





For my Family-
Those who have gone before me,
Those who Live now,
And those who will come to cherish these words
in the future....



Proem



Not, in the saying of you, are you
said. Baffled and like a root
stopped by a stone you turn back questioning
the tree you feed. But what the leaves hear
is not what the roots ask. Inexhaustibly,
being at one time what was to be said
and at another time what has been said
the saying of you remains the living of you
never to be said. But, enduring,
you change with change that changes
and yet are not of the changing of any of you.
Ever yourself, you are always about

to be yourself in something else ever with me.

Martin Carter (1927-1997)

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Foreword

Four rainy seasons ago I wrote in my journal: “I hope this place doesn’t change me.” But I have come to understand that just as culture is fluid, so are the personality and identity malleable. I am indeed a different person having left my home, the twin-island state of Trinidad and Tobago, four years ago to live and study in the United States. So much so that each time that I return home, my ears are witness to the repeated expression of: “You’ve changed; you’re no longer the Stacia that I knew.” How was I different? Did I hold my head at a slightly different angle? Was I more reticent? Maybe. Had I lost my idea of home? Quite possibly. Eventually all my frustrations and uncertainty began arising from the fact that I was not sure how to answer the two simple questions of: who am I? Who was I?

I felt hybrid like Achille in Derek Walcott’s *Omeros*. The Achille who brooded on the river “where it appeared that he was not one reflection but separate men—One crouching at the end of the spindly pier-head, One drowned under it, featureless in mien.” This hybridity that Walcott examined though did not only reference the experience of the

emigrant that crosses literal borders but also the experience of the ‘immigrant’ of colonialism who struggles to define the individual self in relation to a reality that is offspring of a history that belongs to his free ancestors and also one that is written by the colonizers- neither of which are his. Both are potentially alienating and both I understood.

Soon, the burning desire to precipitate a concrete idea of myself in my work became unbearable. Yet, how was I to begin writing my story, when my greatest fears had been that I was “identity-less” resigned to multiplicities and that my search for home desolate?

I was then determined to construct my autobiographical narrative with the intent to test Audre Lorde’s, Suzette A. Henke’s and Gabriele Lusser Rico’s suggestions, in their respective books *Zami- A New Spelling of my Name (A Biomythography)*, *Shattered Subjects* and *Pain and Possibility*: that the narrative form works as “scriptotherapy” penetrating patterns of psychological fragmentation. This healing power comes as the marginal self in the text is granted an empowered position; for what cannot be uttered in life can be written and used to reconnect with the world. What is lost forever to the realm of the living can be put into a dimension that is divisible, timeless and accessible; for the palest ink is always better than the best memory.

My framing device was the metaphor of traditional healing through the natural herbs, roots, plants and spices of my “Trinbagonian” culture. I used texts and interviews to catalogue remedies that were used to create vignettes that provide unique verbal and thematic foci or gateways, however sustained, brief or preliminary, into my short stories.

I simply wanted, as William Carlos Williams so fittingly put it, “not to talk in vague categories but to write particularly, as a physician works, upon a patient, upon the thing before him, in the particular to discover the universal.” The thing that I study is the past; the past in the stories that I have inherited from and about my ancestors and elders, the past in the instances that I have observed and the moments that I have experienced myself. I do this as I have always considered that our personalities may not be entirely of our own makings and that our countenances are a collage of the bits and pieces of everyone else’s that came before us and still surrounds us. So, through detail I endeavoured to paint a portrait of myself and others that I hold dear. I tell their stories to find mine. I tell mine to continue theirs.

I seek to create in art what could be seen as the outpouring of a dichotomous consciousness, split by time and social differentiation. I desire to use my expression to question how the production of a new identity can destabilize ideas about social decrees. Yet, I hope that this work demonstrates the archetypal concerns and hopes embedded in ideas of multiplicity. I anticipate providing new ways to understanding the relations between the artist and her multiple selves, and the artist and her multiple homes.

Take for instance, that the Chinese ideogram for crisis is made up of two symbols. One a simple stack of strokes, the other a muddled mass of dashes and curved lines like the confused carcass of the Pommecythere fruit. The first means danger and the other opportunity. While staring at this symbol I was drawn to the conclusion that empowerment does not lie in trying to escape the unpleasant states or circumventing the memory of loss.

In this presence of absence I know that by listening to my confusion, pain and loss I would be able to tap into the wisdom of the past and thereby move toward the mental, emotional and physical equilibrium that I seek. Healing and creativity are the two sides of the same coin. Underlying both is the idea of wholeness. The urge to survive and the urge to create are indeed connected. You cannot sentence memory to death even if you yourself begin to die inside. It returns through the years lulled into psalms and whispers.

HOPE FLOATS-A JOURNAL ENTRY



I long for days that I was never meant to have. Good ole days, the elders would call them. I will miss the good ole days as I was born into modern times; the time of the metropolis and over-consumption. So I wish for the days of living in wooden houses on stilts that are made of baked earth and wattle; houses bursting with the breath of large families. I long for that deep kitchen sink of chipped enamel that faces a window with tattered curtain billowing; the wind clambering up the uneven hill below that leads to the gurgling river. I picture a yard of dirt tinted ochre and compacted from the frequent pounding of feet; covered in scattered pebble that required sweeping each morning. Sweeping with a cocoyea broom made from the stripped veins of the coconut palm to prevent the night's fallen leaves turning into mossy compost.

I wish for the days of talking over the fence to the neighbour and taking baths in an open air shower. Oh! How refreshing it would be to feel the balmy air clashing with the lukewarm water on the skin! I wish to be there in that small countryside village where everyone knows your name and where neighbourhood loyalties are stronger than socioeconomic or racial ties. I hunger for that place where everyone's mama was yours too and all papas could be borrowed.

I long for muddied days in cane-fields; running between lengths of green hands and waving your arms and fingers while cavorting speedily like the windborne fluff of the pink wildflowers lining the trace. I desire carefree barefoot days by the river where washing and beating clothes on sun-bleached rock was customary and baths taken shortly thereafter. Spring water was considered a fountain of youth.

I desire the days when sitting on the pavement at night, jibbing, liming and watching cars, the occasional donkey cart and life go by added flavour to a day. Where advice came packaged in various manners, whether a booming voice jettisoning or a throaty whisper and from different sources, floating into your soul from the drunkard's filthy sweet mouth or the floater's parched but wise lips. Days when the idea of family encompassed all, even those remotely attached to you. Where lounging in a hammock, made from the multi-coloured twine of what was once a crocus bag, supported by a

sagging veranda and watching fireflies and egrets dance as the yellow disc of the moon rose was one of the best ways to pass the time. Passing the time while listening to drums, jazz and blues from down the Trace.

I long for the days of my ancestors that may be long gone; at least in this part of the world. At least in my outer reality. But they live on in my mind.

SOJOURNING



Washington D.C had become a place of ghosts. Away from home and the familiar I carried this presence of absence within me. And to preserve my sanity I soon began drawing the net of my memory toward and around me in order to dispel the chill inside my heart and to parry that feeling of loneliness and being uprooted that weighed heavily

upon my shoulders. I felt displaced for just like my ancestors were, I had always been interested in the idea of making or finding a home. Great grandfather was a mammoth of a man who left his native Scotland, married an Arawak Indian woman from Barbados and made a home out of a rented house in Trinidad. Granpda Kieley built his house with his bare hands. Mumsie and Grandma Dolly made a place a home, even though their men were scarce.

And I remembered fondly that my favourite childhood reading was *The Secret Island* where a boatload of children rowed to freedom on an island in the middle of a lake, taking with them a cornucopia of things that they thought sufficient to create a self-sustainable abode. And remember that at the tender age of one and a half, I ran away. I was found with my crocheted lime green hat on my head and with a little bundle in my arms by one of the neighbours who recognized me as “de new people chile” and walked me back up the sloping road that lounged lazily on Phipp’s Trace Mahaica hill. I had walked straight out the yard, for then we hadn’t fencing, having just moved. When asked where I had been heading I mumbled “Nana” in my childish gibberish eliciting nervous laughter from my mother-with-the-beautiful teeth and an amused chuckle from my father-full-of-wisdom. Nana, or Ayanna, was my cousin who lived in Morvant no less than sixty miles away. My first home; now out of my reach.

And then I moved on to loftier things like making a tent out my mother’s good tarpaulin that she used to cover items at gatherings on the lawn. I put one substantial hole at each corner of the material and pitched it over the lowest bough of the cashew tree, its leaves like aces of spades revolving in the wind, and staked it with malformed pieces of bark. Mummy was creative enough with her punishment that I never did something like

that again. For one day, they let me pitch my tent, cast my blanket, collect my fire wood and brick only to call me in when the night fell, postponing my plan to camp outside ad infinitum. “Blue vex”, I slept under our dining table that night, the cover and table cloth the closest things comparable to a tent in the wilderness, which I could find indoors. I can admit now that the circumstance of having a dream deferred can paralyze your will and audacity for quite some time.

Yet what was interesting about my leaving-and-returning was that I always carried something of the old place; the place being left with me. Almost as if I wanted to be everywhere at once. Almost as if I realized that no matter how inconsequential the time spent or how short-lived, a place and its people grew on you and left its imprint like a barnacle. When I ran away at one- I apparently had the sense to pack ‘essentials’- a random selection of the paraphernalia from the bag that I carried with me brought up a pair of my mother’s shoes and an old blanket that my sister and I had shared. Whenever I ventured outside, offending anyone else who considered themselves a real tomboy, I would be sent with a Rubbermaid bowl packed with loads of savoury things and cucumbers as was customary and which I willingly accepted. The young protagonists in the *Secret Island* took, of many things, souvenirs that reminded them of some special quality or person of home.

Thus, even though a recidivist wanderer or “ah jumbie” as they would call me in my little country village, I always endeavoured to cast my roots, wherever I let the wind blow me. What I take with me now is the idea that the home has to be within me. And what I carry with me are the memories of things that used to be. Now images centered on food, music and healing swirl through my head like a sluggish elixir.

A LONG TIME AGO – THE ANCESTORS

My father's mother, affectionately called Mumsie and daughter of a slave, was a woman of slight frame and no more than five feet two, who made up for her diminutive size with her spiritual strength, powerful voice and indomitable will. She bore and raised seven children on a circular road in Belmont whose inhabitants were witness to the most breathtaking sunsets in the country "every God-given day."

What I remember most about Mumsie are her hands and her humour. Mumsie's hands clapped in church on Sunday morning. Mumsie's hands handed me a gift of five dollars on every visit and my first knitting kit showing me how to execute some of the stitches that I still use today. Mumsie's hands made a choice pick of a navy blue 'autographed' Michael Jackson wallet for my birthday in the days when I thought the man a god. Mumsie's hands just might have coaxed awake the artist in me.

Her hands could soothe an aching forehead with alcolado; that green stinging fluid that drew sickness out with its vapours. At Christmas time those strong, dark-nailed fingers of hers would grasp an orange bucket, half her size and filled to almost brimming with rum fruit cake batter, and beat that mixture suppliant with a firm right wrist. Mumsie's hands were good at healing with a gentle touch or with concocting some foul-smelling poultice made from a wicked assortment of bushes from the hill to the side of her house.

Her house was set into the elbow of a grassy knoll and flanked by the high walls

of the orphanage. I was always tempted to jump from the hill onto the rooftop, because I they matched each other in height, but I feared the aging and spotted galvanized roofing would collapse under my weight, the fall delivering me onto the old toilet bowl, attached to a tank that always had to be pried open and manually activated.

Seated in a patch of grass on that hill I always thought of the orphanage wall as the entrance to hell. I would lie, facing skyward and cloistered safely on my side, and worry myself to death at the screams that I heard on the other. That reverie only lasted until I was distracted by things nearby such as the big concrete sink and old faucet that stood lonesome, erect and dripping in the middle of the yard, or the old kettle, or that random pile of sand and daydreams on the verandah.

I would excavate my way through the pile of sand at the back of the house, filling that kettle with the make-shift wire handle with choice white stones. The neighbour's sagging fence, weighted down by lianas and vines, then stood forlorn next to the sand hill and I would peer through the spaces left by the parting strips of old wood and galvanize sheeting at the old car that was parked there. I always wondered why the neighbour never came out and why the car was never used. Eventually I decided that the house was abandoned and peopled by the ghosts of men who used to "pull bull" down the hill, running taxi illegally while still registered as "private," with the now cast off vehicle.

Later and after I had sufficiently wasted water at the sink and sped across the red porch with its sloping and fading green awning, past windows of frosted glass and floral patterns jailed by wiring fitted like the board of a "chikeepets" drafts game, past the front door that always grazed the varnished dark wood floor mid-sweeping open and past Mumsie's tiny bedroom with tiny twin bed, I would either sit quietly on the front wall of

the porch kicking my legs high into the air; the concrete warming my backside. I would be squinting intently down the narrow circular road for some diversion. Some days the diversion was a foreigner getting their car stuck around that tricky curve in the road front Ms. Hackshaw's or someone slipping on the worn metal of the old sewer grating at the bottom of the stairs to the hill or the Rastaman Plato with his matted hair hawking or lending for a fee something he had most likely "borrowed", perhaps permanently, from down the valley road.

