“Hurricane Story, 1988”, text of the poem, annotations, and commentary are on the following pages and online: www.dloc.com/AA00061850

HURRICANE STORY, 1988

1. My mother wasn’t christened
2. Imelda but she stashed a cache
3. of shoes beneath the bed.

4. She used to travel to Haiti,
5. Panama, Curaçao, Miami,
6. wherever there was bargain

7. to catch – even shoes that
8. didn’t have match. Back home
9. she could always find customer

10. come bend-down to look and talk
11. where she plant herself on
12. sidewalk. When the hurricane

13. hit, she ban her belly and bawl,
14. for five flights a day to Miami
15. grounded. No sale and her shoes

16. getting junjo from the damp (since
17. the roof decamp) and the rest
18. sitting in Customs, impounded.

19. My mother banked between her
20. breasts, lived out her dreams
21. in a spliff or two each night.

22. Since the storm, things so tight
23. her breasts shrivel, the notes
24. shrinking. Every night she there

25. thinking. Every morning she get up
26. and she wail: Lawd! Life so soak-up
27. and no bail out. To raatid!
Annotations to the Poem

(prepared by Olive Senior)

1] my mother: the mother in the poem is a higgler or trader, a woman who travels overseas to buy and sell. These traders often spread out their wares on city sidewalks.

2] Imelda: a reference to Imelda Marcos, wife of a former president of the Philippines, notorious for extravagance, including her shoe collection.

13] ban her belly and bawl: an expression of mourning, signifying the pain of the womb (“belly”) for the mother whose child dies.

16] junjo: fungus (such as wild mushroom); also mould or mildew.

21] spliff: a ganja (marijuana) cigarette.

26] soak up plans that are spoilt.

27] to raatid!: expression of annoyance; also rahtid.

Commentary

Written by Tim Watson, University of Miami

The poem’s title links it explicitly with the other three “Hurricane Story” poems in the “Travellers’ Tales” section of the collection. Having a date in the title, as well as the reference to intra-Caribbean migration, also link “Hurricane Story, 1988” to the poem—“All Clear, 1928”—that immediately follows it. Moreover, the travelling shoes at the center of this poem reappear, albeit worn and stored by different characters, in “My Father’s Blue Plantation,” a poem in the “Gardening in the Tropics” section of the collection. “Hurricane Story, 1988” is, therefore, tightly integrated into Gardening in the Tropics as a whole, and yet it appears to have nothing to do with either gardening or agriculture. The reader may wonder what this urban shoe seller and her daughter are doing in a book that places the natural world of the Caribbean at its center.

The beginning of an answer to this question can be found in Senior’s annotation above to the first line of the poem where she explains that the mother figure is “a higgler or trader.” Going back to the days of slavery, higglers—mostly women—have been essential to the Jamaican economy and society, carrying and selling small amounts of food and agricultural produce from the countryside to the urban areas and linking plantations and smallholdings to towns and ports. As this late eighteenth-century image of a market in Dominica shows, fruits and vegetables were often sold alongside dry goods (such as linen, or, in the case of Senior’s modern poem, shoes) in street commerce. In “Hurricane Story, 1988,” the mother may be flying to Miami and Curacao and dealing with the customs and taxation infrastructure of the contemporary postcolonial state, but she is also recognizably kin to those women, enslaved and free, who in earlier times provided the crucial link between the natural and human environments in the shape of small-scale commerce. As so often in this collection of poems, history is telescoped and strong associations are made across distant time periods. From a Kingston market in the aftermath of Hurricane Gilbert it is not a long journey to the exchanges between Columbus’s crew and the indigenous Arawak that open “Meditation on Yellow,” the
first of Senior’s “Travellers’ Tales.” And, just as history is recast as a non-chronological network, so too are the geographical divisions within Jamaica and the Caribbean overcome with the small trader or higgler linking the natural world to the human-built environment. In lines 11-12, the mother-merchant of “Hurricane Story, 1988” is described as “plant[ing] herself on / sidewalk” (lines 11-12). It is a homely metaphor— conveyed in a vernacular register close to the Jamaican Creole that the higgler herself presumably speaks— that comes close to being a literal description of the way she roots herself in the urban landscape.

