Many individuals and companies have assisted Kyk-Over-Al since the magazine was relaunched 10 years ago in December 1984. Indeed without such help Kyk could not possibly have continued. In Guyana or the West Indies – perhaps, indeed, anywhere – a literary magazine can by no means survive through sales alone so we are dependent on sponsorship provided by people and companies with the imagination to see that a magazine like Kyk is worth keeping going for the sake of the contribution it makes to cultural and intellectual life in the country. In the case of this issue, #45, we owe a particular and very great debt of gratitude to six organisations which have greatly assisted us in the publication. We hope that it will be reward enough for them to know that their support has enabled an important part of our cultural tradition in Guyana and the West Indies to be preserved now and, we hope, well into the future. We extend our sincere thanks to the following:

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The Editor would welcome the submission of poems, short stories, articles and reviews to consider for publication. Publication, of course, cannot be guaranteed and because of expenses it will not be possible to return manuscripts.

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173 Charlotte Street, Lacytown, Georgetown.
EDWARD BAUGH - Jamaican poet; author of A Tale from the Rain Forest (poems); Professor of English at the Mona Campus of the University of the West Indies.

FRANK BIRBALSINGH - Born in Guyana; literary critic; senior lecturer in Caribbean Literature, York University, Canada, important promoter of West Indian writers.

ROY BRUMMELL - Guyanese teacher, folklore historian, short story writer; now lives in the U.S.A.

MAHADAII DAS - Guyanese poet; M.A. (Philosophy) University of Chicago; her collection of poems Bones was published in 1989 by Peepal Tree Press.

MICHAEL GILKES - Guyanese playwright and literary critic; his most celebrated play Couvade was given an outstanding production in Guyana in 1993; his play A Pleasant Career won a Guyana Prize for Drama in 1992; he now works at the Sir Arthur Lewis Community College in St. Lucia.

CECIL GRAY - Noted Trinidadian poet, short story writer, editor and lecturer, now lives in Canada.

STANLEY GREAVES - Distinguished Guyanese painter, teacher and writer on art; poet; now lives in Barbados.

PETER JAILALL - Guyanese poet; journalist; now lives in Canada.

MARK McWATT - Guyanese poet; author of two collections of poems Interiors (1989) and The Language of El Dorado (1994), published by Dangaroo Press; lecturer in English at Cave Hill Campus of the University of the West Indies; Joint Editor of The Journal of West Indian Literature.
ROOPLALL MONAR - Guyanese poet, short story writer and novelist; author of Backdam People (stories) Koker (poems) Jhanjat (first novel) and High House and Radio (stories) all published by Peepal Tree Press and Estate People published by The Roraima Press.

PAM MORDECAI - Jamaican poet; radio and TV producer; editor of Caribbean Journal of Education; has written many books for children.

HEMRAJ MUNIRAM - Guyanese journalist and short story writer.

NAN PEACOCKE - Born in Guyana of Vincentian parents; resident of Barbados, Editor of Woman Speak, Journal published by WAND; contributor to CAFRA’s Creation Fire anthology of Caribbean Women Poets; she also played the lead in BANYAN’s Video production of Wide Sargasso Sea.

KEN RAMCHAND - distinguished literary critic, historian and editor; professor of English at the St. Augustine Campus of the University of the West Indies; writes a well-known column for the Trinidad Guardian.


CLEM SEECHARRAN - Guyanese historian; author of India and the Indo-Guyanese Imagination, 1890s to 1920s; lecturer at North London University.

KIREN SHOMAN - young poet from Belize.

ANNEWALMSLEY - Born in England; B.A. in English from Durham University and M.A. in African Studies from Sussex University; her anthologies of Caribbean Writing, The Sun’s Eye, and Facing the Sea are widely used; Editor of Guyana Dreaming, the Art of Aubrey Williams; author of the History of the Caribbean Artists’ Movement.
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Across the Editor’s Desk

Apologies

Again, embarrassingly, apologies are due to readers, contributors and subscribers for the long delay in publishing Kyk 45. Issue # 44, featuring Martin Carter, came out in May, 1993. It had been planned to bring out Kyk 45 first in December, then in June, 1994. The intervals between issues are getting longer. The fault, I fear, lies fundamentally with the Editor whose attention has been diverted again and again by competing duties and interests and suddenly prevailing inclinations. I am sure the reason is not failing commitment. I hope it is not fading energy. In future we must find a way at least to reduce the length of delay between issues.

Appreciation

This issue would have been even longer delayed, and certainly its production would have been of lesser quality, if it had not been for the assistance of Brendan de Caires, Vanda Radzik and Red Thread Women’s Press.

Brendan helped greatly by sorting through the mass of material – poems, stories, reviews and critical articles – submitted for publication and discussing the relative merits of the submissions with me. I found this most valuable though, of course, no blame attaches to him either for the omissions or inclusions finally made by the Editor.

Kyk-Over-Al is now very dependent on the work done for it by the Red Thread Women’s Press and in particular its Director, Vanda Radzik. Much of what is important in bringing out a magazine flows from the efforts of Vanda and the people at the Red Thread Press: suggesting the format and doing the layout, organising proof-reading, designing the cover, printing the magazine. Vanda also made many astute editorial comments and supplied the illustrations which add so much to the magazine. As in Kyk 44, her work and the contribution of Red Thread, have made all the difference in achieving quality in production.
I would also like to repeat in these editorial pages the appreciation recorded in the “Friends of Kyk” page to the financial sponsors of this issue. Kyk cannot survive on the proceeds of subscriptions and sales alone. I find it immensely heartening that a number of companies and banks have felt it worthwhile to assist a literary magazine so readily and generously. It is always made clear that no advertising space is available but this has not prevented those businesses contributing. Let me record their names: Shell Antilles and Guianas Limited, National Bank of Industry and Commerce, Courts, Guyana Bank of Trade and Industry, Bank of Nova Scotia, Omai Goldmines Limited.

Five Rules of Poetry

In the letters of John Betjeman there is one in which he sets out for a correspondent five simple rules in writing poetry:

1. Poetry should not be private, but easy for all to understand.
2. It should have tones of meaning beneath the surface one.
3. It should read out loud well.
4. It should be memorable.
5. It should very clearly not be prose. Rhythm helps to make it different.

These seem to me simple, straightforward, clear and useful precepts for poets to remember.

Letter-Writing as an Art

I have happened to read recently, in articles and various collections, a large number of letters by authors who presumably dashed them off as little considered side-shows to their main work. In particular, I have been reading letters in One Art: Selected Letters of Elizabeth Bishop. These have sent me back to browse in the letters of John Keats, Byron in particular, Coleridge, Charles Dickens, Gerald Manley Hopkins among others. I am beginning to think, perhaps because of the spontaneity and the lack of inhibition in letter-writing, that this is a form of creativity too lightly regarded by critics and that in their letters
many writers arrive at a pitch of inspired expression which they rarely equal elsewhere. The body of Byron’s letters, for example, surely represents as considerable a work of art as anything he ever wrote. And certainly Elizabeth Bishop’s letters reinforce the impression that grows in me these days that she is among the front-rank of twentieth century poets.

Now one comes to think of it, have there been any published collections of letters by West Indian literary figures of the past or indeed by great West Indians in any sphere? I think I remember seeing C.L.R. James’s letters. Are there any others?

Who can doubt that letters can be works of art in themselves? Here, for example, is a letter from the recently published letters of Jean Renoir, the film director. For me, even in its slightly fractured English, it is so pure and delicate in expressing the emotion of the moment that I cannot imagine writing being better crafted for its purpose than this. It is a letter written to Jean Renoir’s good friend Clifford Odets whose wife Bette has just died:

Dear Cliff,

We cannot imagine that we won’t see any more this sweet girl – unfitted for modern life. Almost an anachronism in a big town, making elevators, streetcars, neon lights look indecent – born to be Nausicaa and chatter with the King’s servants around the well, with Mount Olympus in the background. The last time we saw her was in a taxi cab. In my memories this banal background – cheap set-up – disappears replaced by an olive tree and the broken column of an ancient temple.

With our love,

Jean & Dido.

The Name and Nature of Poetry

I recently bought a copy of the Penguin edition of A.E. Housman’s *Collected Poems* and *Selected Prose*. (What intellectual delight, what good instructions, what pure pleasure have the multitude of Penguins given countless millions over the years). I began to browse in it and suddenly realised all over again what a beautiful, spare, exact, moving
poet Housman can be. And then I read again his great address. The 
Name and Nature of Poetry which I had not read since University 
days. Here, in case you have forgotten, is the passage on how to define 
poetry:

Poetry indeed seems to me more physical than intellectual. A year or 
two ago, in common with others, I received from America a request 
that would define poetry. I replied that I could no more define poetry 
than a terrier can define a rat, but that I thought we both recognised the 
object by the symptoms which it provokes in us. One of these 
symptoms was described in connection with another object by Eliphaz 
the Temanite: ‘A spirit passed before my face: the hair of my flesh 
stood up.’ Experience has taught me, when I am shaving of a morning, 
to keep watch over my thoughts, because, if a line of poetry strays into 
my memory, my skin bristles so that the razor ceases to act. This 
particular symptom is accompanied by a shiver down the spine; there 
is another which consist in a constriction of the throat and a precipi­
tation of water to the eyes; and there is a third which I can only describe 
by borrowing a phase from one of Keats’s last letters, where he says, 
speaking of Fanny Brawne, ‘everything that reminds me of her goes 
through me like a spear. The seat of this sensation is the pit of the 
stomach.’

Derek Walcott

If Kyk 45 had come out much earlier, as intended, Derek Walcott’s 
Noble Prize lecture would have been printed in it. However, in the 
intervening period of delay this lecture has been reproduced so often 
in magazines and newspapers that it came to seem supererogatory to 
print it again and anyway insulting to be so behind the time in doing 
so.

But what I can do is reproduce what must be less well known 
and which I think in its own right is a beautifully crafted and pitched 
piece, Edward Baugh’s “Introduction” when Derek Walcott was 
honoured at a “Gathering of Graduates” conference at Mona in April, 
1993. Here it is:
"It is not often that I have the pleasure of introducing persons who have had entire city squares named after them. For those of you who have been living outside of history, I should explain that Columbus Square in Castries was recently re-named Derek Walcott Square. I have been trying to imagine what Walcott will say to Columbus when they meet. Will he play the part of modesty and humility and say 'sorry, Chris man, is not my fault. I tell them wasn't to do it.' Or will he step boldly into the role of a new plantation owner and shout, 'Hey Columbus, you son of a Genoan! You like how I shaft you, like how mi brudder Odysseus shaft the Cyclops? Just make sure you don't come near my square no more!'

Actually, I suspect that the meeting will take neither of these turns. I suspect that they will sit down together, man to man, and talk about the sea and ships, about hawser and rigging, about bowsprit and gunnel and spinnaker, about the terrors of the deep and how a man manages his craft. (You may take "craft" as you like it, even according to the Mona lexicon of forty years ago.)

So we welcome into yet another landfall our mariner, Walcott, who has been doggedly and masterfully managing his craft for fifty years, but who has never felt that he has learned enough:

My palms have been sliced by the twine of the craft
I have pulled at for more than forty years....

We welcome him because he is one of those who were young in the infancy of this place, and because he has fulfilled in himself the promise of that golden dawn which he helped inaugurate. In this conference we are to reflect on how we may unlock the potential of the region. We welcome him because he is a splendid example of that potential unlocked, achieved.

I have thought at one time that what I should do this morning is simply recite in Homeric fashion the long list of his honours and awards, the titles of his books, the theatres of his struggle and triumphs, the scenes of his epic quarrels of one kind or another. I recall a day in 1965 when I met him by chance in Seawell airport, as it then was. His right hand was bandaged, and when I asked him what had happened, he replied, off-handedly you might say, that he had only put his through a glass door.
But I like that biographical brevity of the dust-jacket of his Collected Poems. It says simply: ‘Derek Walcott was born in St. Lucia, the West Indies, in 1930. He now lives in Trinidad and Boston.’ Between these two bald markers is an incomparable life. It includes the printed Walcott, who has made his mark on the world, as well as the unprintable Walcott, who is no less unforgettable. When I ask some of his sparring partners of the bad old Mona days what memories they have of him, they say, ‘But you couldn’t use them. They’re unprintable.’

We welcome him because he has helped us to claim the world, and with it an increased sense of our own worth. He has taken us with him into the magnetic sphere of legends. He has made of his foresters and fishermen/heraldic men! His imagination has grown wide as the world and he has made the world recognise the importance of small places. He has travelled far, but he always knows where he came from: The midsummer sea, the hot pitch road, this grass, these shacks that made me.

We welcome him because it has been our custom and pleasure to recognise his progress. For sixteen years, and until only four years ago, he was the only graduate of the university to have been awarded an honorary degree.

Many months ago, when the Master of these Revels told me that this Gathering was to gather and that Walcott was to be the keynote speaker, I tried not to let him see how surprised I was, pleasantly surprised. I should have expected some panjandrum of politics or economics or business or international affairs, or even just ‘affairs’. After all, the conference was to be about Caribbean ‘development’, and the received wisdom is that ‘development’ does not have anything to do with poets. To this day this university has not been able to afford so small a thing as a position for a writer in residence. Presumably that is a luxury too high for developing tastes and states. So, I was pleasantly surprised. Verily, I had not thought to find such great good sense, no, not in Mona.

And too besides, as we say in Barbados, the decision to invite Derek Walcott to address this conference was taken long before the news of the Nobel Prize broke – which only goes to show that the good sense of the people in Stockholm is almost equal to ours.
If time allowed, I could take you through his poems and his plays and show you how he has lived the history of this region, how his hand (has given) voice to one people's grief how the artist has become part of his landscapes. I could show you what his works have to do with 'development' and the potential of the region. But it is enough to repeat his benediction:

Open the map. More islands there, man.
Than peas on a tin plate, all different size,
one thousand in the Bahamas alone,
from mountains to low scrub with coral keys,
and from this bowsprit, I bless every town,
and blue smell of smoke in hills behind them,
and the one small road winding down like twine
to the roofs below.

Ladies and gentlemen, please give to Walcott of Castries a West Indian welcome.”

Sam Selvon

All who are West Indian by blood or love or any affiliation and know our literature loved Sam Selvon’s stories probably above all others. His death brought sadness to even those who did not know Sam Selvon personally because it was as if the characters he created and whom we did indeed know and love had also in some way died.

Sam Selvon was one of the good, true Caribbean writing men, with the most beautiful ear for our language, and his work will last.

In this issue Ken Ramchand’s Story The Patient is based on the last weeks in the life of Sam Selvon who was taken ill on a visit to Trinidad and who died on the point of leaving on a private jet which has been specially sent from Canada for him.
Poetry

PAMELA MORDECAI

*My Sister Cries the Sea*

My sister is crying and crying
her tears grow to salt stormy showers
to rain and to rapids and rivers
they run to the sea to the sea.