Those times in the afternoon, when I ventured in and Mumsie was winding down for the afternoon, I enjoyed the most. Then there was magic. I would sit in Mumsie's room and observe things; observe her. At this hour when the town seemed somnambulant I could squint in the silence, peering through the bedroom window of Mumsie's house on the hill, trying to determine how far into the Queen's Park savannah I could see. The Gulf of Paria flanked this vision, the waters looking like a sagging piece of sky, heavy from unshed tears. There were the Twin Towers in the distance, brushed an old gold in the pulsing light. And the shadow of the Tatil Headquarters was like a bruise that blistered its regality. I would then let my circle of vision retreat to the closer perimeter of the savannah. From this vantage point it looked like a thirsty green tongue spilling onto the foothills of Belmont. I could just make out skittering male figures, most likely enjoying a rowdy game of football, in the afternoon's blanketing haze. I would then let my gaze slide lazily over the varied roofs of houses, some of corrugated galvanize the color of French toast; others of terracotta shingles, making the houses appear as lumbering armadillos. A few curtains would fly freely out of opened windows at this hour that entertained countless possibilities while the howls and barks of dogs resonated

throughout the valley. Smiling, I would gaze as struggling rays of sun clambered to spill into the room, bringing with them a troupe of happily swirling dust particles. I would find myself mindlessly lifting my hand to sift gently through them, modifying their choreography just a little bit.

Then I would marvel at Mumsie once again. She may have been quietly potting about the house tittering and humming to the coughs of the old phonograph and radio that spit out an endless stream of religious hymns and propaganda as she went about some needless thing. She would close her eyes into slits, shake her head to one side and “steups”, sucking air sharply through almost closed front teeth and into her moist mouth, when some atrocity was mentioned or a name in the obituaries sounded familiar. Or she would quietly head to that cabinet, the wooden cabinet painted black with the netting at the center of the doors, and retrieve from it sprinkled custard cakes which she served with essence juice. Or slide her hand under the food cover and magically produce that guava jam that she made almost weekly. I never ate anything made with guava unless it was Mumsie’s and I realize now that these delicacies were the hallmarks of poverty. Mumsie infused necessities with the breath of appeal.

Subsequently, allowing my eyes to follow her floral swaddled body to the corner of the living room to the Singer machine I would spin all the way around while seated on my haunches. And while she sewed I would rock on the old rocking chair, with its seat of rattan coming apart right where the buttocks were supposed to land. Mumsie’s hands would turn that tarnished silver wheel sometimes so fast that it looked like a solid disc. The triangle of thread would shimmy and do fox trots on the spigot while each successive

stitch became a clone of the other. All the while her small feet and ankles seemed to keep time, pumping the pedal of the machine effortlessly. The drone of her bent toil always gave comfort. The whirring and clicking would sometimes lull me into a stupor in the ruddy glow of the afternoon. I watched her masterfully steer fabric through and transform misshapen things into something useful. Oh, she was a master recycler. I admired her strong veined hands wave and pull, wave and pull. Hers was a duty unadorned but approached with as much astuteness as she did her faith.

At day's end, it was customary that she blew me a kiss off of her feebly elegant fingers and from her elevated position on the porch, while I stumbled after my parents looking back into the weakening sunlight to return the gesture.

Mumsie died at the start of last semester. She was ninety-four. Up until her last few weeks she still had some of her wits about her and her humour and after carefully appraising me she still whistled at me what she thought of my outfit and say: "Hmmp! You have plenty back, but you need more bus'!" At that point, the old sewing machine sat in the corner, as if some forgotten conqueror. The wide metal pedal swinging loosely on its old hinges, letting the viewer read 'Singer' at intervals and the small twin sized bed, breathed softly under its floral patterned spread. And as I watched her in limbo between staring skyward to the sun and pleating her duster I marveled at the fact that, even in dying, people never forget their passion and duty. And when I held her hand for the last time to sing her the old Negro spiritual "Steal Away," her right hand, which beat many a cake batter and ministered to many women, still had a strong grip. Her left side was asleep though and her smile a little lopsided.

I felt weak just moments before hearing the news of her death and only three days after I had returned to Washington, D.C. It was almost as if her soul, my ancestors' souls, were a part of mine and when they leave they would take a little part of me with them. Now, I pray that she will firmly steady my hand and turn as she did that spinning wheel. *"....Steal away, steal away, steal away to Jesus... Steal away, Steal away home! I ain't got long to stay here..."*

Her seven children, my father one of them, were ferried between her house and Granpa Keiley's small wooden house further up the street. When Granpa died a few weeks before I left to come to college, the house was still as it was during my father's childhood. It was a fragile, wooden three-roomed house with crumbling concrete steps leading to a porch littered with bird droppings. The yard was swallowed by a tall galvanized fence; with two holes defacing the uniformity of this garrison. This was in the one stand of galvanized fencing directly in front of the entrance to the house where the metal was cut to allow for the passage of a weighty and linked dog chain, the sole purpose of which was to secure the trusty padlock onto the gate. This part of the fence sagged under its weight.

Therefore, my memories of all the moments that I had to alight on those stairs are preceded with the recollection of the whine that tumbling metal on metal made as Granpa grunted to open the gate. Daddy may have said that it was a sign of his stinginess and lack of foresight, that chain. He could remember Granpa playing the lottery religiously everyday of his youth; money he could have used to feed the children in harder times.

I loved that little space though. The place had a musty smell that clung to you, but in such a way that it was almost a cloak with which to parry danger and scatter evil spirits. The upholstery of the old furniture was well worn and stained. But I thought that this added character to the cloth whose floral patterning I would think unbearable unless otherwise muted by dust. The rooms lacked the invasive touch of a woman and the rugged freedom of it romanced me. The floor boards would creak as Granpa let me wander around. I would crawl to peer through the holes in the termite ridden flooring at the brown-yellow earth beneath the house on its stilts. There were also holes in the galvanized roofing that would allow the sunlight passage playing tiny dots of yellow light on the furniture. My father frequently recalls watching the shadows of the leaves of the guava tree travelling with the moving sun in these little circles of light. It always made him think of the how a camera captured beauty. I am not sure how it drew him to this conclusion but it was during those moments that he would cry for the poor and underprivileged, like himself, and fabricate plots to redeem them all as he grew older. It was here that he thought himself as powerful as Jesus Christ.

Granpa would always lead me to the old kitchen where he had the sweetest *douce douce* and *julie* mangoes waiting for me. He would hover clumsily around and now I realize that it might have been because he didn't know what to do with a slight little girl like me who had inherited her grandmother's insatiable curiosity and sharp tongue. He was not an awkward man though. Granpa was called Keiley and was considered a legend by everyone from Belmont down to the fresh smelling street corners in Port-of-Spain which he frequented to smoke his pipe and drink, also passing the time listening to the "lavways" of the fish man and the ice man in "bata bullet" shoes and tattered three-

quarter pants. When he donned his bowler hat and swaggered, yes swaggered like a sly cat, down the street he drew an admiration from passersby.

No man approached him with nonsense as it was told that he beat five Indians in one go in a brawl that was forever “not too long ago.” He had a wiry body, fit for anything. He would swim miles every morning at Macqueripe and not tire, not even in his riper years. His name can be found in any book on the history of the twin-island state as one of the pioneers involved in the creation of the steelpan; the only instrument invented in the twentieth century. He taught me how to hold a proper fist and how to deliver a right-handed haymaker and one lazy evening fashioned me my first sling shot out of smooth guava branch and strips of old rubber tyre. I have been told that I still roll my fingers into fists, unconsciously and even while sleeping.

Papa Keiley had many eccentricities. His temper constantly flared and his children always got the brunt of his bad moods. He hadn't money sense to save his life but put all his children through school. He never went to school past Standard Two, when he was seven, but had an encyclopedic knowledge of all world matters. He was a supporter of Castro and striking with the ease with which he predicted the rise and fall of economies. He always insisted that one must also chew their water as with any other part of the meal. And as I recall his resiliently fickle faith I chuckle. The only time Papa could be found praying was for boy children underneath the dusky tamarind tree at sunset. His wish was only granted twice out of seven with the birth of my uncle Noel and my father Peter.

I would always remember the salty tears that he would cry when he saw me after long periods of silence. We lived so far away that weeks would pass before I had the chance to visit again. He would wring his bowler hat mercilessly between his hands, almost as if he was mourning my departure prematurely. Or it may have been that I was living, breathing proof that though he may not have done right all the time by his children, that there was hope for forgiveness and salvation. And when he finally straightened himself up to his full height after I clapped him on the back and smiled that smile that he thought so infectious, he would laugh that hollow raspy laugh of his, the light in his eyes making me think of the eyes of the man in the portrait on the wall in his home. A portrait that constantly entranced me and the only thing he left for me along with a sun bleached 'house and lan'' umbrella; so called because it sheltered you from any onslaught that Nature sent your way.

Opening the door to his home would shed precious light on that portrait of my father's grandparents that faced the entrance. It is of great-grandmother Caroline and great-grandfather John. Grandma Caroline was an Arawak Indian with full lips and the smoothest dark-complexioned skin. Her straight tresses were obedient, stuffed professionally behind her ears. Her eyes were gentle and dreamy. I have eyes like hers that turn down at the sides and resembling halved "chenette" seeds. Eyes that could one minute belie attentiveness and then snap violently to pierce the soul. Great grandpa was a white Scotsman with the palest green eyes and the healthiest and thickest moustache that curled up at the edges. He had a heart that knew no limits and spoilt his children and the grandchildren who were lucky to know him. Yet, jokingly, we still all blame our short fuses on that Scottish blue blood. Great grandpa was also an avid swimmer and a free

diver. He could make a home out of a rented space. His talent and business was diving for treasure in the most unlikely places. My father remembers bringing armies of friends home after football games who were openly incredulous as to the genetic link between this convivial light man and dark man. These two stood side by side on that wall, forever captured in a large mahogany frame, quietly overseeing affairs from their fair perch.

The tight-lipped windows of that home on 24 St. George Circular Road saw many an evening pass. From the time that the sun exploded its kaleidoscope of entrails across the sky and the moon rose the next day they were a willing audience to the road's bustle. It remembers for me Granpa Keiley betting that his girls could beat any boy in a race down the hill; and the girls delivered. It saw my father and my aunts scooting over the neighbor's sagging chicken wire fence to steal breadfruit. Reflected on their glass were the faces and candid pictures of each neighbor putting up in a "sou sou" to get all the neighbourhood children through school; a copybook passing hands here, a bottle of ink left behind. They surveyed my father retuning from school in St. George's College in Barataria and tired from walking the six miles there and back. Some days they felt the excitement lift off my father's sweaty back when he was able to dupe the ticket master and "bum ah drop" on the train. When the trains slowed down he would lean haphazardly on a railing off to the side edging the rim of the platform with his toes. And as the conductor raced down the aisles gesturing violently through the window he would pelt his lanky frame off and leap to the hard ground beneath and skitter clumsily into the milling crowds; the perfect recidivist. It remembers Granpa and Mr. Alfred Rigsby returning peddling madly from the Mas camps during Carnival placing bets as to which band would win Dimanche Gras.

And, it remembers my father's run in with faith one evening when he was made to say his prayers before going to bed after an unforgettable football game. You could sometimes catch him with his head fixed to one side on the edge of the bed he shared with his siblings and still kneeling half an hour later. He would have been dreaming of that goal, a continuation of the images that had intruded and swallowed the words in the middle of the mumbled "Our Father." But soon, his faith in something was revived when the Williams' moved to the Circular. My mother's family.

Grandma Dolly was my mother's mother's pet name. She, like Mumsie also bore and raised an army of children. She was what they would call a high brown or maybe considered a "coco paagnol" maintaining a light sapodilla complexion that alerted anyone to her mixed heritage. My mother herself was born with the more Syrian features, being dirty blond, pale and straight nosed.

Like Mumsie Grandma Dolly also loved a laugh. She was a particularly reticent woman with one hand for discipline and the other for ministering in the name of the Lord. She had gorgeous thick ankles, kay feet (for even when relaxed, her toes always pointed outwards, ankles tapping as if making an *Alice in Wonderland* wish) and enchanting teal hued veins romancing her thick calves; a gift of her Asian ancestry. Her main aim in life was to raise successful children and she did. Family communion centered around the kitchen and the tiny beds of straw that had to be aired at least once a year.

When music floated down the street, it was most likely from their home. They were usually the first to have many things like the transistor radio or the predecessor to the video camera. David Douglas Williams, Grandpapa, was a big man with big plans who spent much of his time travelling to provide for his family. But music they both loved. Grandma Dolly would bob her head, even after she suffered a stroke that snatched away the vitality that was the most salient aspect of her personality, to the Paul Robeson songs I would sing to her while clipping her nails. There was an air of sickness around her. It had a grainy texture to it like a wind laden with sand particles; blowing histories of loss into your eyes. She also had a smell that seemed to me an amalgam of citrusy detergent, sweating vinyl and talcum powder, which worked not in reminding me of illness but of life and bright sunny rooms. Thus, with my mind distracted by the lightness that I conjured, I sang. And consequently and undeniably, I have an old soul's taste in music.

After I concluded any old ditty that she recalled from her youth, she would laugh that dry laugh of hers; the tinkle of which can be likened to dry rice cascading into a wooden bowl. Her laughs were staccato, whistling through her missing teeth and interrupted by the moments when she would absentmindedly pull her lower lip between her gums and suck in air. She always had her thin hair swathed in a madras head tie that made me think of those powerful women who sold in the markets. Their hips were like great engines propelling them along while they sauntered purposefully with baskets piled high atop their necks.

I loved it when she would sit slouched in a chair with her hands resting slackly in her small lap and under the abdomen. It made me laugh to realize how closely patterned our physiques were. I had that same little round tummy that would never be flat. A pork belly my father playfully calls it. Then I would compare the similar width of our fatty knees, with stretch marks travelling and reclining from top of knee-cap to bottom. And both our hands had the same durable nails that no amount of hand washing of clothes on the “jookin” board could soften as we ran the clothes up and down the rigid and undulating surface of the wooden board or sloping concrete sink.

