripped dryly of their leaves, had been waiting
cautiously for a signal to start turning green again.

April is too early for this to happen some said,
but not for this leap year the natured Rastas knew.

This year, they set up so unexpectedly that
they startled the yellow poui before they had a
chance to reach full bloom on the hillsides.

This year, they set up so suddenly that
they pounced on us like a spotted ocelot
on its unsuspecting prey at night.

This year, they set up so mischievously that
they even stopped Lara from cricketing against
England on Sunday afternoon at Queen's Park Oval.

This year, they set up so purely that
they cleansed nature's dry season debris
from the black road that twists and climbs
like a wounded snake at Valleyview.

This year, they set up so masterfully that
they taught the school children,
caught in St. Joseph's streets after school,
about the wisdom of umbrellas and reminded
them again that exams were coming
as fast and unrelenting as the rains.

These leap rains were hard and thick and pepper black,
salted, at times, with beans of white hail.

These leap rains roared as they punished the
gray concrete window sills,
percussed on the silver,
the green and the red tin roofs.

These leap rains teased their way among the
few stands of pine on the heights,
along the ridge above St. Benedict's
and thinned out those who drink high tea.

These leap rains set the river to complain about
what it had to catch and carry through
the Caroni plains and on out to sea.

These leap rains changed the smell of the place from
hot dust dry to cool water moist.
In these rains even the oilbird couldn't stay dry.

Looking Back at the Young Japanese Fishermen in Point Blanche

As a little boy, I used to go by the relaxing Japanese fishermen in Point Blanche, to buy fish with my father for special family occasions. These young Japanese fishermen would go out far into the rich blue Caribbean Sea or the Atlantic to fish for days on their modern fishing boats unlike anything else on the little Caribbean Island. They were being mentored and taught all the tricks of the trade by older and more seasoned Japanese fishermen. Overhead, fat pelicans and black thrushes would be sailing on the sea breeze keeping an eye out for discarded fish, Point Blanche, with its hills of massive rocks, boldly rising out of the Caribbean Sea with a slanted valley sandwiched in between.

In those days, Japan was still recovering from the destructive consequences of WWII. The Vietnam War was starting to heat up under the new North American President, but I was still way too young to fully understand all of that. Point Blanche has now become a very modern and busy harbor, servicing huge tourist boats and international container ships bringing endless consumer goods and building materials. Every time I went along with my father, I would see the sadness on the faces of the young Japanese fishermen, who would often show my father pictures of their parents or their kids or their girlfriends or wives living on the other side of the world, often in small rural villages, scattered across the interior or on the coast of the Japanese Islands. On the walls inside the fish factory, there were countless pictures of Japan and of Mount Fuji. I was still too young to appreciate what it really meant to be living far away from home. Our Dutch/French Island, at that time, was still quite rural, and extended families were vibrantly intact and constantly interacting. Often, the friendly young fishermen would be eating their sushi or their other Japanese dishes and would give me sweet Japanese cakes, which I loved, but whose names I have forgotten. Their Japanese company had an agreement with the small island government, on the Dutch side, which was interested in the few jobs their presence created on the very small quiet and isolated Caribbean Island, just before the great North American tourist invasion.

Sketches from the Rubble

Small Indulgences

Anyone who's been to an oxygen bar will tell you that they come out feeling brand new, refreshed, and infinitely more alive than before. You can choose from an assortment of flavors to enhance the experience: lavender for relaxation, mint for revitalization. Oxygen bars make few health benefit claims; it's just good, pure indulgence. Metellys Saintville never heard of oxygen bars. Even if he had known about them, he would not have spent a fraction of his hard-earned income on flavored gas. The polluted variety he breathed for free was enough.

When there was work, Metellys – a carpenter by trade – took whatever he could find. He repaired televisions and dilapidated VCRs. He wired houses for electricity, borrowing a line or two from the electrical posts in a nearby street corner. He drove a taxi; he altered suits and leather shoes. However, because there were more days without work than there were days with work, Metellys spent the hours under an almond tree, waiting for tomorrow to come. The next day, he did the same.

Metellys Saintville was 58 years old when he died. Family and friends set the bier ablaze with white lilies and purple gladioli. Metellys would have considered all the flowers a shameful waste of resources. But everyone loved this humble man who always had a kind word and a plate of food for a hungry passerby. They recalled the mild voice with which he spoke; they recalled the ready smile. "I've lost a treasure," his wife said, incapable of imagining a world without Metellys by her side. "We've all lost a treasure," other mourners agreed.

Some said it was simply Metellys' time that had come. Others disagreed. Metellys was buried January 11, 2010 – twenty four hours before the earth would heave. The details of his death continue to haunt me: On New Year's Day, the doctors said Metellys' heart was strong. They claimed the infection in his lungs was treatable. Now and then, Metellys would slip out of consciousness as he struggled with his end of the rope in his tug-o-war with the infection in his lungs. He was in pain, but he was expected to live.

On the morning of January Eleventh, when his suffering reached such an agonizing peak that Metellys begged for death to claim him, his wife informed the doctors that her husband had difficulty breathing. The doctors, affronted, told the wife of course they knew the patient had difficulty breathing! But the hospital had run out of oxygen. "Madame, what would you have us do?"

The doctors told the wife she could run down to the nearby pharmacy and purchase a portable tank. Upon hearing those words, the wife left her husband's side and rushed to do as she was told. She purchased the tank of oxygen and paid someone to help her carry it back to the hospital.

No one talks about what happened between the time the wife left for the oxygen tank and when she returned. All they know is that Metellys Saintville looked like he was sleeping inside the coffin. All they know now is that Metellys' house collapsed twenty-four hours after he was

put in the ground. His wife and children joined him, though there would be no white lilies or purple gladioli on the bier. There would be no coffins. And no gathering of mourners.

“Hot Day, Isn’t it?”

If I don’t answer the question the way you think I should – the way most people would, it is not because I am rude or have a bad attitude. Where I come from, no one asks “Hot day, isn’t it?” Haiti is hot. It’s tropical. No snow. We know. That’s it. So, “Sak pase?” we ask one another. And we don’t do it unless we’re fully prepared to pull up a chair to hear exactly how things are going. Small talk and the Haitian diaspeople I know don’t mix.

If it’s the middle of July and the hundredth weatherman said it would be one hundred degrees, it’s fairly safe to assume that it will be a hot day.

If you look out of your kitchen window and you see thick air quivering like ribbons from helium balloons, it’s probably hot outside. When you come out of your house and the sun slaps your eyes and perspiration trickles down your temples and your spine . . . it’s not wintertime. When a shirt sticks to your ribs like a Band-Aid, you probably won’t need a turtleneck sweater. When you make your way from your front or back door to the driver side door – whether that distance is two or one hundred feet, if your hands begin to drip . . . it’s not overcoat season.

You know it’s hot. I know it’s hot. Everyone knows it is hot. Why then do you ask: “Hot day, isn’t it?”

If I shake my head in agreement and keep going my way, you shake your head and think I’m morose. If I give you my best smile and say “Yes, it is hot,” and keep going my way, you think I’m morose. If my country has a massive earthquake and you see me three days later and you smile your best smile and you mean well and your heart is breaking and I can see the pain in your eyes and you see the pain in my eyes and you open your mouth and all that comes out is: “Hey, what’s shakin?” and I say you might consider choosing a different greeting, you think I’m odd.

So now you’re scared of your own words. You don’t know what to say. What is there to say? You want to cry with me, but I am not crying. Too many tears shed; time for me to get to the business of helping my country.

Now, you’re alone with your thoughts. You think I don’t want to talk, but I am not sure we can talk because if it’s a hundred degrees outside and your sweat is sweating, and you find it necessary to ask “Hot day, isn’t it?” what is there to say?

Silence can be deafening sometimes, so you hurry to fill it before you lose your balance. Who wants to fall with everyone watching? When we see each other in the hallway, at the supermarket, inside the conference room, at the gym, at the airport, at church, and you say “Hot day, isn’t it,” please understand that I hear a question that does not require a formal response.

Maxims, Vultures, and Kidnappings

Sitting on the porch late at night in Petion Ville, my great-grandmother would tell me a thousand and one tales about a baby chick's futile attempts to frustrate Malfini's diabolical plans. Madan Deo's stories were always full of convoluted twists, but the endings never varied: Malfini would swoop down and pluck the song out of baby chick's quivering throat. All that would remain is an echo. And maybe a couple of feathers.

You might say that's too heavy a story to tell a five year old kid right before she goes to bed. Heavier than . . . say, for example . . . Ariel, the mermaid who sells her tongue to a sea witch -- in exchange for human legs.

Once Madan Deo had administered the proper dose of folktales – most of which her own great-grands had brought with them from West Africa – I would shiver and fall asleep with one eye open, but I would sleep. The baby chicks, on the other hand, would not be so fortunate.

Confident that his supply of tender flesh was endless, Malfini would return to the sky. Content and fattened, he would spread his powerful wings and soar. Other vultures would look at Malfini and wonder if they could join him once or twice in that place where baby chicks were so plentiful. A magnanimous Malfini would tell the other vultures to follow him.

Elaborate feedings would take place in the wide open. The doomed baby chicks would tell themselves that God is always watching. They would hope that sooner or later one of Malfini's own accomplices would open its bill and call for the frenzy to stop.

The baby chicks would beg the ones who were supposed to protect them. "Someone, please, please, do something." But those witnesses have a maxim of their own: *Je wè, boush pe*. Eyes see, but mouths don't speak.

On the Rock

the house cannot withstand
the summer rain, the hurricane
when water drips from roof through
holes like mouths to feed
a yellow clapboard house paint flaking
potcakes fast asleep underneath the
nose of the patio
from great grandmother ...down
house has undergone fire and brimstone
this house has heard irreconcilable fights
slaps from in-laws doors slammed shut
shatter of broken jaws
heard the breaking of beer bottles
and wine glasses fine china
seen bruises of black and blues eyes
smelled burning of cigarettes backwood and
marijuana and unwatched pots
heard the moans of love making
raping, toddlers playing
angry folks in the road of Mackey Street swearin
diffused by the prayers of grandma
this house withstood it all, now it has a story to tell

IV

Maybe it happened like that

Internal Injuries

When Cuqui called and invited me to lunch, I claimed to be busy. She wasn't one of my favorite people. The last day of second grade, my son Eddie had come home crying his eyes out, because he wasn't invited to her son's birthday. He was the only boy in the class left out. I should have stuck to my guns, but I let my husband Edgardo persuade me it was silly to hold a grudge about something that happened ten years ago.

Edgardo thought the lunch invitation meant I was finally accepted by the mothers that matter at Saint John's School, the number one prep academy in San Juan. That sort of thing meant a lot to him. His parents ran a *colmado*, a mom and pop grocery, on the other side of the island, and Edgardo was the first in the family to go to college. Besides, Cuqui's husband was a long time buddy of Orlando Ramos, the newly elected pro-statehood governor of Puerto Rico. Edgardo believed in making contacts.

Later that evening, I called Cuqui back and said I would be free tomorrow after all. We arranged to meet at the Patisserie on Ashford Avenue, walking distance from my apartment on San Jorge. Before entering the restaurant, I caught sight of her with two young women at a window table. One was her daughter Cristina, and the other was introduced as Ashley, her roommate from Swarthmore spending Easter vacation with them.

Cuqui had on a bright, flowered silk blouse and she wore large gold earrings, with multiple loops and diamonds, the kind that make your ears ache. The two young women, both fashionably thin, wore muted earth tones and tasteful single band gold necklaces. I was telling Ashley about the best beaches on the island, when Cuqui summoned the waitress in a loud voice and ordered a bottle of wine.

I said it was too early in the day for me, but she ordered a glass for each of us anyway. The wine went straight to my bladder. When I returned from the bathroom, and took my seat, our croissant sandwiches had already been served, and Cristina was giggling about how Marcos, a former classmate from Saint John's, had been flirting with Ashley at a party the night before.

"Marcos turned out to be a real good looking guy," said Cuqui.

Fair-skinned Ashley flushed.

"Watch out!" Cristina told her friend. "He's a real player!"

"What do you mean?" asked Cuqui.

"A mujeriego," I translated.

"He seemed very sincere and straightforward," said Ashley.

"Ella no sabe como son los hombres puertorriqueños," said Cuqui, shaking her head.

"Mom's saying you don't know what Puerto Rican men are like," said Cristina.

Ashley smiled. "Not just Puerto Rican men. You can't be too trusting of *any* man."

"Yeah," said Cuqui. "You have to keep your eyes open."

I wondered why she was looking at me.

"Un momento," I said, "let's not give Ashley the wrong idea. There are plenty of decent Puerto Rican men."

"Maggie should know," Cuqui replied, patting my arm. "She's been married to the same one forever."

The two young women declined to eat dessert, and left soon after in Ashley's rental car. Cuqui ordered coffee for the two of us. Then she asked me whether I'd heard that her son Iván had been named Housing Secretary.

"Edgardo told me about it," I said. "Give Iván our congratulations."

"Thanks. How is Edgardo? I haven't spoken to him since the big fund raiser."

Cuqui was talking about the thousand dollars a plate dinner for Governor Ramos we had both attended six months before. I remembered telling Edgardo I wasn't going. My father had driven a taxi to put me through college, and I wasn't about to give all that money away to some goddamn politician. But Edgardo pointed out that it was hardly the time to be stingy when his consulting firm was bidding for a half a million dollar study of the new health card for the poor.

I told Cuqui that Edgardo was very busy nowadays with a new contract with the Health Department. "In the consulting business, it's either feast or famine," I said. "We hardly see him."

"I saw him a week ago, in Zipperle's, but I don't think he saw me," said Cuqui. "Do you remember the new Assistant Secretary of Health? She made a late entrance at the Governor's dinner. Young, good-looking blonde?"

