An Anthology of Caribbean Poems
Table of Contents

1. Death of a comrade (1950s) ................................................................. 1
2. I clench my fist (1953) ................................................................. 2
3. Do not stare at me ................................................................. 3
4. The child ran into the sea ................................................................. 4
5. Limbo .................................................................................. 5
6. Montage ................................................................................. 7
7. Granny .................................................................................. 7
8. Examination centre ...................................................................... 8
9. Time ...................................................................................... 9
10. Island memory ............................................................................ 10
11. Talk ..................................................................................... 11
12. Coffee break ............................................................................. 12
13. Cane Gang.............................................................................. 13
14. Pearl .................................................................................... 14
15. Pineapple .............................................................................. 15
16. The knot garden ........................................................................ 17
17. The yard man: An election poem ................................................ 19
18. What we carried that carried us .................................................. 20
19. Fool-fool Rose is leaving labor-in-vain Savannah ......................... 21
20. Praise to the mother of Jamaican art ........................................... 22
21. This zinc roof ........................................................................... 23
22. For the girl who died by dancing .................................................. 24
23. Book of Genesis ........................................................................ 25
24. The warner-woman ................................................................... 26
25. The carpenter’s complaint (C.X.C recommended poem) ................... 27
26. Let this be your praise ................................................................ 28
27. Just like that ............................................................................. 29
28. Recompense ............................................................................ 31
29. Her majesty's seal ..................................................................... 32
30. Church Matters ........................................................................ 33
31. Mama’s handbag ..................................................................... 34
32. Sonny’s lettah (1980) ................................................................ 35
33. If I waz a tap natch poet .................................................................................. 38
34. To the labour party .............................................................................................. 41
35. Dutty Tough ......................................................................................................... 42
36. Noh Lickle Twang ............................................................................................... 43
37. New Scholar ......................................................................................................... 45
38. Harlem shadows (1922) ..................................................................................... 46
39. The Castaways ..................................................................................................... 46
40. Adolescence ......................................................................................................... 47
41. Last lines ............................................................................................................... 48
42. Yarn Spinner ......................................................................................................... 49
43. Cat-rap .................................................................................................................. 50
44. For forest .............................................................................................................. 51
45. I like to stay up ..................................................................................................... 52
46. The edge of night ................................................................................................. 53
47. The Bone-trip ....................................................................................................... 53
48. Iguana ................................................................................................................... 54
49. Oregon Elegy ....................................................................................................... 55
50. Last night .............................................................................................................. 57
51. Black Power April, 1970 .................................................................................... 58
52. Anger bakes ......................................................................................................... 59
53. The felling of a tree ............................................................................................. 60
54. Love After Love .................................................................................................. 61
55. The fist .................................................................................................................. 61
56. Cut language! ....................................................................................................... 62
57. Confessions of a son ............................................................................................ 63
58. To Grand... And no farewell ............................................................................... 64
59. Punctuation marks ............................................................................................... 65
60. Fishing .................................................................................................................. 66
61. The Earth is Our Friend ..................................................................................... 67
62. Poetry Caan Nyam ............................................................................................... 69
63. Wine Pon Paper ................................................................................................... 71
64. Toussaint L’Ouverture acknowledges Wordsworth’s sonnet “To Toussaint
   L’Ouverture”(2006)............................................................................................. 73
65. Foremother II: Mary Seacole .............................................................................. 74
67. Dis poem
68. Sistas Poem
69. Wailin
70. For a defeated boxer
71. On knowing someone: The epistemology of destructiveness
72. A Woman in Istanbul tells my fortune
73. Pierre
74. Fire
References
Death of a comrade (1950s)

Death must not find us thinking that we die

Too soon, too soon
Our banner draped for you.
I would prefer
the banner in the wind.
Not bound so tightly
in a scarlet fold
not sodden sodden
with your people's tears
but flashing on the pole
we bear aloft
down and beyond this dark, dark lane of rags.

Dear Comrade,
if it must be
you speak no more with me
nor smile no more with me
nor march no more with me
then let me take
a patience and a calm-
for even now the greener leaf explodes
sun brighten stone
and all the river burns.