One sure thing about her is that her words had power. So much power. In her last days when her mind was usually elsewhere, in one of her more lucid moments, she stared straight at me and said: “we never made a mistake wit’ you chile.” It was what I needed to hear at a time in my life when things were like a hurricane. She also called me “stay-here” instead of Stacia for the first few months after I was born. I was not expected to live long, but I think even her words and faith defied all science. She died, early my sophomore year. After receiving the news, while sitting alone in the hall, I wished my words could have done the same. *“Stay here Grandma Dolly,” I whispered... “Stay here...Come back...Somebody. Somebody please heal my brokenness.....”*

DIANA



Everyone has their gods. My ancestors had magic in their hands and held power in their tongues and I also had my own Diana. Associations with the name ‘Diana’ are

always pregnant with the weight of greatness and hints of the power of the gods and the divine. But my Diana was a healer woman. She was tall and dark; her limbs extending into the stratosphere. I loved her laugh and her smile. Her hiccups of laughter made her tiny round midsection quiver busily and her smile was missing a few teeth, making it even more endearing.

She took care of my sister and I for a little while when we were younger as one of our live-in nurses and remained a fixture in the family for years after. Her hair was a potpourri of colours; strands grey, black, some brown. And she tamed them under a madras head tie. She had a round jocund face with moles dusted on either cheek like confectionary sugar sprinkled on Easter Sunday buns. A button of a nose tied her slight eyes together and these turned upward a bit at their ends as if listening to the wind. If memory serves me correctly, she must have been slightly “cockey-eyed.” And if anything, anything, was wrong with the family’s health, Diana had a natural cure for it. She would look at you as if she were boring into your soul and sum up what was wrong with a grunt, a petulant curl to her lips and suns in those upward slanting eyes.

Then she would stalk outside and return with the most arbitrary things. Some leaves of grass, hibiscus petals, bois canot leaves, the prickly and blood red roukou fruit, soft candle, round glasses, oils and her hands. She had a half-stamp of a footfall, where she walked planting the whole soles of her feet solidly on the ground, as if keeping the earth suppliant. And her walk demanded attention for its ungainly confidence as her arms flapped welcomingly about her. She always reminded me of a bird in mid-flight.

Sometimes she boiled her poultices and used the swollen and wilting mass to heal or she made you drink the liquid that was made of the essence and the entrails of the

ingredients. Even her mere presence seemed capable of dispelling anything unwholesome in the climate. And whatever it is she concocted worked. Without fail. It got any bad influences or spirits out of the body easily. Either through the attic or the basement she would say. And that woman had powerful hands. If Nature's bushes didn't work, Nature channeled her powers through Diana's finger tips. She could cure a back pain with a good "rub dong," a slap and a look.

Like my grandparents and great grandparents she too died a few years ago but I remember vividly her floral dresses and the way the wind seemed to follow her and buffet her skirts. I remember her now as I call on her for healing. Her voice rings throughout my memories cajoling and making offerings for wellbeing, all locked in ancient words curling like italics in the air.

"Come babay. Sh shhhush! Put yo' tough skin back orn. Remember what doh kill does fatten and what doh fatten does purge...lis'en. Lis'en good...."

EYE WASH



*"To 1 large teacup of water, add 1 teaspoon of
Red rose green tea, boil and strain.
Add water to dregs and boil over.
Boil with sufficient water to fill a half bottle when both amounts are added
together,
Strain , cool and bottle.
Tie a string to bottle neck.*

*Double the tie that the bottle should not slip as it is to be hung on a tree for dew
and sun.*

Wash eyes with eyes wash.

Or use softened English plantain over fire, squeeze in a fine cloth and use drops

For inflammation of the eye.”

***“With new eyes observe this present space as neither temporary, never to be considered
forever nor totally binding.”***

Some days I awake to the chortle of delivery trucks outside my window; parked at the rear of the Giant supermarket. Workers hollering across the street their booming voices ricocheting within the tautness of the chilly morning air. These sounds always remind me of my first childhood home in Morvant, when we owned a supermarket. The delivery trucks would bring the morning's fresh produce while the smell of cedar travelled on mountain mist to assail our nostrils as doors were opened for the business day. The storage garage for the supermarket had a mystifying quality to it. The heavy steel door would whirr to life, opening the way into impossibly dark bowels of the large room behind. As I entered what I frequently imagined to be the yawning mouth of a cave, dust particles imprisoned in portly gusts of air and embraced by solitary rays of sunlight, gleamed and shimmered like a scene underwater. These images and sounds will always be symbolized by the faint scent of orange netted onion sacks, which dotted the corners of the storage rooms like sentinels warning of dead ends.

When raindrops beat out a tune on the air-conditioning unit outside my apartment window, I think of the buckets of rain that cascade down on the countryside at home. And of that faulty spout hugging, spanning, and smacking the side of the garage that Daddy could never get to deliver water to the tanks like he wanted to. I remember him trying to remedy the situation many a time with a sliver of guiding galvanize; that leads me into thinking of chasing leaf-boats tumbling down hungry gushing canals. And I remember Safiya and I prancing like pretty Princesses in matching bathing suits in the rain. Oh! How the raindrops stung. We tried in vain to escape the onslaught by trying to submerge ourselves in the blue water drums that stood open under the kitchen windows. Images of sitting on Black Rock with my face upturned to warm drops; the sky's tears of joy, caressing my face, then swarm through my synapses. I remember slipping and bruising my knees on the wet, dead terrazzo and laughing hysterically and nervously in the after-rain atmosphere. That is breathless air sweetened with grace and where everything is kissed with pristine water-light and teased with the idea of rebirth.

Other intangible things remind me of that place where you can still hear the rains coming and you could only try to outrun it with your laughter. And long for those intangible moments caught between the twilight and the dark when the sky is fading from dark to a fringe of light blue. When the moon lingers and shudders bright like the sun, taking one unawares, convincing you that you've missed the night and it's music and that the dawn has come. That time when the cicadas' voices blossom to life and if you leave your windows open that sound of crickets wings and their refrain of "poong men net!" along with the belching of toads would reach you on a tangy gust of air.

The pebbles on the Macomb Street sidewalks, which I traverse to get home everyday, constantly remind me of the packed “lomusy” dirt with its litter of smooth pebble and slate of the rivers of my childhood. We would trot down the slate slope barefooted to explore the ruins of the farm that my cousins’ grandfather had once run. I could smell the stories that lay untold there then and I would finger the moss that hugged the stone walls that were smoothed by years of exfoliation and floods. The river was sluggish and shallow. Safe. We only left the water when Auntie Annie lured us inside with her split peas soup.

The fresh scent of rain water that is caught on the exposed gravel pathways in the yards of the houses on Idaho Avenue, all resembling forgotten streams, makes me think of the East “dry” river at home that staggers through the cobblestone in Gonzales and OF the times in the dry season when the sunlight blazes the hills and water is scarce. Those times when we would have no pipe-borne water for months and Daddy would pelt out of the house to the car; my sister and I at his heels. We would be going to fetch water in Las Lomas. No easy feat to achieve; piling four black containers into the boot of the car. We would try the ditch across from Susan first, the one with the lone stand-pipe and its crusted rust like hieroglyphics revealing the mystery of its age. The head of the tap destroyed.

We would then follow the winding country road through Brazil and San Rafael to Las Lomas. We always seemed to be fetching water as the sun was about to burst its flesh and explode its viscera across the canvas of the sky. My favorite time of day. The neighbors that lived in the board house across the street always gladly permitted us to

disturb their washing or baths. Their wet bodies would sparkle in the evening air charged with the desperate electricity of a fading day. And while their faces flickered in and out of my vision, obscured by waning sunlight, I would squint for them through the unruly spray of water that filters from the tap into Daddy's black containers. My sister and I were not much help except for company. Safiya would wait on her knees in the car, peering through the window, an apparition. I would skip up and down the grassy embankment letting water droplets kiss my eyelashes. We would have a nice bath on such nights. Daddy would tote a bucket upstairs to our bath and Mummy would bring a soot-tainted kettle up and pour hot water into our calabash bowl.

The old abandoned home on Idaho and Macomb; lush with wall crawlers and shadowed by vines and a motherly evergreen, reminds me of the old plantation houses that I pass on my way home to the country in Talparo; where my parents built a new life on a hill overlooking the Central Range and a sea of green. Their galvanized roofs rusted and weathered and humming with the easterly travelling Trade winds. The whitewash of their foundations colored ochre by years of flooding and pock-marked for exfoliation and rain. If you look closely, the wood nearest the earth is stripped in various places. The older villagers says that the soil there is acid; "only good for citrus."

Walking home from school in the Fall just after midday, the light falls just right to make me think of the two o'clock light at home. I particularly loved the atmosphere of two o'clock at Talparo. Any part of the house you went, any corner of the

garden, the shivering light- as it seemed to know that in a few hours it would be extinguished, granted everything a new life. It touched everything with a bronze, which if buried by night would be renewed into gold by a new morning. And this giving and taking is almost silent except for a rushing hush and the sporadic tweet of a corn bird. I chiefly enjoy sitting in the kitchen at this hour and eyeing the dish drainer. All the wares imbued with such fragile light. Some kissed by a plethora of yellows and some with rainbows playing at their bowels. The reflection of the water droplets and streaks on the aluminum sink would play across the brown tile and out the red wrought iron window; reminding me of a lover's face with day old stubble. Outside the palm branches of the coconut tree looked more yellow than green and the pellucid yellow curtains on the kitchen windows seemed to dissolve in the bright light and disappear.

I realize now that memory cannot be taken away unless you leave it unattended. It cannot be bartered for like names can be exchanged to avoid strange looks. Unlike personality that can be ground and packaged for easy import into a new culture; memory is bulky and heavy. And though the mind darkens with the saddening seasons and the voices becomes distant and words puff away like the loose crowns of blazing hibiscus flowers ; the nets of your thoughts can be dragged a long long way. You cannot sentence memory to death even if you yourself begin to die inside. It returns through the years lulled into psalms and whispers.

PARALYSIS



“The treatment is three hot baths on three successive days with half boiled Bayleaf leaves and bark taking a hot cup of tea with the same contents of the bath. The temperature of the heat of the bath is taken by placing the hands in the hot water. After the bath the patient is to be properly dried and prepared for a sweat by anointing the body with diluted Bengue balm missed with melted soft candle. After the bath treatment the patient’s body should be anointed with Puncheon rum added to grated nutmeg or nutmeg mace. Now and again give a clove or spice tea at nights.”

One of the first lines of wisdom, if you can call it that, that I received as a little girl was that “girls should be seen and not heard.” I remember distinctly those warm Belmont streets with their leaning houses and the ubiquitous scent of dog shit mingled with rotting guava hanging in the air where I first became acquainted with those words. I recall that every field trip, or even the short walk to the cathedral next door, was preceded by the gentle reminder of “girls should be seen and not heard” punctuating the air. And knowing that my mother insisted that “provocation was a sin” I always obeyed.

Thus, paralysis, silence and restraint became my invisible playmates. No one wanted to go to that place of indescribable torment. And even in my silent musings when I tried to discover the secret to everything- I couldn’t quite grasp the concept of the afterlife. Did it exist? Was God an unconditionally loving God if he did allow such a place to exist? Who was right? I decided that it was safer to believe what I was told then. So every Ash Wednesday I would cross, like a good little girl, the pot-holed and pock-marked yard of the boy school to the cathedral and receive a grey cross on my forehead; the rosary resounding between my ears.

But there were days when I would watch the boys with envy through the diamond shapes in the wire fencing that sliced our lives apart. I wanted to be free like them. They were not asked to be seen and not heard. They weren't asked to do much but be true to themselves. And even now I realize, though most insist otherwise, that the culture of home still bears the palm-print of the patriarchal misgivings of old. Yet, I recall their frantic scampers and screams that would crescendo as they played "scootch" and "rounders;" dodging wind balls that flew haphazardly through the air like lime green missiles gone astray. I heard them shake the fences and jeer at us girls in our immaculately pleated skirts, but their words usually fell to the ground bursting like over-ripe mangoes, for us girls weren't allowed near the fence and thus never heard.

But I pictured their words like colourful flavors flowing across the blinding midday bleached concrete of the yard, toward my feet. And I would always be tempted to follow the trail like the yellow brick road in *Alice and Wonderland* and go touch the pulsing of their play and smell their sweat. I wanted to climb the poles, with peeling yellow paint exposing the old green matt, which held the black bulky water tanks like they did. I wanted to bruise my knees and have "Miss" then douse it with that sickly purple iodine that burned and have them congratulate me on a scar valiantly acquired. Because amongst boys, scars conferred status. I wanted to soil my clothes and go home with a head full of the memories of escaping pirates.

But those moments were only available to me; buried in the pages of novels. But, I had two gifts. My parents had made sure that I had had a love and grasp of the English language from the time that I began uttering my first words. And I also had the gift of seeing things where others couldn't. I saw a lady standing near a river embedded on the

striated face of a red stone. I felt and saw spirits. So instead of screaming with abandon with those boys, I remained silent and retreated to the dreams of Neverland in my head. There I could entertain myself without disappointing anyone. I was always good. Cross my heart. Catholic girls never hoped to die.

Yet, one of the most triumphant moments in my life was when I joined a game of ‘rounders’ with the boys in our Common Entrance lessons class one Saturday. I managed to lob a ball with just the right force at one of the best and most elusive male players. Getting out of the game brought a feeling that tasted sweet like the red and yellow crystalline sides of the “paradise plum,” but along with a jolt of fear and disappointment as I wondered what my mother or Tanty Trusha would think if they saw me on that field, green floral dress waving in the breeze as my nimble body left it in its wake as I ran from base to base.



*“Treatment is rest and relaxation.
 The white of an egg swizzled with orange juice
 Take once a day for seven days
 Also, peel green Lacatan fig, slice thin and dry in oven.
 Pound and sift, make into a porridge and drink.
 To build nerves beat the white of an egg with two teaspoons of aloes
 Once per day for nine days.”*

I have always been a whirlwind provocateur. I was entertainment from the inception. I must have been doing the fox-trot in my Mother’s womb because I eventually found myself entangled in my umbilical cord. I seemed so intent on detaching myself from life and dancing alone. After birth I was placed in an L-shaped room with other children of woe. My father, in that light blue smock that symbolized hope, loss and the wrenching in-between, walked to the end viewing children who wouldn’t live much longer to find me- one of them.