Technically, the mother is actually an informal commercial importer (ICI) rather than a higgler. The latter term is mostly used for those traders associated with the internal market in foodstuffs rather than the international market in non-food items. Higglers also bear more of the brunt of class- and race-based stereotyping as they are associated in the public mind in Jamaica with petty criminality and deviations from “proper” femininity, mostly because they are poor black women who stake a claim for themselves as non-domestic workers in highly public spaces. Both Gina Ulysse and Winnifred Brown-Glaude report that ICIs often self-consciously distinguish themselves from higglers as they see themselves as more respectable and of higher social status. Such a hierarchy is clearly of long standing as evident in Brunias’s painting of a late eighteenth-century Dominican market in which the linen traders sit on chairs and show their goods on tables while the fruit and vegetable vendors sit on the ground and display their wares on blankets. Notably, however, Senior’s “higgler or trader” in this poem does not disdain other market vendors. Her brand of entrepreneurial self-making in the context of Senior’s book marks her as a symbolic, and perhaps even a literal, descendant of Granny in “Hurricane Story, 1903,” a survivor with her “goat / and fowls”; and, even more so, to the higgler-mother in “Hurricane Story, 1944,” who “sang as she took her crops to market” and provides for the family even as her shiftless husband slides into depression and regularly assaults her. These women may not always be able to overcome the forces arrayed against them, which are economic, social, and cultural as much as they are natural, despite the recurring figure of the hurricane. Collectively, however, they are powerful embodiments of determination, survival tactics, and patterns of family and community support that are organized and directed by Jamaican women.

Although we cannot be sure of the kinship relations, if any, between the various characters in these four hurricane poems, as Victoria Durant-Gonzalez observes in a Jamaica Journal article on higglers from 1983 (which appeared during the period when Senior herself was the managing editor of this journal), many women traders initiated their own daughters into the profession, often as young as six or seven years old (7-8). However, if the ICI-mother in “1988” appears to be the poetic daughter of the higgler-mother in “1944,” the actual daughter in “Hurricane Story, 1988” is a more ambiguous figure. She never directly places herself in the setting with her mother, and sometimes implies that her mother puts the needs of her business ahead of her own daughter; their differences in diction and syntax suggest the daughter is more highly educated and hint at a generational and class divide between the two women. Ironically, this distance is established in the opening stanza by the poem’s speaker comparing her mother to Imelda Marcos, who was notorious for the size of her shoe collection (almost 3,000 pairs). Of course, the small-scale shoe vendor is hardly in the same category as the fabulously wealthy Mrs. Marcos—a fact emphasized by the reference to her mother’s shoes being stored under “the” bed (line 3), suggesting perhaps that their humble home contains only one shared bed. Nevertheless, the comparison serves to undercut the mother from the start and to hint that her commercial/professional concerns (shoes) are taking over the domestic space that ought to be reserved for familial affairs.

Still, the daughter seems to admire her mother’s cosmopolitan travels. There is a rhythmic pleasure in the simple listing of the country and city names that map a multilingual Caribbean
region that includes the southern tip of the United States: “Haiti / Panama, Curacao, Miami” (lines 4-5). In her homely, small-scale way, the ICI-mother is creating her own “Caribbean basin initiative,” although hers is not as obviously dictated by external powers as the 1980s United States tariffs and trade program evoked in the poem of that title in Senior’s collection. But the reader may notice that when the mother returns “back home” (line 8), it is not a reference to the residence she presumably shares with her daughter but to the public space of the urban “sidewalk” (line 12) where her companion is a “customer” (line 9). When Hurricane Gilbert—the most destructive storm in Jamaican history which killed 50 people and caused billions of dollars worth of damage—hits, the ICI mother “ban her belly and bawl” (line 13). But she is not in mourning for lost lives (Senior’s note suggests this is the most common meaning of this Creole phrase). Nor is she expressing relief at the survival of herself and her daughter. Instead, she is mourning the loss of her economic livelihood because planes are no longer flying to Miami.