Now, from the mourning vanguard moving on
dear Comrade I salute you and I say
Death will not find us thinking that we die.

by Martin Carter
2. **I clench my fist (1953)**

You come in warships terrible with death
I know your hands are red with Korean blood
I know your finger trembles on a trigger
And yet I curse you – Stranger khaki clad.

British soldier, man in khaki
careful how you walk
My dead ancestor Accabreh
is groaning in his grave
At night he wakes and watches
with fire in his eyes
Because you march upon his breast
and stamp upon his heart.

Although you come in thousands from the sea
Although you walk like locusts in the street
Although you point your gun straight at my heart
I clench my fist above my head; I sing my song of Freedom!
by Martin Carter
3. **Do not stare at me**

Do not stare at me from your window, lady
do not stare and wonder where I came from
Born in this city was I, lady,
hearing the beetles at six o'clock
and the noisy cocks in the morning
when your hands rumple the bed sheet
and night is locked up the wardrobe.

My hands are full of lines
like your breast with veins, lady —
So do not stare and wonder where I came from.
My hands are full of lines
like your breast with veins, lady.
and one must rear, while one must suckle life.

Do not stare at me from your window, lady.
Stare at the wagon of prisoners!
Stare at the hearse passing by your gate!
Stare at the slums in the south of the city!
Stare hard and reason, lady, where I came from
and where I go.

My hand is full of lines
like your breast with veins, lady,
and one must rear, while one must suckle life.

by Martin Carter
4. The child ran into the sea

The child ran into the sea
but ran back from the waves, because
the child did not know the sea
on the horizon, is not the same sea
ravishing the shore.

What every child wants is always
in the distance; like the sea
on the horizon. While, on the shore
nearby, at the feet of every child
shallow water, eating the edges
of islands and continents does little more,
little more than foam like spittle
at the corners of the inarticulate mouth
of some other child who wants to run
into the sea, into the horizon.

by Martin Carter
5. **Limbo**

And limbo stick is the silence in front of me
limbo

limbo
limbo like me
limbo
limbo like me

long dark night is the silence in front of me
limbo
limbo like me

stick hit sound
and the ship like it ready

stick hit sound
and the dark still steady

limbo
limbo like me

long dark deck and the water surrounding me
long dark deck and the silence is over me

limbo
limbo like me

stick is the whip
and the dark deck is slavery

stick is the whip
and the dark deck is slavery

limbo
limbo like me

drum stick knock
and the darkness is over me

knees spread wide
and the water is hiding

limbo
limbo like me
knees spread wide
and the dark ground is under me

donw
donw
donw
and the drummer is calling me

limbo
limbo like me

sun coming up
and the drummers are praising me

out of the dark
and the dumb gods are raising me

up
up
up

and the music is saving me

hot
slow
step

on the burning ground.

by Kamau Brathwaite
6. Montage

England, autumn, dusk –
so different from the quarter-hour
at home when darkness drops:
there’s no flamboyant fireball
laughing a promise to return;
only a muted, lingering farewell,
and day has passed to evening.
    by Mervyn Morris

7. Granny

When Granny died
I stumbled in and out
her place, remembering
banana porridge, fumbling
her dog-eared bible,
faded bedspread,
musty cushions, hugging
memories of her love.

From the overflowing funeral
this fngled programme
is a talisman I carry
everywhere. Love is with me still.
    by Mervyn Morris
8. Examination centre

Dilapidated room,
paint peeling.
Sufferers
on edge.

The chief invigilator
gives the word.
The fingered papers rustle.

Outside the centre –
part of my recall –
trees bend and stretch
and breathe.
Winds, playful, tease.