And if those who insist that the personality is formed in the womb are indeed correct, mine must be incomplete by a few months for I had to be forcefully removed from my first haven before I was ready to leave. My first experiences of the world involved quarantining and a cold glass jail. No human touch but pin pricks. No mother’s breast but coarse sheeting. I was wrenched out of my mother’s womb; and my lifeline, which somehow got its duty “wrongside” as the villagers would say, was then unwrapped

from around my neck. Luckily, I hadn't turned blue yet, but I was yellowed with jaundice. They stuck me with needles and I balled my little fingers into fists. An inauspicious beginning I would say.

Accordingly, Mummy says that I was born a worrier and I believe her. I make decisions as the waves do. I come in slow and unsure then suddenly retreat to my depths to return again with different yet easily disbanded force swallowed by the black volcanic sands of time. But the "star-apple" does not fall too far from the tree. My mother is the first to pull out her prayer beads at the slightest discouragement or the first to make a hurried sign of the cross. You can see her mouthing prayers even while she is sweeping. But that may also say more about her unyielding faith than anything else; as does my worrying, which works as an evolutionary throwback, molding me into a good caretaker. And from my taking-care-of-others I am endowed with a peculiar resilience, self-confidence and grace.

"Come chickipeets!" she goaded sweetly. The tinkle of her voice rose with each syllable, betraying her distress.

I looked up at my mother-with-the-beautiful-teeth, squinted, and the little person in me curled up into a ball and hid behind my trembling heart. Mummy's curly dirty blonde hair, painted by the blistering midday sun looked as a halo of wool. She faced me, the San Rafael church behind her mocking me with its arched eyes and gaping doors facing west as if waiting and ready to imbibe my soul whole after the rushing river beneath me embraced me in its liquid and hollow arms. I looked at Mummy again and then at the about twelve- inch plank of wood, that now substituted for the real bridge as it

was being repaired. This, I was meant to cross to get to Arima with Mummy.

I didn't budge.

Mummy's face fell and a tinge of sadness hung at the edges of her Asian sloping eyes. My mother was the sort to get easily flustered at sudden and inexplicable inconveniences. But that tall, dark mystery lady understood my fear as something less onerous than stubbornness and my mother's as something more akin to concern. I do not remember her name, but she ushered my mother ahead and walked onto the plank and turned to face me and at the same time stretching her hand toward me in one fluid movement that I thought of it as a dance. I looked up at her shamefacedly and then behind me and was suddenly aware that I was keeping a line of folk in limbo.

Greater embarrassment arrested my movement as the humidity licked relentlessly at my bare shoulders. And along with this sudden consciousness I became painfully cognizant of the sounds around me. The knife-like leaves of the bamboo rustled vehemently as if they wanted to shake themselves free of the jointed bonds that held them prisoner to the hollowed arms of the bamboo grove. The water below me, no longer rushed silently, but tumbled and roiled over black rock stained rust in some places by algae. The white glints of light on its surface waving like freshly laundered whites on the patchwork of hillside clotheslines. The dull roar of the chorus of voices behind me voiced its complaint.

My palms sprang water, in sporadic gushes, identical to the temperamental character of the spring in the forest bordering my yard. This was the first sign that I was nervous. Then I went cold.

I looked up at that long, dark lady and when she smiled once again, I inched

forward.

“Daz it right dere dahlin’....daz it. Corm here.”

I crawled forward and gripped hold of her fingers, warm like the aromatic waves off an effervescent coal pot to my clammy fingers. She pulled me gently and everything remained blinkered. My view was restricted to only a few feet in front of me until I got across to my mother’s yellow arms. An angel centered in my mandorla-like vision.

I believe that Mummy and I share the same spirit and are forever bound by the names we share. My first name is her middle name and it means “resurrection” and though nervous, quirky women we are the strength of our family or friend circles for our attention to all possibilities- “sweet an’ sour.” But like the Gemini’s we are there is that side to us that exudes strength at times when otherwise muted.

My mother’s confidence, humbly masked, could not be hidden from her walk. She sailed forth determinedly, weaving her way through the chaotic crowds on Frederick Street, with her short legs pumping resolutely and toes always pointing outward. “Look Marilyn and she kay-foot!” many would muse. She always held her head up and her nose slightly in the air.

Mummy was virtuoso at making the best out of any circumstance. As a child I never wanted for anything. I always had, even if hems had to be extended and always mended to make a dress or skirt immortal. Mummy couldn’t draw to save her life but had some wonderful artistic ideas, recycling paper to make cut-out outfits for dolls and Styrofoam cups to make Santa Claus decorations for Christmas. She made the same sets

of drapes last throughout some years, setting them up during different seasons- Easter, July-August holidays and Christmas.

She made all holidays at home special. Breaks from school would be spent frolicking between “upstage” which was the archway to the kitchen and “downstage;” the nether end of the music room after the equipment was shifted around, under her inventive and brilliant direction. All Aunties and Uncles would be present and smiling as the children brought to life their childhood stories. I think my best performance was as “chicken little” probably because my childhood was defined by a sensation that I was an only planet lost under a sky that was always about to tumble down.

I remember fondly the time that she tried to make the “buss-up shot Paratha” bake in the toaster oven for Divali instead of buying it hot off the heated “tawa.” The bake was harder than roast bake, a meal notorious for cracking teeth and dislodging gold caps. My sister, Safiya, and I laughed and begged to be saved, but we ended up eating it anyway, soaking it in gravy and mindful to tell Mummy that if she made it again that “it could be used as a weapon on garden “tiefs”.”

Mummy was also and is a star storyteller- I still feel the overwhelming gratification I used to catch from her retelling of the “crick crack monkey” stories when I head to a reading in Washington. And Mummy made prayers sound like songs. Songs that would soon lull us to sleep; even when kneeling on the slightly uncomfortable bamboo mats in front of our beds... *“Gentle Jesus, meek and might look upon this little child, pity my simplicity, suffer me to...”* At “to” I was always already daydreaming or asleep or laughing at how her “gentles” always sounded like “genkles” to me.

They tell me that when they dropped me to my first day of primary school that they stood at the fence to the yard of Belmont Girls' R.C School worried that I'd return crying. But as soon as they set me out the car, I scampered into the yard, forgetting my belongings in their arms and never looking back. After all they had christened me Stacia; resurrection. Hence, my resilience.

My advisors in the army smile fondly as they remember the shy, skinny girl that they teased and ridiculed on the first inspection, predicting failure. The girl who, on the three day hike to Lopinot, cried when it rained so that they couldn't see her tears and who was determined to survive just because they thought she couldn't. That slight teenaged girl who stood for "no-nonsense" and whipped a band of wayward Scottish contingents into form with her well chosen words. That 'gyal' who would turn red in the face when upset and who took a blow to the nose, and still piped up enough, to earn the title "Rock of Gibraltar."

TO REMOVE SEA WATER FROM THE EARS



*“Fill mouth with sea water.
Shake till it becomes heated, then pour and full ears.
Jerk back and drain ears.
(Use self to heal self)”*

“Touty-fi feet deep an’ sixty-sumin’ dong,” Mufasa said in that nasal Grenadian twang.

He was telling me how deep the pool at the bottom of the gorge was, trying to reassure me that it was quite safe to dive. I didn’t need the reassurance.

I looked back, giving him a cursory glance. Rather rough and primitive; dark like a sahel warrior. The sun made his wet skin glisten like freshly shined brass. His limbs seemed uncharacteristically long, inciting my over-active imagination to fabricate a ludicrous image of one those flying monkeys. His smile, that almost split his face into two halves, lit up those eyes with two liquid pools of amber at their centers. I dare you, they seemed to say.

I exhaled in excitement. Few had ever dared do what I was about to do. I looked around once again, resting my hand firmly on the hot metal rail in front of me. I looked up at the thick canopy above me as the sun’s rays struggled through the leaves, forming a tiger-dappled effect on the undergrowth. I closed my eyes and smelled the cedar and tasted the freshness of the water on my lips. Ah yes! That tumbling mass of water below me was called Annandale Falls. I watched the water cascade downwards, white sprays

morphing and melding into murky green waters. The steep rocky slopes that surrounded the falls formed a half-moon, amplifying the boom of the water as a shell onstage projects the sound to the audience.

The water was singing to me. I was its audience. It was inviting me to fall into its cool bosom. I looked at my feet. I had unconsciously gripped my toes on the edge of a rock outcropping. I hummed the psalm of the water to myself. I looked back at Mufasa. He lifted his hand with palm upturned, and with an elegant flick of his wrist, waved me away. I hooked my toes on the edge again in preparation to dive, simultaneously spreading my arms wide. I closed my eyes.

For an islander born in the rainy season, I had a strange fear of water. Looking back, I don't believe that I had any justification for this phobia. I am sure I never saw anyone close to me drown or that I ever came near to drowning myself. What I was pretty sure of, and still am today, was that I never was moved to run into the surf with that perverse exhilaration that most children my age did , nor did I ever venture into the water that past my calves unless latched, like a barnacle, onto someone older and considerably taller.

The curse of the primary schooler would be upon me though. After having successfully avoided swimming lessons of any sort for the first seven or so years of my life, it became mandatory that I take swimming as a class. Nope, there was no shirking this responsibility.

All went well the first few weeks, basically as we spent half the time out of the water learning technique. When the water work started everything was done in the shallow. I could see my feet; I could stand firmly on solid ground. I was, in a sense, in some control of my situation. So I focused on my toes and on my fingertips; on everything besides the fact that I was immersed in the very liquid body of my fears. So I focused: One, two, three and breathe. One, two, three and breathe.

But the inevitable is what it is: assured. The day came when they brought those poles out and marched us to the other end of the pool. The deep end. Strange, how that day was one of the most beautiful days I remember from childhood. The sky an azure blue and a mellow wind, swollen with air somnambulant and scented with the perfume of the hibiscus, was blowing. It was a sign of God's irreversible humor, I guess, as it was the most beautifully petrifying day of my life.

"What we want y'all to do is simple. Jus' jump in the water an' when you come up we'll have the poles ready for you to hold on to. Ok? Everyt'ing will be fine."

I looked up at my instructor Bennie. Had he grown taller? For some strange reason he seemed more massive than he usually did. The sun was behind him at this point and he was silhouetted, along with the palm tree behind him, against the brightness. The palm leaves made it appear as if he were an angel with wings. Might as well have them, I thought, I was going to die soon anyway...

I was focusing hard on the backs of the same heads that I had been staring at for the past two hours. The closely cropped old-gold hair of Kimba's head. The straight dark

tresses of Nikita. The wavy brown of Natalia's. The list can go on. This was the tenth set. I had reached the front of the line nine times already and had not touched the water yet. I kept returning to the back promising to jump the next time. Here I was again, the minutes ticking by quickly, doing a crazy duet with the lub dub of my heart beat. I could see nothing but what was in a tiny circle in front of me. I might as well have had blinkers on. It seemed as if the pressure had changed around me, my ears squeaked but I could hear nothing. Soon it was my turn again.

And my turn only. The other girls were allowed to leave. I was ordered to stay until I jumped in. I wiped sweaty palms on already wet thighs. I looked at my instructor and shook my head, partly in defiance and partly to disperse the cottony cloud that was making my head feel heavy. It felt like I had water in the hollow of my skull that was sloshing sickeningly.

"No. You have to try once before you leave. It's going to be ok. Jus' come up and hold on to the pole. I'll be right here. Jus' hook your toes and push off."

I looked at my toes. They looked like crooked fingers in fierce battle with arthritis. I was sure that they would fail me. I closed my eyes, whispered an earnest prayer and let myself fall.

I opened my eyes just as my feet left the outcropping. I let out a whop of ecstasy and of release, as the rocky slopes seemed to whiz past me in my descent. I hit the water with laughter on my lips. It opened to accept me and closed in to protect me like the

amniotic fluid of a womb. I stayed there for a moment, held in suspension. I broke the surface; Mufasa was emitting loud guffaws from his abdomen, in his magnificently barbaric way. He showed me the universal sign of congratulations that Bennie once did years ago- a hefty thumbs up, and then joined me in the water.

In retrospect I do not really know what had augmented this fear of water. But then I am moved to ask the question: Was it really the water that I was afraid of? Or was it just the fear of the unknown? That fear of being wrenched from out of my comfort zone; skipping a step on my checklist of safely logical things.

Maybe it's an incubator-child-syndrome. You are thrust into such a harsh and unforgiving world as a newborn that when you are given to human comfort and consolation you hold onto it with unforgiving brutality. Daddy does tell me that I wasn't a difficult child to put to sleep. It was actually quite easy for me to fall asleep in anyone's arms, but what was a feat in itself was getting me to stay asleep when left alone. Apparently, the minute I sensed impending parting, I cried out for attention again. One had to sleep with me in their arms.

Then I was a naturally reserved and reticent child and I still am to a certain extent. But, small inner urges assuaged and moments when it becomes easier and more feasible for me to become someone more outgoing bring with them a subsequent sensation of exhilaration that is addictive as they surprise and entertain me and Daddy more so, supremely.

SHINGLES



“This disease has no medication to heal it. It heals only through prayers and nature’s power. It comes in a circling rash. It sometimes skips. The circle goes around from one point to the next. When the two point meet, the patient dies.

The treatments is done by applying seven steel needles after their points are sterilized. Or by the application of a hot steel knife on either points of the rash in the form of a cross, with the prayers of “Our Father,” “I Believe in God” and Psalms from the Holy Bible.

Then rub the rash with seven crushed leaves of the Aguma tree mixed with olive oil.

Later on a course of molasses is to be taken in a teacup of hot water once per day.

Then drink Tesan cooling.

Dust the affected area with baby powder.”