My sister sobs softly she knows
she listens at shells and the shallows
she hears from things sleeping in winter
winnowing minnowing dreams

hears walking fish clear at Mayaro
black eyes popping out of their heads
"The wind has gone out of the water
the sea things are tarred to their beds."

hears lichen and moss at Newcastle
as tree things brown up and go dry
"The poisons have captured the airways
the land and the sea are to die..."

My sister sits up and speaks slowly
her words are tripped up by her fear
— the news is no longer a secret
and all but the speaking ones hear—

"The rain has leaked out of
the sky its skin itches
hot winds dictate the weather
fluting mean riffs
through stops holed out
by feisty fluorocarbons
cores overheat the rainbow
its seven bright notes charred to one
white beam trails heaven’s
last comet aching to be born...”

My sister is crying and crying
her tears have joined up with the tide
the shells and the shallows have vanished
the earth and the heavens divide.

My sister cannot stop her tears.

My Sister Gets Married

It is dark

At five she is stirring
catarrhd in wet coughs
of old whiskered wives
assembled for rites
black bumps on fat boxes
knees knitted together
heel out and toe in
securing the bride for
them brazen can’t finish
these days...

My sister gets up and
she walks to the window
in an ocean of sky
sees the crazy old crabs
She opens the window
and smiles clouds feel bad
embarrass like how them
dress drab and bedraggle

Crabs curl into their backs
wrap shawls gainst cool breeze
gainst the pride of the mornin
pat safe in them bosom
nuff thread bag containing
queen gold and king silver
for blood is the sign them can
leff go dead quiet

Beyond in the yard is
the one she will mate with
she measures his limbs feels
the stems of his arms as
they wrap her slight body
his trunk as it tumbles
cut down by her eyes

My sister is wise

She will give herself
to him little by littie
he'll pole up the stream
of her hauling so patient
work his craft to the river
head feeling the way
then reckless on rapids
run with the river

Crabs bless the new blood
left di mcney for wares
bedsheet with embroidery
new ewer and basin
big enamel chimney
coal pot some flat iron
a plaque for declaring
di Lord is di head of
dis house breaking bread
with the household
eavesdropper divine
every God time
you open you mouth ...

My sister looks down at
her small sturdy body
she knows long years later
she’ll gather to marry
daughter and daughter
black bump of a crab with
a threadbag of silver and
rheum in her eyes.
PETER JAILALL

I Want to Go Home

I want to go home
But I can’t go home
I’m stuck wid de wuk
And the designer clothes

I want to go home
But I can’t go home
I’m stuck wid de weather
And the heavy paka
Changing me culla
In white white winta

I want to go home
But I can’t go home
I’m stuck wid de ting
Dey call Burga King
Addicted to de taste
Of all that waste

I want to go home
But I can’t go home.

My Agie’s Hands

I can still see her thumbs
Dancing as they work
Her fingers rotating
In precise coordination
Those loving fingers
Bathed in coconut oil
Helping each other,
Moving like a team
Of dedicated doctors
To fix the infant’s hasley
My agie’s hands
Twisting the corn bag strainer
To squeeze out the coconut milk
Leaving the kus kus dry
Then extracting the last drop
Of coconut oil
Making the chan-chee
Drier than crapaud bone
My agie’s finger nails
Harder than alligator’s scales
Sporting a permanent yellow
From the cutex
Of the jusya weed
Those Kurmee hands
Massaged the rice field’s
Stubborn clay
Gently stroking mother earth
Opening her up for the beeya root
She, transplanting them
Giving life anew
Waiting for the autumn sun
To yield a bumper crop
My agie flexing her biceps
To make the grass knife sing
Grabbing and cutting
Handfuls of solid 79
Cleaner than the red combine
My agie’s hands
Were sowing hands
Scattering dhaan
To feed the nation
And to fatten chickens
With her che-che call

My agie’s hands

Were caressing hands
Cuddling and pressing
The pink nipples
Of the bhuri cow
Making milking music
Chun-chai, chun-chai
In her black saucepan
Sweeter than the calypso man

My agie’s hands
Had barakat
Her capstan cup, never empty
Always glittering with shillings
Those hands washed
A million cups
Clapped roti enough
To feed the world’s army
My agie’s hands
Were small hands
Small hands like hers
Build big nations.
EDWARD BAUGH

Responsibility

I half awaken
to the comforting blur of my mother
pulling on her house -
dress in the half light

and already the sound of my father
as from muted dream distance
clucking the chickens to corn

I too some distant morning
shall rise responsibly
to set my house in motion.

Meantime, I pull the covers close
and smile for the pure secret
thrill of it, and let myself down
into that last, sweet, morning sleep.

View from the George Headley Stand, Sabina

"You see, you see what I tell you,
he playing and missing, I tell you!"
"No, no, you don't read the stroke.
He know what he doing, he leaving
the ball alone. Just at the last
crucial moment, he easing the bat
inside the line and letting it pass."
"Well all I can say is that that
is a damn dangerous way
to be leaving the ball alone."
“What you saying in truth? You mean you meaning to tell me that in this almost - twenty - first century them white boys making my boy look fool?” “Mister man, all I know is it wrecking my nerves for just make that ball swerve a fraction and follow the bat and bap is a snick to slips and, ole massa, we gone, we dead.” “Cho, I don’t care what you call it, that is what I call a indigenous stroke. You know what I know? This argument can’t settle, for if him out now caught in the slips that still wouldn’t prove nuttn and if you ask him himself, the man would be a fool to tell you the truth.” “Gentlemen, gentlemen, is watch we come to watch cricket, or is epistemology we come here to talk?” “This chicken sweet, yes! Is Brenda cook it? Say what? You mad? You don’t know long time that rum don’t agree with my stomach? Man, just pass me the Scotch.”
IAN MCDONALD

Betrothal

Old story. Young girl getting bigger now:
Fifteen, tender, good, submissive.
Parents want the best for her:
Pious, fierce for family and name
And old traditions steeped in race and time.
Goldsmith's son is thirty-four:
Had his days, boy, played an eager field,
Wants to settle now and take a wife.
Offers house and future safe as gold
And cows and coconuts up Essequibo Coast.
The thing is done, families agree:
A marriage is arranged for all to see,
Proud and suitable and good for all
Except — she's irremediably locked in tears.
She will not talk to family or friends
Except to say she does not wish to live
If this must be the burden of her days:
Not furious but a quiet, downward look.

All are summoned against this stubborness:
Old, gentle uncles come, brothers hold her hands,
White-robed Pandit shakes his head and warns.
They appeal to me: I see the girl
I knew since parents gave her birth.
She has her story when we sit alone.
Young man she saw once by the temple wall:
Hardly speak though they meet at festivals.
Hands once touched, and held, and that's enough.
I say the sensible things I must
But eyes have blazed like that before,
Storm-light on a sunless shore.
I meet my old, grey, saddened friends.
"She is young! What does she know of life!"
Yes, she is young as the new moon,
Green as young grass after rain,
But what she now has in her heart —
Hard as antique mountain stone
Sleepless, ancient scythe of stars.
And, yes, she will kill herself
You bring this goldsmith's son of yours.
ROOPLALL MONAR

Wash Pot

Me wash you cloth, man!
sweep you bloody house
cook roti and shrimp curry,
give you wife
mash you foot
rub-down you skin

And you tun mad
when me wear short frock...
see English picture in Town,
read me sista letter from America?

Me wash you cookin’ pot
talk- nice with you sweet-woman
hear you jhandee

but you face tun like hatching-fowl
when me sista say:
“Come America.”

Tink this is long time, nuh?
Is all day me goin’ wash pot?
You wait til me get that ‘Merican visa!
MICHAEL GILKES

Ragged Point, Barbados

Quick waves crack those old black rocks, break to bright foam streaming through mossy seams and fissures studded with snails. Look! That rock bares gnarled, jagged hurts, steams in its own encircling white.

How many shocks
How many Drownings grew those dreadful spears
those matted Rasta locks?
KIREN SHOMAN

Dead Again

"I like your poetry,"
he said, coming
a little closer to me.

I didn't mind now.

"Do you really?" I
asked him, blushing.
How silly of me to

have ignored him—

to have thought
for one minute
that he wanted to use me ...

"Yes," he answered, more

sure of himself,

"especially the last one
you wrote... what was the name?"

"Dead again," I answered
quickly.

Postcard to Exiles

Hot Belize City boredom
It gets under your armpits.
The tourists still eat carrots
from Saturday market
without peeling the skins
Do you remember?

The last time I heard
from you
you said you wear thick tights
even in the summer
and that everybody goes
on holiday around now.
When are you coming back?
MAHADAI DAS

Murdered

A crimson sun drowns over Guyana horizons at dusk.
Birds do not chatter but droop.
Dogs howl.
News is a young girl raped and murdered in Le Repentir Graveyard of impenitence.
The whole country mourns like fathers and mothers weeping open-eyed.
What has become of citizens responsible for their brothers?
Like Cain, the killer slays his blood and flesh.
Meanwhile, the dogs and cats witnessing the attack, continue to howl.
Cecil Gray

Ancestor

One great-great-grandfather was bought from the chief of a tribe that won him prisoner; yoked in a coffle to stumble miles to the coast; latched down in stench, shipped across the Atlantic, ankles and neck ringed with bright sores the irons scraped in. Put up for auction. On the canefields the whip at times sliced through his black skin, and the children he bore were ripped from his grip. Pain, like a spear in his side, never left him.

I sit here and contemplate that. But how can I say that the sting and the grief are real in reflections? Should I believe that his anguish and my thinking of it are the same? It is easy to use him to browbeat the world and blame it for cutting my skin. Easy to claim his flesh as my own. I imagine it true and how I should feel. I should say what others are saying. Still, moving the pen on the page it is only my finger that hurts.
Lucky

In some towns, you’re black, you’re suspect. You have criminal stamped all over you. In a store eyes track you, in a park you find plenty of space. You awaken interest in all cruising policemen. They want to know all about you. Their questions belie their respect. My friend had a key for a suite a white colleague on leave had lent him one summer. A neighbour saw him enter, called the cops. ‘A stranger’. ‘Black’. The cops took him in. His story of being a professor was as far-fetched as any they’d heard. Afterwards, they said to the ambassador it was only a pardonable error. After all, he was lucky. He could have been running. He could have been shot.

Roots

Poets and historians talk a lot about heritage, legacy and such. I cannot pretend I carry around
any connection with castles
or huts of some past
dispensation. I move light.
I'm just not interested in
toting more burdens than
ones the present straps on.
And I want no excuses
to shunt any blame I
deserve on to someone's
ancestors. Let me fight
my own day-to-day battles.
I am grateful that fortune
mixed what fools call my blood.
These islands are all that
I have, that I want. Call
me whatever you like, but
don't waste your four-letter words
to try insult me. I feel
extremely insulted already,
being told I belong, not here,
in these islands that made me,
but to some unknown, foreign country.

Carnival Sunday Jump-Up

Carnival will spill out tomorrow and run
over the streets. But today we keep it
contained in backyards like this one,
with music more drunkening than rum.
We jump-up, happy and helpless. We were
christened to keep faith with the beat
of calypsoes and the sanctus of drums.
The crowd thickens and rolls like an ocean
washing its billows across the whole lawn.
This one is up on a hill and below us
the Gulf, in costume already, all satins and
sequins, is dancing as if Jour Ouvert has come.
Hill or no hill, we jump-up and jump-up.
I shuffle and move to the side to sit down.

Two English critics, accents heavy with pounds
of patronage they can’t spend in England,
and finding the strong rhythm too difficult,
waylay me to talk, raising their voices to
stickfight with the jamming, about language
most appropriate to West Indian verse.
I take it they’re playing Pierrot Grenade.

But I listen as well as I can since
it is Carnival. It has to be patois, like
calypsoes, they say; and anything metrical
is aping what’s foreign. (Hanging one’s
hat, etc.) I think. The feet tramp the grass
keeping time with a metre even the new
colonisers can hear. They continue.

Since our experience is black, and
somewhat incestuous, we must stick to
a language of anger born in grim ghettos
of squalor where history shuts out laughter
and dance. Those who had essayed (their word)
outside natural limits had failed, falling
somewhere between Shakespeare and Larkin.

Verse raises its volume in the loudspeakers
and I slip slyly away to dance the vernacular.
It is Carnival and each one, local or not,
is allowed to spout robber talk without limit.
So I don’t say to them I want to jump-up in time down the hill although I might fall somewhere between Walcott and Naipaul.
MARK MCWATT

Gull

My son brought home a seagull with a damaged wing. His mother and sister helped him fuss over it and feed the wild, ungrateful thing.

They treated the raw, unfeathered patch and tied the drooping limb to its body with a strip of cloth; deciding not to name him yet, they placed him for the night in a shoebox lined with an old towel complete with plastic tot of water and two smelly sprats, procured with difficulty at such short warning. The boy guessed all would be right, come morning.

In fact the thing died. When I checked before breakfast, it was stiff, and its rank death had already attracted a phalanx of tiny ants. My son said nothing; looked at it a while, then dealt it an almighty kick, box and all and sent it crashing into the opposite wall.

So much for the nameless bird. Sister and mother were aghast, upset he could be so uncaring. But I understood why he kicked it,
and approved, beneath the mandatory frown.
I think it’s right to kick at death,
especially when you’re young.
He was not uncaring, what he cared for
was life, the chance to see the creature mend,
to release it and watch it soar;
the lifeless form was cruel recompense
for all the love and care he’d felt before
– and so he wanted no business
with dead things, his savage kick
focussed his argument more sharply
than these words, and I hope for him
a life as fiercely free as he had wanted
for that awkward, damaged bird.
STANLEY GREAVES

FRIENDS.

FINETIP TIPS AND FLOWERS
SMALL FEATHERS SWEET BIRDS
AND SPACES BETWEEN WORDS.
THE COURTLY DANCE OF FRIENDS
IS AN IRIS OF SURPRISE
SOFT-EARED WORDS
AND A FEELING NATIVE TO SELF

AROUND THE FESTIVAL TABLE-
OF HEARTS HANDS AND MUSIC,
GOSSAMER MEMORIES
OF AN ANCIENT FACE
PROVOKE A REALITY
OF CHANGE WITHIN CHANGE
AND THE CHALLENGING DREAM
WHERE THE MOTH FLEW
BRUSHING MY LIPS,
LIKE THE STARTLED FINGERS
OF A CHILD PLAYING WITH FEAR.
Nan Peacocke

The Inheritance

Early that morning
pain laid you back
into the geography
and all our long journey
of love and conflict
the incredulous household
the drops of
water I rubbed
across your lips
were nothing
against that
one
quick
blow

Finally
I shut away
the mild surprise
still
in your eye

That night
keeping watch
from this side
I followed your
windy desert crossing
till these poor instruments
could no longer sight
your sheet white hair
sailing to glory
Into a hole
in the hillside
we let the satchel slip

I shuddered at the ghastly
clinking
unloosed
buckles

My brother
leaning inward
said
Remember, that's not her there
Not you
You're not here now

That you lived is certain
under a mackerel sky
with your flowers
your insistence
that you counted
and were counted

and parted
this universal loneliness
counts me
strangely
among the believers.