"You mean Claudia Meléndez?"

"You have a good memory," said Cuqui, smiling. "That's who Edgardo was with at Zipperle's."

"Edgardo has lunch with the people at the Health Department all the time," I said and looked her straight in the eye.

"It was dinner time. About eight thirty," Cuqui replied.

I couldn't think of anything to say. I had known Cuqui for many years, but she had never invited me for lunch before. She knew I was born and brought up in Brooklyn. Up to this point, I had assumed the idea was to invite someone to lunch who spoke good English while entertaining Ashley, but it looked like there was another motive.

The waitress came and asked if we wanted anything more.

"Just the check," I said.

Cuqui said that her friend Gloria told her just last week that Claudia went to the same plastic surgeon she did, a man known for working wonders.

By this time we had exited the restaurant. I politely returned Cuqui's kiss on the cheek. While she waited for the valet to bring her car, I started for home on foot. As I got to the corner of Ashford and San Jorge, it started to drizzle. A loud honk made me realize I was crossing on red.

When I got home, I made myself another cup of coffee. The words "around eight thirty at night" not only rang in my ears, they rammed into my stomach and turned the food I had eaten into a hard lump. The second coffee only made it worse. A wave of nausea sent me to the bathroom. When I finished throwing up, I felt like my first mother's milk had come up, or would have if I'd been breast fed.

I lay down. The lump in my stomach had been replaced by a hollow emptiness. I started dialing Edgardo's private office number, but stopped midway when I remembered he had taken our son Eddie to his office party to celebrate finishing the first part of the health card project. What was I going to say to him? I needed to get my head straight first. Maybe Cuqui was making up a story to get back at me. But what for? On the other hand, just because my husband had dinner with Claudia didn't mean he was having an affair.

When father and son got home around seven, I had enough self control not to bring it up in front of Eddie. Luckily, the guys had eaten too much at the office party to be hungry, and I didn't have to sit through a family dinner. We all three watched a Law and Order rerun until Eddie's friends came to pick him up.

"He's a great help at the office," Edgardo said.

I nodded. I was the one who had suggested a part time job would be good for our son, keep him away from the fast crowd at Saint John's School.

"You're awful quiet," said Edgardo. "How was the lunch with Cuqui?"

I muted the sound on the TV. "Strange."

"Come on Maggie, it can't have been that bad."

"What do you want first?" I asked, my voice neutral, "the good news or the bad news?"

"The good news, baby."

"Cuqui said you should give her son a call. I guess there might be some possibility of consulting for the Housing Department."

"Good work, sweetie. Now what's the bad?"

"She's an awful gossip."

Edgardo shrugged. "Okay, so who did she give you the low down on?"

"You."

"What do you mean?"

I told him.

"Maggie, sweetheart, don't tell me that woman worried you. What a witch! My relationship with Claudia Meléndez is strictly professional. You have to wine and dine them."

"But did you take her to dinner?"

Edgardo hesitated. "Just lunch, I think. He wrinkled his brow. "Maybe dinner once. Really it's not important."

"I just wish you told me before someone else did."

"Oye, *mi amor*, I'm flattered you think I'm still attractive to a young woman like Claudia, but I swear nothing is going on. *Negra*, I love you."

I began to cry hard. Edgardo comforted me, assuring me he treasured me and the family we built together. All those resolutions to keep calm, judge with my head not my heart, went flying out the window. We ended up making love like teenagers.

I awoke to the first gray light of approaching dawn. Edgardo was snoring by my side. I ran my hand over one breast, cupping it in my hand. The solidity of my body reassured me the lovemaking was real, and I drifted back to sleep. When I awoke, Edgardo already had coffee made. We had a leisurely breakfast before he left for the office.

All day I was like a surfer riding a frothy wave of reconciliation, until Edgardo called me at about four saying he would be late. He had to have a quick drink with Ricky Colorado, the head of the research section of the health insurer Triple S.

"I'll just be an hour late. We'll go out for dinner."

My husband was trying to reassure me. But the phone call made me uneasy. The snapshot of Edgardo swearing his undying love for me was replaced in my head by a man wrinkling his brow, trying to remember whether he had taken Claudia to dinner. What man wouldn't remember? Fucking liar!

I spent the next three days riding a see saw, up one moment and down the next. I looked forward to the spring vacation ending, hoping that getting back to teaching would steady me. A crisis with the best student in my high school English class, a girl of sixteen, kept my mind off my own problems for a week. But when I finally got Social Services to intervene with her abusive stepfather, my own situation began eating me again.

The feeling of not having my feet firmly placed on the ground didn't go away as summer approached. After that one night of passionate sex, I just went through the motions. The momentary flame inspired by jealousy was replaced by the dull deadening ache of distrust.

But after a couple of months I began to feel better. Edgardo was working hard on the health project, but he rarely stayed late, and he called me at least once a day to just chat about how the day was going. He was doing his part to help me get over my suspicions. Neither of us mentioned Claudia Meléndez again.

By summer's end, I thought we were back into our old groove, until I noticed Edgardo was obsessed with the news. He read both the San Juan Star and El Nuevo Día cover to cover, and then at ten he would urge me to join him in the TV room to watch the local news.

One evening, the newscast on channel two said the Federal Justice Department was investigating the use of funds for AIDS patients at the San Juan AIDS Institute. They were interviewing Dr. Emilio Orsini, the head of the Institute, a distinguished gent with white hair who solemnly assured the camera that the investigation was pro forma. The Institute was late providing the financial paperwork, because they had been too busy working on a new program for the homeless who walk the streets of San Juan.

When the ads came on I asked, "What was that all about? That Orsini guy's face is kinda familiar."

"He was at the thousand dollars a plate dinner. An honest and dedicated man."

"I hope so. They were talking about taking funds from the AIDS Institute. Just imagine. Stealing from the dying."

The ads were over. The pretty TV reporter was interviewing Elí Carmona, the Independence Party leader, who promised to push for a full investigation.

"Interesting," I said. "He's an *independentista*, but he seems happy to back up the Feds."

"Maggie, you don't understand the way things work in Puerto Rico. Anything to get Governor Ramos. It's all politics."

It annoyed me when Edgardo lectured me on how things work in Puerto Rico as though being born in Brooklyn meant I was any less *boricua* than he was.

"Carmona sounded sincerely disgusted about a scheme to rob the sick," I insisted.

Edgardo changed the subject. "What worries me is that a full blown investigation of the AIDS Institute could spill over."

"Spill over?"

"Into investigation of other health contracts."

This conversation worried me, but when I broached the subject the next day, Edgardo told me not to be silly.

"Don't worry sweetheart, we do everything by the book."

I wasn't completely reassured. Edgardo often looked preoccupied, and he began complaining about splitting headaches. Then I found him sitting in the living room at two in the morning, his head in his hands

"Maybe you should see a doctor," I said, handing him some Tylenol.

He swallowed the pills and told me that the Feds had started investigating political contributions made by Health Department contractors. "I'm in trouble, Maggie."

"But honey, I don't think going to a \$1000 a plate dinner for the Governor would be considered a bribe."

Edgardo shook his head. "I made a much larger contribution to the Ramos campaign. I was just trying to get my company considered on its merits. Like an entrance fee to a contest. If you don't pay, you're not in the running.

"What kind of entrance fee?"

"A lot."

"For God's sake, how much?"

"Twenty five thousand."

I gasped. "What?"

"I knew you wouldn't understand."

"That's our family savings, not yours alone."

"I wasn't thinking only about myself. It was an investment for you and Eddie, the ticket to our future prosperity."

The son of a bitch had taken out twenty five thousand from our savings without even consulting me. But was he in danger of being charged with anything? Edgardo was scaring the shit out of me. My legs felt like rubber. I sat back down on the sofa.

"They could accuse you of bribery. You could go to jail."

Edgardo reached for my hand. "Maggie, believe me. It wasn't a bribe. I'm proud of making a donation for a good cause. Statehood. Dignity for all Puerto Ricans."

"But would a jury buy that?"

Edgardo slumped back into his chair, like a child whose birthday balloon had been pricked.

"You know me, Maggie. I would never try to bribe anyone. I just wanted to level the playing field. But you're right. People might come to the wrong conclusions. I went to see a lawyer."

"What did he say?"

"He's making inquiries. It all depends on who's talking to the FBI. I have another appointment tomorrow. Come with me."

"Jesus Christ, Edgardo," I said, trying to keep my voice steady. "How could you do this to us?"

The appointment was for the next day at two in the afternoon at the lawyer's office on Justo Street in Old San Juan. The building had an old-fashioned façade, round columns at the entrance. Inside it had a black and white checkered floor and modern furnishings. We were directed to the third floor occupied by the offices of Álvarez, Dalmau and Petersen. After about twenty minutes, Licenciado Raul Álvarez, a handsome man with gray hair and a patrician nose, came out. He clapped Edgardo on the back, and said how pleased he was to meet me. From his office, you could see a lovely view of San Juan Bay through the picture window.

The first five minutes were spent in small talk. It turned out that Licenciado Álvarez had been two classes ahead of Edgardo at San Ignacio, the school my husband always said not only gave him a scholarship but a start in life.

"It's a small world, isn't it?" said Edgardo. The chatter of the two men about mutual friends reminded me that I was an outsider in the cozy world of people who matter on the island.

Mr. Álvarez glanced at his gold watch and said, "We had better get down to business." He opened a file, stared down at it and drummed his fingers on the table, as though searching for the right words.

"Mrs. Rodríguez, has your husband explained to you why he sought legal advice?"

Edgardo who had been staring at his shoes, his shoulders hunched, looked up, "I explained that I made a large political donation that could be...misinterpreted."

The lawyer nodded. "I have good news." He smiled at us both. "The Re-election Committee has no record of a donation from Edgardo Rodríguez."

Edgardo sat up straight. "Then there's nothing to worry about."

"Not so fast," said the lawyer.

He was right about taking it slow. My head was whirling. If no money was donated to the Committee, where in hell was the twenty five thousand?

"The Feds have been asking questions," said the lawyer. "They'll be talking to Miss Claudia Meléndez next week."

My stomach muscles tightened. "What does she have to do with it?"

The lawyer opened his mouth, exchanged a glance with Edgardo, and kept silent.

"I gave the money to Claudia," said Edgardo. "To be on the safe side."

I hadn't forgotten my suspicions, but what he seemed to be saying was that Claudia was the courier to the Committee.

"A large gift to Miss Meléndez doesn't look good given the fact that she was Assistant Secretary of Health," said Álvarez in a low voice. "It could have an appearance of impropriety."

My head was spinning. "Impropriety?"

"An effort to secure her influence to get the health card contract."

“You mean bribery?”

The lawyer shook his head as though pained by the word. “Mrs. Rodríguez, you and I both know your husband is an honest man.”

“Claudia had nothing to do with the committee that selected the firm for my contract,” Edgardo said.

“Good point,” said the lawyer. “But the Feds might still be interested in a substantial gift made to the second in command in the agency. Did you give her a check?”

“The first five thousand. After that, I delivered cash”.

This was beginning to resemble the plot of a Grade B mafia movie.

“Jesus Christ, Edgardo,” I said.

Licenciado Álvarez turned to me. “Mrs. Rodríguez, I understand your concern.”

“No, you can’t possibly understand,” I retorted, struggling not to break down. “For you, it’s all in a day’s work, but it’s the good name of my family.”

“Sometimes things appear worse than they seem,” the lawyer said in a soothing voice. “Miss Meléndez’s lawyer is my wife’s cousin. Of course, I didn’t discuss your husband’s case with him directly. But he did tell me that she is a single mother with one child – an autistic boy of five. You know the schools here on the island don’t offer adequate services. Friends have helped her with the expenses of a child psychologist and special schooling.”

“You mean Edgardo helped her.”

The lawyer nodded.

“Twenty five thousand for a woman he just met?”

“The check in her name was only for five thousand,” Edgardo pointed out

“But your wife is quite right. Even if the amount is small, the Feds are bound to question why you took on the role of Good Samaritan.”

Edgardo changed color. His eyes met mine for a brief second and then he looked out the window at San Juan Bay.

“The Feds are not the only ones who want to know,” I said.

Through the airtight window I could hear the muffled shouts of young people and the distant rumble of cars from the street below.

Finally, the lawyer said, “Mrs. Rodríguez, your husband is in a dangerous position. Appearances could be against him unless we all pull together. If Claudia reveals anything to the Feds, we will have to address the question of why Edgardo donated money for the boy’s education. The most logical explanation would be what we call a sentimental relationship. Of course, there was none, but...”

From the beginning the lawyer had been the perfect gentleman, a concerned friend offering a helping hand. But the web he was spinning was not to save me. No, he was winding sticky strands round and round my body to make sure I would do nothing against Edgardo. If I didn’t say something quick, the gooey stuff would reach my tongue.

“You mean adultery is not a crime, but bribery is?”

Mr. Álvarez frowned. I had broken the rules.

“I am sure your husband had no intention of influencing the contractual process,” he said slowly, enunciating each syllable.

“May I assume,” I replied, imitating his precise way of speaking, “that you are equally sure that my husband didn’t fuck Claudia Melendez?”

The lawyer muttered something about giving us privacy and excused himself. He walked hurriedly around Edgardo’s chair, not mine, to get to the door, tripping on the throw rug in his anxiety to exit.

Once the door closed, Edgardo leaned over and said, "Maggie, sweetheart I'm terribly sorry. I've done some stupid things, but believe me there was never anything between me and Claudia."

"Stop it! I screamed. "You're a goddamn liar. Do you think I'm an idiot?"

"Lower your voice. You're making us look bad. Everyone in the building can hear."

I got up from my chair and started to walk toward the door.

"Maggie, I made a terrible mistake. Please let me explain."