“Surely goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever....” Lines from Psalm 23; my father’s mother’s favourite Psalm and mine. As he reads them in remembrance of her, I cannot help but smile at how much younger he looks holding that battered Bible in Rhonda’s sleek modern kitchen set in a up-scale area in Maryland. It is almost as if thinking of his mother and years gone by does literally strip the years from his appearance. The various memories of my father then erupt collectively in my mind. In the same manner in which the buttons of the shingles rash paraded disorderly over his stomach a few months before, to soon dry up when no longer nourished by ephemeral spirits.

Some of my favourite memories of him are infused with images of vegetation and the graceful circular swing of his arms as he ‘swipes’ grass. The images in my mind are

bordered by the rainforest in the background, which surrounds our almost six acre plot of land. In the air there would be the swishing sound of sharp metal meeting moist stalk, sounding like a zip being pulled shut hurriedly. This lovely dark man would be bent almost double at his toil, most likely devising some business plan in his head and cracking numbers or humming and ‘lullabying.’ Daddy can sing like Frank. There would be days when he would catch you unawares with his voice like honey, either because you forget he sings as he hardly belts out those old tunes or because his singing voice was in stark contrast to his dark, clipped British speaking voice that would command the attention of even the most inattentive.

He would usually be clad in torn gray trousers and a once-maroon t-shirt splattered with white and dark red paint. The hat on his head is soiled with various water rings from sweat or rain. It makes him look like a cricket umpire when he raises his arms, index fingers puncturing the dry air: “six!” I know the grass must burn his palms as he reaches for it and pulls, but he continues. He would return to the house later, arms soiled with earth and pulling little invasive needles from his fingers; the bushes’ last attempt at fighting for life. And as sweat oozes like liquid molasses from his pores; each motion of his arms, eyes and entire body are patiently guided under a perpetually furrowed brow.

The careful motions of his body are patterned like a dance revolving outward, each new set of movement rises like determination and hope ratified and set free on a final whisper of release. His movements always make me think of music. About the polyrhythm of old. Of jazz and the flooding wails of blues.

I’ve been told that I got me an old soul. And it is most likely because of him. My father had his children late in life and growing up I was surrounded by the ideology and

music of decades past. He would dance with Mummy in the music room to the music of Ray Charles, Sam Cooke and Nina Simone just to pick a few. I loved going through his old records and placing them on the record player and hearing the little vignette of scratches and static as the needle found its groove. They used to call him DJ Sweet Peas when he returned from studying and living in London. Dj Sweet Peas it was because he would throw the best parties on the circular and also cook the food once the guest provided the goods.

He has been called many a thing as a result of the ‘baccahanal’ that occurred at his christening. His parents wanted him to be called “Pete” but the priest insisted that that was not a proper name and they officially settled for “Peter” but stubbornly referred to him as “Pete” all his life. And my father Peter or Pete, spent most of his evenings in those days of ever present music, sitting on the stooping porch of his father’s house waiting to hear my mother’s laugh ring over the hills at dusk when her comedies were aired.

There he would dream of having a big house in the country. And this man, this cauliflower man, as Ms. Gladys and Tantie Girlie would call to him for “he leave here dark an’ han’some an corm back lookin’ like cauliflower!” and cackle; this man did just that. He built our house with his bare hands on top of a hill surrounded by a moat of trees, with a view of the Central Range, the church bell tower and the most beautiful sunsets. He dabbled in the landscaper’s plans too and planted the orchard and magnificent garden that we have now “from scratch.” He farmed the land like a pro, one year it was corn, another pineapple and ground provisions and “blue food,” another it would lie fallow for the “zandolie” to prowl.

His hands could do many things. He was a jack of all trades enjoying the trill of figuring things out himself. I remember his big hands teaching me math in primary school. My mind, more inclined to words, just couldn't quite get numbers. He was a numbers man; an accountant. And on evenings he would sit hunched with me, on a chalk-dusted parquet floor in front of the little blackboard jabbing at sums on the board with his large, rectangular tipped middle finger. I was always fascinated that he used his middle finger for then it was taboo for me.

Walking through Daddy's half of the library took me everywhere. The shelves that stretched to the varnished roof were stocked with books that made the man. Daddy calls himself "spiritual." I would call him an intellectual butterfly. His mind flew between theories and theologies as an island hopper skitters about. Just to name a few, you could find the Bhagavad-Gita, the Koran, work by Khalil Gibran and scores of work on the ancient religions and civilizations of Africa, Asia and South America on the shelves all vying for attention. He always says "take the good from everything." I can see him now in his wooden reading chair, large smoky-gray framed glasses slipping just under the bridge of his nose. I have adopted much of his philosophy on life. Envisioning is the thing that we share.

Daddy travelled a lot on business. And this has possibly honed his already innate and impeccable sense of style. I remember him bringing Mummy the best jewelry and 'parfums' from foreign exotic countries and coming with his mouth full of tales for me. Oh how I loved his return! Once he brought Mummy black pearls that I fell in love with because they reminded me of the depths of the sea that my ancestors embraced. His leaving was another story. There was one time he left when I was younger and he missed

my learning to ride a bicycle without training wheels. I didn't mind though for he didn't get to see me fall. Instead he saw me riding steadily down the palm-lined driveway while he 'swiped' his grass and surveyed the land he had left behind for a little while.

HIGH BLOOD PRESSURE



“Pound garlic skin and boil with orange peel

Drink a teacup once per day for seven days.

Boil sour tamarind leaves

Take a teacup once per day for five days.

The green fruit of a soursop with skin, flesh and seeds,

Slice in small bits and soak in a jug of spring water and drink as cooling for seven days.

Pound three medium grains of garlic and boil with a branch of celery.

Take a teacup first thing in the morning for seven days.”

Aunty Gloria always says “nigga doh dead. Dey does eider ugly away or fade away.” That phrase has been shown to have more than just a grain of truth to it. Both my parents and possibly all my ancestors suffered with blood pressure. Either it was high or low or an undulating combination of both. But they all lived long. A hard life has its good points I suppose and all heroes have their genetic faults. And aware of ailments such as these or not, I think we all approach our parents as gods when we are children. At those times they are larger than life to us and capable of performing miracles.

My father was a Jack-of-all-Trades moonlighting as technician, musician, cook, butcher, farmer, and builder all at once while officially an accountant. Mother was my

mother of sorrows, a teacher absorbing the pain of harsh circumstance to harbour all the children in her care comfortably underneath her wings. My fondest memories of them are many, some centered specifically on the comfortably recurring events of Saturdays when we were all together and time in the country slowed to a crawl.

Saturday mornings were comforting in their sacrament sameness. Mummy would always waltz into my room with her characteristic breath of subdued cheeriness. I would watch from under down-turned eyelashes, pretending to be more deeply asleep than I really was. She would turn my fan off; fling open my windows; one at the foot of the room; the other above my head. Then she would kiss my forehead, whisper good morning and then prowl around my room and the corridor beyond, whispering the Rosary as she clutched the wooden finger beads to her heart.

The sun's rays would envelope and imbue with golden light the hair on her arms. Her yellow-pale skin; criss-crossed by teal hued veins, made her a vision of natural beauty. Through my now ajar door I could hear the rumble and the jolting sounds made by the washing machine and dryer downstairs. The curtains, buffeted by the morning wind, would brush my cheeks tractably like a lover saying goodbye indefinitely.

After saying my prayers I would get up on my knees on my pillow and push the window above my head further out. I would smile, close my eyes and let the sun warm my sleep-glazed face. Then, I would appraise my surroundings with joy. The crest of one of the mountains in the Central Range, dominating the center of the scene, looks like a scoop of sugar on a saucer. To me it always appeared as if caught in the act of arching

and stretching into the sky, which always seemed a rich azure blue on Saturdays. There even the birds seemed touched with the same lethargy that ailed the fluffy clouds. The trees waving in the breeze would allow me to preview snatches of the Talparo Roman Catholic church bell-tower; the stained glass winking in the sun, somehow always inciting me to think of a wind chime gently tinkling in the breeze. The lone Todds Road, like a monochromatic gray snake stretching toward infinity, was all that disturbed the green of the scene.

I always saw color first. Then the Saturday morning sounds would greet me. The calls of neighbors over fences or walls further down the trace and out of my reach. The violent rustle of the wind through the leaves. The trill of the wind through the louvered windows downstairs that were never fully opened. The sharp toot of car horns and drivers greeting passersby; that taxi with the slogan “Yuh Wife Inside” heaving by. The loud speaker of the fish van squalling “Carite!! King fish!!” over the pleasant cacophony. And finally, the comforting hum of the lawn mower, which meant that Daddy was up and out on the land. At times the collective smells of the village breakfasts cooking would greet me along with the scent of severed grass stalks and the pollen of the hibiscus that would be gently wafted up to my vantage point for my sensory enjoyment.

After my bed was made in the manner that I was taught, the way that resulted in the bed looking like an ice-cream sandwich with the wrapper folded neatly quarter of the way down, and I had washed, I would barge into my sister’s room next door to see if she was awake. I would usually find her on her twin-sized bed (she had never wanted her childhood bed to be upgraded), with the Peanuts-themed pillow wedged between her legs,

laying in fetal position, her head propped up on one arm. Either there would be novel in the other hand or she would be staring at the paneled ceiling. Her little button nose would be defiantly upturned; her tiny mouth folding into the beginnings of pout; her round red-brown face aglow. She would turn when I entered, scowl, then groan or mumble something incoherent. I would say nothing much but would let air out of my mouth slowly. This was our morning greeting ritual.

I would glide downstairs in a cocoon of happiness, past the huge toy chest on the landing and past the laundry where the dryer and washer were trying to outdo each other in a duel of sound, into the kitchen. Breakfast was usually frosted flakes and milk on a Saturday. I would boil water, stir in the powdered milk for both my sister and myself and introduce flakes into our bowls. While doing this, I would stand with one foot on top the other, looking like a preening flamingo, in the fashion that always amused Daddy. Some days, absentmindedly, I would put the extra milk in the ladder and the box of flakes in the fridge. I somehow always realized that I had something to rectify a few seconds later. Saturday mornings always made me dreamy.

Safiya would hustle downstairs soon after, bristling with the anticipation of an escape, rescue her breakfast from the center isle and jog back upstairs. I would follow in close pursuit. If you looked at the clock, it would have been nearing ten o'clock, the time when Mummy's classes would begin and our personal space invaded by her class of students whose ages ranged between six and seventeen. Safi and I always made ourselves scarce until classes were over at midday, or one o'clock, depending on how close to the season of exams it was. For the next few hours my ears would be allayed with Mummy's

teaching voice encouraging students to enunciate clearly and correcting their grammar and spelling, the continuous coughing of Daddy's lawn mover and the raucous conversation amongst the wild birds.

As the morning would wear to an end and the sun was trailing the other half of its semicircular passage through the sky, Mummy's pupils could be seen returning herd-like to their respective homes. Mummy could be heard rustling about downstairs packing her books, folders and papers back into her cabinet. The lawn mower would yawn one last time and Daddy would bring it into the house, where it would rest under the stairs across from the now silent and melancholy washer and dryer. By then some clothes would already be dancing on the patchwork of clothes lines outside. Daddy would gallop into the house after ducking under this quilt of wire and flying clothing in order to escape the blistering midday sun; smelling "green" as my sister used to say; a conspicuous blend of sweat, grass and wet dirt.

He would come in silhouetted against the brightness outside, looking darker than he really was and smile when he saw me and say "good morning choonkiepoonks." His teeth -perfectly sculpted large rectangles and sparkling white. Both my parents had teeth to envy. In that same expression would be registered the pleasure of a hard day's work accomplished on time and his wide but distinguished nose would quiver with pleasure. And while he showered, his work done, Safiya and I are acutely aware that Mummy would whistle for us soon. For it would be time for us to emerge from hiding and resume our own chores.

RASHES AND ITCHES



“Grate carrots and draw with boiled water

Drink as cooling.

Also drink burnt bread drawn, and minie roots.

Drink tisane and anoint the body with a mixture of:

Boric Powder and Petroleum Jelly Vaseline.

Take a course of aloes and molasses.

Finally rub swelling area with raw onion.”

It was during one of those sweltering day in July, heavily pregnant with windy anticipation, that Safiya got bitten twice. And while our family is notorious for having allergies I am only allergic to seafood but my sister is allergic to almost everything on the face of the earth especially insect bites. A reality that she is continually displeased with. And the fact that we lived in the countryside, sharing the run of the land with all manner of crawling or flying organisms, did nothing to facilitate her already fragile situation.

Families of insects were used to descending upon our home during those humid holiday months. Our parents used to glue this fly tape to the roof of the kitchen. It descended like the sticky yellow tongue of a crapaud ending just above the center isle in a rolled up red ball. I am not sure what attracted the insects to such an unflattering thing but they landed and remained fixed there until discarded. I also remember the ‘chinee’ chalk

that Mummy would use to draw around her precious sweet breads and corn pone, to poison the ants before they could get to the food. In that heat, the insects invaded.

At that time, all around the house “Jack Spaniards,” more commonly called “jeps,” had built nests, fixing them to the red beams of the structure with a viscous fluid that resembled molasses and solidified quickly into arms. The nests looked the ashy grey colour of moldy white bread with holes bored into the whole structure. They hung all about like stalactites.

Unbeknownst to us there was another large nest that extended for metres in the lawn near the water tanks. The trees in the orchard skirted the edge of it and danced like a shouter Baptist lady in white head dress would around a field of colourful and flaming candles. The fig trees stood lazy to one corner shadowing where the nest stretched its crumbling tentacles over the “soak-away.” The ‘caraili’ tree seemed untouched by its proximity to its roots; the bumpy yellow fruit waving meticulously in the breeze, spilling red, bittersweet seeds, onto the fecund earth. Daddy was dragging on those worn rubber boots of his and take his ‘swiper’ and machete down the hill to manage the growth of the elephant grass, which grew beyond the nest.