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Editor's Note:

This Poem was written as a tribute to the life and work of Nora Peacocke, Nan's mother. Nora Peacocke was Editor of The Vincentian newspaper, and as an ardent 'Federationist' was a life-long advocate of Caribbean Unity.
The Korean woman what tell Jerry to bring some Frank Sinatra records for me (I don’t know what kiskadee tell she I even listen to Frank Sinatra record), that same bitch pushing her mouth against my ears as if is a trumpet, getting on just like that writer feller what look at a big man like me and tell me he love me.

She come to announce that they carrying me to Canada in a special plane: “Saam, Saam darling, I know you’re hearing me. Saam, I have something to tell you but you mustn’t get angry you hearing me? I want you to be a good boy?”

What the ass is this? Who have more cause to be obedient more than me? Who could want this sickness to pass more than me?

Afterwards, the boy in whose veins the poem sang left his companions sitting on the steps of the railway station and wandered off for more poetry, discovering it in the sleeping village and the flower-strewn lane by the cemetery, and in the flowers which appeared to explode into efflorescence. A clear stream ran through the village. Engraved on a clock high on the steeple of an old church were the words. ‘Grow old along with me, the best is yet to be.’

It surprise everybody how meek I get in the hospital. I abide by all the rules, and I follow every instruction. Keep my mouth quiet when I know the care is not intensive care. Kick up no fuss when a female patient whose head can’t be right, leave her own bed and come to lay down in mine, and nearly tangle on all them wires and hoses that tying me down. Make no complaint when a nurse get confuse and try to give me a tablet and I know, from the colour, that is a tablet the doctor who come this morning decide he not giving me again.
It have no dignity in this helplessness. I keep still while they do all the shit that they have to do for me. I don’t flinch when they invent some new procedure, some new pain that they have to inflict. I make no complaints. Sometimes I think I will go mad on this hopeless, heartless mount, but I refuse. If it is time they want to clear up what has to clear up, is all right, I am fighting, I am giving them time.

Blinding shocking sensations crossed crisscross in his brain as the little men began their macabre work. He longed for death as the blunt pegs thudded against and split open the skin of his forehead, then met unresisting bone. Armies marched in his brain, all the drums in the world boomed, cymbals clashed, the Kaiteur Falls roared. And yet, with a grimness impossible to conceive he clung tenaciously to reason, preferring to die than be driven into the looming limbo of the ring of deep purple, and every time he thought that he could bear it no more, some itch of life stirred and came forward.

Haul all you ass, little men.

The first time the hospital send me home was a happy time. I remind the short bitch how he make me go outside in the Colgate snow everytime I want to light up and smoke. Then I tell him not to worry it wouldn’t happen again, I finish with that, boy. If they are looking for a famous face to advertise how smoking is bad, and how liquor will lick you up before your time, they don’t have to look far, they could come and take out my photo any day.

Three times they let me out, and is three times I had was to go back. The Black Englishwoman tell Junior they didn’t really have to admit me again, but they like to be absolutely sure.

When they let me go for the third time, they still telling me I can’t leave right away. They playing up in they ass. I didn’t want to wait no ten days again just for them to make sure I could go by myself. But seven days pass and I am feeling so nice, I start to believe I will travel on Sunday for sure. I drink a cold Carib because the doctors say one drink a day is good medicine for the heart. I almost feel I could take a smoke. The temptation strong. But not me, boy. A year or two from now when I forget the terror I pass through, I have a feeling the battle will be hard. But not now. Not so soon.
But Friday morning it is fever and pain, and when Junior come for us to drink some coffee before the Test match start, I don’t have the pride to put on appearance to fool no man. I have to hold on to the walking stick with two hands, bend my head over, and let my belly squeeze in order to breathe. The Black English doctor ask me some fucking questions she shouldn’t be asking a man of my age, and shouldn’t be asking after I in the hospital so long. I am glad Junior didn’t hear because he would have make some joke about how I am just like Syl and I can’t even recognise a drawing of the thing, and how it is so long since I bounce up one he could bet I wouldn’t know the difference between a picture of it and a dry coconut.

I feel as if I am dying this time. As if something clog and the air reach a wall at the top of my nose, and when I pull with my mouth, air jamming again at the back of my throat. I can’t believe it. These mother asses don’t know what is wrong with me. They are putting me under observation which mean I have to lie down, and they are going to wait and see.

For three days nobody observe that I am fighting for air. On Sunday I prop up in the bed struggling as usual to breathe, and the nurse get up and leave saying your friend come. The next thing I know is like Junior gone crazy in the place. I hear him telling somebody he don’t care one fuck, he is a fucking doctor too, and he know that fucking man stifling, and they better find some way of giving him some fucking oxygen before he dead. The fucking man he talking about is me. If I wasn’t frighten before, I frighten no arse now.

By Sunday night they have on something called a life-support system. They tell everybody they ventilating me, Ventilating. After weeks and weeks of ‘Nothing ain’t wrong is only the medication to adjust’, they change they mind and decide the problem is the lungs. The Black woman with the English accent say in she funny voice that the lungs full of Gunk. If is scrabble she playing, I could think of plenty other four letter words.

Weeks now of the needle’s prick, of black and blue and red, of the flesh bruised and dug up and plastered over, of tubes in my mouth, in my nose, in my throat, and in openings drilled in chest, in neck, in arm,
in leg. I studying how I am paying all this money and they are tearing me up, and just so I start to remember the song they they teach you to sing when you small and stupid in school. *Je te plumerai la tete. Et le nez. Et le dos. Oh Oh.* They suctioning through my mouth, they suctioning through my nose, and the same Korean woman wants to make a by-pass and suction through an opening she will cut in my chest.

Every day is a different doctor, everyday is a different story. Each new doctor have his favourite medicine he itching to try. You remember ‘goes in goes out’ where who get the ball, bowl and whoever knock down the wicket, bat? It is goes in goes out they playing on my head, and every man Ambrose pelting ball at my ass. If things wasn’t so serious in truth, I could of raise a laugh and make a ballad out of these hospital blues.

I am a man of words and I could tell you, the metaphors and similes these doctors using would put Lamming and Naipaul to shame. Some of them playing police and thief, some of them fighting guerrilla war. Hear them. They can’t make a positive i.d. but they have some clues. They eliminate some suspects, and they closing in on the elusive bacteria. Getting on as if they want to hold press conference to announce they have a strong lead, but time after time, the lead led to nothing in the end. The pot-belly man say he can’t be sure if the one they pin-point is the culprit for true, or just an innocent bystander. Assness.

I should be glad they put me in a coma to keep me alive, but this is not the way I want to live. Day in day out, I can’t talk, I can’t eat, I can’t drink, I can’t pee, i can’t shit. Most of the time, the shapes and colours that cross my eyes are shadows I can’t name. If I imagine hard, some of the sounds I hear can turn into words. I know in my heart of hearts that I am going. The day Jerry and Junior look at me and say I had lovely skin and now they looking at dead man’s flesh, water tried to come to my eyes. I am angry that it is ending like this, but I try to tell myself there is always an ending. I have always known.

*There is a joy in living because you know you are going to die, and nothing can affect that one way or another. But what I am deeply afraid*
of is that when the final call comes, I may break down and become a jibbering piece of frightened humanity.

But when the bodi vine finish bearing aint' it does dead? Everything does dead when it finish the work it have to do. Still for all that I am glad this dying is slow. Have I finished my work? This absorbing silence is an infinite space, and I have drifted in it towards truths that give fight to words. The work I have done. The work I did not do.

There is greatness in the written word, and when men die what they have said will live and sing for other hearts.


I lie and think of those I love and those who love me, I have never been this close to the woman since those windy days, and I cannot even raise a finger to let her know.

My girl, she is beautiful to look at. I have seen her in sunlight and in moonlight, and her face carves an exquisite shape in darkness. These things we talk, I burst out, why mustn't I say them? If I love you, why shouldn't I tell you so? I love London she said.

All the words I have gathered to say to her at last, I had gathered many times before, and always when I reached to the edge of utterance, something would happen to make me hold back, as if saying the truth would be too complete a surrender, as if I must wait and let her be the one to break the silence, as if the heart that sang in the darkness of the lonely city could not free itself from it's own choking. 'What's the Use', as if love's innocent life-line snaps as soon as it start to find out about life.

I have not said it, but she knows it now.

Eh, eh. All of a sudden, the great hospital changing their tune. The long ‘Je te plumerai’ is over. They have plumerai’d me into silence, immobility and the odour of death. They have done all they can. They cannot find the bacteria. If I improve, it will not be because of anything they do. The best course now is to send me abroad. It might be a virus, and the colder countries have more experience with viruses.
I smile to myself, and Junior is looking at me as if he is expecting me to say ‘What fuckery’. I do not know what anancy story they spin for the insurance company to spend all that money and send flying ambulance for me.

My wife, she loves me, and she wants me to come home. Oh, but when I think. Still, if this journey and this peace between the woman and me can bring some healing, and make me at last the father and family man I have been in my secret heart, my spirit shall return to day and life like a backward sunset.

My private jet is waiting. But I know what the native legend says. Whether I go or whether I stay is not for me to decide. I don’t know what will happen when they move me from this bed. I don’t know what will happen on the road to the airport. I can’t tell what will happen when they try to load me onto the aeroplane.

The land knows, I have always trusted the land. Whatever it decides will bring me peace.

Leaving the island this time, there was a great deal of anguish because so much had been left unsaid and undone .... let cockcrow and early bird whistle make the decision for me: let the green mountain spin a coin in the first rays of the sun, and when it was light enough I’d enlist the crystals of dew and the gossamer strands that spiders had miraculously spun in space, and pass the buck to them too.

I have always loved the land (even more than the people) and it was not too much to ask. Whatever the land gave I took without question, and it had sent me away and it had brought me back, and it had a certain responsibility which it respected.

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Editor’s Note:

This story is based upon the last weeks in the life of Sam Selvon, who died in a hospital in Trinidad.
A long dry spell had come and parched the villages of the Essequibo Coast. Old Manu’s village, Dartmouth, was especially dry; even the trenches were as hard as the mud dams. The villagers disliked the hot days but loved the nights. Moon-lit nights they adored! Whenever the moon was out, the villagers sat in their yards or on their steps and gazed at her for hours.

It was the night of the full moon. Old Manu, who had been a fisherman for over forty years, slipped the strap of his quake across his shoulder and settled the fish container on his back. Then he took his castnet in his strong right hand and headed for the sea.

Usually, Manu would go straight to the village koker channel and begin casting his net or sit by the koker and wait for the tide to rise. On that night, though, he often stopped to look with wonder at the beauty of the moon. She had not too long stepped out of the Atlantic and was resting on the tops of some courida trees. She looked like a huge, juicy, spotless orange and Manu thought he could eat her. Her brilliant light covered the entire village, as if it were day, but Manu thought that she shone for him only. That had to be so, for their eyes had met and he could see himself so plainly that she must have been examining him. But though he could have stood there with her for the whole night, he had to go.

As Old Manu neared the koker, he thought he saw someone. There was nothing strange about that, as other men also fished by night. But he could not tell for sure that it was a man! The person stood there, backing Manu, and as still as a post he was. The old man stopped. He could tell the other fishermen, on the darkest night, by their shapes and how they walked. But was this man or woman? He had heard stories of mermaids who visited kokers on moonlit nights and the thought made him tremble with fear and joy. He was afraid that he might be looking at the creature from the deep but he was joyful, because of the
story people told about her. The story was that the lovely being, whose top half was human but who was fish from the waist down, visited kokers on brilliant moon-lit nights. Nobody knew why she did this, but it was said that she sat there combing her hair and that anyone who could get her comb would be rich for life, since she would bring him fortunes to get it back!

The old man itched, as he waited. Then, he inched forward. Suddenly, the figure moved and he stopped. It was all in white and the clothes did not look like a woman’s, but Manu was not sure, for though the light of the moon shone brightly on it, the figure backed him. Manu was tempted to shout at it and to throw a piece of dry clay, but he decided to wait. The being moved again, heading for the sea. And that was when Manu knew! It was a woman! Her walk had told him so. It must be a mermaid! No, that could not be, for mermaids could only swim!

Manu felt as if he were boiling, but only his sweat poured down his back and stomach. He followed slowly, not knowing how he did. When she got to the edge of the water, she stood there watching the clear silver sea. Then, several times, she bent and dipped the water in both hands and let it fall again.

Manu had put away his quake and net and had crept close, but he had not yet seen her face, since she still backed him. However, he was in doubt about her; her hair was not long and flowing nor was there a comb in it! Was she a mermaid? Whatever she was, Manu’s beating heart had slowed and much of the sweat had dried. He had never seen the sea so beautiful. In the background was the sea of moon light; above was a sky, as clear as a child’s painting. And most of all, there was the woman who dipped the water and let it fall.

Without warning, she walked into the water and stopped. Manu’s heart pounded. She walked farther in and stopped again. Manu thought that she was sure to hear his heart beat. Lying flat on the mud and sand, he crawled closer to the water. Then, like a flash of light, she disappeared. Manu leapt to his feet. She reappeared, as suddenly as she had vanished. Manu trembled. She disappeared again and he walked quickly to the edge of the water. Once more, she rose very quickly and
Manu crouched. She walked farther out and stopped. She looked at the moon. Next, she looked at the wide sea. Manu crouched lower, because he knew what she would do next, but he was too late! She turned to see the view behind her and saw him and, quicker and more smoothly than a meteor, she vanished beneath the water.

Manu had had one brief glimpse of her face but, years later, he still told the story of the most beautiful woman he had seen on the most beautiful night. He told of his doubts about what she had been and how sad he was that he had not got heaps and heaps of money from her. He said, though, that he had been made eternally rich, for he would always have the great beauty and the mystery of that silver moonlit night in his heart.
My eyes and hands were tired as I packed my tools and wrapped the unused leather and tied together the four handbags I had completed for the day when I heard the chain on the gate clanking. I dropped everything on the workbench behind the apartment and dashed towards the passageway to see who had arrived. He had already opened the gate and was rolling his bicycle towards me.

“Good afternoon,” he said with a wide and respectful smile.

“Good afternoon,” I replied. He looked fresh in his sky blue shirt-jac and his navy blue pants and well polished black shoes.

“Jennifer home?” he asked.

“Yes. Upstairs.” I pointed at the upper half of the back steps.

He leaned his bicycle with one hand against the stairway and simultaneously removed his attache case with the other hand from the handlebar. The attache case, black and polished like his shoes, seemed heavy to me and made him look refined.

He walked up the back stairs effortlessly, knocked on the door three measured times and was sucked into the landlady’s kitchen.

I took my tools and my day’s labour into my apartment downstairs, lit myself a cigarette, stood at the back doorway and found myself staring at the bicycle. It had no front brake, no back fender, no bell. A piece of stiff wire encircling a bulb at one end and hooked onto a generator at the other end constituted the bicycle’s lighting apparatus. A triangular patch of cloth overlapped the saddle and clung to it underneath with an elastic strap. The entire contraption cried out for a coat of paint. I wondered whether or not Jennifer’s visitor had borrowed the bicycle; he seemed too important to own it.