"What's to explain? You betrayed your marriage for a goddamn whore who's a thief besides."

Edgardo sighed.

"Where's the twenty five thousand? Cuqui knows Claudia because they go to the same plastic surgeon. A boob job here and a bit of botox there wouldn't leave much for tutoring, would it? The bit about the autistic son is a sob story if I ever heard one."

"Maggie, please, she really does have an autistic child. I'm sure she'll give back the money. But I can't ask her for it. Álvarez says under no circumstances am I to contact her."

"I suppose that's why it's over."

"No, it was over months ago. Maggie, believe me, I love you. It was a stupid midlife crisis."

"That line won't work. Not with me."

"I was flattered when she began asking me for advice about the kid. Like I was her big brother, and then before I knew what was happening..."

"Shut up," I screamed, my hands covering my ears.

"Maggie, please, we've been together for over twenty years."

"It's over," I said

"Don't do anything hasty. God, Álvarez will be back any moment. Sweetheart, you're in no condition to talk to him."

"You're right about that," I said. "Give me the keys."

"I'll only be with the lawyer a few minutes. Get the car from the parking garage and pick me up."

I took the keys, and walked out the door. Before slamming it hard behind me I turned to say, "You can find your own fucking way home."

I ran down the stairs rather than taking the elevator. It wasn't until I was on the street that I lost control and began to sob. I couldn't find the car in the Doña Fela parking lot until I finally remembered it was Edgardo's BMW, not my Toyota.

While driving home I got stuck in traffic on Ashford Avenue. It was about three o'clock when all the mothers pick up their children from school. I leaned my head against the steering wheel. When I opened my eyes the light had turned green. I pressed the gas too hard and crashed right into a large black SUV in front of me. The driver came out yelling about stupid women drivers, but he calmed down when he saw only his bumper was dented, while the whole front of my BMW had caved in. By this time I was crying again. The man asked whether I was hurt. I said no, I'd just had a really shitty day.

By some miracle the BMW started, but every couple of seconds there was a horrible clackety clack. I prayed the axle wouldn't break in two. Somehow, I got the car into our covered garage. It was a relief when the door closed and I could no longer see the damage. In spite of everything, I dreaded the moment that Edgardo would set eyes on the wreck.

Thank God Eddie wasn't home. I collapsed on the bed. There was pressure on my chest, and then in the bones of my head, and my mouth twisted into a grimace. Sobs were forcing their way up but finding no exit, because I couldn't weep. When the tears finally came, I could hear my own cries, like some wounded animal.

You can cry for a long time, but not forever. On the bureau facing me was a shot of me and Edgardo at the beach, drinking the same piña colada out of two straws. I got up and threw it against the wall. The tinkle of falling glass didn't make me feel any better.

I lay down again. By this time the fury I had felt at the lawyer's was gone. All that was left was an empty pit in my stomach and a fuzzy feeling in my head. If I divorced Edgardo would I have enough money for Eddie to go to college? Should I go back to New York or stay in Puerto Rico? Thoughts whirled around but I couldn't get hold of them. My brain was like an old car battery that jumpstarted and then sputtered out.

I didn't move when I heard the key in the door. Edgardo called out my name. I was lying on the bed with my face to the wall when he entered the room. He lay down next to me, his body encircling mine, reminding me that what I thought belonged to me wasn't mine anymore.

Edgardo finally arose, picked up the picture of the two of us at the beach, and put it back on the bureau. I closed my eyes, and didn't open them until I heard him sweeping up the glass.

He gave me a hand to get up from the bed. I hadn't noticed it before, but my neck hurt. I let him guide me to the living room and sit me down on the sofa.

"We have to talk," he said, taking a chair opposite me.

"Yeah."

"Maggie, please forgive me. I love you and Eddie. I don't want to lose you."

I said nothing.

"I lost my way. Please help me get back on the right track."

"It's over, Edgardo."

"Maggie, please."

I kept quiet.

"You want me to move out?"

I shrugged. Our family was broken. What did the details matter?

"Maggie, please don't abandon me now. I promise you I'll be a new man. Don't kick me when I'm down. Just stand by me until this is over. Then, if you still want a divorce, I won't stand in your way."

Forget about becoming a new man. I wanted the old Edgardo back, the man who had never heard of thousand dollar dinners. The man who thought me and Eddie were more important than anything else in the whole world.

"I'll sleep in the guest room," he said softly.

I wondered whether this was what the lawyer had told him to say, advising him that it was important to be sure the wife is on board and ready to stand by her man, just in case it hits the newspapers, or goes to court. "You've got to humor her," Álvarez would have said.

My old Edgardo would never have thought of separate bedrooms. For years we couldn't get enough of each other. Whenever I went for a few days to New York, he complained it was hard to fall asleep without me beside him.

I looked at him.

"I mean, of course, if that's you want," he added softly, smiling at me, uncertainty in his eyes.

What I wanted was to wipe the sticky smile off his face.

"I crashed the BMW."

"What?"

"I hit an SUV."

"The Beamer, is it bad?" Edgardo's voice rose in spite of his efforts to keep it under control.

"Maybe you should take a look." I held out the keys.

He took them and went out the door.

After a few minutes he came back and yelled, "Jesus Christ, Maggie, you totaled my car."

"The insurance will cover it."

"No, it's a total loss, believe me. You have no idea how I loved that car." He sat down and cradled his head in his hands.

"Whatever the insurance won't cover, you can take out of the divorce settlement," I told him.

Edgardo just sat there staring at the ground

"You never asked me whether I'm hurt," I said.

Edgardo lifted his head to stare at me. "Maggie, I'm so sorry. I'm not thinking straight. You look fine."

"Appearances can be deceiving."

"Sweetheart, tell me, are you okay?"

I massaged my neck with my hand. "Not really." I said, blinking back the tears. Starting to cry again would mean collapsing into a heap of howling pain.

"What's wrong?" asked Edgardo. "Whiplash?"

Still fighting back tears, I forced myself to move my head from side to side, slowly and gingerly. "I don't think so."

"I'll take you to the doctor."

"That's not going to help."

"Maggie, are you sure you're okay?"

I shook my head.

"For God's sake, tell me what's wrong."

"Internal injuries."

He looked at me.

I stared back.

Edgardo's smile died before it was born.

Six and One Hand in Hand

Five pelicans keep their place in a vee
to remind us it's time to form our circle
before the clouds trap us in their shadows
and there's not enough sea and too much sand
to make our ritual words reach the corners
of our cobwebbed universe.

We start
holding hands, drop them, find our set order,
mother, daughter, mother, daughter,
and the third pair of mother and daughter again,
the six that renew each sense in our beachside feast
on chosen days where slides and slips
in water are nothing more than a tug
of a ring on the shore.

Today another pair of hands
is among us, those of an eight-year-old niece
with curly long hair she shakes, coping
so much with parents recently divorced
that she spends her time in the water
looking at the horizon through blue goggles,
wanting the jet skis to get closer but happy
they are hidden by the giant waves
that bear down upon us.

She's the seventh
in the circle. She too will learn to transform
vagary into vision as she writes
her third-grade name in the book of breakers
approaching our shores. With her hands.
With flying pelicans. With us.

He wiped beads of perspiration from his forehead with the threadbare rag he always carried. The bottle of water he had been sipping for the past hour now merged with the heat of the afternoon sun. He glanced at the traffic lights at the intersection and picked up a few parcels of vegetables from his knapsack which he had packaged earlier, holding them up to vie for the drivers' attention. The lights changed to red and he resumed pacing alongside the waiting cars.

"Ochro–tomato–pepper! Anything for you?" He paused next to the station wagon which had stopped at the front of the line, occupied by a young couple with their infant son strapped in a car seat at the back. "Fresh ochro and tomato for your soup–nice hot pepper for your pepper sauce." The woman averted her eyes and waved him away.

He walked further down the line of vehicles and recognized the boy his age in the back seat of the black SUV, chatting on his cell phone. The boy fixed his eyes on him, briefly looking him up and down. His sister who was a couple years older, about fifteen, was in the front seat with her head buried in a book. They always drove by twice per week that time of day after picking up the girl from extra lessons and the boy from football practice. Some days their father drove while other days like today their mother was in the driver's seat. "Anything for you today? Nice and fresh from the garden." The woman bought two pounds of tomatoes and a bag of peppers, insisting that he keep the change when he didn't have the correct note to give her.

He moved across to the vehicles in the parallel lane, displaying his merchandise in both hands while repeating the prices. He caught the eye of a young man in a business suit. "Ochro–tomato–hot pepper! Anything for you sir? Pick fresh from the garden." The light changed to green and he almost tripped on his thin-soled slippers trying to get out of the way as the man sped off.

Sales had been slow leading up to the after work traffic when it usually increased. He managed to sell everything within the next hour, practically giving away the last two pounds of tomatoes at a bargain price.

He returned home to a mother too drunk to notice he had even left. The tiny living-room was messier than he had met it a few hours before when he had arrived from school. The smoke and alcohol scent lingered in the air, with the half-filled bottle of white rum he had hidden away earlier now empty and the ashtray stuffed with cigarette butts. Though she had nodded when he made her promise she would bathe and have an evening meal ready, she was still in the exact spot he had left her since then; sprawled out on the sofa, shielding her face with the back of her hand and the other arm outstretched.

He knelt beside her, grabbing hold of her arm and shaking her, but she barely stirred. "Ma, get up! I bring something for you to eat."

She moved her head slowly from side to side, mumbling inaudible sounds under her breath. He shook her harder until she half-opened her eyes, only to close them again. He placed her outstretched arm across his shoulder, bringing her to a sitting position. He then raised her to her feet and supported her towards the outdoor bathroom, the bare floorboard creaking under their weight. He left her propped up against the galvanized enclosure and went to fill the pigtail bucket with water from the nearby barrel. He threw a few cups of the rainwater over her head to shock her to her senses. He stayed until she was alert, then waited outside while she cleaned up herself, calling out to her at regular intervals. After she had finished bathing, he helped her to her room, selecting a home-dress for her to wear and leaving her to change.

"I wasn't feeling too good so I didn't get to cook nothing today," she said in a soft voice, emerging from her room.

He knew her routine well. "Is okay, I buy some doubles and a sweet drink." He motioned to the chair placing a plate in front of her and a glass of soft drink. "I sell out everything today so you could go and see the doctor tomorrow if you want."

"Okay, you could leave the money for me and I will go in the morning."

He would have liked to believe her but she often promised to visit the doctor, then he would find her at home reeking of smoke and alcohol. "I will go with you when I come home from school, I have to get two notebooks and I go buy it one time." They continued to eat in silence.

As expected, he arrived home from school the next day to find his mother fully recovered and in good spirits. This was the usual scene after her moment of weakness and her way of avoiding the doctor's office. The house was reasonably clean except for a few items strewn around and he could see the small iron pot covered on the stove. She was sitting at the kitchen table counting out the ochros and hot peppers he had picked from their garden earlier that morning, filling them into clear plastic bags.

"That is you Navin?" she called out to him. "I take two tablets and I feeling better today, so I don't have to go to the doctor again."

He acknowledged her and took the few small steps through the living-room, snuck past the kitchen separated only by a plywood counter, and headed towards his room to avoid her scrutiny, but she had already noticed him.

"What happen to your face?" His mother was on her feet. "And look at your clothes."

"I fall down in school."

"Fall down? That looking like you was in a fight. What you was fighting for?" She jerked him around, forcing him to look at her.

"Nothing, just some fellas playing around in school."

"What they have with you? You do them something?"

"No."

"Then what you was fighting with them for?" She watched expectantly. "If you not answering then it have to be you who cause it."

Navin lowered his head and remained silent.

Before he knew what was coming, his mother slapped him hard across his face. "Answer me boy! You feel I have time to go in school and talk to them teachers every time you get in trouble?"

"I tell you already that it was nothing. You don't have to go in school."

"And you talking back to me too! Take out that belt for me, now!"

He did as he was told, maintaining his composure while she struck him hard across his back with the buckled end of the belt.

"Don't play you talking back to me, you too big to be getting into this kind of trouble. Next thing people go be saying I don't know how to raise my child." She stopped to take a couple of breaths and shoved him with all her strength, causing him to knock his head against the door frame. "You just like your father and have all he bad ways. Go and clean up yourself before I kill you here today! And you better don't let me hear you fighting again!"

He had already turned to leave when she called him back and gestured towards the items on the kitchen table. "When you finish, you go carry this for Sandra and collect the money from she one time, she ask me for it since morning."

"Yeah-okay," he replied. "It have anything for me to sell today?"

"Sandra take everything but it have some tomatoes go be good by tomorrow, and you could pick the few zaboca from the tree."

He retreated to his room, rubbing the tears out of his eyes knowing as his mother had said, that he was probably just like his father who had brought her so much pain, then left her with nothing but a young child to raise on her own. At least that's what his mother always says.

That Sunday before noon Navin had just returned from watering the plants in the back yard when he noticed the utility vehicle parked out front and heard voices at the front door. Through the kitchen he caught a glimpse of the boy who was being strung along by his mother, so he chose to remain out of sight near the back door.

He recognized the woman standing inches above his mother while she introduced herself and informed his mother that their sons were in the same class. His mother invited them in but the woman politely refused, choosing to stand in the narrow doorway. "Sorry I couldn't come earlier during the week but it was difficult because of the hours I work." The woman smiled politely, her straightened hair held back smoothly and set in place, emphasizing her round face.

"You come to see my son? He out in the back but I could call him for you." Her head swiveled round. "Navin! Look somebody..."

"No, we're here to see you." The woman grabbed her son's arm, pulling him closer. "My son is here to apologize to you."

"Apologize? To me?" His mother frowned. "What for?"

"For the incident at school, the Dean explained to me what happened."