We’re struggling here
with questions
and time
and longing
for a life we glimpse
through dust
clouding the panes.

by Mervyn Morris
9. **Time**

Not too old to feel the bile,
that back-breaking anger,
that feeling of death in my heart.
Not too old to turn on their smiles,
transparent thin things,
wanting to raise an open palm; to strike.
Not too old to watch an ancient one of them
lament the encasing of her man,
the jutting-bellied cracker, and smile . . .
Not too old to count their grave falling
like notches of God’s blessing, to say;
“Shit, I outlived you, I outlived you.”
Not too old to still my tongue,
to hum a blue gospel, while my soul
wails that old cry of motherlessness.
Not too old to dream of blood,
the taste of iron on my lips,
the swell of power in my breast.
Not too old to hear the nightriders,
to face the starched sheets of this South,
with trembling, with the heart of a child.
Not too old, not too old,
not too old, not too old.

by Kwame Dawes
10. **Island memory**  
*Flying over Montserrat*

Clear one island.  
The surf brings you softly  
to another. Stations  
of cratered mountains, clouds  
tightening around the necks  
Of these green monstrosities.  
This archipelago is a trail  
of memory. On this old path  
I find a new poem, a new  
way of seeing myself.  
These are strange pauses—  
young tender islands.  
Below, the sea is clear,  
a sharply sloping plain.  
The rippled surface like a sheet  
of writing paper waiting  
to be scratched in clean  
white trails: the remnant  
of lives written on its softness.  

by Kwame Dawes
11. **Talk**  
For August Wilson

No one quarrels here, no one has learned the yell of discontent—instead, here in Sumter we learn to grow silent, build a stone of resolve, learn to nod, learn to close in the flame of shame and anger in our hearts, learn to petrify it so, and the more we quiet our ire, the heavier the stone; this alchemy of concrete in the vein, the sludge of affront, until even that will calcify and the heart, at last, will stop, unassailable, unmovable, adamant.

Find me a man who will stand on a blasted hill and shout, find me a woman who will break into shouts, who will let loose a river of lament, find the howl of the spirit, teach us the tongues of the angry so that our blood, my pulse—our hearts flow with the warm healing of anger.

You, August, have carried in your belly every song of affront your characters have spoken, and maybe you waited too long to howl against the night, but each evening on some wooden stage, these men and women, learn to sing songs lost for centuries, learn the healing of talk, the calming of quarrel, the music of contention, and in this cacophonic chorus, we find the ritual of living.

by Kwame Dawes
12. Coffee break

It was Christmastime,
the balloons needed blowing,
and so in the evening
we sat together to blow
balloons and tell jokes,
and the cool air off the hills
made me think of coffee,
so I said, “Coffee would be nice,”
and he said, “Yes, coffee
would be nice,” and smiled
as his thin fingers pulled
the balloons from the plastic bags;
so I went for coffee,
and it takes a few minutes
to make the coffee
and I did not know
if he wanted cow’s milk
or condensed milk,
and when I came out
to ask him, he was gone,
just like that, in the time
it took me to think,
cow’s milk or condensed;
the balloons sat lightly
on his still lap.

by Kwame Dawes
13. Cane Gang

Torn from the vine from another world
to tame the wildness of the juice, assigned
with bill and hoe to field or factory, chained
by the voracious hunger of the cane

the world’s rapacious appetite for sweetness

How place names of my servitude mock me:
Eden, Golden Vale, Friendship, Green Valley,
Hermitage, Lethe, Retreat, Retirement, Content,
Paradise, Phoenix, Hope, Prospect, Providence

Each with the Great House squatting
on the highest eminence
the Sugar Works overlooking
my master’s eye unyielding
the overseer unblinking
    not seeing
    the black specks
    floating across
    their finely-crafted
    landscape

At shell blow assembled the broken-down bodies,
the job-lots scrambled into gangs like
beads on a string O not pearls no just unmatched
pairings the random bindings like cane trash no
not like the cane pieces laid out geometric and
given names

and burning,
    by Olive Senior
14. Pearl

Trophy wife, power object, your lustre fading from neglect, pull

that rope from around your neck. Don't you want to be free?

Come now, break the spell. Let each pearl be. Or cast them

before swine. What have you to lose? Honour, like the pearl,

is already used. Keep a single pearl for contemplation of the kingdom within,

or inject it for melancholy, madness, and other lunar folly.

Better yet, count it a blessing, save for longevity. Too many lives already lost for this string.

by Olive Senior
15. Pineapple

With yayama fruit of the Antilles, we welcomed you to our shores, not knowing in your language “house warming” meant “to take possession of” and “host” could so easily turn hostage.