An unexplained curiosity overpowered me throughout the night, pelting my mind with questions I never asked before then. Did Jennifer find herself a boyfriend? Where did she meet him? What was their first meeting like? Would my landlady upstairs approve of him? Never
before did I associate Jennifer with a man. She seemed destined to live the rest of her life with my childless landlady, who had adopted her when she was a baby and had moulded her into a loyal house-servant.

Shortly after I resumed work the next morning, Jennifer came downstairs with a tub-load of clothes to wash at the backyard standpipe. She must have been reading my mind for, before her washing was over, she crept up to my workbench, her hands gloved in lather, and whispered, "De man you see yesterday, he look nice?" Her magenta lips flushed and her eyes danced with expectation of approval.

"Yes. And cultured too," I replied.

Her mouth widened with satisfaction.

"Aunty Margaret say so too. Is me boyfriend, you know," she announced.

She waited for me to say something, but I gazed at her with unhidden surprise. Then, as if my fixed look had let loose a spring within her, she unburdened herself. "He name Andrew." Wringing away the lather from her hands, she went on, "Andrew Price. He say he got a nice job at de bank. De local bank. You see dat briefcase he come wid? He say is heavy responsibility inside. He meet me last week when I coming home from Red Cross lessons. He tell me he bin observing me long now. And how I look decent and quiet. He say he want tek me out for a dinner. I tell he Aunty Margaret got to say 'yes' before I go out wid he. That's why he come yesterday afternoon."

"Aunty Margaret say 'yes'?" I also called my landlady Aunty Margaret, as most people did.

Jennifer nodded. "We going out tonight, but Aunty Margaret warn he to bring me back home by nine o' clock," she said.

She asked me for a razor-blade to trim her eyebrows. I gave her a sharp one. Somehow the sun shone brighter that day, giving the washed clothes a newer look as they flapped spiritedly on the wire line in the backyard.

At sundown Andrew returned. His appearance was preceded by a compelling fragrance of some expensive cologne. His greeting to me was as polite as on the day before. Pulling out a comb from his shirt pocket, he dragged it through his hair methodically before setting foot
on the back stairway. It always was a mystery why my landlady never opened her front door to visitors, however important they might be.

From my workbench the footsteps above sounded chaotic and impatient. Even my landlady’s leaded shuffling assumed a hurried pace. And then, suddenly and excitedly as children released from a classroom, Andrew and Jennifer ran down to the gate, his bicycle left behind and her winsome smile pointing toward a sportive evening.

After packing my tools I went up to my landlady to pay the rent. In her Berbice chair she laboured over a dog-eared receipt book, originally custom-printed for a clock repairer’s establishment that used to be run by the man she had lived with for over thirty years. When he died, she inherited his house in Thomas Street, Kitty, but the man had willed his bank account and stock-in-trade to his brother. That did not prevent her from displaying his photograph prominently on the wall behind the Berbice chair. It was a black-and-white print, turned yellowish, of a handsome coloured man fully garbed in a three-piece suit, felt hat, two-toned shoes and tobacco pipe. That picture never ceased to fascinate me.

As she handed me the receipt, my landlady noticed my interest in the photograph.

“Walter never married me, but he used to upkeep me good,” she said.

I fidgeted with the rent receipt.

“In we courting days, I had to be back home by eight o’clock or get a good cut-ass”, she said. “I never was too big to get licks from me mother and father.”

“Jennifer told me you allow her until nine o’clock tonight,” I ventured nervously.

“These days is modern days, and de man look decent,” she said. “And he promise to marry she.”

That was a shocker. Aunty Margaret allowing Jennifer to get married? Who would clean the house, cook the food, wash the clothes, go to the market, take the old lady every week to her doctor in Georgetown?

“You will be lonely after the wedding,” I said.
"No way," she replied quickly. "They gon live right hey." She stressed the "hey" by pointing an index finger downward.

Another shocker. My head became numb at the thought of an imminent eviction. After occupying the bottom flat for nine years, and after anchoring my workshop behind the flat all that time, I couldn't figure out another place where I could live and work at an affordable rent. Besides, I had built up a sizeable clientele in Kitty, and had acquired a reputation there for making beautiful leather handbags. My throat burned itself dry, but I managed to ask huskily: "They will be living downstairs, Aunty Margaret?"

"Naw, man," she assured me, pumping the index finger up and down. "Right up hey. You think me stupid?"

A gush of relief overwhelmed me and rendered me speechless momentarily.

She broke the silence. "Yuh had dinner yet?"

"No, Aunty Margaret. I'll cook just now."

She sighed and raised her hands. "High time yuh find a wife, man," she said as she heaved her massive body up from the Berbice chair, left the sitting room and disappeared into her kitchen. She reappeared with a plastic bowl containing fried ripe plantains and salted fish, which she placed on my lap.

"Jennifer tell yuh 'bout the man?"

"A little." I chose my words.

"If was anybody else, he cork wouldah duck. Especially dem Kitty boys. Dem is sheer hooligans. But I hear Andrew got a good position at the guvment bank. He briefcase alone can tell."

Amid sucking a piece of fishbone I nodded in support of her statement, not merely because I agreed with her but moreso because experience had taught me never to contradict her.

Buoyed by my apparent approval, Aunty Margaret leaned forward and whispered, eyeing the front windows: "Yuh know how much people envy poor Jennifer now? Me hear they talking she name at Kitty market every day."

"People will say anything." Again I chose my words.

"They can talk they bellyful, but me aint care, darling. They cyaan
stop Jennifer from becoming Mistress Price.” She emphasized the “mistress”.

Pausing to light herself a cigarette, she said, “Ah hear they laughing Andrew on he rokotok bicycle, but wait, puppy gone tum dog. Andrew say he in line fo promotion soon and he go get car and car allowance. He deserve it, you know. When dem gossipers snoring in they bed is then Andrew does open he briefcase and wuk pon documents. He say he wukload too heavy to finish daytime.”

After the meal I also smoked a cigarette, relishing the feeling that I had been spared the task of cooking that evening. It started to rain and I felt comfortable and prepared for a long conversation with my landlady. She usually became garrulous whenever she collected her rent. Now, the new development in her household assumed the proportion of a major event in her life and she could not restrain her thoughts.

She shared with me her regret at not having a formal wedding with Walter, the clock repairer she lived with. However, she would make up for her loss by arranging a simple but conspicuous nuptial for Jennifer. She would hire a car and have it decorated and after the civic ceremony at the Registrar’s Office in Georgetown she would make the driver blare the horn continuously when the car returned to Kitty. An important young man like Andrew Price deserved a more lavish affair, Aunty Margaret lamented, but she would try her best within her means.

When Andrew arrived the next afternoon he initiated a chat with me at my workbench. No doubt, he had been briefed about my shaky occupation. He proceeded to advise me on the virtues of a savings account and other plans for financial security. As I was self-employed, he showed me different ways to prepare for my old age. He reeled out a series of banking jargon so quickly that I lost the essence of his proffered counsel. I managed to single out the term “equity annuity” and asked him to explain its meaning. He rested his briefcase on my workbench and deftly turned the numbers of its gold-plated combination locks. I expected him to pull out a fact sheet, brochure or even a book. His thumbs eased off the locks. The briefcase remained shut.

“Equity annuity means just what it says,” he spurted out confi-
dently. "You receive your investment back in equal parts every year. Principal plus compound interest."

The words sounded impressive, although I wished I had seen them in print.

"Think about it," Andrew said authoritatively, straightening his shirt-jac. "If you ever decide to take a firm grip on your future, I’ll be always here to help you. Jenny must be getting impatient. I’d better go upstairs."

I thanked him for his advice and looked on as he walked up the stairway. About half way up he suddenly stumbled. The attache case flew out of his hand, hit one step and bounced away in a small arc towards the concrete floor before me. I jumped to catch it, but could not. With a thud it landed, snapped open and out rolled three shrivelled boulangers. The hapless attache case lay empty.

Above me Andrew leaned on the rail, frozen. His face became grim and twisted. Streams of sweat broke out on his forehead.

I gave him a forgiving smile. He did carry some responsibility in that briefcase, after all.
PAGES

from the

ARTIST’S

SKETCH BOOKS:

STANLEY GREAVES '24
S P A I R S
O R
B I P E D

† Mermaid in a fisherman's cart
outboard motor (as fisherman)
pushing the cart

† Square knot with twisting figures
making one rope and vegetation/trees
the other
Sometimes that trick of answering a question with another question leads to a statement, and ever makes the statement false.

Sgt.
* BIRDS

* SPOON SHAPES
Profile

FRED D'AGUIAR

Profile of Wilson Harris

PAULINE MELVILLE:
The legacy of Wilson Harris is a legacy of myth and legend. He is a writer who has deliberately thrown out a great deal of the social realism on which a lot of European fiction is built and has gone straight for the legendary, the mythological – and in a powerful and visionary way, in a way that's similar to Neruda, the poet, and other great South American writers such as Marquez. Or in the case of European writers, I would say he is more on the level of Blake and Milton. That level of writing has been forgotten in Europe.

FRED D'AGUIAR:
Guyanese writer, Pauline Melville, placing Wilson Harris in the particular tradition of the European writer as a visionary and a philosopher. Wilson Harris was born in 1921 in what was British Guiana in South America. He has written nineteen novels and two collections of short stories. This month sees the publication of his latest novel, Resurrection At Sorrow Hill.

Like his previous work, it too is preoccupied with the Amazonian rain forest basin which flanks Guyana and its neighbours, Venezuela and Brazil. He is widely recognised as the Caribbean novelist whose work best embodies the slave and colonial history of the region as well as the myths and legends of the indigenous peoples whose presence pre-date that of both Europeans and Africans.

Wilson Harris, you worked for many years as a Chief Surveyor for the Guyanese Government. This involved mapping out parts of the rivers that run through the rain forest. It's clear from your novels the experience made a deep and lasting impression on you.
WILSON HARRIS:
It is true that the impact that the rain forest made on me was very profound. The very first expedition I made – the first major expedition – was into the Cuyuni River. We had to make our way through what is known as the Camaria Rapids. Those are forbidden rapids but we had to survey those rapids. Rather than going around the rapids on a portage, as surveyors, we had to go into the rapids and we had to move with men who knew the area extremely well. And the impact that made on me is quite incredible. It comes early in Palace where one has this sense of the extraordinary life of the rapids that seems to well up through oneself as well as through the rapids themselves. And I had this odd sensation that this is how the gods must have been created through, I mean, the voices that came through the rapids and everything else. One could understand in ancient times how men had this sensation of gods moving in places, in water, in fires, in floods, in trees, in rocks. It was a primordial kind of sensation.

WILSON HARRIS (reads from Palace of the Peacock):

The map of the savannahs was a dream. The names Brazil and Guyana were colonial conventions I had known from childhood. I clung to them now as to a curious necessary stone and footing, even in my dream, the ground I knew I must not relinquish. They were an actual stage, a presence, however mythical they seemed to the universal and the spiritual eye. They were as close to me as my ribs, the river and the flatland, the mountains and heartland I intimately saw.

I could not help cherishing my symbolic map, and my bodily prejudice like a well-known room and house of superstition within which I dwelt. I saw this kingdom of man turned into a colony and battleground of spirit, a priceless tempting jewel I dreamed I possessed.

I pored over the map of the sun my brother had given me. The river of the savannahs wound its way far into the distance until it had forgotten the open land. The dense dreaming jungle and forest emerged.
FRED D'AGUIAR:
I asked Edward Blishen about his first encounter with a Wilson Harris novel.

EDWARD BLISHEN:
Oh I remember very vividly: first it was very short and I love short books because I could see at once it was a short, compact book. I thought I'd never get into it because it was obviously crammed from end to end. Then I found it was terribly easy to get into. It was easy to get into because he writes in a way which everyone is familiar with: that is, the narrative connections and associations are those of dreams, I think. Actually reading it is just like reading a splendid dream. And the language is so magnificent. I think it's magnificent when it baffles me. He's one writer I enjoy being baffled by, and going back and - where I can - unbaffling myself. It's partly the language, it's partly the fact that it introduces me to a world so absolutely tight, hot, crammed with meaning, crammed with tragedy, crammed with laughter, crammed - he has a phrase somewhere about, I think, "the toughest breed of sensibility ever known to the world". There is a tough sensibility at work, I think that's what thrills me about him.

PAULINE MELVILLE:
Wilson once said something I've never forgotten: he said, "I went out to map the land and the land mapped me." Wilson's is a voice that comes out of the bush, comes out of the jungle, a very solitary voice; it's not a metropolitan voice. But it's also a voice of somebody who took into the jungle with him Plato and Socrates and Shakespeare and stories of Quetzalcoatl, the Macusi bone flute, and the civilisation of the Incas. So he had his own private melting pot - when he was sitting in the bush with his crew.

FRED D'AGUIAR:
Pauline Melville refers there to your eclectic reading within the European canon as you construct a way of writing about the Caribbean with its complex mixture of races and recent volatile history. You
appear to be searching for a language to match the experience of the Guyanese interior. And it occurs to me that there is a continuous interplay between language and landscape in your novels. The landscape appears to dictate the language that is used to talk about it.

WILSON HARRIS:
What started to happen, as I look back on it, was a very peculiar thing. I had read quite widely. When I went into the rain forest reading was something that gave me immense pleasure. So I’d read French novels, English novels, right across. But I could not really respond to that world in terms of the sheer comedy of manners novel which I knew well. There may have been some kind of insinuation that I could draw perhaps from Herman Melville, but I was very much on my own. And I had to think of much older traditions than the novel at a certain level in attempting to write about the interior. But also what started to happen was this: I began to move into the language and to move into what I call densities – and you could see the densities there, the rock in the waterfall, the turbulence of the river, the way the forest on either side came over, you know. The whole experience was utterly different from the coastlands as if one had actually adventured to another planet. The language was becoming a world in itself. So the language was becoming another dimension away from a photographic image of the bush or the river. One could take photographs of the forest, of the river, one could take photographs of the bush. But those were all on the surface. Landscape has been treated as a purely aesthetic medium in which you would speak of the mountains and the grass in a one-dimensional way. But landscape is a matter of dimensions. So that even though I have left Guyana, the rain forest, which made such an amazing impact upon me, I could walk in Essex and at times I could sense a return to that South American world. Essex, as you know, is quite open and you get this sense of return. Also the light that comes up from the East Anglian coast and sweeps across, occasionally brings this sense of an arch that goes back to some of the sunsets I saw in Guyana. It’s as if you’re living in a theatre and the curtain rises and falls between different worlds.
FRED D'AGUIAR:
I really like that image. It seems to me that you are writing out of a colonial experience and you seem to be stretching the parameters of a novel to include that experience. You’re not alone in this attempt to revise the conventional expectations of the novel. In fact, I’d say you’re in very good company since it goes back to Laurence Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy* through to James Joyce. I’m thinking now of the narrative tradition you were working against.