"Oh God that boy don't listen to me at all." She held her head. "What he do now, I go break he..."

"No-no, I'm talking about the fight he had last week with my son and those two other boys. It seems they had a habit of picking on him." The woman looked puzzled. "Didn't you go in to speak to the Dean, he had asked to see all the boys' parents?"

"I...um...well...I already deal with my son and tell him I don't want no fighting in school, so it wouldn't have no trouble from him again."

"So he didn't tell you what the fight was about?"

"Well...he...he not supposed to be fighting in school in the first place."

The woman turned to her son and lifted her perfectly arched eyebrows. "Anything you'd like to say about that?" Her son understood his role and spoke with his eyes fixed on the ground. "We were just teasing him and...he get vex and hit one of my friends. Afterwards he tell the Dean that...how his mother was sick and couldn't come to school, so he'll take whatever punishment they give him. The Dean made him stay in class all week to do penance during lunch time and recess."

The woman let out a long breath, clearing her throat. "I'm really embarrassed now because I don't know how to say this, but I feel I owe it to your son."

"Say what?"

"My son and the other boys were saying some unpleasant things about you. Your son asked them to stop ill-speaking his mother...and...well...they continued to say some very nasty things. I suppose your son felt he had to defend you so he punched one of them and they ganged up on him, until some other kids saw and called a teacher."

"But why? What they was saying about me?"

The woman's eyes danced across the clustered living-room, lingering on the empty drinking glass and cigarette butts scattered about the small coffee table. Navin bent round to steal a glance at the front door, locking eyes with her. The woman's eyes narrowed and her lips drew into a smile of recognition. He darted out of sight. "It doesn't matter what they said; I don't think it would help anyone to repeat it."

Navin saw his mother's expression change, knowing too well all the things that had already been said in the past. "You didn't have to come and apologize, boys does behave like that all the time."

"My son was disrespectful and rude, especially to someone's mother and he should've known better. That's why he would like to apologize to you. Isn't that right son?" She glared at the boy.

Navin's mother accepted the boy's well-rehearsed apology, mostly because she was anxious to get rid of them. The woman had already turned to leave when she swung around, allowing her son to walk ahead of her. "I hope you weren't too hard on your boy. I would like to hope that my own son would defend my honour the way yours did. He's a fine example of an upstanding young man. Tell him for me that those boys will never interfere with him again." She caught up with her son, issuing stern warnings to him until they got into their black SUV and were no longer in sight.

His mother's heart sank, heavy with guilt and shame. She often drank in the comfort of her home when she knew no one was looking, but nothing like this had ever happened before. Navin felt sad for his mother but was not ready to face her and knew she would feel the same. He quietly slipped out the back door, fitted on his tall rubber boots and headed towards the garden under the blazing heat of the mid-day sun. He uprooted the weeds and supported the plants with thin strips of cloth tied to pieces of sticks that were shoved into the ground, a task he had scheduled for the next day. It was not too long after, that the heat combined with skipping lunch took a toll on him and he retreated inside.

He saw his mother sitting in the living-room rocking back and forth with her arms crossed and wrapped around her. He knew she had heard him come in but she continued staring out the front door with her back towards him. "You didn't come and eat lunchtime?"

"I wanted to finish see about the plants."

"It have rice and curry aloo, you should go and eat." She continued to rock back and forth, her eyes fixed on the road. "Everything good in school?"

"Yeah."

She slowly turned around with sad empty eyes and confessed. "I'm sick Navin. I sick a long time now, and I want you to go with me by the doctor to help me get better."

At that moment of admission, with her hair untidy, eyes swollen and her cheeks stained with dried tears, Navin thought his mother to be the most beautiful and courageous woman in the world, and knew she could be the mother he always remembered♦

Shani Oliphant

Mama Sings to the Lord

and prays on knees
blackened often
for me.
every night for me
her stomach
mourns
that I
will be freed
from the white devil
I deal
on the streets.
mama preaches
I ignore
her heart sore
anguished
by me.
mama sings
sad songs
all night long
lamenting
the cold earth
beneath me.

Teacher May

She felt the embarrassment of the warm pee running down her leg, seeping into her pantyhose and clinging wetly to her skin. The stink of it filled her nostrils. She felt all of this before she even registered the cold steel at her throat, in the hollow between the bone and the fleshy part of the neck. She wanted to stop right there, in the street, in the shadow of the tamarind tree and strip off her drawers and panty hose, socks and sneakers, everything; anything rather than stand there at his mercy, smelling like a child with a saggy diaper.

In her 66 years, she'd never been so disgusted with herself.

She imagined that the mask her attacker wore protected him from the smell; but ripe as it was with her fear, probably not. She hoped not, hoped they were together in this shame. And just then, she wanted to see it, in his eyes. She twisted, reflexively, and he growled,

"Hold still, Teacher May"

The shock froze her body.

Teacher May.

He knew her.

And yet...

Well, that did it! These boys with knives and guns where their hearts should be were really without shame!

She wanted to slap him, hard. And her body must have twitched in anticipation because he tightened his grip and growled again,

"Hold still"

"Or what? You go kill me?"

The words – instinctively, the broken English of her childhood – were out of her mouth before she'd had chance to think it. That seemed the order of things in situations like these.

Action, then Thought.

A reversal of the right order.

Because there was nothing right about some young buck who knew her name, at her back, with his knife at her throat, his voice in her ear whispering like no one had in a good long while, while her own piss dried on her leg and stunk up the air. No, situations like these certainly must have their own upside down set of rules. They made no sense.

And if he knew her damn name then he ought to know that since retiring from teaching she'd been pushing the shopping cart he'd toppled over when he'd grabbed her, taking the plants she grew in her backyard nursery to market. He must know all this, so what did he hope to get. Surely, he didn't think the little potted plants sold for thousands or even hundreds. She'd probably have given him the three crumpled \$20 bills if he'd asked. Wasn't she always cooking too much since her husband died and didn't the brawta go to the ones who knew what time of day to fish around her kitchen.

Stupid boy.

Stupid, stupid boy.

Wait, she knew this boy.

“Kenny?”

Mouth jumping ahead of brain again, but she had her answer when he stilled so that even his breathing stopped for a few moments.

“Kenmore Garity! I thought I recognized your voice.”

After that, it was no problem releasing herself from his grip, he wasn't holding her anymore and as she turned to him – his face unmasked, as it turned out, and the shame blatant there – he didn't seem to know what to do with himself. And her heart broke as she looked up at this boy. Even the pee smell, stronger now as the wind blew picked up, was forgotten. They stood like that for long minutes, just staring at each other, as much of each other as they could see under the three quarter moon. Well, she looked at him, he looked everywhere but at her. Finally, she made a decision.

With a twitch of hand and head, she instructed him to help her right the cart and return the potted plants to it. He obeyed; stashing the knife or gun, she still hadn't looked at the damned thing, in one of the deep pockets of the too big pants hanging off his too narrow ass.

Silently, and in step, they walked to her house, just three houses up from the tamarind tree at the corner. The sounds of this person's TV or that person's conversation flowed through still open windows and if she could think, she'd marvel at how bold these boys were getting. They'd be robbing the collection baskets during Sunday mass next, too stupid to fear even the wrath of God. But she couldn't think past the fact that she'd dodged death by pulling up a name from a classroom 10 years earlier.

Kenmore Garity.

Kenny.

He'd sat in row three of her first grade class always full of back chat, though more often than not something about his spunk and spirit had stilled her hand when she might have reached for the belt that always sat on her desk. She rarely used it but it was a good deterrent, and a single lash would have been sufficient to silence him and allow her to get on with the lesson. He was chatty but never rude, like a smirky tom cat or that Richie Rich character from the cartoons. She liked boys and girls like Kenny. Sure, it was easier to keep in line a quiet and responsive band of drones, but it was dull too. You could have a conversation with boys like Kenny; get to the heart of things with them. Because they were thinking boys; they had opinions on things. She never wanted to be one of the teachers bent on beating that out of them.

“What happen to you today, eh?” She might ask instead. And Kenny had been the kind to give an answer. And she'd been the kind to listen.

So much so that even after he left her class he would stop by from grade five or grade six on breaks, or after school while he waited for his mom to pick him up, just to chat or to beat out dusters or clean the board or empty the bin for her. All the while his mouth would be going a mile a minute. Some days it was a distraction from the books she was grading, some days she welcomed the distraction and, even when she was done, delayed the return to her empty house. It was her secret that the company of these children gave her relief from the loneliness that so often consumed her, even when her husband had been alive. That door closed to them, she took what she could get and was happy with it. So, she wasn't one of those teachers who would shoo the

children away. And she was one of those teachers who didn't retire until pushed, resigned to talking to her plants and pushing her cart like a crazy woman.

She opened the door to her two bedroom house, an idea forming. The extra room didn't have anything besides boxes anyway, boxes of things she hadn't been able to bring herself to throw away when she'd boxed them up. Now, she couldn't remember what they were. But here was someone next to her, who needed her.

He wasn't a bad boy. She'd always thought his mouth would get him into trouble one day, but not this kind of trouble. Woman trouble maybe. He'd been a handsome boy even then, and chatty chatty as he was, talking up girls when his hormones started talking to him was inevitable. But the kind of trouble that saw him at sixteen – yes, he'd be about sixteen now – with a gun or knife in his hand grabbing an old woman by the throat and making her piss herself. No, she hadn't seen that coming.

She sat him at the table and poured them both a shot of brandy before setting the kettle on the stove. She always had a shot of brandy before bed, and, shell-shocked as he looked, it was likely to thaw him out and bring him back to himself.

It took a while and she watched him the whole while sitting across from him at the table, studying the face that was at once familiar and that of a stranger. He still had that broad forehead and full eyes. His lips still twisted like a gossip-woman's after years spreading people's business. His skin was still the colour of heated brown sugar; still smooth like he hadn't yet hit adolescence. The baby fat was gone though, and he was stretched out like a reedy bamboo stalk. He looked like he'd been living rough.

What happen to you, eh? She wanted to ask.

He hadn't had one of those no-good mothers. They weren't from the community and she'd fallen out of touch, but she remembered the little woman, so short she's what some might call duckaseh, always a little bit rushed but always there – for school reports and PTAs and to pick him up.

Teacher May had never seen a father, not once. But the mother, she remembered, never left him behind or treated him like an afterthought. If anything she seemed like a woman with too much on her stout shoulders but carrying it nonetheless the way of long ago women bearing the world on their heads, only a catta for cushion and balance.

What happened?

Had the world fallen and cracked open?

It felt like it sometimes.

She'd stopped listening to anything but her Gospel stations when it got too much to bear: one story of doom after another. Drive bys and break ins and serial rapists raping women well into their eighties, oil spills infecting the water they needed to live, politicians turning mother against daughter, a foreigner infestation that felt like Pharaoh's plague of locusts, the world feeling different in a way that had to do with more than getting old and out of touch. The end times; that's what it had started to feel like. Fear, that's what had started to seep into her and pour out of her skin. She hated it. Radio Paradise with its familiar diet of Shirley Caesar and Tammy Faye buffered her from it; the bury-your-head-in-the-sand brand of Christianity.

So, maybe it was partly her fault that this boy sat here, lost.

It may be a world gone to hell but the children still needed hand holding and guidance around the pot holes.

“Where your mammy?” she asked him, and it was the first words either of them had spoken since she’d named him.

He only shrugged, eyes down. She didn’t even bother to ask where his father was as he’d never been there to begin with; or what had happened, the story was all too familiar already. She could write the narrative herself:

The chatty chatty boy ventured into the crowd of a secondary school already infested with drugs and gangs and became easy prey, his mouth talking him into trouble he couldn’t back himself out of.

“Me get kick out,” he told her, and she jumped at the unexpected sound of his voice. It wasn’t gravelly like it had been at the tamarind tree, when he’d been trying to sound like a man instead of the boy he still was. It had started to deepen, yes, but it still didn’t have enough bass for it to be recognizable as anything but a boy’s voice. A boy with all the vim kicked out of him. Kick out? Kick out of what? School? Home? Both?

“Mr. McKellar min a ride me an’ me tell he back off,” he said. There were pools of water in his eyes now as his words picked up, leap frogging over each other so that she could barely keep up. “Me pull pan he an’ threaten he an’ dem call police pan me an’ me get kick out an’ den mammy try get me fu talk to Parson Allen but all he do a talk at me an’ tell me how God nuh like bad john an’ me boy an’ dem always deh an’ dem nar let me go an’ mammy jus’ ah nag me straight, say she na wan’ no duffer ‘round she an’ she nar come look for me at 1735 nor crazy house an’ she work too hard fu me tun out so an’ me jus’ want things quiet down so me can’ t’ink.” On the last word he slammed his hand into his head, damn near knocking himself out and abruptly cutting off the raging river of words.

And she wanted to hug him, just hold him still so he could think and see that the world would right itself in time. But how could she when she didn’t believe this any more herself. But he was, in the end, just a lost little boy and she was a grown up. She had to hold his hand and guide him through the huge pot hole that his life had become.

So, when the kettle whistled, they drank their tea and she set him on the couch for some rest and she retreated to her room to pray and think. Come morning, before even cock crow, she was up and got him up for a shower and the hard work of helping her lug the boxes out to the corner where dogs and people would have ample time to pick through them before the trash men came on Tuesday. She fed him saltfish and chop up for breakfast and they still made it to church on time. She could tell he hadn’t been in a while the way he fidgeted in her late husband’s old clothes and scratched at himself all through mass. She almost expected him to bolt when finally Father George set them free. But he stuck to her side on the way home and throughout the day as she cooked a dinner of potato salad, macaroni pie and goat meat. She didn’t have a TV anymore but he sat with her as she read from the Bible and when finally he started to nod off, bedded down on a cot in the now-cleared-out second room when night came. The next day and the next and the next, she worked in her garden and he was like her shadow, and she didn’t need to talk to the plants anymore, because he was there to listen – that was all he did as he watered and trimmed at her direction. She didn’t mind being the chatty chatty one.