It might have been between our rustling in the shiny tear drop leaves and red full to bursting bulbs of the Jamaican plum tree, and our dashing past the fields of corn to the “fat pork” tree in the backyard that Safiya got stung by the “jep.” It must have been brought in on the ribbon of wind that rose off the tops of the corn plants, bringing with it little flecks of herb seed and turning the large graceless yellow flowers on their heads. Or it may have caught her unawares while climbing the guava tree and chasing the

kiskedee's yellow tail. But either way she got stung. Twice. I remember her bawling and Mummy worrying about her swelling 'like ah balloon' until Uncle Brian caught her by the wrist and rubbed raw onion unto the spot. The swelling abated, in the way that boiling water calms its dance when the fire is killed.

But that wasn't the end of it. The second time that she got stung it was by an army of ants. We were playing "ten stoops and run fuh yuh life" and she stooped right into that nest that we hadn't listed on our mental catalogue. She sprung up like she had fire in her "bamsi," squealing. Just one year and two weeks apart and frequently mistaken for twins, I trotted beside her unsure of what to do; in as much anguish as she was. She did swell up 'like ah balloon' that time. But our play that day was not cut prematurely because after she had tablespoonfuls of antihistamine poured down her throat and the affected spots lathered in Petroleum Jelly Vaseline, she trumped right back outside to play with me until the kaleidoscope of lights of the setting sun was swallowed by night as promised.

It was not unlike the camaraderie we shared as was routine as we sat in the back of the old hatchback, after Mummy and Daddy bought us our favourite B's coconut ice-cream from that cart stationed at the noisy bend in Charlotte Street across from Rosary Boy's R.C, the sun setting behind us as we headed East. Just as we sat in quiet sharing eating the ice-cream with identical licks and bites; we plod through life at parallels paces, matching the tempo of the other so that we finish satisfied and together.

MALARIA FEVER



- 1) *“Boil one spoon of ashes, settle and strain; add one slice of rough skin lemon with skin, pulp and seed to a few branches of lemon grass; boil over. Take ½ teacup in the morning and ½ teacup at night. Continue treatment until recovery.*
- 2) *Zebapique leaves soaked in Vermouth. Take ½ wine glass three times daily before and after meals.*
- 3) *Deep sea water, added to sour orange; bottle and hang on a tree for sun and dew. Take a wine glass on mornings.*
- 4) *Wintersmith tonic destroys malaria.”*

The heat of the fever was unbearable. I had already sweated through my Kimono-styled pyjama with the little embroidered dragon on the left breast. I lay in the sunken living room, balled on the love seat, only seeing shadows. My parents fluttered over me, their dark forms transient and melding with the little images of fireflies and points of light that floated across my vision. Mummy’s hands were cold to my throbbing head and her mutterings inaudible gibberish. She might as well have been speaking the patois of her childhood that she refused to teach me as that was the language that my parents spoke to prevent our impressionable ears intruding on their conversations.

I remember that the wind that day came through the louvers with such a force that the music it made, as it stretched its way into the belly of the house, sounded much like the plummeting water of the Maracas waterfall. The sunlight that day did not warm me

but blinded me with a second sun reflected on the glass of the window directly above my head.

“They say it’s a rare bacterial infection...,” I managed to make out Daddy saying, his voice charged with concern.

“Chut. Chut. Shh.Shh” Mummy said reaching for her blessed oil, “Why you always sick baby? You come tuh give Mummy trouble?”

As I recall that incident I laugh at how, if looked at collectively, my childhood experiences would seem a chain of misfortunes. I wouldn’t say that I was an accident prone child but I had my fair share of childhood mishaps. It was and still is a running joke between my best friend Yohance and I that every year since my birth I have had a “new complication to add to my list of already existing complications.” If it wasn’t an allergy, it was some infection, or some complication that they had missed at my premature birth that returned to haunt me and if it wasn’t either of those it was my adventurous spirit that got me into some “commess.”

Once I got stuck in a guava tree that I was warned not to climb, for a quarter of an hour. Again, the old adage that mother’s had “goat mout,” their words having the power of prophecy, was proven correct. That fateful afternoon I slipped down three levels, gashing my thighs on the descent, and then a broken branch caught a thread in my underwear and I was swinging there for fifteen minutes. Served me right for wearing a skirt I thought. Then Mummy’s other words replayed in my head: “always wear good

underwear when you leave the house you never know in what state you'll be brought back home." I looked at the pink frilly panties that I was wearing and threw my hands up in my usual gesture of defeat.

And they were fifteen agonizing minutes of praying that the person who discovered me hung on the hill like the post-modern Jesus Christ would not be one of the village boys. But fate it seems is not without a sense of humor and it was indeed one of the village boys that had to come pluck me from my perch, with an annoyingly pleased smile on his face. I don't remember saying thanks as I ran down the driveway never looking back. And I chose to forget his name.

Then there was the time that I suffered "ah serious buss head" after chasing my younger sister under the extension of our center isle. Mummy was cooking and trying to shoo us away by waving her fingers feebly as she tried balancing mitten and pot in a cloud of steam. "Allyuh! Doh play in de kitchen, I said!" she would squeal; sweetly reprimanding as only she could. But my sister and I were in our little imaginary play world and didn't heed her words. My younger sister, probably two or three at the time, and considerably smaller in stature, ducked under the center isle and I followed. She emerged gracefully from underneath but I didn't, misjudging the distance between my crown and the edge of the wood. I came up fast and received a sound blow to the middle of my head. It bled for what seemed like ages. My cousins, who were in the living room watching the "Muppets Show", heard my cry and came to survey the disaster. Daddy then had to drive me to the nearest doctor some miles away in St. Helena. On the way home I remember he bought me an ice cream cone and I ate some and decided to save the rest for

my sister. What she got was liquid cream and a softened cone, but I cradled it in sweaty palm and offered it like myrrh to a deserving princess. My cousins eyed my bandaging with something akin to awe.

No more than three days later I skinned all the tissue off my knees while chasing my cousins around the house and slipping ungracefully on the wet terrazzo. Mummy spent the rest of the week yelling behind me to stop running because the bandages and gauze would fall off. But there was no stopping me when it was the July-August holidays and the pollen in the air spelled freedom and the wind was laden with the scents of the tiny ripe “gros-michel” figs and the jump-up-and-kiss-me flower. It was time to get up to mischief with cousins.

STROKE



“Take three hot baths with half boiled leaves and bark of the Bay leaf tree and a sweat. Drink a hot cup of tea of the same bath water before bath. Take a sweat. Repeat for three successive days. After baths anoint body with diluted Bengue’s balm mixed with Soft candle melted over the fire. After bath treatment body should be anointed with Puncheon rum added to grated Nutmeg or Nutmeg mace.”

We would arise to the chortle of delivery trucks outside our bedroom window. Workers hollering greetings across the backyard their booming voices ricocheting within

the tautness of the chilly morning air. This was morning in Morvant, while the family supermarket was being prepared for business.

As the trucks would bring in the morning's fresh produce the smell of cedar, from the lazy trees that lined the river bank, permeated the air. We would all tumble out of bed. Ayanna, as graceful as an egret digging for grass-glazed treasure, would stretch her long legs into the kitchen. Jamila, her round face beaming with a bright smile already and bandana in her hair, tottered out of bed. Tamika, small then, arose silently. My sister and I, like the twins everyone thought we were, climbed out at the same time and promptly began to fight for the use of the white sink posted onto the wall outside the shower. We had spent a rowdy night playing with "bedslides" where we would remove the mattresses from the beds, lay them across the double-decker from the top bunk past the lower bunk to the floor and happily roll ourselves in a tumbling whirlwind of reverie onto the cold tile beneath.

Breakfast was always the simple and frequently impractical meals that we had mastered like cheese-paste with a snatch of ketchup or 'pizza' - white "Kiss" bread slices with cheese, frankfurter pieces and ketchup piled haphazardly on, and not necessarily in that order. There were two possible destinations after breakfast – the mystifying supermarket and its squadron of trucks or the river.

The supermarket was where we would head first. With its heavy steel door that whirled to life as we peered into the seemingly eternal darkness at its bowels. The shelves of products stood at attention in the gloom until the lights were turned on. Glittering dust particles were always imprisoned in portly gusts of air as they were simultaneously

warmly embraced by a solitary ray of sun. This vision in our memories will always be symbolized by the faintly omnipotent scent of bulbous onions in netted orange sacks. We five would parade through this neverland until Annette would coax us, from behind her small desk with the grand calculator that whirred and spewed paper, unto another trip outside by bestowing upon us free snacks.

We all loved to collide into Uncle James on our way out. My Uncle James- a wonderfully sculpted mammoth of a man with a mind and heart just as big and brilliant. He would always heft me, throwing me upwards toward the morning sky. And I was never worried as his large arms were as a basket that calmly collected my person as I cascaded downward. Uncle James also loved to tease us with his driving. We enjoyed riding in the trays of the trucks when they had been emptied and would sit in anticipation as Uncle made the wheels move in reverse. He would always pretend to be driving us over the cliff that overhangs the river. He never did. But our squeals would ring through the valley with the variety of pitch and intensity of a professional string quartet. Oh, those carefree sounds in our minds would remind us of the nights that we would go for longer drives in the tray, over the Lady Young Road past the lookout, where we could feel the moist mountain-night air on our little noses and be mystified by the lights of the city down below that were always winking at us.

The river would then beckon to us. With pants rolled up or skirts modestly knotted between legs, we would trot down the slate slope barefooted, occasionally colliding into one another like young goats. We would explore the ruins of the farm that my cousins' grandfather had once run. I could smell the stories that lay untold there and I

would finger the moss that hugged the stone walls that were smoothed by years of exfoliation and floods.

The river was sluggish and shallow. Safe. With an assortment of plastic bags and the one fish net on a red metal handle that we owned, we would plow into the water to catch us some fish. These fish, no bigger than our little fingers, would be placed in an irregularly rectangular fish tank and left out in the gallery as Aunty Annie lured us inside with her “split peas” soup that I still insist is the best in the world. We would eat, and at intervals, press our noses against the glass of the tank leaving a mosaic of oily smudges on its face. As the afternoon wore on the fish would be freed.

Evenings were spent pushing each other on a rope swing with wooden seat, whose location would change depending on our mood. But it would be laid to rest in the same place each day: under the red-painted stairs leading upward to the gallery, tied to the railings at night.

...The fish net has been lost for what seems like ages. No longer the repository of our childish dreams. The fish tank broken and discarded. The lone shard of glass left is a mirror reflecting my flustered expression as I try to salvage everything, even the little minutiae that I remember about it. Its cold sharpness, a memo that I can't...

Days at Aunty Patsy's in Barataria with Aisha and Marlon were just as fun. Aisha and Marlon were the first to get Cable. So we would all huddle in the living room to watch television. Then, Aisha was particularly proud of her accessibility to Batman.

Shortly thereafter we round the small yard several times, occasionally stopping at the metal swing set with the see-saw and play a while there. Distracted, we would next approach the dog kennel cautiously and amuse ourselves with our own fearful anticipation for Aisha's pet dog was particularly harmless.

That's what I loved about Barataria- its characteristic scent a mixture of wet dog, Aunty's boiling pots and drying concrete. At that time we would enter the bedroom from the garage. There was a double decker here too, but there we never played 'bedslides'. We could usually be found cavorting wildly down the street in this, our urban haven.

...I have no idea what has become of the old "swing-set-with-see-saw" at Aisha's. The last glimpse I had of it, it was rusted and no longer swung freely with the wind. And they have long since moved away leaving behind a visible reminder of the sore spot in my heart that throbs when the images in my mind correlate negatively with what I really see moaning in front of me ...

Next all the cousins would descend upon my house in Talparo for the July-August holidays. My mother was the only teacher amongst her sisters and brothers and therefore the only one with time off to look after us. Those were wonderfully crazy times, with the house budding with chatter, a stark comparison to the other more silent seasons of the year. We would stay up late playing board games, watching rented movies or making some concoction of ours in the kitchen under the careful supervision of Mummy.

We would race the sun as it rose and be outside before it had fully opened its eyes, heading straight for the fruit trees. Mummy never had to worry about breakfast. By nine o'clock we had fed ourselves with cherries, "governor" plums, oranges, pommecythere and portugals and would return to lounge on the porch with our bellies distended and our cheeks smattered with juices.

At this hour Daddy could be found gardening and "hoeing." There was a depressed plot of land on the side of the house, where he was growing a patch of pumpkins, which was surrounded by a concrete wall. The concrete wall extended well above the crest of the land and mounted there was a slab of cured wood about twelve inches in diameter and quite long. It extended from one end of the wall to the other. We would enliven our day by standing on this slab of wood singing "seven Usa nah nah nah nah nah!" -some unmentionable song from Cable that we had distorted with good and innocent cheer. We would bounce on this-our bridge to entertainment while singing. Once we tired of this we would take Daddy's planting trays, the fiercely black rectangular ones where seedlings in miniature garbage bags are stored before they are transplanted, to the grassy mount toward the back of the house. We would sit, three or so at a time, in the trays and maneuver ourselves down the hill at full tilt. When we still needed to satisfy our need to be rough-and tumble we would enter one at a time into our spaceship- Flash. It was a barrel left behind by Aunty Trusha when she sent down some things from the States for all of us. We cut a window in the cardboard and then climbed in and were promptly rolled around until we screamed for mercy.

The silent land, overrun in some places with the thorny “timari” that flourished in the humidity, remembers kites and little feet in ditches. Left to our own devices we would eventually abandon the trays and the run with wild abandon through wet turf, mincing our steps where the “timari” snapped, brandishing grass swords and our imaginations like shields and sealing the supple ground with our imprints of euphoria. We would soon be losing the kites that we got to fly; those delicate crepe paper and brightly-colored-cockeye-broomed structures. The others, possibly unsound for some faulty engineering, never felt inclined to make love to the buffeting wind and stayed grounded forever. But that never mattered, what was important was all that open space, free time and friends.