WILSON HARRIS:
It is not that I had dispensed with tradition, but that I realised that the novel tradition is a very recent invention. It may be a useful invention, it was invented in Europe to hold up a mirror to the way European societies were built within comparatively recent times. Why should the novel apply to areas of the world such as South America where you have cross-culturality on a scale that is very self-evident? I mean you can't escape from it. you may escape from it in Europe because to a large extent there is a homogeneity in Europe which can entrench itself at the centre. And even though you have immigrants coming in they remain very much on the margins. They may eventually penetrate into the centre as well. Well, you can’t do that in Guyana. You know in Guyana that you have to deal with cross-culturality: not only the Indians and Africans and the Portugese and the Chinese, who are minorities anyway. But remember the Portugese may be a majority in Brazil which is next door. And the American Indians, though they are a minority, are the oldest people there. So you have all these contradictions. Therefore you need an orchestration of imageries and resources and histories ancient and past, modern and ancient, that may not be contained in the novel form that one associates with Europe. Thus one had to find traditions older than the novel, as well as to find within oneself the originality to cope with the stresses that one faced. Because it is so easy to succumb to the temptations of writing a kind of novel with the linear biases you associate with the conventional novel which will appeal to the colonial masters, the institutions that still govern culture.
So that there’s a vested interest in the Jane Austen novel, in the Dickens novel, in the Hardy novel. And writers from the colonial world who write in that vein are likely to be the blue-eyed boys of the establishment. But that doesn’t mean that this other world is not crying out for expression.

FRED D’AGUIAR:
That other world, as Harris describes it, manifests itself in the use of a particular language. Writer and critic David Dabydeen:

DAVID DABYDEEN:
I think that in a sense Harris has creolised the English language but in a much more unfamiliar way. He’s not creolised it in the sense that you’d expect, using the sort of language of Sam Selvon or Linton Kwesi Johnson. But what he’s done is that he’s taken a language to describe a landscape – a landscape which is intrinsically magical and mysterious – and he’s twisted and torn the language and broken it and let the sentences run on and on so there’s a total confusion: an anarchy of verbs, an anarchy of subjunctive clauses. And to me that’s a fantastic measure of his achievement, because he’s taken the language to the very edge of breakdown of meaning and then brought it back, so that you get fantastic moments of illumination when you can see very deeply into the prose.

WILSON HARRIS (reads from Carnival):
Everyman Masters celebrated his sixty-fifth birthday in the summer of 1982 with several glasses of red wine he consumed in a pub. He returned home intoxicated and, ascending the stairs to his flat in Holland Park, came upon her again, the woman who had moved in within the past week to occupy the apartment above his. He had caught a glimpse of her then but now it was as if he knew her for certain, and everything he had surmised in their previous encounter was true. In her lay the climax of Carnival, the terror of dying, the bliss of reciprocal penetration of masks. She was tall, slender, very white; her skin was transparent yet stood beneath or within coal black hair.
She gave him a faint, pointed smile of recognition. A needle seemed to stitch a spirit on to her lips. Red wine for thread. White skin for fabric. Blackest hair for a veil or net. All these – the glimmering shadow of a star in a glass of wine, the net of whiteness and blackness like the painted apparition of a ghostly storm – were substitutes for another presence as if they were all Carnival fabric, as if they were all animate costume saturated by the wine of memory, the strangest sacrament of jealousy and love that binds one to involuntary divinity, plagued humanity, with which one wrestles across the years.

Her subtle red lips were stitched by the needle of space into another woman’s jealous mouth. Yes, it was true. He saw it all. He remembered.

FRED D’AGUIAR:
You have spoken, Wilson, of an ancient past. It strikes me that this is slightly different to a personal past that might be ascribed to a character. For example, in your latest novel, Resurrection At Sorrow Hill, the character Hope dreams he has been shot. Through the process of a descent into his own death, he is able to recover some strategy for survival and for seeing his life more clearly. Would it be fair to say that there is an ancient past and a more personal one, so that the two make history at least a plural notion?

WILSON HARRIS:
Yes, that is true. With regard to the ancient past, the characters are dual personalities. Monty believes at times that he’s Montezuma, the Emperor of the Aztecs. Monty is Venezuelan. Len was a professor in a Brazilian university, and believes that he is Leonardo Da Vinci. They have suffered a certain kind of breakdown in the asylum. And the asylum is a theatre. The asylum is a theatre therefore of the ancient past which comes abreast of the present moment through these dual personalities. To a great extent this simultaneous rapport of times and histories comes into play so that one has an acute sensation of how the legacies of the past bear upon the present moment.
FRED D’AGUIAR:
I agree. I can see how all of this is played out with nature at the centre of things. And your idea of nature goes beyond the Wordsworthian notion which argues that nature is a force we can benefit from by knowing about. Your view on the other hand sees nature and humanity as somehow symbiotically related with nature as a character or characters in dialogue with people.

WILSON HARRIS:
Yes, I feel that very deeply. We have locked out from ourselves so many areas of nature which we have tended to manipulate, or despoil, or ravage, so that we live in a situation in which nature itself at times seems to be alien to ourselves; nature seems to threaten us. So we tend to lock ourselves into one dimension, one human dimension so-called. And the resurrection of meaning lies in our capacity to cross from one dimension to others. Because if you remain locked in one dimension, the world becomes a very threatening place. It becomes so threatening that things that happen to us seem random, seem meaningless. So this question of nature, how one opens up the other dimensions in nature, becomes critical to a resurrection of meaning. Because that is when we begin to sense that the world that is alien, that is out there, also has something to say to us that is deeply important if we are to come to grips with the hideous polarisations that afflict us.

FRED D’AGUIAR:
I wonder if we can move on to this idea you have written about concerning faculties that reside in nature. Because these give shape and direction to the characters you have invented over and above your own control of them as author.

WILSON HARRIS:
Well, what has happened is that precisely because of the kind of voyage one has been making, in which one has a sense of the orchestration of the ancient and the modern, of dimensions in nature, as we’ve been discussing this, there’s a strange paradox in that a character can suddenly take over. This has been happening for some time but it is particularly marked in the Carnival Trilogy and in Resurrection because I regard myself as the editor. Resurrection, as
you know, is Hope’s book; and then there is Robin Redbreast Glass, *The Infinite Rehearsal* is his book. Everyman Masters has written *Carnival*.

FRED D’AGUIAR:
How exactly does this happen as a process?

WILSON HARRIS:
It seems to me that it happens in the sense that connections appear in the book which I did not control or consciously design. I worked with great concentration with these intuitive clues, revising through them. And in that way, revising through them, it is as if one was informed by a stranger or strangers in the self. And therefore these connections disclose themselves with hindsight, though they were there at the time. So I could read some of my own novels as if I did not write them. I know that I wrote them. But I can come to them with a degree of objectivity. I am never embarrassed when I speak of a novel of mine because there is no egocentric motivation in it. I’m simply speaking of a work which seems to me to be alive, to be a living text. And the way this has become a living text is mysterious because of strangers in the self. Thus in order to record one’s debt to these strangers, a particular character looms in one’s mind and one invests him with this comedy of creation. It is a comedy, a unique kind of comedy to say that Hope wrote the book *Resurrection At Sorrow Hill* or that Anselm wrote the *Four Banks of the River of Space*. It is unique comedy but it also has this reality in it. It has this reality to do with the extra human world, the world beyond our human logic, the world that is deeper than logic in the purely human absolute sense.

FRED D’AGUIAR:
I’d like to talk to you now about the way you’ve organised some of your books around European epics. In a way they become Caribbean epics, once you’ve handled them. For example, when you quote these classics and epigraphs, they appear to be signposts. I think your term for it is “a validation of your thinking”.
WILSON HARRIS:
I think that's a very important question because what began to happen as I was engaged in this exploration is that I found myself drawing closer to figures like Homer, Dante, Goethe. But drawing closer to them in ways that I would never have imagined possible. That was one aspect of it. The other aspect is this – that from childhood, these figures have been imposed on me: through the Odyssey, the Divine Comedy or Faust. I had therefore to come to them from the extremities of the civilisation. Because I believe that South America is at the extremities of the western world. I don’t see South America as Third World per se, but at the margins or extremities. Now “margins” for me is not a denigratory word. Margins simply mean that you can tilt the whole area and you dislodge certain boundaries and you see them differently. And I was able to enter into these three epics in that tilted way because since these had been imposed on me, it seemed to me utterly necessary to approach them from another angle. So, for example, in The Four Banks Odysseus is not one figure, Odysseus is a plural figure; there is Harold who is Odysseus, Harold who is a kind of womaniser; there’s Proteus the drunkard, he’s an Odysseus figure; there is Simon, The Englishman; also Penelope, there are several figures that portray Penelope. One is saying that these figures can come home to us through different masks, indeed, through different cultures.

FRED D'AGUIAR:
I’d be interested to know about your notion of home. You’ve lived in Britain for many years now. It seems to be at least a plural notion, a definition of home that is shifting. A so-called post-colonial consciousness coupled with a counciousness that has travelled, having acquired a second cultural layering and sense of belonging. There is this idea that the imagination is the ultimate home or theatre where this rehearsal, reviewing and re-imagining takes place. For this consciousness, home is a complex notion: open-ended, fragile and vulnerable. Each generation it seems has to re-define home for itself. Would that be a reasonable description of “home” for you?
WILSON HARRIS:
I would say, Fred, that from the main thrust of your remarks, you’ve defined “home” beautifully as I would see it.

FRED D’AGUIAR:
There is a relevant passage in your new novel, Resurrection At Sorrow Hill, a short poem, in fact.

WILSON HARRIS (reads):

FOR REFUGEES

Would Butterfly
bear him a child
with Mr. Universe’s name,
a child small, tender as a leaf?
Uprooted populations
voyaging in space
are written into a tree
that breaks the cross, breaks the crucifixion,
into a pregnant hollow and vessel of soul.

I listen to the dry beak of a master spirit singing
and am told
we are born with the dead and their expedition of soul.

Home is the moment of the rose.
Home is the moment of the yew tree.

Home is the sculpture of the rain
into rivers as gentle as singing grass...

WILSON HARRIS:
Now “we’re born with the dead” came from T.S. Eliot. But it’s extended into “their expedition of soul.” “Their expedition of soul” suggests that “soul” works through densities. I mean, our body is a kind of density through which soul may sing when we least expect it. And soul may also give fire to the imagination, as if soul brings in to us
elements that we would normally simply place on a wall, in a picture
or in a museum, or simply see it as something performed, as a
performance. Whereas it is coming through the density of our lives in
spite of the devastation of the world of landscapes. In spite of all that
has happened, we have some involuntary connection with this globe
which is our home. I think that “home” signifies soul: that without a
sense of soul, which reaches through us and beyond us, there is no
home for humanity. Humanity is utterly lost. It is this gestation of soul,
this spark of soul that can appear anywhere else, that becomes one’s
promise of home because the host resides there, the host that welcomes
us in resides there. We can no longer think of home as
compartamentalised, home is not just the surfaces of the globe, home is
this gestation of soul which allows us our sense of kinship with
creatures, with strange messengers, with angels if you like, and with
human beings like ourselves, and to recognise how vulnerable we are
because we can be swept away. We can disappear like any other
species.

A BBC Radio 4 Kaleidoscope Feature first broadcast on 27 November
1993.
Produced by Fred D’Aguiar.

[Transcription published by kind permission of Wilson Harris and
Fred D’Aguiar, and the producer of the programme, Razia Iqbal.
Extracts from ‘Palace of the Peacock’, ‘Carnival’ and ‘Resurrection
at Sorrow Hill’ reprinted by kind permission of Faber and Faber.]
Interview

FRANK BIRBALSINGH

An Interview with Fred D’Aguiar

You were born in London, in 1960, of Guyanese parents; then in 1962 you were taken to Guyana where you remained until 1972 when you went back to London. While you were at school in Guyana, do you recall any influences that may have led to your writing poetry?

Yes, I remember an East Indian teacher read poetry and nursery rhymes to us and would get us to say things from memory. There was also my grandfather [on my mother’s side] who liked Tennyson and Victorian poetry – Palgrave’s *Golden Treasury*. He was a merchant seaman who would be away for long periods when he would learn poetry by heart, and recite it to us from memory when he came home. The radio also had a powerful influence on us. We listened to calypsos and learned them by heart. So, alongside heraldic English poetry with its Tennysonian, Victorian metres, we also had some crude creole poetry bursting over the air-waves into our ears.

*Did you see any local writing – by Martin Carter or A.J. Seymour, for instance?*

I know from talking to other Guyanese, that people used to recite Martin Carter’s poems at street corners, and dramatists would practise reading his poems as a way of presenting their own work. But it didn’t filter down to us in school. I don’t think my grandfather would have countenanced anyone mentioning Martin Carter in the same breath as Tennyson.

*What happened when you returned to London in 1972?*
My parents' marriage had dissolved, and we [children] came back to a house with one parent. It wasn't as distressing as it might have been, partly because of the newness of England. Our Guyanese relatives had always made us feel that we were English children waiting to be sent home to England. We enjoyed all the novelties of England, although we missed relatives back in Guyana. After my A-level school exams, I went into psychiatric nursing for three years before going on to university.

*It sounds like a big change from psychiatric nursing to university and, I presume, an arts degree?*

I'm glad it happened that way because by the time I came to reapply to university, after nursing, I had heard about the University of Kent's course in African and Caribbean literature—it was quite new then—and I went for that instead. There was nothing else to do but read and write while I was nursing. I knew by then that I'd be a poet of some kind.

*When did you begin writing poetry?*

At secondary school.

*Was there any encouragement from teachers?*

I had a couple of very good English teachers at secondary school. They got me involved in the school magazine, and I edited one issue of it with a lot of poetry. But I never thought of black subjects or West Indian things like carnival as subjects to write about.

*How did you respond to University?*

Valerie Bloom was in her last or second last year at Kent when I arrived there. She was already known as a poet. I had published one or two poems in magazines, and people were talking about me as one of the up-and-coming Caribbean writers. There was also the whole canon of
Brathwaite and Walcott that I was furiously reading through. But, before that, I had already started reading people like Lamming when I was a psychiatric nurse. I worked my way through Caribbean literature, re-familiarizing myself with the region in a strange way, because I had been away from it for all those years in London while I was at secondary school. I also read African American novels, for example, *The Invisible Man* [1952] by Ralph Ellison.

*And [James] Baldwin?*

Yes, I read Baldwin with great excitement: his essays were very strong.

*Apart from Valerie Bloom, was there anyone else at university that you met or whose work caught your interest?*

Sandra Agard was known as a black woman poet in London in the mid-1980s, and she was at Kent. Achebe’s two children were also studying there at the time. Achebe and other writers visited and read from their work. So, there was a feeling of something exciting happening. I had not read African literature until I took the course for which I applied and opened *Things Fall Apart*. The course introduced me to Ama Ata Aidoo, Ayi Kwei Armah, and other writers. It tied culture and history with literature, so the literature wasn’t taken out of context.