People talked, of course they did. People wouldn’t be people if they didn’t talk. Gossip was as essential to this small Antiguan community as air and livestock and clean ponds of water.

Electricity and running water they could live without when the Antigua Public Utilities Authority chose to cut it off, following no particular rhythm but their own, but gossip was another thing altogether.

Su su su su su su. Listen close you could even hear the murmur of it on the wind.
So, she expected it.

“Teacher May really lose she mind now, shackled up with that little boy.”

They made it something it wasn't, as if she hadn't been done with that nonsense for decades. It was only men that acted as though they would die without it. Well, her husband was dead and she still lived these twelve odd years without it, barely missing it. Missing the company more than anything. And she had that again. So, really, she wanted for nothing. Nothing at all.

Kenny was doing better, too. Didn't spook as easily, didn't fidget as much, had stopped looking over his shoulder or palming the knife or gun in his pocket as though to reassure himself it was there. He had started to put some meat on those spindly bones, but still wore his pants – well, her husband's old pants – halfway down his ass belt or no belt. He was even talking more. Well, he read to her from the Bible at her direction, but still, it was words coming out of his mouth. And it made her heart glad to hear them. Really, he wasn't doing badly. Could even get back into school with a little help. She said as much to him, and he quieted, seeming to consider this.

The boy was not lost. Everything would be okay, she assured herself.

The world would right itself.

....

The villagers noted his absence days before they picked up on the smell. And when they found Teacher May, he was long gone; and her body was so swollen, the men from the morgue staggered under the weight of it. Those who got close enough saw the way her eyes stared as though frozen in fear and surprise, and shame. And under the near-overpowering stench of rotting flesh was the faint smell of dried piss.

....

You think is so the story done, not so, read on.

I don't remember the moment of my dying and that is a blessing. Like an accident victim with partial amnesia, I remember everything before and everything that came after. I remember that I made us cocoa and we sat like we always did on the couch in the parlour – the same couch he'd slept on that first night, while he read to me from the Bible. He was getting better, too, and it was one of my favourite Bible passages. It was from Luke Chapter 18. My heart sang on the words, Jesus said, “suffer little children to come unto me, and forbid them not: for of such is the kingdom of God”. I remember wondering if he heard them as I did, what they stirred in him. It was a fleeting thought and soon enough we both started nodding off, and bedded down for the night.

Had I noticed the restlessness stirring in him?
I don't know.

He'd never returned to being the boy I remembered in the few months he lived with me. If I noticed anything, intuited anything, perhaps I chalked it up to him being the boy he had become. Scarred and confused by life, afraid and lost.

The last thing I heard was the squeak of the bed springs in the neighbouring room. And then I slept.

I awoke to a sunset such as I had never seen. The colours swirled around me, pinks and yellows and oranges and reds, dancing in and out of each other. It was beautiful, so beautiful I couldn't turn my eyes away from it, but then I didn't need to, it was there everywhere moving around me but also inside me like I was a part of it. I saw it even when I closed my eyes, and it felt warm against my skin. It hardly seemed to matter that I no longer had eyes or skin, only imagined I did. I never slept during that sunset time, and I never tired. I don't know how long it lasted. The next thing I knew I was with him again, and I couldn't decide if it was heaven or hell to be tethered to the one who'd killed me. Why wasn't I reunited with my husband? Or blessed enough to see God's face, or, assuming this was hell, Lucifer's face? Nothing was as I imagined it would be, after.

Looking back I see how our bonding, my soul with Kenny's, can be both a torment and an opportunity. I was surprised to discover that I wasn't angry at him. Instead as I watched his life move from pillar to post, I cried long water for him, hardly surprised to note that some of it penetrated the veil between his place and mine, that my cry water wet the earth around him, that he felt my presence at his back. And, as I watched, the blood of others dried on his hands, his soul blackened and he ran the earth like Cain, bedding down with others like him. And it was sometime during this time that I realized they had never released their hold on him; there was the drugs, of course, and the intimidation. But there was something else, something to do with the search for a daddy, a place to be. His mother had tried, she'd tried her best, and I wished I could comfort her and tell her that. That she'd been set an impossible task, that she could never have been all things to him. I wished to tell her this. But I was tethered to him and saw her only as he saw her. Those mornings he slept on her porch like a stray dog, home to lick his wounds for as long as she would let him, before she tired of the way he was, the life he couldn't seem to give up. Not even for her. Not even for the boy he had when finally he had a boy of his own, a boy he never saw, like his father had never seen him. I whispered to him loudest during this time, my tears raining down like blows on his back. He felt me, I'm sure of it; but he never heeded. He stayed far away from his seed, maybe telling himself the boy was better off without a coke head and a thief, sometime murderer, for a father. And maybe the boy was because between his mother and grandmother and aunt and the man his aunt married, he got through school okay and never raised his hand to another soul that I saw. Much as I could see, from the shadows of his life, out of the corner of his father's eye.

I can hear you asking, so how does it end?

Well, here, of course: with me and him side by side, tethered to each other for eternity, both watching over the boy that looks so much like him.
Maybe it had to be.

After two stints in the mental home thanks to the drugs and his attempts to talk to shadows ...
After his trips to the hospital following his frantic efforts to spill his own blood ...
After one forced stint in rehab from which he back slid faster than a Christian on Saturday night ...
After the police eventually caught up with him under that tamarind tree three houses down from where I lived... my blood on his hands....
Wait...

Maybe I have that wrong...

Maybe it was some other old woman pushing a cart. Maybe it happened like I said. Or maybe when I called his name the knife – definitely a knife – jerked and slashed out of fear and shame, and my blood gushed hotly over his hand. And maybe he dropped the knife like it burned while my body crumpled to the ground. And maybe he sat there holding my head heavily in his lap and crying long water and hiccupping my name – “Teacher May, Teacher May” – until someone called the police for him. And maybe he went as docilely as a sleepy baby and lived out his years at 1735 his mother bringing him a warm bowl of soup every Thursday, her heart at ease now that she knew where to find him. Maybe that’s where he read his Bible and thought of me. And maybe he found a kind of peace, after all, when the girl he’d impregnated at all of 16 before my life was lost at the end of his knife, made sure his son knew him if only so that he wouldn’t end up where he was. And maybe he looked forward to those visits with his son. And maybe the son heeded his mother’s words and his father’s example and grew into a bright boy who finished school and got his diploma and made his mother cry long water, tears not born of shame but of something else. Maybe it happened like that.

It’s hard to remember the order of things in a place where time is so fluid. But then in this upside down world, the order of things hardly matters. Heaven, hell? Who knows. Our souls, mine and his, are linked forever and ever and ever; and the faint smell of piss lingers in the air.

People of the Moon

Monday morning measured out her love
in even shares of chicken chunks.
Ché won't eat processed meat anymore;
he's sticking to his new expensive diet:
low-cal cereal, veggies, fresh fruit and white meat
and avoiding all the other junk
he's not supposed to eat.
She'd heard experts say what harm
could come to a mother's self-esteem
from childish reprimands; the use of charm
could work miracles. These bits and
bytes of research were factual to say the least
but the boys' fighting would only cease
if she threatened them with warnings
of no PS2 as their weekend treat.

Somewhere between brushing teeth and finding socks'
time allotted for getting out the door
Jonathan reminded her about that permission
slip she'd meant to sign the night before.
School is asking yet again for money
but a ten-year-old car needing shocks
is more important than anything educational.
Sure she'd read newspaper reports
about the damage a 9mm Glock
could inflict when kids were real delusional
and their psychological needs not met,
but thank God the boys weren't premenstrual
yet. They knew to get her attention
meant love notes dipped in honey-
coated words dropped in her brown work bag:
'My dear sweet sexy Mum,
we need milk, snacks, bran sandwich bread
and when I finish washing dishes
could I get my 30 minutes on the PC please?
Don't forget my roll-on is almost gone.
P.S. Justin has a really big head.'

On her way home from work she copped
a little quality time wine gazing in the shops.
The difference between red, white and blush
was an interpretation of mood
and no longer had anything to do
with a certain type of food.
On YouTube she'd seen how

12-step programs interrupted a lush
life, but a sip or few of crushed
grapes now and then, opened to let 'breathe'
won't make the slightest bit of difference
to a woman intent on mayhem.

The May issue of Essence gave good tips
on how to keep her man focused on her tits
"if your romance is in need of sprucing up,
dump those ugly padded bras,
wear to bed lacy 38 DD cups."
The downside is she'd have to think of something
racier than a pair of new Goodyear tyres
for who really had time to sneeze or blink
when the whole world teetered on the brink
and she was ill equipped to put out fires

Why Cats Hate Birds

There were many strange things about the old Brody house, but the one thing no one seemed to ask was why Brody had kept Bulgar around for so long.

“Hatie, how a wicked old white man have such a fine garden?”

The women stood at the far end of the property, nearest Graeme Hall Swamp, and peered through the rectangular apertures of the crumbling walls. Brody House was one of the earliest of the grand homes of Barbados, but it now stood in semi-ruin. The only person that lived there was Jeremiah Brody, if one excluded old Bulger who lived in a dilapidated shed at the back of the grounds.

“Dat is God laughin at we girl. He give dat nasty man someting dat he ain’t want. Yuh see, God know dat we is fearful, but not old Brody ... nuh ... God talkin tuh he, see.”

Hatie’s voice dropped to a whisper as she crouched lower and leaned closer to an opening in the wall. “Oh ... quiet girl ... look ... der he is.”

Old Bulger was out in the garden, as was his custom, it being early twilight. Like a vampire he kept hidden during the day. The fading light softly drew his deformed shadow against the white walls of the garden. He was hunched over, awkwardly, balancing a hoe between his limp left arm and his leg.

“Listen ... if he look dis way I runnnin, yuh hear, or I ain’t get nuh sleep tuh night.”

They stared intently anyway, straining to catch a glimpse of the poor creature through their respective portals. Bulger worked the ground as best he could, breaking the top layer of soil at the base of the frangipani tree. He stopped and placed his hand on the trunk and began to softly sing a song; the words the old ladies could not make out. The man ran his hand over the bark and gently caressed the newest shoots, and their wondrous blooms. The shrubs, plants and flowers were his family, not because he had no family, but because whatever they gave him, they gave him unconditionally.

No one, not anyone on the coast road, not on the grounds of the finest plantations, not even at Nicholas Abbey, no one had ever seen such a beautiful garden. Perhaps it was the contrast between the wondrous blossoms, their towering fountains of iridescence, and the dead and decay of Brody House that caused people to stop outside the gate. Anyone looking over the property could be forgiven for thinking that the roots of the flowering plants and shrubs must have sucked all the beauty from the surrounding land and building, leaving them desolate and lonely.

As Bulger spoke to the flowers, he dropped the hoe and turned so that the light of the setting sun illuminated his face at an angle that exaggerated its contours. The women screamed, and ran as quickly as they could.

“Oh good Jesus ... oh Lord ... dat bad, dat real bad. De man so ugly, I ain’t goan tuh sleep proper for de rest a de week.”

Bulger heard them. He knew he frightened people. He even frightened himself. Years earlier, a few short months after the accident, he’d wandered into the woods and had found a small pond, fed by a natural spring. When he looked down into the water and had seen his reflection, he’d screamed, just as the old women had done moments ago. He’d run through the woods until he reached the darkness of the shed.

A brightly coloured bananaquit landed on a nearby branch, hopped along the stem and jumped onto his shoulder. From the back veranda of the house old Brody laughed. He’d also heard the retreating howls of his malicious neighbours. He sat in an old rocking chair, with his feet propped against the stone half-wall that ran the perimeter of the porch, with his cane planted firmly for support.

“Bulgar boy, yuh better dan any guard dog.”

Bulger had lived on Brody’s land for so long that no one could remember a time when he had not. When people spoke of them, they spoke of them as one. Apart from Brody’s niece, who visited on a weekly basis, bringing food and sundries, and the cleaning lady, who arrived on Friday mornings and departed on Friday evenings, no one had any interaction with either of the reclusive pair. Of the niece it was said she only visited to make sure that she would get the place when the old man died; this being an unsubstantiated rumour, made believable by the woman’s behaviour ... she’d never once said hello when she passed the old ladies of Welch Road. Once Hatie and Thelma had passed judgment, even divine intervention could not alter their opinion.

“Mista B, de onlyiest ting dat yuh need a dog for is tuh keep dem cats away,” replied Bulger, not fully understanding the meaning of Brody’s comment. Behind him the golden bananaquit sat perched on a low branch of the frangipani tree. Two cats, their bellies low to the ground, approached the tree from opposite directions. The bird watched the larger of the cats, seemingly unaware of the other. As Bulger turned, the smaller cat pounced on the bird, and a short-lived struggle ended in a cloud of feathers and a final desperate chirp. Bulger screamed at the cat, which dropped the bird and scooted under the wall through a narrow passageway. He hobbled over to the dead bananaquit, picked it up, and lovingly cupped it between his hands. Old man Brody laughed.

“Bulger, don’t trouble yuhself man ... dat is nature’s way.”

Bulger slowly made his way over to the back porch of the house and stood on the bottom step. He looked up at old man Brody.

“Mista B, why it dat cats hate birds ... why?”

The two men stared at the dead bird in Bulger’s hands. Brody was about to speak when a memory surfaced, a long dead memory. Bulger saw in Brody’s face a look he’d only seen once before, the day Brody carried him from the mangrove swamp. The recollection drew poor Bulger further into the past. He looked deeply into Brody’s eyes.

“Mista B, why yuh did trick me in de woods dat day?”