Oblivious of irony, you now claim our symbol of hospitality as your own, never suspecting the retribution incarnate in that sweet flesh.

So you plant pineapples arrayed in fields like battalions not knowing each headdress of spikes is slanted to harness the sun’s explosions and store them within the fruit’s thick skin on which — unless you can peel
them off quick —
pineal eyes
watch and
wait,
counting
down.

by Olive Senior
16. The knot garden

Gardening in the Tropics, you’ll find things that don’t belong together often intertwine all mixed up in this amazing fecundity. We grow as convoluted as the vine. Or wis. And just as quickly! Only last week as our leader left for another IMF meeting, he ordered the hacking out of paths and ditches, the cutting of swaths to separate out flowers from weeds, woods from trees. But somebody (as usual) didn’t get it right (what goes on in mixed farming is actually quite hard to envision since so many things propagate underground, by division). Returning, our leader finds instead of neat trench and barricade separating species, higglers and drug barons moving into the more salubrious climes while daughters of gentry are crossing lines to sleep with ghetto boys with gold teeth and pockets full of dollars derived from songs on the hit parade. In the old days, he’d have ordered some hits himself but agencies that give aid are talking human rights now. Instead, something more subtle —like poisoned flour or raging tenement fires — is allowed to spread. While citizens are dying our leader is flying again, off to another IMF meeting in the presidential jet high above this dense tropical jungle. Meanwhile, the fertilized soil (nothing like fire to do it) bursts into new and twisted growth of such profusion by the time he returns, it proves
too impenetrable for landing.
Avoiding confusion, our leader
carries on, searching for
unencumbered skies, over the
Cayman Islands, or Liechtenstein,
or Geneva.

by Olive Senior
17. The yard man: An election poem

When bullet wood trees bear the whole yard dreads fallout from lethal yellow stone fruit,

and the yard man will press the steel blade of a machete to the trunk in effort to control its furious firing. He will dash coarse salt at its roots to cut the boil of leaves, try slashing the bark so it will bleed itself to stillness, and yet it will shoot until the groundcover is acrid coffin color, the branches dry bones. Under the leaves it lives, poverty’s turned-down image blind, naked, one hand behind one before. The yard’s first busha was overseer who could afford to cultivate poverty’s lean image, but good yard man says since we are already poor in spirit, fire for it.

by Lorna Goodison
18.  What we carried that carried us

I
SONG AND STORY

In ship’s belly, song and story dispensed as medicine, story and song, bay rum and camphor for faint way.

Song propelled you to fly through hidden other eye, between seen eyes and out of structure, hover.

In barks of destruction, story functioned as talisman against give-up death, cramped paralysed darkness.

Remaining remnant tasting all of life, blood, salt, bitter wet sugar. Ball of light, balance power,

pellucid spirit wafer without weight, ingested, taken in as nourishment, leaven within the system.

Remnant remaining rise now.

II
DANCE ROCKSTEADY

You dance upon the deck of the slaver Antonia named for the cherubic daughter of sea captain Fraser. Aye kumina.

You moved just so, in and out between wild notes sounded by the suicide followers, staying well within rock steady rhythm,

range of Kilimanjaro, length of river Limpopo. Respond again to higher rimshot and one drop ride rocksteady.

by Lorna Goodison
19. Fool-fool Rose is leaving labor-in-vain Savannah

Grass cultivation on roof top
hot sun striking it down to chaff,
Rose bundling with strong effort
scorched fodder fit for Jackass.

Rose securing sinkhole in river
with rock salt and rose quartz,
to find favor with headmaster
inspecting her morning tea sugar.