It is paradoxical then, and intriguing, that it is at this very point of the poem, where the distance between mother and daughter seems greatest, that the tone begins to shift and the voices of the two central figures begin to merge more seamlessly into each other. This shift generates more sympathy for the mother, whose wares are going moldy and whose very body is suffering as post-hurricane weight loss shrinks both her breasts and the banknotes she stores between them for safekeeping. If lines 19-20 — “My mother banked between her / breasts”— had appeared in the first half of the poem, they might have sounded a note of half-mocking resentment. Breasts can symbolize maternal nurture, and so placed earlier in the poem these lines could have been read as evidence of the mother’s working life that excludes her daughter. But placed here in the post-hurricane second half of the poem, the lines invoke a memory of a personal and emotional prosperity that cannot now be recovered. As the poem closes, it shifts completely to the mother’s Creole voice, battered and neglected in the post-Gilbert reconstruction, wailing to God in exasperation at life’s injustices. In her analysis of the four “Hurricane Story” poems, Denise deCaires Narain argues that they “explore the impact of hurricanes on people who have little to buffer them from such events” (99). The poem’s closing exclamation, “To raatid!,” may be a cathartic release for the mother as well as for the daughter-narrator, but it does not put food on the table.

In terms of poetic form, the poem is strikingly plain and unadorned, which is in stark contrast to the meteorological excess that is the poem’s inspiration. The Barbadian poet Kamau Brathwaite famously declared in “History of the Voice” that in order to properly represent the region and its people, Caribbean poetry must shed its debt to the conventions of English verse because the “hurricane does not roar in pentameter” (265), the five-stress, ten-syllable line associated with Shakespeare and other masters of the British poetic tradition. But in “Hurricane Story, 1988,” the hurricane does not roar metrically at all, except perhaps in the mother’s final line-and-a-half exclamations. Nevertheless, it should be noted that Senior eschews the pentameter all the same, favoring unrhymed lines with three or four stresses and anywhere from six to nine syllables. Most remarkable of all is the almost total absence of adjectives. The poem moves quickly but plainly along in a flurry of nouns and verbs. Its straightforwardness is an echo of the pragmatic ethos of the mother who must always be in search of the next bargain and who never has the time to stop and assign descriptive terms to the shoes, customers, damp, or even the spliffs that provide her temporary relief from the drudgery of work and travel.

The only adornment, thereby drawing attention to itself as a literary technique, is the frequent use of internal rhyme, including “stashed a cache” (line 2); “to catch — even shoes that / didn’t have match” (lines 7-8); and “getting junjo from the damp (since / the roof decamp)” (lines 16-17). Internal rhyme is a typical feature of the ballad form, which is associated with narrative accounts of ordinary folk, sometimes in extraordinary situations. In some ways, “Hurricane
Story, 1988” is ballad-like: its three- and four-stressed lines, often roughly iambic in pattern, are typical of the ballad, although more commonly in the ballad these lines would be organized into rhyming quatrains (four-line stanzas). The phrase “she ban her belly and bawl” (line 13) may well be a direct allusion to the most famous Caribbean poet of the ballad form, Louise Bennett. Bennett’s well-known poem “Jamaica Oman” in The Heinemann Book of Caribbean Poetry is a Creole-language homage to the cunning power of Jamaican women who, its poetic persona claims, have long known how to use trickery in order to exert their dominance in the home and in the world. “[D]e cunny Jamma oman / Ban her belly, bite her tongue” and finds ways to manage the “fambly budget” (13-14) even amidst male complaint and criticism. Senior’s poem appears to acknowledge a debt to Bennett, one of the most important Jamaican poets of the twentieth century and a pioneer in the representation of women’s voices and vernacular speech in general. At the same time, by altering the phrase to make her ICI-mother more outspoken, bawling rather than biting her tongue, Senior suggests that in the late twentieth century quiet cunning is not necessarily the best strategy for women who want to assert themselves and take control of lives in which men are strikingly absent. (Unlike the previous three “Hurricane Story” poems, there is no mention of a father or grandfather figure here. It is also worth noting that the poem is immediately followed by “All Clear, 1928,” a tale of a man who abandons his lover and then does not recognize her when he returns home.) However, while the poem gives space to the assertive, even domineering figure of the mother, she is framed within a poem that is anything but strident as it is controlled by the “understated, coy tone of voice” that Denise deCaires Narain argues is a powerful feature of Gardening in the Tropics (84). Still, while the mother gets the last word, the reader is left wondering about the relationship between mother and daughter, and whether domestic and commercial recovery is even possible after this latest and strongest storm.

Notes

Works Cited