For a moment the question hung in the air like a dagger. It struck Brody in the pit of his stomach, as if a steel-toed boot had kicked him hard, a cold merciless kick. Tears pooled in Brody’s eyes, as an irrational anger rose within. He stood up and raised his cane high in the air. He struck Bulger hard across the face forcing the poor devil to crouch, screaming, as a second and third blow fell across his back.

“Yuh damn dog ... shut yuh mouth.”

“Please Mista B, please ... stop ... Bulger ain’t mean tuh mek yuh angry ... please.”

The last blow left Brody sobbing. Leaving the disfigured Bulger lying on the steps, Brody rushed into the kitchen where he threw up in the sink. He fumbled for the tap and ran the water, trying desperately to wash the sickening yellow bile, and the memory of that day, down the drain. He slumped against the counter and fell to the floor; his legs splayed wide, his back propped against the wall. The cold ceramic tiles offered no comfort. The memory that Bulger had disturbed was his only companion.

*

The day had begun like most summer days, brilliant, blue, cloudless and hot. Jeremiah had just turned fourteen and he had nothing planned. Unlike the majority of the people on Welch road, his family employed local labour to work and maintain the property. He stood outside the house with three friends from town, older boys he’d befriended in his first year at Harrisons. They tossed small stones against the wall opposite. The old lady from a chattel house, a few doors down, passed, on her way to the bus stand.

"Morning Miss," volunteered the eldest of the boys, as he smiled a smile that the others immediately recognized. Once the woman was out of earshot, the boy whispered,

"Morning, yuh fat cow."

They all laughed. Jeremiah looked about to see that nobody overheard. At the end of the street, approaching the boys was the unmistakable figure of Jimmy Roe, the local eccentric. Poor Jimmy was not entirely there mentally. He slurred when he spoke. He called himself Bulger, and came to be known as Bulger. 'Bulger' was as close as Jimmy could come to pronouncing the word 'Buller'. The man had recently taken to wearing women's clothing. Where he'd come by the colourful outfits was anybody's guess. Jimmy lived alone in a rundown chattel house, which sat at the far end of Welch road. To the best of Jeremiah's knowledge the man had been born in the same house and had never lived anywhere else.

The others huddled together, whispering.

"Brody, listen ... tell Bulger yuh got something tuh show he in da woods, down by de gully ... yuh know de one."

Jeremiah nodded, as the rest scampered away down a nearby path that ran into the swamp. He was left to wonder what mischief they'd planned. Bulger approached him wearing an ill-fitting bright yellow dress. Jeremiah stifled a laugh.

"Jeremiah, yuh all alone tuhday."

Against his better judgment the boy decided to play his part.

"Bulger, I need yuh help down in de swamp ... a boy get hurt down der."

Bulger looked concerned.

"Jeremiah, I help yuh ... yes, Bulger help yuh. Yuh know dat Bulger would help."

The truth was that Jeremiah liked the man in spite of his oddness. The boy wondered at the naïve humanness of someone upon whom life had played such a cruel trick.

They quickly descended into the woods and after a time came to the edge of the gully, where the older boys said they would be. A voice called out from above. The others stood on an outcropping of rock, above the gully.

"Brody ... come up here." They motioned for Jeremiah to join them. Bulger stood at the mouth of the gully, confused. As Jeremiah joined them, the eldest boy grinned. In both hands he held fist-sized chunks of white limestone.

"Smile for us, Bulger boy ..."

Bulger did as directed, and the boy screamed, "... yuh sick bastard," as a shower of stones and rock struck the poor man. A wild frenzy, a blood lust, overcame the boys, amid shrieks of glee, until Jeremiah himself, picked up a rock and hurled it at a prostrate Bulger, striking the poor man in the face. The sound of stone meeting flesh, the dull thud of rock breaking bone, reverberated within Jeremiah's being, cleaving his soul until he spewed a wave of sickening nausea.

"Stop ... stop!"

A desperate Jeremiah, stumbled towards Bulger, as stones, intended for Bulger stung him in the back.

"Leave the man lone ... leave him!"

As if realizing the evil they had done, the others ran. Jeremiah tried to talk to Bulger, but all the bloodied figure could manage was a weak smile. Jeremiah ran for help.

*

Brody lay on the kitchen floor, as the feeling of nausea subsided. Darkness had fallen. He must have slept for some time. He pulled himself up and disrobed in the bedroom before stepping into the shower. The lukewarm water cleansed his mind. After drying off, he stood before the mirror and examined his aged frame. His manhood hung limp. It had been limp for many years.

Even the young girls he'd previously paid for sexual favours could no longer provide any solace. The truth was that ever since the death of his dear Vivian, some twenty years earlier, he had not known any real comfort. He dressed and stepped onto the porch. Under a moonless star-filled sky he saw old Bulger sitting outside his hut, looking up at the same night sky. Brody stepped down to the ground and walked over the dewed grass.

"Bulger, what yuh lookin at?"

"Mista B ... I sittin here tuh feel de rain."

There wasn't a cloud in the sky. Brody sat beside Bulger.

"But Bulger der's nuhtin but stars up der."

"Yes Mista B ... yuh can't feel it ... de tears from de stars."

Brody smiled weakly. He began to cry.

"Mista B, don't be sad."

Bulger placed his arms around Brody's shoulders and rocked him back and forth as waves of emotion broke over Brody's body.

"Not all tears from sadness, yuh know."

V

Second cousins are not on the list

Carlyon Blackman

A Drowning

for Kyle Shaquille (Jacks) Jackman – d. November 30, 2009

An *extremely quiet* boy died today.
He went to my son's school.
He (not my son) was 15 years old.
Skylarking with his friend
he got into difficulty while swimming
at Heywood's Beach
and was pronounced dead on arrival.
This happened on Monday, Independence Day
some happy independence that turned out to be...

Each morning I tell my oldest son
not to talk to little old ladies on his way to school
even if it is raining he's not supposed
to go inside strange houses seeking shelter.
But he sucks his teeth and says "that joke
is getting old mums (mums?!)
come with something else new."
What's new is that my pressure was 140/90 last time I checked
and I have a doctor's appointment on Friday.

Some say girls are easier
I wouldn't know
female mystique is more of a calculated thing
than this slash and burn method of cultivating
maturity from seedlings spawned in charred dirt
always needing watering.

My father used to tell his children that joy
comes before sorrow
right after a happy meal
or just before a surrender.
I know enough of sacrifice and gain
to be afraid of arbitrariness
how wide open spaces encouraged thoughtless-ness
in an independent boy who felt that
summer was the time reserved for picking fruit
scandalized by fingers unused to cocking
guns and killing doves for sport
every single day of his pluperfect summer life.

There should be a law against the release of joy
the kind boys get from laughing so hard
you feel faint, giddy, helpless, close to tears

with what they think is anger
but really is the sound of a tree falling unheard in the forest
who knew what karma they disturbed
farting in a crowd and telling off colour jokes
to catch Shenika's ear or blunt Christina's scent
from disturbing the atmosphere inside them
with something akin to possibility.

Forgotten now the uses of enchantment
why the blood of kings and queens goes a begging
through the tyranny of the famished earth
and here we are: miserable and grotesque with want
when marking time
inside cinder blocks with lines and bells and clocks,
he might have looked for a braver heart
than mine framed by an outlawed hem
the parenthesis of a 4th year skirt
and worked out the probability that
unopened book bags and laces left undone
will not mean anything to anyone.

Split Second Life Change

My first awareness is of not being able to breathe. I try to take a breath and nothing happens. My chest won't expand; none of the muscles used for breathing respond. I feel like I am suffocating. Why can't I breathe? I will die if I don't breathe.

I focus all the mental energy I can muster and try again to take a breath. This time a whisper of a breath goes in through my open mouth just to tickle the back of my throat and then out again. What a monumental effort that took. What an awful gasping, wheezing noise accompanied it. Did that noise come from me? I focus as hard as I can again and do the same. Another whisper of a breath repeats its journey just as far as my throat with that sound which caused my 16 year-old son to later say "You were making weird noises when you were trying to breathe."

Then into my awareness roars the most excruciating pain I had ever experienced. The searing in my chest explains why it will not move when I breathe. Then there is the intense burning sensation across my lower lap and then burning throbbing pain over every inch of my body.

My oldest son, Daniel's, terrified voice comes from somewhere from my left, "Mom, are you alright?" No, I am definitely not alright but I cannot respond, I cannot even get the thought together, let alone put it into words.

I hear awful moaning sounds from behind me, is someone else hurt? Again Daniel's panicked voice, "Meghan, Tim, are you guys okay?" Oh my God, those are my other children. More moans. What's happened? What's happened?

I appear to be in the front passenger seat of my car but it looks so different. I am strapped in with my seat belt but my seat is twisted so it is almost facing the door which is open. I am in so much pain. I feel like I have been beaten from head to toe with a baseball bat. Oh my God, that's what's happened. We have been attacked and robbed. The thieves must have attacked us with baseball bats and attacked the car as well as it seems to be disabled.

Panic rushes through me as I want to tell Daniel that we have to get out of the car and away from here because they may come back. However, again I don't know how to put it into words and the thought quickly leaves me as do all the thoughts that enter my head.

"Come back, come back," I hear next and a woman is leaning into the car and shaking me. Daniel also still in the car to my left still panicked, holding my hand and adding to the chorus with "Mom, come back, please, come back!" What are they talking about? I haven't moved from this spot; this is all much too confusing. This happens a few times, usually just after I feel very sleepy. Apparently I am drifting in and out of consciousness.

"What happened?" I ask Daniel. "We were in an accident", is his reply. Apparently I can't remember asking this or his reply for more than a few seconds as he tells me sometime later that I asked and he answered several times that night. I don't remember.

I look at what I can see of my car that no longer looks like my car. Things aren't where they were; everything is twisted at an angle and mangled. Something white is hanging from the dashboard which is the deflated airbag but I won't comprehend that until much later. The bottom of the seat that I am sitting on is broken in several places and hanging. The window in front of me is shattered where my head collided with it which has caused small tears in my brain and scrambled the brain cells that are left, which is why I cannot remember what I am being told and why I cannot put a thought into words.

I cannot see out the front window which puzzles me until much later when I see my car on the lot to which it was towed and see that the engine was pushed up so that it blocked the front window. I become aware of a smell that I am trying to place. It is the smell emitted by the deflated air bag but I don't know that at the time. As I try to place the smell I start to think it smells like gas. Panic again. I think there is a gas leak and the car is going to explode into flames. Again I want to tell Daniel we have to get out of the car but cannot put the thought into words.

Daniel is still sitting in the car with me because his door is jammed shut. He is 23 years old and was driving when a car coming in the opposite direction lost control, swerved into our lane and hit us head on. He is holding my hand and telling me to hold on Mom, please hold on, an ambulance is coming.

I realize it is silent in the back of the car and I ask for Meghan and Tim. Daniel tells me someone took them out of the car and they are being looked after across the street. Terror screams through me as I think that they have died in the accident and no one wants to tell me. I cannot put the thought into words. I can only whisper "Where?"

Daniel points out of the open car door and says "They're right there." I look out the door and the world outside looks like a jigsaw puzzle that someone has taken apart, thrown all the pieces in the air and they have landed haphazardly on the ground. I cannot make any sense of what I am seeing. I cannot see my children. More terror as I don't know if Daniel is protecting me from the truth of their death. Mercifully, this is another thought that I am unable to hold onto for very long.

I am suddenly very cold. Someone puts a blanket on me. I am still cold. More blankets. They make no difference. Worried faces keep leaning into the car and murmuring words I cannot comprehend. Two men had been working on opening Daniel's door and finally get it open. Daniel jumps out and runs off and again I hear terror in his voice as he shouts, "Someone help my Mom! Someone help my Mom!" My heart breaks to hear him; I'm his mother, I should be helping him, but I am physically and mentally completely helpless.

The ambulance arrives and I'm on a stretcher being taken out of my tomb of a car. I now see the huge crowd that has gathered with very somber faces. I later heard that the sound of the crash was heard for several blocks. My ex-husband arrives as I am put in the ambulance and comes over and puts his head in. The EMT who is in the ambulance with me stands up, points her finger and loudly says to him "Out." He gives his usual reply whenever he wants preferential treatment anywhere and which never ceases to annoy me, "I'm Dr. Jones." Ms. EMT says "I don't care who you are, you ain't coming in my ambulance." I want to laugh, but I am unable, I want to raise my arm and pump my fist and say "Yes! You go, girl!" but again I can't even get

the thought together and if I could talk it would only come out in a whisper and I can barely lift a finger, let alone a whole arm and pump it.

“I’m her ex-husband.” He will not let her have the last word. “So what,” comes to my scattered mind in the vague way that all the thoughts are drifting through my mind as if it is full of holes and cannot contain anything that enters it. “Well in that case maybe you can tell us which hospital to take her to cause she can’t,” replies Ms. EMT.

She is right. She has asked me several times whether I want to be taken to Doctors Hospital or Princess Margaret Hospital. The words “Doctors Hospital” enter my mind and then quickly escape before I can comprehend their meaning and before the words “Princess Margaret Hospital” enter and escape. I cannot process the meaning of the words, let alone hold two concepts in my mind at the same time, compare them and then make a decision. I cannot explain this to her as I cannot put these thoughts together, I’m only aware of her words floating aimlessly past me as I try desperately to grasp them. I just stare at her in silence.

As we head for the hospital Ms. EMT phones in to the ER with information about me, who gave her this information? I don’t remember giving it to her. She tells them I am a known hypertensive. A known hypertensive? Is that like a known fugitive? Do they have my picture posted somewhere on a wanted poster with other people being searched for because they are guilty of hypertension? Well they’ve caught me. I am strapped onto a stretcher unable to move, being taken to one hospital or another at breathtaking speed with sirens blaring.