Sign on sign and she did not heed,
returning to shut-bosom mountain
spite river’s mouth spitting weeds.
Open lands with never enough room
for her to raise a modest Rose tattoo.
Soothsayers in suits well-pressed
prophesying Rose-death from fatigue,
expecting a legacy of marrow secrets
scrolled soft-tubed in yielding bones.
A quiet stranger came empty handed
to the well; Fool-fool Rose offered up
her cup, in thanks uttered key words

that turned her from housetop agriculture,
and locked off her ambition to bottom
and dam a river hole. Farewell/hosanna,
Fool-Fool Rose is leaving Labor-in-Vain Savannah.

by Lorna Goodison
20.  **Praise to the mother of Jamaican art**

She was the nameless woman who created images of her children sold away from her. She suspended her wood babies from a rope round her neck, before she ate she fed them. Touched bits of pounded yam and plantains to sealed lips, always urged them to sip water. She carved them of wormwood, teeth and nails her first tools, later she wielded a blunt blade. Her spit cleaned faces and limbs; the pitch oil of her skin burnished them. When woodworms bored into their bellies she warmed castor oil they purged. She learned her art by breaking hard rockstones. She did not sign her work.

by Lorna Goodison
21. **This zinc roof**

This rectangle of sea; this portion  
Of ripple; this conductor of midday heat;  
This that the cat steps delicately on;

This that the poor of the world look up to  
On humid nights, as if it were a crumpled  
Heaven they could be lifted into.

God’s mansion is made of many-coloured zinc,  
Like a balmyard I once went to, *Peace*  
*And Love* written across its breadth.

This clanging of feet and boots,  
Men running from Babylon whose guns  
Are drawn against the small measure

Of their lives; this galvanised sheet; this  
Corrugated iron. The road to hell is fenced  
On each side with zinc —

Just see Dawn Scott’s installation,  
*A Cultural Object*, its circles of zinc  
Like the flight path of johncrows.

The American penny is made from zinc,  
Coated with copper, but still enough zinc  
That a man who swallowed 425 coins died.

This that poisons us; this that holds  
Its nails like a crucified Christ, but only  
For a little while. It rises with the hurricane,

Sails in the wind, a flying guillotine.  
This, a plate for our severed heads;  
This that sprinkles rust

Over our sleep like obeah;  
This that covers us; this that chokes us;  
This, the only roof we could afford.  
by Kei Miller
22. For the girl who died by dancing

‘It is a warning to young people that dem mus stop du de Dutty Wine,’ said one woman who called the incident a curse on the land. ‘Is like a demon sen’ from de pit a hell dat is taking the lives of the youth even before dem have time to repent’

Jamaica Gleaner, October 30, 2006

Forgive the old woman who only sees confusion in the wild rotations of your head & the in/out butterfly of your thighs. She could not imagine how, in the helicopter swing of red braids, you were being lifted high.

Forgive her, the selfish belief that heaven is reserved for ladies with names like Agnes or Beryl & that no Tanisha would ever inherit the kingdom of God.

She will be surprised soon enough to find you on a wide marble tile in front of Jesus. She will be surprised that the saviour has given unto you a tall speakerbox, filled to its brim with music, & that you continue your peculiar art – dancing duty wine with a clean heart.

by Kei Miller
23. **Book of Genesis**

Suppose there was a book full only of the word, *let* – from whose clipped sound all things began: fir and firmament, feather, the first whale – and suppose

we could scroll through its pages every day
to find and pronounce a *Let* meant only for us –
we would stumble through the streets with open books,

eyes crossed from too much reading; we would speak
in auto-rhyme, the world would echo itself – and still
we’d continue in rounds, saying *let* and *let* and *let*

until even silent dreams had been allowed.
by Kei Miller
24. The warner-woman

The morning shimmers in its bowl of blue crystal.
Me, underneath my mother's bed.
I delight in dust and dimness.
Connoisseur of comics and the coolness of floorboards,
I prolong my life's long morning.

But the blue sky broke. The warner-woman.
Bell-mouthed and biblical
she trumpeted out of the hills,
prophet of doom, prophet of God,
breeze-blow and earthquake,
tidal wave and flood.

I crouched. I cowered. I remembered Port Royal.
I could see the waters of East Harbour rise.
I saw them heave Caneside bridge. Dear God,
don't make me die, not now, not yet!

Well, the sky regained its blue composure.
Day wound slowly down to darkness.
Lunch-time came, then supper time,
then dream-time and forgetting.