...What is left of that plank of wood, upon which we spent hours competing with Broadway, is just now a splinter of wood. Its purpose has changed so many times with its façade over the years that at times I forgot what it originally symbolized. Some days while I “clothes-peg” pieces of clothing onto the line I squint at the spot, now a patio, where it used to rest and swirl my vision into a play of what used to be...

And when the sun’s orange clad herald loudly proclaimed his retiring from the sky, like the village madman, we would walk down the quiet countryside road chasing chickens, gazing at the oxen and stumbling out of the way of the rare passing car. On other evenings we were lucky to follow the excitement of the hunters getting ready for a night on the hunt as they walked onto the muddy track with their helmets lit and “pot-hongs” in check. And with their airs of anticipation guiding our steps we would then walk

and wait in hope that old Mr. Tribbs would have a treat of sugarcane slices for us on our way back.

...Like I said before, I have no idea what has become of the old “swing-set-with-see-saw” at Aisha’s. The last glimpse I had of it, it was rusted and no longer swung freely with the wind. And they have long since moved away. The fish net has been lost for what seems like ages. The fish tank broken and discarded. Mr. Tribbs has long since left this mortal world, dying from a stroke, leaving me only a bitter taste in my mouth. What is left of that plank of wood, upon which we spent hours competing with Broadway, is a splinter of wood – a souvenir for those who’s hearts refuse to forget. Like mine....

And into your conscious thoughts, hands and the vacant nibs of pens memory, and the love and fondness that it carries with it, bleeds.

HEART TROUBLES



“Heart troubles can be caused by many things such as overwork of the body and brain,

High and low blood pressure and indigestion. The treatment is the white of an egg with

Two teaspoons of honey and two teaspoons of aloes once per day

For three days each week for three weeks.

*I Obie seed divided into four, grate 1 piece and draw with boiled water, drink
once per day for*

Nine days.”

Keston was my first love and the first person I trusted with my emotions. Our paths crossed when we were both on the brink of a new phase in our juvenile lives. We were both months away from sitting the Common Entrance exam. The exam that would soon separate us as it made the possibility of us being placed in different schools on different sides of the country more plausible.

It was at this point of ambiguity that I noticed him. He was not just one of those nameless and faceless boys across the fence at our brother primary school that unwillingly crossed the threshold to have joint classes with us on evenings and over the weekends. No, he had a face that was unforgettable. Ample brown lips, warm hazel eyes and a smile that was the harbinger of a fluttery feeling in the chest. When his smile lit his eyes, which always searched for mine, the blood vessels in my face would gush and glow. He was my little singing cherub, my partner in musical crime, who spoke to the artist in me.

We would spend snatches of time, when none of the other girls or boys were paying attention enough to remind us that we had to pretend to hate each other, comparing notes. We were passionate singers and were participating in the National Music Festival. We both had integral parts to play in our school's success that year. He

would sing, unfalteringly, the words to “*Come leh we go, Cock in de tree a Crow*” and I would croon, unsteadily ever so often, “*Midnight*” and “*Frog from Dover*”. We were each other’s critics, and sometimes, sitting in appreciative silence was all the comment we made.

He and his sisters lived adjacent to my cousins in Morvant. Following the course of the river, you could find there modest home squatting close to the edge a cliff and swathed within a stand of coconut trees. The girls both went to my school. Daddy would offer to drop them home on evenings and those were some of the happiest moments of my life.

I would sit on the front seat with my sister and Keston would be festooned between his sisters’ laps in the backseat. I would look him in the eye occasionally, via the rear view mirror, as we blended our voices in song. We would sing even when no one else in the car cared to hear or was oblivious to our euphoria for they were lost in their own daydream. The sun would always be setting behind us as we wound around the circumference of the Queen’s Park Savannah. He was my boy, amber, glowing in firelight. Smiling at me with his mind and loving me with his song. How we felt though, remained unuttered. I don’t believe we knew what to say.

I passed for the school of my choice, Bishop Anstey High School, and he passed for a school that was an hour, at most, away. But, for eleven year olds that was a yawning

chasm of time and distance. And we also were not assertive enough to save numbers or record addresses. I knew where he lived right? We could make new friends.

The last time I saw him in person he was prancing across the bridge at Morvant after a brief visit. As he waved goodbye, he hollered, as a horrible afterthought, that: “Oh! I’m moving away!” To where? I wondered and at that point he didn’t offer any answers. Hopelessly inventive twelve-year-old I was, with my mind drugged with the romantic misconceptions of Romeo and Juliet and the immortal optimism of the phantom of the Opera, I believed that we would find each other again and that the bond would outlive my fears.

The change required to survive the trials and tribulations of high school plagued me with its excitement. I became distracted with the world. Keston soon became a shadow of hummed chords, until one day I came across one of his younger sisters. She was a new student and serendipity would have it, if you can call it that, that I would become her Prefect. One morning, while adjusting her classmates in line for assembly, I allowed her to recognize me. We exchanged awkward but warm smiles. And after the formalities and congratulations I asked of Keston all the while attempting to hide my eagerness behind fluttering eyelashes.

“Oh! I’m sorry .I thought you knew. He died. He drowned a while ago. It was on the news” were the words that she hurled carelessly at me.

She seemed unmoved, and I was struck dumb, any fitting response curling asleep on my tongue behind quivering lips. I smiled and walked away. It hurt. The pain was hot

and grating at my chest. I'd somehow thought he'd always be there. That boy I barely knew. I had always known that the sea was a selfish lover but never that she would betray me by taking something of my own. I wished then that life was ambiguous when it came to death.

Even now I think about him, not all the time, but sporadically. And it is bittersweet each time. Have you ever been happy and melancholy concurrently? It's a wretched sensation. You feel as if an invisible, schizophrenic undertow is tearing you in two while pulling you under at the same time. When I drive around the savannah at sunset and I pass that one spot, near the Botanical Gardens, I look into the rear view mirror in order to catch a glimpse of my boy, amber. But I can only see him in the rear view of my mind. And, if I listen closely I can always hear him singing in that sweet low voice that had just been breaking into male maturity. Singing the same ballad over and over again.

What could have been? I guess I'll keep wondering. But that song and its constancy comforts me in this nebulous world. As do my memories of David....

INDIFFERENT FEELINGS



"To relieve indifferent feelings in the body drink the tea of the male Malomen."

It is twilight. You have been surfing a while. I sit on the unforgiving concrete of the bight and watch you from a distance.

Oh twilight ! So full of romance when the last gasping breaths of the sunlight greet the sobering hues of the night. As the dusk heightens, a theatrical sorrow rises with it. The breath; a signal to return home. The coconut vendor a little ways off is a collage of emotions- being phlegmatic, bothered and melancholy all at the same time. He is reclined slackly on a tottering bench with a newspaper sprawled across the width of his barrel-shaped torso. Maybe he hated the onset of night as much as I loved it. But not tonight. Tonight I hate it with the intensity of a rabid dog. Today this transient quarter-hour is to engage conclusions, not beginnings. Tonight you leave me.

Over the sound of the waves I hear the living sounds of the airport. I see the lights on the runway on the promontory a mile away. You wanted to come to the water one last time. You loved the water as much as you loved adventure. I watch as you slip off your board and are embraced by the crest of a wave. You emerge with a song of praise on your lips and your features, are dotted with water; that look like beads of gold and opal when touched by the failing light. You wave and proceed to wade out of the water toward me.

Over the past two weeks in Boddentown the sun has colored you orange. Your hair has become blonder; the combination of pale hair and tanned skin making your eyes even more conspicuous. Those eyes were the first thing I noticed about you.

You pick a hibiscus and cup my chin in one hand and place the flower in my hair with the other. You smile through a shroud of pain; the expression in your eyes retreating with resignation, as the annoying drone of a plane flying overhead interrupts your

nostalgia. We stare at each other in silence then the tension dissolves into fits of hiccupping laughter that distills into the chilly air.

You shiver and huddle close as you deposit your slight frame on the sand. I lie backwards on your stomach. You play with my raised clavicle and I am reminded that you always knew where I wanted to be touched and that I would soon be without the gentle flutter of your finger tips.

A dog howls in the distant village. It howls so painfully it almost seems as if his cries are being emitted by a human. And as we struggle, too fatigued, trying to cross that tumultuous deluge between us, it howls louder as if trying, as we were, to tell each other how much we loved. Reproaching each other and preparing ourselves for imminent abandonment.

That July in the Caribbean was a hot, brooding month. The days were endless and humid. The springs retreated into the earth and blackbirds ploughed through struggling weeds scavenging for worms. The trees were laden with fruits of many colors and the Poui tree was in full bloom littering the ground with yellow blossoms like a madman throwing away gold pieces. They could be seen on the hillsides and hilltops like explosions of fire-petals. That particular summer built up in all a new enchantment, a vigor and an adventurous palette for the farfetched and absurd. That July heightened all emotion, passion and gossip.

The market place. The repository of everything. Where a person's private life is stripped, dissected and laid to dry in the unrelentingly public, fruity air.

The tongues in the market wagged almost continuously fulminating with the full range of human emotions; betrayal, fickleness, suffering, viciousness, frailty, strength. The voices clacked like castanets on the street corners, under sagging, tired awnings and fluttering flags and cardboard signs advertising all manner of produce. They grouped like atoms. Around the yam-seller's barrow, around the baskets of wilting cabbages. Voices trembled interspersing the hawking and my story.

“Ah see she wid dat Amber boy. De white foreignah...”

“You hear how dey get ketch behind de jump-up-an-kiss me tree?...”

“Oi Missis, doh mind dat! Dey was holdin' hands in broad daylight near de jetee de odder night. Dey getting bol' face eh?...”

“Oui! Lissen hear wha' Braddah Clayton say...”

Behind the pocked visage and stale laugh; behind the wrinkled skin and calloused hands; amongst braids and locked tresses; between the young and old bittersweet words were jettisoned.

“Ah hear he geh tek up fo' ganja...”

“Daz lie. You know pohlice doh touch dem foreignahs. Dey could come and do wha'ever dey want...”

“Wham? She cyah hol' hands wid a broddah? Ah dark one too? Like Claude ova dey?Mmmmm . Dark like a sahel warrior...”

“Steups. She just like she faddah. Gorn away an' come back speakin proper wid a woman de color ah cauliflowah hangin' on tuh he arm...”

Over wash tubs in noisome backyards; under trees with forlorn leaves
succumbing to heat; like the crackle of a radio amongst ramshackle hoardings of wood
and corrugated galvanize- they spoke.

They spoke about me. They spoke of David.

I had stepped out of my tent at the Farmer's Market grounds and waltzed right
into David. I didn't quite run into his person, but his "vibe." I was scuttling amongst the
empty stalls trying to beat the traffic to the showers. The rest of the officers on the
exercise were still asleep; tired from the impromptu PT and triage session from the
previous night. I bumped my knee on a solitary bench; hissed at the inanimate object for
its 'audacity' and as I returned to an upright position, our eyes locked. His eyes were
enchanted. They were aquamarine hued with a yellow circle around the irises and orange
flecks adorning the rest of it.

He was about fifteen feet away but his eyes shone. He smiled and I sought refuge
in the showers. When I was done I clambered over some fencing and ran through the
corral to the open shed for quiet meditation. And there he was, resting on his arms staring
upwards at nothing in particular. I stepped lightly on the threshold of the shed.

"Salut," I said.

"Sah-lute? What is that? An abbreviation for salutations?"

He spoke with a twisted accent, the bastard child of American jargon and the
British slur.

I laughed: “Maybe they are connected linguistically. But I meant salut as in “hi” in French.”

“Ah!” He chuckled sheepishly while propping himself on his elbows to appraise me better.

Suddenly, he sprang to his feet and caught me by the hand.

“The name’s David!”

I smiled and timidly shook his hand. He looked inquisitively at my hand that was temporarily immured within his grasp and frowned. My expression mirrored his.

“What?”

Bewildered, he muttered: “Oh nothing... you just have the most beautiful hands I’ve ever seen and an exquisite smile....”

I was caught.

David was like a powerful tide caught in a schizophrenic stupor. He would come in sweet and low and unsure; caressing soft and mellow. Then he would retreat silently to his depth at times; his eyes like empty husks. We spent endless days diving in Sting Ray city, swimming out to the reefs near Lee Trace and reaping sea grapes on random walks along the limestone pathways that criss-crossed the island like arid, thirsty veins.

Sure we were different. But I was hybrid; half of him and there we had a connection. Sure we stood out like sore thumbs. But I loved his eyes; tired eyes. And how he always jerked as if startled when he was about to laugh at something I would say. I loved the hyperbolic parabola that his shoulders made, curving around to comfort me. Elders and close friends walked slouched as if they were waiting to be hit; their

confidence gently wafting asleep in their balled fingers. David and I knew how they all felt; the villagers, parents, even the strange passerby, but we folded our raw emotion and naivety around us like a shawl with which to parry stones.

We did this as long as time and circumstance allowed. Until the rushing water of two realities made converging rivulets that drowned the emotional landscape that we had made our own.

His parents all at once decided that it was best to leave the islands and he left some days later. My return date loomed cheerlessly. I returned home and promptly wrote him a letter. He never answered and I never bothered to try again. Why do the good people always leave? Too many of my loved ones do.

Consequently, my heart is well versed in letting go and beginning a new sojourn. I will search insatiably for ideal love as my hopeless romantic Bengali friend Rahman once put it after reading my palm. And as he also put it- I will forever be surrounded by many options.

See? There's another in the distance that seems enamored with my magic. Hopefully he will fall in love with this magic heart and never leave. And if he leaves maybe this good guy would come back soon. Three days from now. Two days from now.

Tomorrow. "*Kaalke*" as Rahman says. Tomorrow.