My stretcher suddenly slides from the left side of the ambulance to the right as the ambulance takes a corner and I scream soundlessly in pain. Ms. EMT interrupts her monologue with the ER to stand up and hang on to the sides of the ambulance and yell at the driver. “Hey! Slow down! You g’kill all of us!” She then returns to her phone.

The stretcher immediately slides back to the left indicating the driver had no intention of slowing down as he took another corner. “That fool,” muttered Ms. EMT, then she looked in my eyes and saw the pain and said “Chile, I know that must’a hurt.” Hurt it did, but I felt an immense appreciation for the driver who was so intent on getting me to the hospital as fast as he possibly could. As for Ms. EMT, I had fallen in love with her as soon as she had ordered my ex out of the ambulance.

My time in the ER is spent staring at Christmas decorations hanging from the ceiling since it is the day after Christmas. I cannot look in any other direction as Ms. EMT has put a neck brace on me and in any case, as I found out later when it was taken off, the slightest movement of my head produces incredibly painful spasms in my neck. It would be explained to me on one of my follow-up visits with the ER doctor that I had severe neck whiplash and whiplash of my entire body for which I will be on antispasmodics for two weeks, along with the narcotics and anti-inflammatories for much longer.

Little do I know that this is just the beginning of a lifetime of pills as the brain injury would lead to scars that would cause seizures and sleeping problems for which I would need daily medication, and sleep apnea for which I would need to sleep every night with a mask on my face hooked up to a machine to make sure I don’t stop breathing in my sleep. I would also need to take Prozac for chronic pain due to the many other injuries that caused my entire body to go into spasm for protection. This body spasm would make it impossible for me to pass urine that night

and I would have to be catheterized. My neck would grow painful bone spurs to protect my bruised spinal cord and I would need surgery to relieve the pain of a shoulder injury. I would also need surgery to remove the cataracts that grew over my eyes due to the airbag exploding in my face.

However, as I stare at the ceiling with symbols of a joyful season I know none of what is to come, in fact I know very little of anything because my brain is hardly working anymore.

The news comes from the other hospital that the man who hit us died. I am shattered like my mind. So is Daniel. We will find out later from the autopsy report that he was “heavily intoxicated”. His decision to drink to intoxication and then drive a car completely changed my life in the split second it took for our two cars to collide.

When I think of the life I had before it seems like a dream of someone else’s life. When I think of my life now as a result of the crash, it seems like a nightmare from which I cannot wake up.

Jonathan B. Highfield

Oyster Bay Requiem

(for Stephen)

So here I am in Elmina
back at the beginning of our cultures
and I see you in every face.
On this rocky coast, facing the roiling ocean
watching the waves threaten the men poling the fishing boats
I am your eyes. What would you see first looking on this scene?
The life-giving sea or the thieving castle,
where thousands died and more
walked through the door of no return
in chains?

You've been part of me for so long
I no longer need to conjure you
but here the bleached skeleton of the castle
the jubilantly living faces in the market
work like incense and watching the waves
I wish again that I could know your older self
that we could sit with the castle distant and drink a cold Star
rage and cry and laugh as the sun sets over the Atlantic.

Scars from chains and whips still cripple
both Africa and America,
so many die of deprivation,
of anger, and not for the last time
I wonder what you were thinking
as you tightened your finger around the trigger
and said goodbye to life.

Stephen, we were so young,
too young to know the full range of despair and joy life has to offer.
My wife walks on the beach below
with our daughters, and you should see the three of them.
I get up every morning to hold them in my arms
to feel the blessings I've been given.
At fourteen you felt life was too bleak to go on,
but from here in Ghana I've got to tell you that you were so wrong.
Life is so achingly bereft of meaning and so full of absolute beauty
that we must survive just in order to give the next generation hope.

Sam Patterson

News Too Soon

Some news reach
Us too soon too soon
Like tsunamis
And invading armies
And malaria
And poor and African countries
And Haiti facturing
And subsiding into itself
And droughts
And drought
And starving mouth
Some news reach
Us too soon too soon
Like burst and doom
Boom and boom
And more doom
Of AIDS
And raids
And Darfur
And genocides
Where there is no place to hide
Some news reach us to soon
Such as the continued
Growth of malaria
And polio and
Small pox making
A come back
As if some one
Invited them back
Some news come too soon
Come home too soon
News of coups
Of dictators
And marauding rapists
And jihadists
And terrorists
And refugees
And refugees
And those damn
Rising Chinese
Some news reach us too soon
Like Afghanistan
And Pakistan
And those persistent Taliban
And crises

And crises
And crises
Washing up on the shore
Of our lives
And still and still
The oil continues to spill
Some news reach us too
Every day it runs
And runs
And Iran
And who ran
And he ran
And she ran
In Kabul and Congo
And God know
And God knows

Some news reach us too soon
Too soon too soon
Like personal news from home
Waking up the damn sleeping phone
And my sister's voice
Bawling and hollering
And announcing
Mom passed mom passed
And I mumbling mumbling
Mom pass what
Mom pass where
Mom pass what
Mom pass where

Bereavement Pay

Come on in, dear. Sit down. Would you like some coffee? Hey, how often does the big boss ask if you would like something to drink? Times are changing, indeed. By the way, has everyone in your family been accounted for? Never mind that question. You must be getting sick of hearing that. People must ask you that day and night, right? After all, it's been weeks since the quake struck your country. I hope you don't hold it against me for asking you this now.

I hear communication is pretty bad; hear it's tough getting through. Well, from what I understand communication was pretty below standards even before this thing happened. Still, I'm guessing when an estimated quarter of a million people die, the line between "Family A" and "Family B" starts to blur a little bit, am I right? I mean, no one can claim to know every fruit on the family tree. Come to think of it, you may never know if all your family is accounted for. Dear God.

Listen, I understand. I do. I've even had a nightmare or two. If I were in your shoes, I don't know what I'd do. I can't even begin to wrap my brain around some of the images I've seen on CNN. I can't imagine what your people must be going through. The scope of this. . .this. . .this mess. . .like nothing the world has ever seen. Dead bodies in wheelbarrows. Dead bodies being shoveled into mass graves. Blood everywhere. Dust and blood. No one has a name. No one is truly being accounted for, wouldn't you say? This sort of thing must never happens on US soil. I've got kids, you know: a boy and a girl, plus one on the way. Can you imagine? I don't know what I would do if something like that happened here.

Even our military guys down in your country right now are having a difficult time. And some of those guys had done tours in Iraq, Afghanistan. They say your country has the desert beat by a thousand miles. I read somewhere that the soldiers having trouble sleeping. They can't keep food down. They're going to need some serious assistance after this thing blows over. If this ever blows over. War, you know, is different. You expect to see certain things on the battlefield. You expect to hear certain cries. You expect to smell certain smells. You expect to see death. A lot of it, in fact. But this is not war.

My heart goes out to you, my dear. And to your family. Believe me when I tell you that. My heart goes out to your country, too. I'd never heard so much about that place in my entire life before January Twelfth.

You know, I became so interested and curious that I started to do a little research myself. I had no idea you guys were the first black republic. 1804, right? Wow, that's pretty amazing. I saw something about the maroons. . . no one could catch those guys. It was cool the way they hid in those hills. . . I'll have to go back and read a little more about them.

I found out your country used to be gorgeous. Imagine that! It was the place to be once upon a time, am I right? Who called it the Pearl of the Antilles? That sounds so resort-like, you know: Come on down to the Pearl of the Antilles. . .Lose your shoes and your troubles. . . Have a cocktail with one of those little umbrellas in them. . . Somebody told me Elizabeth Taylor and other movie stars used to vacation down there. I hear Bill Clinton and Hilary honeymooned down there. Imagine that! Wild isn't it?

Hey is it true your country is next to the Dominican Republic? Never knew that. I've taken my family to the DR several times. Nice place. Amazing beaches. Good food! You'd never know your country was right next door. Imagine that.

Yes. . .of course. . .forgive me. . .Here I am going on and on, telling you what you probably already know. That's because I really, truly do feel your pain. I can put myself in your

shoes. So, let's get back to your question about bereavement pay, etc. If you consult the employee manual, you'll see how that's broken down according to proximity. Your mind might be all jumbled up right now with all that you must be going through. Mine would be, too. So let me help you find the information you need:

If you lose a mother or a father, that's an automatic five days off. With pay! If you lose a sister or a brother, three days, also with pay. Grandparents: two days (but you get paid for one). First cousins: one day, without pay. An uncle or an aunt – depending on how close you were to them, half a day (and we'll need proof, of course. . . you know. . . something to show you were actually at a memorial service. . . you understand. . . oh. . . wait. . . in your case. . . given the circumstances. . . well, how do I put this? . . . given what we've all seen on TV. . . , you won't be required to provide that sort of proof).

Okay, let's get back to the list. Yes. . . Second cousins. . . let's see. . . no. . . they're not on the list. . . you would not be allowed time off per se, but there's always your lunch hour. At any rate, you can see, second cousins are not on the list. Your mother-in-law's brother on her father's side. . . no, also not on the list. . . your cousin's sister on his mother's side. . . nope, sorry. . . the lady who took care of you for ten years while your parents immigrated to another country to work and send money so you could eat and go to school . . . sorry, not on the list either. . . the lady's children? Aw, come on, are you kidding me?

Lorna Goodison

Our First Christian Martyr

Ran the banner headline. News flash;
she was related to our history teacher.

In the morning assembly at St. Hugh's School
we sung hymns in praise of missionaries

who bear the gospel to heathenlands; hailed
the brave who risk their lives for Jesus Word

in far areas of darkness for to win dark souls.
Scenes we pictured in our inward eyes:

her eyes raised to heaven; a hymn winging
defiant from her lips; savages dragging her

to boiling pot; sound track of savage DRUMS
sound across a jungle where Tarzan was lord

grey smoke rising from torched mission house.
But before term was over she turned up alive.

saved by natives who spirited her away
down paths a-swarm with armed insurgents.

Down the Congo to the Atlantic where she was
delivered on to a ship booking out of Africa.

On the day she appeared to show herself to us
we did not rejoice to see her;

she who deprived us of our first Christian martyr.

Lesson From a Dry Leaf

The hand that touches the fallen leaf
trying to decipher the parched braille
that tells of its demise, finds instead the grief
of its own ageing, like re-reading old mail
from one now dead; I note instead the bas-relief
of veins and wrinkles: bars of the fleshy jail
that prisons us for life—whatever our belief...

Distracted thus from happy morning thoughts,
I gaze at my sixty-year-old hand
and consider how, unlike the fallen leaf,
my flesh is tethered by metal symbols of desire
to time and love and duty—each a thief
of happiness; though all of these, like this dry leaf,
will one day have to feed the final fire...



Left hand on coconut leaf

VI

Slim vinegar licks her fingers

Maria Soledad Rodriguez

The Cat's Back

For Myrna Báez, painter

When your avocados are olive green,
I look for pimento in their pits.

When your cows are the brightest red,
a hibiscus bursts open in their milk.

When those landscapes are aquamarine,
I look for seashells high in the trees.

When a woman towels her tired feet,
rivers flood in my cotton weave.

And when your Tiffany lamp keeps its glow to itself,
I want to smash the closed sliding door,

but when it throws light across your table,
live compasses emerge from its colors,

to point at your cat with its back to me,
its tail swatting questions with no reprieve.

Philip Nanton

Kitchen Combo

Round midnight
when the old house lies dark and deep
the owners all gone off to sleep
that's when the kitchen combo wakes
and starts to find its groove.
The oven clock beats a 4/4 time
Salt shakes high and Salt shakes low
calls a tune all the pans will know
and soon they're cooking.

Slim vinegar licks her fingers
up and down the guitar neck
Pepper sauce says what the heck
no one here will sleep till dawn
and blows himself a fiery horn.
When Batch the bread loaf sings
his stomach rolls.

Sad Scratch the Grater sits up straighter than a ladder
scrapes his off beat up and down the larder.
Just one thing makes old Scratch sad and low
no fork, no knife, no spoon ever wants a grater solo.

Anna Price

Pepper

Pepper
In Pumpkin Soup.
On Days when illness takes hold,
An extra turn is needed.

To feel its solid weight in weak hands,
The grinding sensation gives relief.

Pepper, till the nose runs
And eyes water,
Clearing sinus pressure.

Black and grounded,
Green and sweet,
Red and hot,

Hot,	Heat
Flavor,	Fever
Savory	Sickly
Course,	Cough
Delicious,	Delirious
Spicy-twang,	Painful-pang

Plenty Pepper in Pumpkin Soup.
For all the days when illness takes hold.

The Avocado Affair

Third, fourth, fifth
Who counting
Yet another affair
Wid a sweet ting in a green dress,
Oh my lady
Sweet to my hands
And sweeter to the taste
When my lips touch your skin.
Plump, small, a little tall
I seen dem all
But baby you de best by far
Wid yuh petite top
And yuh bad nasty behind
Let muh run muh hands down your plump face
Wid your yellow make up
Doan worry about de scars
I want yuh bad.
Let muh undress of yuh dress
So green
And then
Oh yes then!
Yuh is heaven to behold
Yuh natural scent
Does mek my nostrils wukk up
As I take you in my arms
Nibbling at your soft yellow neck
While you lay naked fuh my eyes to digest
Whip cream, chocolate, even a little hot sauce in the mix
But you the first mistress I hear dat want dis foreplay tuh got salt.
shh! Be quiet
Don't let de girlfriend hear yuh
Wuh! Nah
She ain' got no problem
With you an' me
She would just be angry
Dat I ain' include she
But doan' worry my yellow skinned love
I gine tek good care of yuh
Bite yuh, nibble and eat yuh all night
Cuz I just can' resist
Another avocado affair.