*That was quite an awakening obviously. It must have influenced you during university and perhaps immediately afterwards.*

*Mama Dot* [London: Chatto & Windus, 1985] came out while I was just finishing my degree at Kent. I got a first class degree and applied to do a Ph.D. on Wilson Harris at the University of Warwick. I was going to work with Michael Gilkes who wrote a very good study of Harris. But, in trying to make ends meet, I got diverted, and did a writer-in-residency, part-time, at Birmingham Polytechnic. Immediately after that, a writer-in-residency came up at Cambridge University, where I spent another year. By that time, Wilson Harris studies had receded from my mind, and I was writing all the time.
Both Mama Dot and Airy Hall [London: Chatto & Windus, 1989] are divided into three parts of which the first is biographical, dwelling, for example, on aspects of Mama Dot's life and character; the second is more general, commenting on the society and people; while the third reflects on the whole experience of the society and all that is involved therein. Is that more or less how the structure of these two volumes works?

Yes. I had a body of poems that I made up around the character of Mama Dot, who was slightly larger than life, and I found other poems for example, Dreadtalk [28-31] which is a long creole-type poem about Britain. There were other characters and poems which didn't quite fit into the Mama Dot body of poems because they were more overtly political or seemed to be doing other things. Then the third part looked back at the whole experience of childhood. I was particularly interested in literacy in that long poem Guyanese Days that forms Part Three [43-48]. I had an awareness of being caught up in the sounds, smells, and innocence of running around in Airy Hall [a village on the Atlantic coast of Guyana], which didn't quite mix with the formality of having to read and write. The sensual experiences didn't seem to correspond with trying to write on a slate in a sequential way. I remember also the feeling of liberation when I did learn to read; so I tried in Guyanese Days to look at the notion of someone who is aware of the printed page while being steeped in an oral culture, at the contrast between the two.

I think that Guyanese Days fully captures the day-to-day actuality of the life you are describing. I can relate it back to my own experience in Guyana in the 1940s and 1950s.

Country life is country life.

It is earthy and vigorous – the same for Zola's peasants as for Chekhov's muziks. So there is no intentional meaning in your three part structure.
No, I didn’t consciously think of innocence, experience, death, or anything like that. I had a body of poems which just put themselves in that sort of order. The same is true for my Airy Hall sequence in which I examine place. The poems all work together.

I divide your poems into three categories, the first of which is political. This includes poems in which you make observations about life in Guyana under [Forbes) Burnham. For instance, in El Dorado Update[32-35] you talk sincerely about the “fowl coop republic” [35], and mockingly ask, “what people, what nation, what destiny?” [35]. In Letter from Mama Dot [20-21] you have such lines as “With all the talk of nationality we still hungry” [20] and, “People are stabbing one another for a place” [20] in a queue. Such lines express great disappointment in Independence. In fact, in the same poem you write: “Since Independence / This country hasn’t stopped stepping back” [20]. Surely Guyanese had a right to expect that Independence would benefit them. Yet this has not happened. You record the continuing suffering and deprivation of Guyanese under Burnham: but you do not condemn anyone. I am struck by the absence of any instinct to blame. Your quiet recording of the human toll of Guyanese politics suggests deep and genuine affection for the victims — a firm bond of unspoken communal solidarity with them. But you don’t cry out.

You draw your own conclusion, I think. In writing about politics, I felt I should try and step back from any emotional attempt to lay blame or responsibility. I felt there are other forms of writing where that could be done more properly. The appeal of a poem should be in the way the images work. Sentiment would have to be kept under tight rein if I were to communicate a sense of hunger, distress, deprivation, inhumanity, or injustice, and communicate it in a way that was loyal to poetry-making. I felt if I were loyal to certain rules in poetry, I would better serve the community about which I was writing. One of the rules was not to stand on a soap box, because people might stop listening. Another was that people who heard my message might be the very people who perpetrated the terrible things I described, and might not
want to listen if I judged them: I didn’t want to cast the first stone. I felt there would be no progress if I took sides. Besides, I was interested in the lyrical line. I like poetry which will both sound good and prove to be memorable; and I do try to secrete one or two overt political phrases in the course of my poems, which show clearly that I am not sitting on the fence.

*My second category includes what I call evocative poems, for example* Mama Dot Warns Against an Easter Rising [17] *and particularly Guyanese Days. In these poems, or in* Airy Hall [9] *and Airy Hall Wash-Boy [12], you present everyday occurrences or scenes and evoke their uniquely Guyanese or Caribbean qualities, that is to say, their openness, freshness, and lack of restrictive conventions. More than thirty years ago I recall Selvon, Salkey, Carew, Lamming, and other Caribbean writers using West Indian speech and local experiences in somewhat exotic fashion because they aimed their work at an English audience. Do you write with a particular audience in mind?*

When I wrote those poems I didn’t think of an audience; I wrote them for a personal, or selfish reason. I’d seen Airy Hall change beyond recognition, so I tried in my poems to rescue a place which I had in my head and heart, but which didn’t exist anymore. Each memory is exactly as I remember it when I was there, and each now has an emotional weight for me, because I played in those trees and ran on that red sand road, which is now paved, while the trees have been cut down. I was aware of creating an emotional map of a place and of superimposing it on a geography that no longer existed. My second reason for writing is that I realised that all black British children would know was Britain – they may have an inkling of another place, of Caribbean music, reggae, or of stories heard from their parents – but they would not have first-hand experience of them. I had ten years in the Caribbean, and those impressions were clearly in my head; but they were colliding with English rhythms. I therefore have a twin heritage – literature written by other Caribbean writers about a Caribbean setting that I know, and literature about an English landscape or location. In
my poems I wanted to put the two against each other. I wanted to use an English way of speaking that went back to Wordsworth and before, and set against it a countrified, Guyanese experience, including the creole language.

They fit together very well, with the creole language adding colour and texture to the standard English and creating a mixed medium that is true to its subject and coherent at the same time. Basically, it is the contact between England and the Caribbean that you are recording. But you have an insider's viewpoint that Selvon, Salkey, and the earlier writers did not have. This is an advantage that you have over these earlier writers. You also have an advantage over younger Caribbean writers living in the diaspora because of your first-hand Caribbean experience during those ten childhood years in Guyana.

I had come through the late 1970s when there were racial riots in England, for example, at Notting Hill. These riots made everyone aware of a young black population that was growing up in England. Then, in 1981, the Brixton riots were even more disastrous, and affected black communities right across the country. By then, people were talking about the black British experience so I couldn't pretend that black Caribbean immigrants living in Britain did not form a unique community. At the same time leaving the Caribbean and coming to Britain wasn't like leaving one planet and going to the next; there was direct continuity between the two places. I had to try to bring that home to the children of Caribbean immigrants in Britain who did not know the Caribbean.

That gives you a role as interpreter or arbitrator, someone who can bring two opposed sides together. But in a poem like Guyanese Days, you mention “coconuts banging grooves in the mud”, “a Downs-tree”, “splintery plimplers”, “a stinging marabunta” [43], and so on. What effect do such expressions have on your [white] English readers who, I believe, are still your main audience?
I don’t have footnotes; but I expect that interested readers could find out about those things or look them up in a dictionary. All those things were part of my childhood experience. I was preoccupied with childhood as an experience that was lost and replaced by adult life. I knew from Wordsworth’s *Prelude*, and other similar works, for instance, Derek Walcott’s *Another Life* that writers appear to go through a period where they have to assess their early years in order to move on, or at least use the assessment as a yardstick to judge other things. When I was writing about childhood, even though I was specific about Guyana, I knew I was on a big, wide field with many other players. So I didn’t feel I was being exotic or marginal at all. I just felt that I had to be specific.

*But when you mention a “train-crushed knife” [44] in Guyanese Days, the phrase cannot communicate to an English reader what it communicates to me. Maybe it is similar to our reading of poems like Wordsworth’s sonnet Composed upon Westminster Bridge, September 3, 1802 when we were in school in the Caribbean, or to your grandfather’s response when he recited Tennyson’s Lady of Shallot. I believe that these words, like many others, evoke a local as well as universal level of response, and just as West Indians might have failed to pick up the local level of response in some traditional English poems, English readers may now have difficulty in picking up the local references in your work. In your creole language poems – my third category – which have the strongest local flavour, for example, Dreadtalk, Mama Dot Warns Against an Easter Rising, and *El Dorado Update* one can’t miss the outspoken earthiness of the Caribbean language, which acquires force, again largely local in character, through its incorporation of oral elements – popular songs and calypsos – and references to political events and personalities. Your creole poems will appeal most powerfully to readers whose first language is creole, but that shouldn’t make them totally inaccessible to other readers.*

I was aware of holding a microphone in *El Dorado Update* to a place that had gone down the road of destitution. I wanted to record the spirit...
of that experience, so I surrendered my pen to those people to try and get their own phrasings, the exact things they were saying. Then I had to put all those voices together in some kind of order. It is different from my usual method of finding an image of my own that would channel the people’s thoughts and emotions. Here, I did it the other way around: I found a phrase from the community and tried to see if it carried my thoughts and feelings – I was trying to be more loyal to the group I was describing.

*Loyalty comes through both volumes – a genuine sense of affection or delight in your Guyanese origin, despite those unpleasant aspects of it that you report. It is not a lyrical evocation like Laurie Lee’s autobiographical Cider with Rosie [1959].*

Actually nostalgia is a pitfall. Another pitfall is an over-lyrical way of writing that romanticizes one’s material. I try to avoid those two problems by giving my writing a hard edge all the time. Whenever I find myself being over-lyrical, I introduce political observation, or something that is slightly harder.

*Your poems in both books are indeed hard-edged, conveying sentiment without being sentimental. You reproduce concrete experience frankly, without frills. To achieve this you use varied techniques and forms. Some stanzas are three lines, some two lines, and some five or six lines. Where do your techniques and forms come from? Are you aware of consciously responding to specific writers, styles, or principles?*

From Milton’s *Paradise Lost* I get a sense of the poet speaking to a multitude about man’s first disobedience and other subjects of equally grand importance and weight. That’s one strain of voice in me. Then I sometimes hear a less public voice like Philip Larkin’s which I just happen to overhear because it is fine, domestic, and very quiet, expressing itself in small sayings and throw-away phrases, which undermine and work against the lofty, heraldic Miltonic voice. In addition to these voices, and those of contemporary figures from the
recent past – Yeats and Eliot, principally – I also hear Claude McKay whose poetry and novels I very much like, especially his early volumes of poetry, *Songs of Jamaica* [1912] and *Constabulary Ballads* [1912]. In everything I write, I’m pushing against what’s been done before. Of course, in writing ‘*Mama Dot Warns Against an Easter Rising*’, the line lengths were dictated by breath. The line ‘Doan raise no kite is good friday’ [17] has a natural length based on how Mama Dot would say it.

*It is based on Guyanese speech rhythms that we immediately recognize.*

Exactly. There was nothing telling me to include two or five beats per line. As to the form, I knew I wanted to tell a story. As long as it took to tell the story, that’s how long the poem would be. Then the language had to be creole to be plausible in terms of the character and her environment; it couldn’t be in standard English. Those are the kinds of rules I followed. The community I was observing was not a literary community; it was essentially oral-based. My poems have many sources, some literary, some based on experience, and others made up or imagined.

*But the fact that you can consider Guyanese subjects so naturally in poems published in England seems a phenomenon in itself. Selvon, Salkey, Lamming, and the others could not write as naturally in the 1950s.*

The difference between Selvon and myself is that I do not have to explain everything. Selvon was creating an audience as he wrote. In other words, his story had to have all the necessary constituents to make it understood by an audience who had no idea where it was coming from. Today, after Selvon has written in that way, I know that I can take a number of things for granted. There is now an audience for my writing, and I know they will take the trouble to find out things they do not understand in my poems. Also, there is more knowledge about the West Indies from newspapers, television, and travel. Derek Walcott
said that in his day the only fruit he could put in his poems was an apple; he couldn’t put a mango, for instance. I was stunned, because by the time I came to write *Mama Dot* in 1985, I could mention mango and apple in the course of a poem without any trouble. That shows how things have changed in one generation. In the book I am now writing, *British Subjects*, I’m trying to discuss Caribbean experience as part of a British cultural identity. Nowadays, Caribbean culture in Britain is no longer exotic, marginal, remembered, or in the process of being introduced to a host nation. The British host identity itself actually consists of Caribbean elements.

Contemporary British culture has Caribbean components in the same way that it has Jewish, Asian, or Greek Cypriot components, and even as it has older regional variations in Cornwall, Wales, or Yorkshire. Absolutely. Now poems can mention all those tropical Caribbean fruits because they are available in stalls and supermarkets all over London. In my writing, I have to respond to changing attitudes toward the Caribbean.

In doing that, you are acknowledging the evolution of a Caribbean literary tradition in which one generation uses their social and cultural conditions and sources to create literature, and in the process stimulate interest in their subject and find an audience for it; then, a later generation builds on what they have created. By writing as you do, you are being truthful to your time, place, and experience. You don’t write like Selvon or Walcott; you write like someone from your generation. But is it not realistic to expect that the purely Caribbean characteristics of your generation—in England, Canada, and America—will tend to diminish through inter-marriage and other factors? What implications might this have for Caribbean art and literature?

Wilson Harris, who has been in England for nearly forty years, still maintains that he’s writing from the margin, which means he has brought a perspective to English letters which could not have come out of England. The difference between Harris and myself is that whereas
I belong in England where I have put down roots, I'm still being made to feel like an alien. I also have a language which appears to belong in Brixton market or places like that. I come up against BBC English, the Queen's English, or whatever language holds sway and power. In that sense, my Caribbean language works like any regional dialect in England, whether it is in Yorkshire, Liverpool, or Wales. This means that I still feel a sense of being on the margin, and still have an adversarial relationship with England. But the values have changed slightly from those encountered by Harris, because I am now located in England. Although I still have to fight a David and Goliath kind of battle with an official or dominant opposition, my Goliath is no longer remote and out of reach.

In the days of Harris and Selvon, it was essentially a colonial relationship, and the British Goliath was way out of reach. First, one had to make the long, sea journey to come to his land. Second, one was always excluded, and felt excluded while living there. But, as you say, you have a legitimate claim to Goliath's home space, where the centre of power exists. Your relationship does not carry quite the alienating, obliterating force of colonial exclusion; it is one of several regional sub-cultures in Britain which are excluded from the centre, but are within striking distance of it.

I think that's right. British Subjects, my new book, is trying to consider Britishness in terms of Salman Rushdie's idea of mongrelization, or Stuart Hall's idea of hybridization. Homi Bhabha also mentions this idea of multiplicity and plurality. These are the catch-phrases which have to do with a contemporary situation that allows me to acknowledge the particular cultural strain that I inhabit while belonging to a larger culture. I now play a role in this larger British culture that is dominated by small pockets of people who are in charge. In Scotland, Tom Leonard and others still perceive themselves in a David and Goliath relationship with an English metropolitan centre that is always trying to keep itself pure against what it views as corrupting influences in terms of the creole, Scottish dialects, and so on.
The English metropolitan centre took a similar view toward the poetry of Robert Burns in the eighteenth century. More recently, Hugh MacDiarmid is only one of many writers considered pejoratively as being “fringe”, or regional – who waged war against this centre.