Haven’t heard a warner-woman
These thirty-odd years.

by Edward Baugh
25. The carpenter’s complaint (C.X.C recommended poem)

Now you think that is right, sah? Talk the truth.  
The man was mi friend. I build it, I  
Build the house that him live in; but now  
That him dead, that mawga-foot bwoy, him son,  
Come say, him want a nice job for the coffin,  
So him give it to Mister Belnavis to make —  
That big-belly crook who don't know him arse  
From a chisel, but because him is big-shot, because  
Him make big-shot coffin, fi-him coffin must better  
Than mine! Bwoy it hot me, it hot me  
For true. Fix we a nex' one, Miss Fergie —  
That man coulda knock back him waters, you know sah!  
I remember the day in this said-same bar  
When him drink Old Brown and Coxs’n into  
The ground, then stand up straight as a plumb-line  
And keel him felt hat on him head and walk  
Home cool, cool, cool. Dem was water-bird, brother!  
Funeral? Me, sah? That bwoy have to learn  
That a man have him pride. But bless mi days!  
Good enough to build the house that him live in,  
But not good enough to make him coffin!  
I woulda do it for nutt'n, for nutt'n! The man  
Was mi friend. Damn mawga-foot bwoy.  
Is university turn him fool. I tell you,  
It burn me, it burn me for true!  

by Edward Baugh
26.  Let this be your praise

And what is praise but the offering up of one’s self,
the daily rituals: waking to the stream of light seeping in
under the bedroom door, dressing slowly, humming Marley’s
'Three Little Birds' or a made up melody,
cursing the traffic and the heat - the unbearable brazenness
of the morning sun - punctuating your profanities
with pleas for forgiveness. When you were a child
your mother threatened to wash your mouth with soap.
You have not forgotten how a mouth can sully everything,
its desire to be perfect and how often it fails.
At work you smile with the girl who asks stupid questions,
you imagine she has unpaid bills, a wayward child,
you imagine you are more alike than different.
You cut your nails at your desk, laugh when someone falls,
eat lunch too quickly, take Tums for the indigestion.
In the evening you drink peppermint tea, watch TV and
when your eyes grow heavy you say a quick word
of prayer, a thank you for another full day, a request that you
not be killed in your sleep. Perhaps, you squeeze in an orgasm.
And if this is not praise, this simple act of living, if this is not
enough, then let us lie here and do nothing and see
what God has to say about that.

   by Tanya Shirley
27. **Just like that**

She got up and died; scraped the chewed bones to the side, remnants of the stew she stayed up late making on Holy Thursday so that not a pot would be put on fire come Good Friday morning. She centred the fork before lifting her plate high in the air and in one motion stood, bent over and collected his plate — her breasts dangling low before his eyes.

Then she navigated the sharp edge of table, swooshed her hips just once and died. Her hips did not complete their sway before she fell full-bodied to the floor. He, stunned into action, would later remember that he wanted so badly to skip breakfast and partake of her flesh, but she, thinking of her mother reciting verses in the back pew, thought it was sin enough that she was not in God’s house; she could not worship at his mouth. And so, without the last rites of flesh on flesh, hip against bone, tongue along lip, they parted ways.

II

She walked into church that Good Friday morning with death on her mind; sang each hymn louder than even the choir and off-beat bird propped in Sunday manner against the tree by the window (each week he forgot pursuits of nectar and women to sit on the highest branch, nose pointed down as if he knew the colour of each sin and sinner). She threw the notes out and up as if Jesus could have been saved by her voice, his open wounds sutured by her bellow. She had to get death out of her throat. This was the first Easter she felt each whip, each nail, each jeer. When they came to get her — three of her brothers, eyes on the ground, grown men looking like boys — a note rolled back down her tongue.
She saw her child flying higher and higher, 
the clouds parting; saw her greet Jesus 
on this Good Friday morning. 
by Tanya Shirley
28. **Recompense**

remember how Janet get up in history class
& say she not black
& we laugh & tell her fi sit her black backside down
but Janet say
we too fool for school; she half Scottish
& somebody
tug on Janet plait & say look how yuh head tough
& Janet say
don't make that fool you; naked eye don't see the blood
in 18something
her great great great somebody step off a boat
& dig up
her great great great somebody out the cane field to test
the sweetness
of local sugar (no sense buying puss in a bag)
& she not
letting Scotland get away scot-free; she laying claim
to that money
that build bronze statues & columned empires on cobblestone streets
& she say
bet you when Scotland issue apology & say all half-breeds line up here
for recompense
all a we who black & a bray like ass going start sing different tune
but she going be first in line;
all along she singing the same thing: there is money in this blood
money in this blood
    by Tanya Shirley
29. Her majesty's seal

Someone at the British High Commission
did not agree with my express photographer
that the smile I had practiced
in front of the mirror for a whole half hour
made me look beautiful
brought out my innocence
made my lips look sexy.