SUNBURN



“Rub the affected area with the cool side of the

Aloes plant.

Eat the pieces of what is left.”

It had not rained since January.

Feel. We come off the plane in May after flying in on a turbulent gust of wind that rushed us home into warbling heat. The airport air is enveloped in a pulsing, nebulous shroud of dust. I walked out of the revolving doors to have my senses allayed with oppression. The air grew fingers that stretched taut across the skin and clung to the face like dew-slicked cobwebs. The trees choreograph a dance of dipping leaves and cracking veins to passersby. The day is hot and brooding. Taxis crawl in, appearing suddenly, as if emerging from under the heavy cloak of a dying mirage. Where was the oasis? Somewhere between nowhere and goodbye. This was the drought of ‘07.

Look. The once manicured six acres of lawns at home are dried to a sickly ochre. They crunch hungrily underneath bare feet; no amount of morning dew can soften these perennial leaves. The trees are drooping, like they are trying to embrace the ground, as if both trying to bolster each other up for the struggle ahead. Wind does not bring a comforting sound, just the cacophony of scratching over a landscape that is two toned: the tops of the trees a dull green and their lower boughs and foliage browned by layers of dust. We are lucky to have some fruits still. Safiya salvages a solitary portugal and, because it has not imbibed much water during its development, it is sickly sweet to the taste and bursts promptly on the tongue.

Listen. Amidst this monotony there is an incessant cawing. We hear it as the sun drags itself to its summit in the sky and at night; the only time of day that is cool enough to take a full breath in. It is the call of a peacock. Beautiful. He spreads his plumage, like one would nimbly pry open a Chinese fan, and stands still. I think it is less for entertainment than to remind us that beauty can emerge even from adversity and the brutally hideous, gasping cracks of barren earth. Where has he come from? We are not sure. He sits perched on the verandah of the neighbor's house and peers into our yard. I believe he is the biomass of our hope. Our hopes for the endless possibilities of the summer. Our hopes for answers. Our hopes for water, rain and long life.

One hot, uneventful afternoon Safiya squeals and daddy swears that he hadn't seen it before. There is a mass of twigs, grass and grub hanging from the bathroom door. Hanging by a thin thread of green that looks like it may have once been the main vein of a palm tree leaf. Most likely the birds trying to escape the onslaught of the heat outside by building nests indoors. I lie on the bed dreaming of Sidojiwe in Zimbabwe when

Daddy's heavy footsteps echo throughout our quiet hall as he ambles on his way toward the bathroom. He halts in front of my door; wearing a long towel with African print and brandishing a blue broom with its bristles facing skyward. He smiles a huge smile and Safiya giggles. I laugh as I transfer the image of my father, with his dark skin glimmering from sweat, into my picture of the plains of Zim; his broom transformed into a spear. Soon, I can just make out the indistinct stalking of a black cat in the distance.

We eat as a family on one of the four porches. Cabbages and rice. I stare blankly through the bald spaces in the foliage hoping no one walks into my view of the trace and disrupts my impression that we are alone. Mummy nurses a sore ankle and daddy christens it Kiki. Safiya chortles at the fact that an appendage should have a name. Shortly the juice of the "julie" mango is rolling down our chins and the yellow hairs bristling between our teeth. The night wind is misleadingly moist and at first I think it may rain, but the sky is clear of any clouds and I can see Cassiopeia too plainly. Would that queen in the sky turn herself upright and let her tears fall? Moisten my lips and loosen my tongue so I can sing? The "w" shape remains. I look at the expanse of the sky-orange and fiery red as if challenging the moon with a perpetual sunset. It is like a Phoenix flying by and brushing my cheek with the stardust that trailed after its tail.

Once again, time moves by slowly as we sit trying not to move. Heat seems to press everything down into stoicism. The wind is heavy laden; the trees sway as if in limbo, animals lay still as if playing dead may bring them water. We should do a rain dance I think. Daddy tugs at the dark tank outside. He calls me to help him. Pull here, push there, line up here he orders weakly; his voice distorted as it is snatched to elsewhere by the wind and struggles through an opaque wall of dust. A little water

trickles out of the opening in the side of the tank and disappears immediately into the navel of the earth. He is soon triumphant in silencing that thief that draws our last liquid away from us as we hear the first trickles of water in one of the tanks in the cavity of the walls. A lizard ambles by as if keeping watch. The peacock's call from the trace then sounds like the desperate caw of a seagull tangled with the mewing of a lost cat.

After a month it rains and the Trace is like a sluggish river of asphalt, little waves tumbling downwards and over each other heading nowhere. You could glare down the length of it on those hot days after rainfall and dizzy yourself up by following the waves of steaming air off the melting, oozing tar. If there was water still laying there from a morning drizzle, circular rainbows would wiggle around a neutron of sunlight. A restless amoeba fighting the inevitable.

After that moment, I pivot between sleep and wakefulness, a smile on my face. I hear the rains outside, bouncing off the leaves of palms, sounding like sand swooshing through a time glass. Temporary. The water gurgles in the roof above and I picture it bubbling and popping. And I hug the pillow tighter and close my eyes; expectant. I think: This drought brought us together for it reminded us that love and the company of family was all we needed to survive hardship.

To me the after-rain scent is always a mixture of the aromas of chamomile tea and fresh fish. Making me think of the sea and fishnets. Waves lapping lazily on the side of a boat fragile and shaped like a leaf. The sun beating down and pressing you into its bowels, the 'lats' like whale's ribs and blocking the view of the sun sporadically. Here. Not here. Like a signal from Heaven saying live or die in peace.

SCARS & BITES



“Rub affected area with lime and salt,

Condes crystals or Epsom salt.

Apply the spittle of a dog to your wounds.”

Daddy was the first to tell me about the value of a dog’s spit. He told me that the quickest way that he chose to heal bruises and “white mans,” what we call cuts where just the upper layer of skin is removed exposing white tissue beneath, was to have his pet jet black dog lick it. I was never able to test this hypothesis for I never had any pets. My parents tried us with fish, which we killed within three days, from over-feeding. The closest I came to having pet dogs was playing with Sarah’s and the other children’s dogs on the private trace, but I became wary of them after the Bali’s Chihuahua bit me on the ankles, leaving four light brown lines on my leg for a while after it healed.

Life was sweet then. With all of us from the three houses collecting on the crest of hill near the Stevenson’s in the afternoon sun and playing until sundown. I can still hear

the distant crack of a cricket bat and laugh at how prone we were to losing yet another ball. Daddy always found them some time later in some unsuspecting clump of elephant grass when it had been long forgotten. Its discovery would be well celebrated in prodigal-son-returning-home style. I remember sessions of “rounders” where we batted “Chubby” soft-drink bottles with our palms and skittered unsystematically between bases, made up of our shod shoes and “rubber ding dings.” Someone was bound to lose a side of a slipper in the melee.

We would have sack-races in the backyard, racing everyone in crocus bags, which once held chicken feed. I can see us now, running and lunging off the steps to the laundry and running full tilt to fling ourselves off the top of the storage-cube for the tanks onto the sponge-feathery grass below. We would then be heading to the pen where we could be found timidly reaching under crazy hens to retrieve eggs, one person intruding the hen’s privacy; the other waiting to hurriedly shut the pen if the other was attacked, getting fingers entangled in chicken-proof-wire. I remember rolling down the hill near the “putigal” trees adjoining the pen and retreating inside nursing minor cuts and a scratch attack and racing up the stairs and sharing the shower with my sister; spending more time wasting water and laughing than anything else.

Myriad and wonderful and green days were spent with family by the river along with the other children on the private trace. Edward would make up some dubious fairytale about the soap tree having supernatural power and fabricate improbable hypotheses about the rocks in the water turning into Caimans under the shade of the Caimetre fruit tree. This was all in an attempt to bar us from the crazy farmer’s territory across the river and his private space.

Now the pool near Sarah's is empty and mossed over. But a luxuriant and flowering "bouganvillea" bush grows along its perimeter. What remains of the house that stood there, that was Kim's, is a stand of exposed brick and a rusted bathtub overgrown with "timari." Their remote and exposed setting made them ideal prospective victims for vandalism and Nature's wrath. A wrath that, though seemingly vicious, cleared the way for the most beautiful field of white and yellow wildflowers.

The Bali's have long since migrated taking with them their Hindu weddings and traditions and the aroma of Divali delicacies in September. The house now stands empty and sinister but provides a home for a peacock saviour. The heavy set old man in his clay and wattle house with thatched roof, which I had vowed to take a photo of, is gone and his memory lies beneath compacted dirt and a field of "sorrel" and "pigeon peas." The absence adorned with a beautiful sea of green attractively interrupted by bulbs of bright red that makes me smile just as much as the ole' house did. Those classic old plantation houses with their frieze woodwork edging the roofing are being leveled and are going, going, gone- smothered under the name of progress. Yet, their empty lots are calling again for notice but for different reasons as they are turned into an eco-sanctuary.

Even my castle of a home is showing signs of aging and scaring with time. Cracks are suddenly bursting forth on the walls. Insects float into some of the rooms, through the rotting grating of the rain guards between the ceiling and the roof, to make it their final resting place. They make one fell swoop and lay still and no resuscitation will ignite their spirits into movement again. The fireflies' light flash and dim, flash and dim, then dim forever. You can find them all crowded together under the beds; mangled legs

touching and entwining as if even in death or dying they hadn't relinquished the importance of touch and love.

At night dirty, fat water drops fall onto moist newspaper with a dull clap. Other drops slam into a red basin. I find a strange joy in watching the forms the dirt that remains after evaporation makes. Sometimes something abstract other times, a recognizable image. Certain parts of the roof look like they might cave in soon. The darkened wood, burnt by time, sags tiredly. Amongst, between, within the lats spreads a white fungus. It swells and stretches hungry fingers, holding fast like a pining lover. One part of the roof has given away now. Broken pieces point downward and agape like a giant open mouth bearing jagged teeth. But the chill of its look is obliterated by the wafts and tufts of sunlight that it allows to filter into the dark corner of the empty guest room. The corner now kissed by a dusky liquid love.

Oh the days! Soap fruit and all still can't wash my nostalgia blank for I am deft with binding my fears with the same sweet viscous bond that the Caimetre fruit tongue-tied me with. Things lost to the living world are only lost if their existence is not immortalized in the spoken word and oral tradition. Things changed are at the same time only changing into themselves or something stronger, more potent; and wise. I must leave room for change for enduring, things change with changing times and yet are not of the changing of what they were. Ever present, they are always going to be, symbolized by something else ever with me.

I use this knowledge to gather my memories to myself and bind them to my heart. And your heart too.

LAST JOURNAL ENTRY

“Nothing lives forever but the love that bears your name, love”



I believe that healing is the reversal of loss. Turn heavy footed loss on top its head and the pain it drags with it slides downwards and into the mouth of the earth. And you know the earth is well equipped to turn our refuse into something fertile. Thus, loss or being on the losing side can be used as a cure in itself. Just like salt can burn to heal. Just like lime stings to soothe. Being broken and being misunderstood isn't such a bad thing. That way expectation, which is the bane of the existence of the perfect and precise, ceases to define your limits if you no longer embrace it. Be water. Being made up of a million tiny particles like sand I can dupe time and space and travel throughout it and fit into histories as I see fit. Being liminal I can jump borders forever taking all manner of goods at any time as I desire. I get to decide who I am and where I stand at any point, because no textbook can and has defined me.

I may have to seek that definition of myself alone, but in that seeking is a truth that even words cannot encompass. A truth based on my own belief from the deepest part of my heart. That sacred space where, in the face of adversity, my spirit speaks of joy and

peace. One day I may decide to gambol in the farthest-out position of memories and thoughts. And the other I may caper down a straight and unruffled middle passage.

Liminal, I now embrace being born after an era of sweet struggle and disquieting, yet necessary, moral malaise. I am unable to experience the blues streaming from the brothels, and other homes of disrepute. I will not have the chance to walk through the derelict hoardings of wood that housed my ancestors, the theatricality of the scene articulate and cheap and caught within the lush moaning balanced precariously against the encroaching gloom. I wished to have been around when poverty, any kind, and love, any kind, was the mother of innovation and invention. Where the maddened knocking of the heart was for the creation and nurturing of society and not the clamoring of the individual for recognition.

But I have blossomed in this other time, waiting upon a healer woman's prayer, in order to transport the tears and laughter so long preserved in the tightly knotted madras head tie. And collect from her flowered skirt the herbs she keeps, the chipped glasses, cowrie shells, Bois Canot and Zebapique leaves, the petals of the hibiscus and the wicked yellow of a wild flower's petals; crushed and fermented good and strong. I hope to stain my fingers with some of this knowledge of survival. And I will hold a wake for us both. For nine nights, linked by events, like pearls on a hemp necklace, I will raise the stakes. Each night symbolizing the raising of the soul to deliverance. To deliverance on the victory night symbolizing victory of life over death.

As my mind scales tier after tier, loss slowly transforms into health. I no longer wish to be there. But to take it all with me; with the understanding that these struggles of old were for me to sail farther and faster into deeper sea water and understanding than

they did. For me to realize that I have a history of my own that would someday be someone else's envy and source of therapy. For me to realize that my story should not go untold.

I must cease my fight with time and changing place. I was always trying to arrange myself in this world and fit the world between my ribs and rising diaphragm in order to tell Life as I might. This is almost impossible. Impossible for everything is already arranged by love's and death's impenetrable laws, the selfish love of mortality and time's dancing tides.

I am aware now that the dead have flown that I may stand in a new place. A new home and order. Their struggles elevate me. I stand tall knowing that the power, strength and wisdom of the ancestors and elders are now as close as breath.

I burn the dawn with the flame of their spirits and let music pour from me as round and whole as the disc of the coconut shell. I gather the rich tones of a faltering requiem, humming psalms with lips at rest and crying- release the salt water of my healing benediction.