That metropolitan belief in its own purity and authority is still true today. I feel I am now entering an arena of cultural and artistic debate standing in a Caribbean corner from where I’m fighting. After all, the Caribbean dialect that is being spoken in London will not be heard in Kingston, Jamaica. Caribbean people in London sound Jamaican because of the power, size, and strength of the overseas Jamaican community compared to the Guyanese, Trinidadian, Barbadian, or St. Lucian. Young blacks are picking up this London Caribbean dialect from the record industry. It is a dialect that is a hybrid of all the Caribbean dialects boiled down into one mixture that is served up with a mainly Jamaican flavour. Caribbean people in London make grammatical “errors” by introducing structures and features of their Caribbean dialect, or language into their use of English. What they speak is not a “nation language”; that is making too big a claim for it. But it is having some impact on their comprehension of English, and English grammar. It is an otherness of English that they are trying to register. I don’t think its bad English. But the metropolitan cultural centre or establishment is trying to exclude this Caribbean, creole otherness from what they consider to be correct or acceptable English. So this is a battle of cultural recognition and linguistic validation in which I am engaged.

*The battle lines are clearly drawn in your two volumes of poetry. That is why I asked earlier about the use of Guyanese linguistic and cultural practices in your poems without seeming to care whether they might confound your British audience. There is no danger of Mama Dot being pejoratively labelled exotic, as Selvon’s The Lonely Londoners was in 1956. Thirty years have made a difference.*

I belong to a community of writers like many others, all over the world, who are fighting battles with similar centres and despotisms. But while
belonging to this global literary community, I am also trying to address local problems in England. I am still passionately interested in the Caribbean, and will continue to write about it and be intrigued by it, partly because of my parents, and partly because of the experience I had while I lived there. But my memories of the place are now receding. When I go back there, my friends and relatives say "Hello English", because of my views, and how I talk about the place. I have to remind them that in England I am told "Hey, go back to the Caribbean!". This is good ground for a writer because it produces precisely the tension that will generate poems. I'm pleased about the multiplicity and the multi-faceted nature of my experience. I actually welcome all the complexity. It means there are lots of books to be written, and I am glad about that.

Note:

This Interview took place on the 11th April 1992, at York University, Toronto.
This is the second collection of articles on Indians in the Caribbean edited by Frank Birbalsingh, an Indo-Guyanese literary critic who teaches at York University in Toronto. His previous collection, Indenture and Exile comprising papers presented at York University, in July 1988, to celebrate the 150th anniversary of Indian presence in the Caribbean, is an impressive scholarly achievement. Indo-Caribbean Resistance is somewhat more polemical: it comprises four speeches and three academic papers; it is refreshingly provocative, and raises, tantalisingly, a range of crucial issues on the Indo-Caribbean condition.

In his introduction to these seven pieces, Birbalsingh argues that they are all, consciously or unconsciously, animated by a spirit of resistance, which he contends, inheres in the Indo-Caribbean experience, during indentureship between 1838 and 1917, and afterwards. He believes that this culture of resistance is rooted in ‘marginalisation’—in 19th century India, in colonial Trinidad and Guyana, as well as in what he sees as an ‘Afrocentric’ contemporary Caribbean, ‘dominated by cultural assumptions that are creole or ... mainly African derived’ (p.xv).

The first contributor, Roy Neehall, argues that resistance is ‘the most valuable factor’ that Indo-Caribbean people have made to the Caribbean legacy. Neehall, an Indo-Trinidadian Christian minister, observes that their retention of Hinduism and Islam, in an environment seething with Christian proselytisers, constituted a potent form of resistance. He sees their remorseless struggle to acquire land as a manifestation of their will to resist the consuming power of the plantation regimen (pp. 3, 5). He concludes that their contemporary
powerlessness, in Trinidad and Guyana (all these pieces were presented before Cheddi Jagan’s election victory in Guyana in October 1992), has not diminished their capacity to resist: their ‘exclusion from the corridors of formal political power’ has reinforced their economic role, as food producers providing sustenance to all Caribbean peoples (p. 10).

The theme of resistance also underpins Basdeo Mangru’s scholarly piece, ‘Tadjah in British Guiana’. This originally Shi’ite Muslim festival was celebrated in Trinidad and British Guiana not only by Muslims, but, inexplicably, by Hindus, and even by some Blacks. Tadjah was characterised by music, dancing, fencing, ganja-smoking, serious rum-drinking, etc.—very un-Islamic accretions, indeed. Mangru does not explain why this Shi’ite Muslim festival became so popular when most of the Muslim Indians in the Caribbean were Sunnis; nor does he account for the widespread participation of Hindus, and apparently, many blacks. However, he does explain why the plantocracy encouraged the celebration of Tadjah. He believes that this riotously carnivalesque, somewhat anarchic, festival, with its evidently demanding physical exertions, helped to release pent-up, potentially volatile emotions; mitigating the boring plantation routine, while feeding an identity with the Caribbean environment. It had a ‘therapeutic value’ (p. 23). It is noteworthy that white planters were expected to dismount their mules, and invariably did, as they approached a Tadjah procession — a small, but richly evocative concession, for Indian workers (pp. 23-24).

Although Tadjah is represented as a uniquely multi-racial instrument of ‘resistance’ in colonial society, no explanation is given for its disappearance. Growing up in rural British Guiana in the 1950s-1960s, I was unaware of it; and I suspect that my Muslim compatriots would have been repelled by most features of Guyanese Tadjah; but its peculiar evolution and appeal, coupled with its strange death, deserve better scrutiny.

David Dabydeen also advances the case for a tradition of resistance among Indo-Caribbean people. Reverence for the land, commitment
to family, thrift, industry, cultural resilience, resistance to plantation oppression, and the pursuit of Western education, established a tradition of effort and achievement, and a sustaining vision (pp. 27-32).

Probably the most provocative, but infinitely most challenging, piece is by Ramabai Espinet, an Indo-Trinidadian scholar. She dares to question the entrenched, comforting Indian male notion of the comfortable, contented Indo-Caribbean woman: loyal wife, devoted mother – a virtually mythical, self-abnegating Sita, the classical quintessence of Indian motherhood. She bemoans the ‘invisibility’ of Indo-Caribbean women, which she partially attributes to their paucity in the public spheres of writers, artists, politicians, performers etc. Even those who are teachers, nurses, civil servants, etc., invariably retire to ‘the seclusion of the patriarchal culture’ (p. 42).

Espinet identifies ‘a single germinating centre’ for this stultifying Indian patriarchy: ‘the ownership of woman and her reproductive capacity, the only means whereby the powerful male can perpetuate himself’ (p. 43). The woman’s ‘invisibility’ is exacerbated by the fact that Indians in the Caribbean are ‘a marginalised racial group’. This insecurity, she seems to suggest, tends to reinforce the patriarchal fences, designed to corral the intellect and sexuality of Indo-Caribbean women. Espinet observes that this has developed in spite of a history of woman’s resistance. She notes that many indentured Indian women were rebels, women of enviable physical and mental strength and independence of spirit, who migrated as individuals or with their children, unaccompanied by husbands or male kin. This, she argues, represented a solid, conscious resolution to break the shackles of a rigid, stultifying patriarchy in village India.

Espinet proceeds to scrutinise the fate of Indo-Caribbean womanhood in Trinidadian calypsoes, composed almost exclusively by male Afro-Trinidadians. The Indian woman is again corralled, now by a beguiling sexual imagery which eclipses any other dimension of her being. From at least the 1930s, by a skilful, often wickedly funny, manipulation of Indian folk images, often drawn, significantly, from Indian cooking, Black calypsonians are able to imaginatively savour
the alluring, forbidden fruit of Indo-Caribbean womanhood. These sexist images also imprison, denying identity, capacity for self-expression, and independence of action. However, Espinet does see one redeeming feature: the calypso itself is being impregnated with Indian musical temper and rhythm the ‘chutney soca’; and at least one Indo-Trinidadian is asserting her ‘right to sing instead of being sung about’ (p. 54).

Espinet’s article raises a question of fundamental importance to Black-Indian relations in the Caribbean; but it does not attempt a critical historical analysis. Some years ago, a male Indo-Trinidadian friend, a writer, on seeing an Indian girl and a black boy in warm embrace, instantly remarked: ‘Boy, the future of our race is in the womb of the woman, yes! This may not be a minority view among Indo-Caribbean peoples. I detect in my friend’s remark a deep-seated fear of sexual ‘pollution’ by Blacks, exacerbated by the perceived political power of Blacks. In an environment where Indians have retained many caste-like, Brahmanic notions of race, colour, and beauty, darkness and identifiable Negroid physical features invariably call up negative responses. This is a Himalayan hurdle to race relations in the Caribbean; yet this question never receives intellectual scrutiny. Racism is not a monopoly of Europeans.

The independence of many women workers under Indentureship, their paucity and a tendency, initially, to be more assertive, financially and sexually, and the frequently demonstrated tendency of Whites on the plantation to seduce Indian women, probably hastened the closing of ranks among Indian men in the Caribbean. The tentative, fledgling freedom of many Indian women on the estates was soon being circumscribed; the patriarchal fences were being put up. This process was greatly assisted by the rapidly eroding disparity in the woman–man ratio, among Indians, towards the end of the 19th century. And a caste-like fear of ‘pollution’ by Blacks accelerated the consolidation of Indo-Caribbean patriarchy.

In this context, one can comprehend why so many Black calypsonians continue to be seduced by the sexual challenge of the
Indo-Caribbean woman of the imagination, the proverbial forbidden fruit. Playing what they feel the Indian man sees as Black trump, phallic superiority, they poke fun at the over-protective, mean, Indian patriarch of supposed limited sexual means: ‘You [a Black man] handlin yuh rolling pin much better than Samlal [an Indian]’ (quoted on p.52).

This is too difficult a subject for scholars to address; it is seen as a potential minefield. Yet it is a nightmare of bigoted associations, stubborn prejudices; and it continues, silently but perniciously, to gnaw away at race relations in Trinidad and Guyana.

In the final piece, Victor Ramraj calls for the end to Indian ‘marginalisation’ in Caribbean Studies. He argues that to reserve this, there must be ‘unrelenting attempts to claim a central position in Caribbean seminal texts’ (p. 76), by the pursuit of ‘on-going’ extensive research and scholarship’ on Indo-Caribbean topics (p. 73). These should not be ‘disparate ethnic studies’, but should be integral to the central focus of the Caribbean experience.

Birbalsingh, in his introductory essay, attributes this marginalisation to a post-war Afrocentricity which has been encouraged by Europe and America – a belated atonement for their historical oppression of Blacks in the New World. He adds that this Afrocentricity contributed significantly to the machinations which led to the subverting of the foremost Indo-Caribbean leader, Cheddi Jagan, and the elevation of Forbes Burnham, in Guyana. He does not find Jagan’s Marxism a ‘convincing’ reason to account for his rejection by British, American, and Caribbean leaders.

Afrocentric perceptions might have influenced the Anglophone Caribbean’s eloquent silence on the enormities of a perceived dictatorial, Black minority regime in Guyana until October 1992. But it is this reviewer’s contention that Cheddi Jagan’s unconditional eulogising of Moscow’s brand of communism, over a period of over 30 years, contributed more than any other factor to the ‘marginalisation’ of Indians in Guyana. Burnham’s nebulous, eclectic, radical (Marxist?)
pronouncements seemed moderate against Jagan's irrepressible, pro-Moscow dogmas. In the context of the Cold War, he, not Burnham, was deemed the enemy of the West. Jagan's election last year came with the fall of communism, and his belated, new-found moderation.

Indo-Caribbean people have a distinguished record of effort and achievement. They have every right to be at the centre of Caribbean affairs. They have earned it. But they must also research, write, and buy the books which focus on and give scholarly and imaginative scrutiny to, their experience. A solid body of work, relatively comparable to the literature on Afro-Caribbean people, is indispensable. Moreover, in free, democratic Guyana, Indians must ensure that Afro-Guyanese do not become marginalised; that elections remain free and fair; and that in a society with an Indian majority, they are prepared to make sacrifices, work assiduously and be seen to do so, to ensure that the ethnic insecurity of Blacks is lessened. As Ramesh Maharaj pleads in this collection: '.... we must dismantle the structures of oppression and reach out for true democracy based on a non-racial and just society in which colour, creed, and race shall form no point of reference. Let us liberate our society from the cancer of racism and racial divisions' (p. 40).

This is a massive task; and Indo-Caribbean Resistance challenges all to begin to shape a freer, humane, non-racial, non sexist Caribbean environment. This sounds platitudinous. But it is crucial for Caribbean scholars and writers, whatever their ethnic origin, to begin to write personally on the race issue, to dare to piece together the archaeology of their individual prejudices. Intellectuals must begin this process of slowly, agonisingly, reconstructing how racist perceptions have been shaped and lodged in their own lives. It will demand considerable courage; but it is the only way to begin to address the question of race. This fundamental self-exposure at the highest level of thought is essential to ensure that the issue of ethnic insecurity becomes the principle focus of government in Guyana and Trinidad. History and time are not on our side: African-Indian intransigence could destroy everything.
ANNE WALMSLEY

The Zea Mexican Diary 7 September 1926 – 7 September 1986
Kamau Brathwaite (Foreword: Sandra Pouchet Paquet)
University of Wisconsin Press, 1993.

‘takes one look at this irie dahta of Guyana then visiting Barbados April 1960 and married her by May.’ Kamau – then L. Edward – Brathwaite was on leave from Ghana, and Doris Monica Welcome was returning home to Guyana from Britain, her training in Home Economics complete. Days after their first meeting at a party in Bridgetown he followed her to Trinidad, then to Guyana. After their wedding, he took her back to his home and family in Barbados, when ‘everyone... comes to me as if in shock and “yes, yes, yes.... She is the one”.’ Their miracle of meeting, of recognition, resulted in a partnership of extraordinary richness and creativity. They worked together in Ghana, St. Lucia, Jamaica, London – at individual projects and joint enterprises. And then, in May 1986, when they were both nearing 60, when new pathways of work were opening, their home at Irish Town becoming more and more of a haven – Kamau Brathwaite was told that Doris had advanced, inoperable cancer. She died six months later, on her 60th birthday.

The Zea Mexican Diary 7 September 1926 – 7 September 1986 records the poet’s experience of living through these six months, and beyond: in extracts from the diary he kept at the time; in letters and extracts from letters written immediately after his wife’s death – to ‘Zea Mexican’, his name for Doris in honour of her part-American ancestry (Rights of Passage, 1967, is dedicated to ‘Mex’ and Jah Music, 1986, to ‘Mexican, my wife’); from Ayama, the poet’s alter ego; to his sister, Mary Morgan; in an epigraph written by Brathwaite before his wife’s thanksgiving service; and a short epilogue, ‘The Awakening’.
At one level, the experience recorded is universal – the loss of a loved one, a beloved partner. Brathwaite tells fully and honestly his human response to impending loss: the swings between irrational hope and bleak reality; the agony of not knowing whether a refusal to accept the medical facts, a strong enough belief in a miracle, may prevent his wife’s death, or whether this stands in the way of death, hampering their preparation for it; of how, without meaning to, he blurted out what the doctor had told him; the endless question of ‘why why why why why why why why’; He tells of his responses to the moment of loss: the realisation, as the hearse moved away, of nothing nothing nothing I cd do cd do ever do w/her for her for her for her for her; ‘the concern to know, ‘And you, my love? Can/you see me? Hear me?/ Are you close by? Ang/ry? ... In/different? Different/ The/ same? Chang­ing? And if/so how? Do I affect you?/ Do you affect me? Are /you okay?’; disbelief that the cremated ashes are indeed her whom he loves.