Dee Horne

Diving the Wreck

The ship lies still
bereft relic of old battles,
coveted cargo
a ghost of former glory.

Sunken and settled,
silent sea swirling
currents caress
rusted engines.

Meanwhile, orange octopus
and gentle rays
colonize the decayed deck
amidst brilliant hues
of blue and yellow schools.
Butterfly and angel fish treasure
empty hold now home.

Dawn V. Hanna

Blank Pages

words spill
onto blank pages
songs reborn
with streaks of violins
in purple haze
heart rhythms
hanging off tips of pens
dance
as ballads return
uplifting the wind
drums beat into air
onto leaves
stained with ink

Mark McWatt



Boys fishing off Cienfuegos, Cuba.

Fishing

Two boys fishing—like me—for a poem,
waiting to play each line till it gets taut,
hoping to hold onto it as it fights
to slip away, burning the hand that wants
to grasp and measure it as it leaps and dives.
Often, as with all good lines of poetry, it cuts
the flesh that tries to tame it, to
tire it, to haul it into the light of human
understanding and watch its colours sparkle
as it fights the shape of the vessel
in which they land it and to which
they will make it yield the meaning
of its capture, the scale of its hope—
the syllabic wonder of its form and breath.

And so with every line: some, of course
must be thrown back—too tired,
too weak, too hauntingly familiar,
too easily wrestled into limp acquiescence...
Yet, by the time the circling beam of the
lighthouse, like the flash of trope and image,
becomes visible, the poem will have taken shape
on the crude palimpsest of the dinghy's floor
and the poet-fishermen will head for shore...

And when the poem is complete, packaged,
marketed, the fisherman of words is happy
to let go of it and return next day
to the blue sea of wonder, to seek again
the fin-flash of lines of poetry, just
beneath the surface of his longing.

CONTRIBUTORS

D'Anthra Adderley: is a Year 13, scholarship student, enrolled in the International Baccalaureate Program, at St. Andrew's School, on New Providence, in The Bahamas. At The College of The Bahamas, in 2009 and 2010, on scholarships, D'Anthra attended Bahamas Writers Summer Institute and participated in Poetry Workshops and began to take her involvement in poetry as seriously as her pursuit of her IB Diploma.

Thomas Armstrong: is a Canadian/Barbadian writer. He has published short stories and one novel, *Of Water and Rock* (DC Books, Montreal 2010). The book, in manuscript form, won 2nd prize in the 2008 Frank Collymore Literary Endowment Awards, and as a published book it won the NIFCA Gold Medal for best book, and The George Lamming Award. He is currently working on a novel with a supernatural theme, set in Barbados, entitled *The Out Man*, and is hoping to see publication in 2012.

Carlyon Blackman: Since winning the inaugural Irving Burgie Literary Award for Poetry in 1983, Carlyon Blackman has been honing her craft. After a hiatus of several years she has re-emerged on the literary scene and her work has been published in online and print publications including *The Caribbean Writer*, *Tongues of the Ocean* and *St. Somewhere Journal*. Currently she is working on getting a collection of her poetry published.

Shakirah Bourne: is a Barbadian writer who specializes in short fiction addressing moral themes and issues. She has attended the Fiction Writing classes conducted by George Lamming and the Cropper Foundation Caribbean Writers Workshop and holds a Certificate in Screenwriting from the Barbados Community College. Her stories have won various awards, and have been published in newspapers, online journals and websites such as *St. Somewhere* and *Writers Weekly*. She is pursuing a Masters in Art and Cultural Management at Queen Margaret University in Edinburgh.

Vashti Bowlah: is from Trinidad and Tobago. She has published articles, poems and short stories in local newspapers as well as anthologies, and has won awards including the David Hough Literary Prize, awarded by *The Caribbean Writer* in 2009.

Jane Bryce: born and brought up in Tanzania, and educated there, the UK and Nigeria, she is Professor of African Literature and Cinema at UWI, Cave Hill, where she also teaches Creative Writing: Fiction. She worked as a freelance editor and journalist before becoming an academic, and still contributes to newspapers and journals. She has published a collection, *Chameleon and other stories* (2007), and an edited anthology, *Caribbean Dispatches: Beyond the Tourist Dream* (2006). She is working on a memoir.

Simon Peter Eggertsen: was born in Kansas, raised in Utah, schooled in Virginia and England. He has degrees in literature, language and law. He has lived in the U.S. Virgin Islands and Trinidad and has worked in a number of Caribbean countries. His work has been published, or will be, in *Nimrod*, *Vallum* (Canada), *Atlanta Review*, *The Caribbean Writer*, *New Millennium Writings* and elsewhere. He won an International Publishing Prize (Atlanta Review, 2009), was a finalist for the Pablo Neruda Prize in Poetry (Nimrod International, 2009) and a runner-up for the International Poetry Prize (Little Red Tree Publishing, 2010).

Francis Farmer: is a clinical psychologist in The Bahamas. Ms Farmer is a part-time faculty member at The College of The Bahamas and has a part-time private practice. This is her first venture into the area of creative writing.

Lorna Goodison: is a Jamaican poet, a leading West Indian writer of the generation born after World War II, currently dividing her time between Jamaica and Ann Arbor, Michigan, where she teaches at the University of Michigan. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lorna_Goodison

Gregory Gilbert Gumbs: was born on the small Dutch Caribbean island of Aruba but grew up in the French/Dutch island of St. Martin/St. Maarten. He studied law and criminology at the University of Utrecht in the Netherlands where he worked briefly as a lawyer and as a criminologist. In the USA, he studied film and screen writing at the University of Southern California (MFA), and worked as a screenwriter. He also has a PhD in World Politics from the Catholic University of America. His poems have appeared in magazines and anthologies all over the world.

Dawn Victoria Hanna: was born in Nassau, Bahamas. She was trained at the East-15 Method Acting school (Essex, England), majoring in Drama, but has also explored many aspects of the performing arts, including Music and Dance. She is currently working on a theatre/dance production entitled 'Rise', which she is writing and directing, as well as an art exhibit called 'Religion, Myth and Fantasy,' both to be mounted in 2012. She now enjoys painting art items on Wood's Roger's Wharf, Nassau, Bahamas.

Jay Healy: Literatures in English student at the University of the West Indies, Cave Hill.

Jonathan B. Highfield: is professor of English at Rhode Island School of Design, where he teaches a range of courses in postcolonial literatures. He has published essays in *Antipodes*, *Atlantic Studies*, *Canadian Journal of Irish Studies*, *The International Journal of Environmental, Cultural, Economic and Social Sustainability*, *The Jonestown Report*, *Kunapipi*, *Passages*, and *Rupkatha*. His poems have appeared in *Hiram Poetry Review*, *The Innisfree Poetry Journal*, and *The New Review*.

Joanne Hillhouse: Antiguan born (she also writes as jhohadli) is the author of two books of fiction: *The Boy from Willow Bend* and *Dancing Nude in the Moonlight*. Her third book is forthcoming in 2012. A 2008 Breadloaf fellow and announced recipient of the 2011 David Hough Literary Prize from *The Caribbean Writer*, her fiction and poetry have also appeared in *Tongues of the Ocean*, *Mythium*, *Ma Comère*, *The Caribbean Writer*, *Calabash*, *Sea Breeze*, *Women Writers: A Zine*, *St. Somewhere*, and more. She was awarded a 2004 UNESCO Honour Award for her contribution to literacy and the literary arts in Antigua and Barbuda.

Dee Horne: is Professor and Chair of the English Department at the University of Northern British Columbia. A regular contributor to *Poui*, she has published over 30 poems and is the editor and publisher of Scroll Press (<http://scrollpress.com>) and Scroll in Space (<http://scrollinspace.com>).

Helen Klonaris: a Greek Bahamian writer, singer-songwriter and social activist, she has been published in Bahamian newspapers and journals such as *WomanSpeak*, *Lignum Vitae* and *Yinna*, as well as *The Caribbean Writer*, *Writing Women* and *HLFQ*. Her work has been anthologized in *Our Caribbean: A Gathering of Lesbian and Gay Writings from the Antilles*, edited by Thomas Glave, and *Caribbean Erotic*, edited by Opal Palmer Adisa and Donna Weir. While she writes and teaches in California's Bay Area, she is co-founder and co-director of the Bahamas Writers Summer Institute.

Mark McWatt: is Professor Emeritus of West Indian Literature at Cave Hill, where he taught for more than thirty years and still teaches Creative Writing: Poetry, and a founding editor of *Poui*. He has published three collections of poetry: *Interiors* (1989), *The Language of Eldorado* (1994) and *The Journey to Le Repentir* (2009). His collection of short fiction, *Suspended Sentences*, won the Casa de Las Americas Award and the Commonwealth Prize for Best First Book in 2006.

Andre Marsden: is an aspiring poetry, fiction, and essay writer currently living in Belmopan, Belize. His writing has been published in online journals such as *MediaVirus Magazine* and *St. Somewhere Journal*, and in print in *News Exchange Magazine* in Belize, as well as a 2004 poetry anthology published by the University of Belize. He also enjoys performing his poetry on stage as well as organizing events for other poets to do so.

Philip Nanton: born in St Vincent and resident in Barbados, he is a cultural studies lecturer, literary archivist, radio presenter and freelance writer and performer. He contributed to *Caribbean Dispatches: Beyond the Tourist Dream* (2006) and has contributed consistently to *Poui* since the second issue. In 2008 he wrote and produced a spoken-word cd, *Island Voices from St. Christopher & the Barracudas*, which he has performed regionally and internationally.

Shani Oliphant: is a 23 year old Jamaican and graduate of the English programme at the University of the West Indies, Mona; currently works as Quality Assurance Analyst with Mossel Jamaica Ltd. (Digicel).

Samuel Patterson: has adopted the Muslim name Sami El Mahdi. He writes poetry for adults and children. American citizen born in Saint Vincent, he grew up in Brooklyn, New York City, was educated at universities in America and England, and is based in London where he works as an English lecturer.

Donnya Piggott: is a History with Cultural Studies student at Cave Hill and Guild representative for the Faculty of Humanities and Education. She has won a gold medal and Most Promising Poetry prize at the National Independence Festival for Creative Arts (NIFCA), and been featured artist at NCF Read In and Mahailia's Corner at Bump and Wine Café, as well as performing for the World Women's Boxing Championships opening ceremony, Tallawah (Jamaica) and the closing gala of the Labour Party.

Ana Price: Born in Trinidad, she studies Literatures in English at the University of the West Indies, St. Augustine. She spent her second year on exchange to York University and the first semester of her third year at the Cave Hill Campus of UWI. She is now looking forward to pursuing a Masters of Fine Arts in Creative Writing.

Keith Russell: born Pineridge Grand Bahama, Bahamas, lives in Freeport, Bahamas. Publications: *Passage of a Native Son* (collection of short stories); novels, *The Disappearance of J D Sinclair*, *When Doves Cry*, and *Hezekiah's Independence*; one play, *Let Freedom Ring*, performed in Freeport and New York..

Olivia Russell: a 21-year-old Bahamian first published at the age of 15 and since when she has interned for a weekly newsletter and been published in two international poetry anthologies.

Obediah Michael Smith: was born on New Providence, in The Bahamas, in 1954 and has published 13 books of poetry in English. He participated in writers' workshops at the University of Miami and the University of the West Indies, Cave Hill and was the Poetry Workshop facilitator for the Bahamas Writers Summers Institute, held in June and July, 2009, on New Providence, at the College of The Bahamas. His poems are included in literary journals and anthologies throughout the Caribbean, in the USA and in England, and Spanish translations are included in anthologies in Colombia, Mexico, Peru, Venezuela and Spain. His fourteenth book, *El amplio Mar de los Sargazos y otros poemas*, was published in Costa Rica (2011).

Maria Soledad Rodriguez: from the Rio Piedras campus of the University of Puerto Rico, has primarily taught and published on pan-Caribbean folk figures like Bobo Johnny and douens as well as women's literature. She is currently working on poetry manuscripts in English and Spanish.

Barbara Southard: a retired professor of history at the Río Piedras Campus of the University of Puerto Rico, she has published extensively in the field of women's history and gender studies, and is now writing historical fiction. Her short story, 'Heavy Downpour', was published in *Calabash* (2008), 'The Pinch of the Crab' in *Poui*: (Vol. X, 2009) and 'Grandfather's Portrait' in *Cerebration* (Issue 2, 2010). She is completing a novel about women's lives in Puerto Rico in the 1990s.

Kevon Squires: Literatures in English student at the University of the West Indies, Cave Hill.

Bianca Thorne: Literatures in English student at the University of the West Indies, Cave Hill.

Katia D. Ulysse: Haitian-born writer, performer, and educator, she attended Le Petit Chaperon Rouge and Anne Marie Javouhey in Petionville, Haiti. Her works of fiction, poetry, essays, and photographs have appeared in *Poui*, *The Caribbean Writer*, *Calabash*, *Peregrine*, *Phoebe*, *Wadabagei*, *Macomère*, and others. She has been anthologized in *Mozayik*, edited by Roger Savain and Drexel Woodson; *Brassage* (edited by Claudine Michel); *The Butterfly's Way: Voices from the Haitian Diaspora* (Soho Press), and *Haiti Noir* (Akachic Books, 2011), both edited by Edwidge Danticat. Katia has recently completed her second compilation of short stories.

Correction: (Volume XI: the bio for Hazra C. Medica should read as below and not as previously stated. The Board apologises for the error)

Hazra C. Medica: Cave Hill graduate, award-winning journalist (recipient of two gold UNFPA Caribbean Population Awards and one national PAHO Caribbean Media Award) and freelance writer and reporter. Winner in the Highly Commended Category (Canada and Caribbean) in the 2008 CBA Commonwealth Short Story Competition and two times winner of local Independence literary competition.

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