At another level, the experience is the particular one of a poet losing his wife. Brathwaite quotes from AJ Seymour’s letter of condolence, saying that it was he ‘who best, as poet to poet, spoke to me about the meaning of loss of the poet’s wife and the threat/this loss is to the poetry – my now widowered images!’ Through memories and tributes, Brathwaite evokes his wife’s central role in his life of poetry. He describes a tape he made in Ghana of ‘her Xtraordinary reading of Charity (1 Corinthians 13) and Lorca’s Death of a Bullfighter which, interwoven with Miles Davis was ‘as if she, somehow, had created them all into a single breathing’; recalls how at Runaway Bay in Jamaica she ‘read sheet by sheet by sheet the miracle of Rights of Passage’; and at home in Irish Town ‘incessant stalks & arguments over a/poem’s meaning(s)’; records his assumption that he would die first and so ‘giving her my manuscripts & asking her to keep the various “versions” and dinning into her how she wd have to speak/speak up for me/the work when I was gone.’ Doris was, he acknowledges, ‘my wife/the perfect poet’s wife – I mean the perfect wife of/for the poet. She made it possible’. With her death, ‘what I fear /fear for is not the future me/but future of the poems.’
At yet another level the poem reveals the specific features of Kamau Brathwaite’s loss of his wife Doris in the cultural context of Jamaica. Kamau’s lovingly observant, roundedly recognisable portrait of Doris is constructed from his own tributes: ‘her morality’, ‘her generosity’, ‘her courage’; from his vivid character-revealing memories: the motorbike she rode in London’s rush-hour traffic, the computer which she mastered ‘long before the current craze’. The portrait comes alive, painfully, through incidents and conversations during her illness: how she wanted to drive a neighbour’s badly-burnt child to Casualty, weak as she was, to enable Kamau to continue his work; her last murmured worries, ‘files, Savacou, Michael, did we eat etc etc etc’; how ‘she said she was sorry for the inconvenience’. The portrait is lit from another angle by the letters of condolence received by Kamau, in which ‘Every/one speaks of yr ra/diance’, and ‘where the growing chorus is that “Doris was gold Do/ris is gold’. Kamau Brathwaite’s portrait of marriage to Doris is as revealing of him as of her: her generosity towards him, how safe he felt with her; how it was she who handled ‘all the hazards of all the foreign travel’ and ‘dealt w/ people...from marketwomen to workmen to editors, professor/s.’

Kamau’s loss of Doris seemed to strip him of all that she enabled and protected. He writes with devastating frankness of the self that he is compelled to face. Conscious of having hurt her deeply many times through infidelities, through absences, he is now tormented by fear that the hurt led to the cancer, and by guilt that he was not there with her at the end. His fears and anxieties are exacerbated by accusations of so-called friends that Doris had spoilt him, given in to him too much, that ‘w/she Dead i am now Nothing’.

There is no comfort anywhere, from anyone or anything, until much later. Miss Mac, the ‘practical nurse’, and Jean, the maid, insist on obeah practices in the Brathwaite’s home after Doris’s death, but to Kamau they seem to invite an alien presence. The Jamaican folk culture which he promoted and embraced as poet, teacher and researcher, now seems to harm not help him. He looks in vain for Caribbean rituals and customs for the bereaved, especially for widow-
ers. Losing his wife causes him indeed to assert that Caribbean ‘culture’ has ‘so marginalized our males (or have they so/marginalized them/ selves) that we don’t even know how to/comfort them’. Not until his own ritual with her ashes, and Mass Reid’s with the tulip tree, is there any hint of vision.

_The Zea Mexican Diary_ is the work of historian, dramatist and, supremely, poet. Each detail of the six-month ordeal is recorded with concision and simplicity. Dramatic dialogue abounds, each persona speaking in an appropriate language register; the action is punctuated by flashes to past and future time. All its words are poetry. Here are statements of closely observed detail, in which each word is perfectly placed: ‘Miss Mac was there, walking about in the sitting/sinking room & Aunt May was lying on the settee as if sleeping’; ‘and when I was going downstairs to get the second vessel, I put some of the ashes on my tongue & swallowed her’. The apparently factual often brims with metaphor, as when Brathwaite refers to the concurrent Chernobyl nuclear disaster, the heavy Jamaican flood rains, and relates them to the spread of cancerous cells. At key moments, the words are winged. After the doctor has told him of Doris’s illness, ‘it was as if a clock was ticking silence in the moon’; after being told, ‘She’s gone’:

&& I went inside & saw her all my life
    all all my love & hopes & dreams & past & future
    still quiet on that bed & gone in the quiet flickering light of Mary’s candle & there was no sound
    in all the world that Sunday midnight which
    went on & on forever

after Mass Reid has planted the Tulip Press and spoken to God about Mrs Brathwaite,

&&

suddenly as an end & signal he plucked the whole green stem w/his fingers
& it vibrated there in the sunlight like music like the string of life it had become
The presentation of words on page is particular and personal to Brathwaite, what he calls his ‘SycoraXian “video” ’ (the unconventional stylemetre or manner in which I have presented this Diary) ‘... the “video style” I now use for my work.’ His own wordprocessed typescript – arrangement of words on page, choice of typeface and font, choice of weight of ink – is reproduced on the printed pages of the book. So lines of text are at times in full-length width, justified (i.e. an even righthand margin); at times centred and with uneven margins. Words are printed in varying weights of inking – from pale, draft quality, to the dark of bold type. Typefaces and fonts range from a simple, sericed face for diary extracts to a very small font of the same face for his ‘Letter to Zea Mexican’. ‘The Awakening’ uses a large and open typeface. Typographic ornaments are placed at strategic points within the text – a small black square, familiar as indication that a piece of writing is complete – appears after Doris’s death; a star-stem after the planting of the tree, a large Heartease flower-star after the final section. ‘Video style’ because a visual presentation of words, yes. But for me the effects of such presentation is continual modification of the sound of the words. It sings in the same way that a musical score, read silently, can convey not just the notes of music, but the dynamics, the style, the phrasing, and the timbre and character of different instruments. The words of The Zea Mexican Diary thus presented become a performance; they sing on every page – narrative as a recitative, expressed emotion as a lyrical aria, dialogue as a duet, spaces as silent pauses. The varied typefaces and fonts orchestrate the words, signifying here a trombone, there a flute. Brathwaite has been a pioneer of performance poetry. His video style seems now to present performance on the page, an alternative to a taped reading. He uses, indeed, audiotape images to describe composition: ‘the poem miXing from a tape... the dub dub dub from one’s own self.’

Brathwaite reprints the words of ‘Things Went Forward’ by Ken Boothe, Jamaican ‘pop’ singer, at the start, acknowledging it as ‘an extremely poignant song of loss and mourning that won’t let me go’. Brathwaite in turn has created, in The Zea Mexican Diary, another
such song which will haunt forever all who read it. For those who know none of the participants or places, it will echo and articulate their own comparable experience, extend their understanding of love and loss and the creative process. For those who know – and recognise – each person, each location, the poem brings Doris Welcome Brathwaite radiant, humanly alive, immortalises her generous giving which enabled his.

The poem’s ‘video style’ seems itself an apt memorial to Kamau Brathwaite’s Zea Mexican, who, he tells, continued to work on her Kaypro computer in her illness, kept it with her until the very end. Its effect of making the words sing echoes the vibrations of the Tulip Tree

her stem
singing

and is confirmed by Mary Morgan: ‘Doris loved to sing’.
While this retrospective to mark his sixtieth birthday comprises a fairly representative selection of the paintings and sculptures he has executed with verve and growing technical mastery over some forty years, it falls well short of being a definitive array of the whole corpus of work Stanley Greaves has produced first and mostly in Guyana and latterly in Barbados. Thirty-three paintings and seven sculptures are on view. Enough for us to get a sense of the main themes and scope of Greaves’ life-long intellectual and artistic researches. He calls them “visual arguments”. The sense of a series of philosophical investigations visually pursued is particularly strong in the sequence of paintings.

It is a pity that the three-dimensional work is represented by only seven pieces: it is easy not to realise that Greaves’ formal academic training at Newcastle and Howard Universities was in sculpture and that over the years he has produced, in addition to the better-known wood carvings such as “Political Gift”, scores of constructions, making creative use of a wide variety of materials such as glass, aluminium, formica, steel, wool, wire, plaster and canvas: “Amatuk”, “Diamond Box” and the two “Xipe-Toltec” pieces must stand for all. In these mixed-media fabrications, his interest is in the tension produced by the interaction of the various materials. These are sculptural explorations concerned primarily with identity and differences and, in the realm of material, with the unity of opposites. Certain of the arguments are carried into the ceramic work – the bowls and dishes and pots – to which Greaves has been applying himself these last several years. “Ideas and concepts,” Greaves has written, “to a significant degree, determine the materials and techniques required to give them form.”
In his “Comment” to accompany the list of works, Greaves writes of his “efforts to reveal the relationship between intellect and imagination” and of his “conceptual or ideational approach to the production of art.” Marx says somewhere that the creation of the humblest architect differs from the architectural wonder of a spider’s web in that, in the case of the former, he creates twice; once in the mind and then in the external world. Even the few pages reproduced for this retrospective from the notebooks he has diligently kept over the years are enough to demonstrate that Greaves is the least spontaneous, the least instinctive of artists. Every painting, every pot, every sculpture is premeditated. Colours and their values are tested, composition is shaped, mechanics and technicalities of construction are worked out in fine detail. Very little if anything at all is left to chance. The final production is just that: the end of a process which, if we examine the notebooks, we can follow in its raw development.

While it is true to say that the point of departure is usually an idea or concept, the Notebooks reveal that already existing images – faces in the newspapers, a man pushing a cart in a magazine advertisement can ignite the imagination and lead to elaboration and further investigations.

In the end, it is here, in the final execution, that technique comes into its own. “There is no excuse,” Greaves writes, “for not pursuing mastery of technique.” Arguments and ideation aside, the 40 works on view demonstrate not only technical virtuosity and increasing technical mastery in a variety of media and over a wide range of materials. More importantly, such insistence on the highest quality of execution is always a timely rebuke to the churning out and acceptance of the shoddy and the third-rate. It is more timely than ever.

The exhibition is conveniently divided between the early works (1950s-70s) at Castellani House, the new home of the national collection, and the later works (1980s-1990s) at the Hadfield Gallery. To grasp the essential continuities and leaps of Greaves’ arguments, it is best to begin at the beginning with the paintings of compassion – “The Preacher”, “Beggar and Urchin”, “The Weeding Gang”, “People of the Garden City” – the group of works which Basil Hinds called the
People of the Pavement series. In these paintings of the 50s, perhaps his best known, Greaves is very much the public painter: bold social themes dramatically, even theatrically expressed in a readily accessible idiom. The work of the great Mexican muralists, Jose Clemente Orozco in particular, is a strong influence in this period. This organic interest in the lives of ordinary working people – organic because they are never for him mere spectacle – is to remain with Greaves throughout. Decades later, having moved on to a more stylised and abstract idiom and away from groups to single figures, his depictions are of the channa man, grasscutter, street vendor, fried fish seller, cartman. This series of single figure paintings is represented here by “Black Sunflowers”, Greaves’ poignant portrait of a fallen brother: W.A.R.: Walter Anthony Rodney, with his buckle spelling BOMB and sunflowers black with grief.

“Big Bread”, with its religious allegory and private symbolism, was painted in 1971 out of his experience of his father’s dead body laid out on the mortuary table. The boy Greaves is the little loaf lying quietly out of sight under the baker’s table where the big loaf is laid out, a perfect little replica of the grand original. Like the much earlier “Evolution”, triggered by a page of H.G. Wells, “Big Bread” is a richly symbolic even allegorical painting in the surrealist mode to which Greaves has returned in recent years. The Caribbean Folklore series at the Hadfield Gallery, with their startling juxtapositions and allusive imagery, are descended from these early surrealist confrontations.

The 80s were dominated by the Hearts and Diamonds obsessions. From the “Tantric Landscapes” of 1985 to the “Mountain of Hearts and Diamonds” of 1987 Greaves expresses his fascination with what is at once an aesthetic and a mathematical principle: the principle of symmetry which, as he wrote in 1988, is “an aspect of harmony.” In painting after painting he pursued these researches into related principles: “reflection, refraction, inversion, progression, chance and inferences of infinity.” These paintings are among the most desolate he has produced. Complexity of design and elaborate symmetries are the grids of order and necessity brought down on chaos and contingency. They are moments in a drama of ontology. A score of paintings,
stoneware pieces and mixed-media objects elaborate the themes of hearts and diamonds into the late 80s.

The Caribbean Metaphysics series of mini-paintings (all 8 x 10 inches) which were exhibited in Barbados in October 1993 represent Greaves’ most sustained and coherent exploration of the techniques and theories of the Surrealists, in particular Max Ernst, De Chirico and Magritte, to explore dimensions of Caribbean reality. Intuition, imagination, dreams. Ordinary everyday objects, immaculately drawn and painted, are illuminated into extraordinariness by the company they are made to keep. Incompatibility between and among objects is the instrument of renewal. “A thing which is present,” writes Magritte, “can be invisible, hidden by what it shows.” We are in the presence of an allegorical story-telling that is strongly reminiscent of Magritte, the great fabulist of the surrealists.

“Caribbean Metaphysics” is Greaves’ most “autobiographical” series of paintings. The world of his Georgetown childhood is celebrated in the buttons and bent nails and biscuits and taps and rope and kites and keys and fish-hooks; the bric-a-brac hauled up from the store-room of memory. They are pressed into the service of new explorations: the relationship between scale and theme, the nature and function of the intuitive, the validity of other realities.

From the public assertions of the People of the Pavement to the enigmatic, private explorations of the mini-paintings, a journey of some 40 years, Stanley Greaves has provided as powerful an illustration as exists anywhere of the exemplary dedication to the creative life. A Caribbean master at ease with the great art historical traditions, he is, even on the evidence of this small retrospective, among the most fecund and accomplished makers of our time.

Editor’s Note:

Celebration 60, a retrospective exhibition featuring the work of Stanley Greaves, was held in Georgetown, Guyana at Castellani House and at the Hadfield Foundation from November 21st to December 3rd, 1994.
"HOUSE MOVING"

- TONALLY close-modulated colours for plain background / solid colour very subtly modulated.
- Boxes like houses
- Coal pot with pot boiling
- Balancing breadfruit
"MIDNIGHT CRICKETER"

RED SKULL?

+ CHECK THE BANANA-MAN SKETCHES

+ MAKE HIM A CRICKETER

+ MAKE IT HIGH CONTRAST FOR DRAMATIC EFFECT. 174
Cockroach Grass
Pumpkin Leaves
Cover Illustration 'Guitar Man': Sketch by Stanley Greaves
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