He or she
had with firm prerogative
blotted out my face with
her Majesty’s Seal.

The lion’s head made an obscene pattern
on my forehead
his torso covered my two eyes
and his behind sat imperiously
over my nose and sexy mouth.
At least my two cheekbones
my vain claim to African royalty
stood out on either side of his torso
small assurance
I had not been totally obliterated by the beast.

It’s a lie I tell myself
they have no interest in my photo
they just could not catch me
to brand my face
force me to carry the mark of the beast
in my forehead
so they stamped it on my photo instead
blotted out my face.

When I arrive at Heathrow
her Majesty’s Imperial seal
in the place where my face should be
will be enough to let me
a (former) colonial subject
in.

         by Paulette Ramsay
30. Church Matters

She knelt meekly at the altar
bowed her head and prayed silently
then as if to a cue
she lifted her hand
stretched forth her palm
to accept the offer
of the body broken in
her stead
symbol of supreme sacrifice
she chews with reverence
and gratitude
swallows with dignity
bows her head and prays again
she lifted her head
accepts the offer
of the blood shed in her stead
symbol of supreme sacrifice
she swallows with gratitude
happy to be among
the chosen ones
her prayer of gratitude completed
her ritual of holiness ended.

She rises from the altar,
cuts her eye and
twists-up twist-up her mouth
at Angie as she passes her
on her way
to receive her own
emblems of sacrifice and love.

By Paulette Ramsay
31. Mama’s handbag

Una bolsa bien usada
its scratched leatherette
not even a poor Louis Vuitton imitation
inside the labyrinth of secret compartments
a chest of quaint surprises
an old, forgotten, half stick
of Wriggley’s Spearmint, my favourite
pieces of watercrackers
rolled up in crumbled wax paper
leftovers from last week’s visit
to the gastroenterologist
a neatly folded silk handkerchief
embroidered with my initials
a sweaty mint ball
sticking to brown paper
a twisted crochet needle
holding a spool of red thread together
my first tooth
or what was left of it, apparently returned
by the tooth fairy
a button, just like the one
I need for my plaid dress
the first Easter card I made
showing Jesus on the cross
singing glory hallelujah.

Mama’s dilapidated handbag
preserves the secrets of my life
tells my stories
between its tattered lining.
Mama’s prized possessions
keep us close.

by Paulette Ramsay
Dear Mama,

Good Day.

I hope dat wen deze few lines reach yu,
they may find yu in di bes af helt.

Mama,
I really don’t know how fi tell yu dis,
cause I did mek a salim pramis
fi tek care a likkle Jim
an try mi bes fi look out fi him.

Mama,
I really did try mi bes,
but nondiles
mi sarry fi tell you seh
poor likkle Jim get arres.

It woz di miggle a di rush howah
wen evrybady jus a hosel an a bosel
fi goh home fi dem evenin showah;
mi an Jim stand up

waitin pan a bus,
nat cauzin no fus,
wen all af a sudden
a police van pull-up.

Out jump tree policeman,
di hole a dem carryin batan.
Dem waak straight up to mi an Jim.

One a dem hol awwn to Jim
seh him tekin him in;
Jim tell him fi let goh a him
far him noh dhu nothun
an him naw teef,
nat even a butn.
Jim start to wriggle
di police start to giggle.

Mama,
mek I tell yu whe dem dhu to Jim
Mama,
mek I tell yu whe dem dhu to him:

dem tump him in him belly
an it turn to jelly
dem lick him pan him back
and him rib get pap
dem lick him pan him hed
but it tuff like led
dem kick him in him seed
an it started to bleed

Mama,
I jus could stand deh
and noh dhu no

soh me jook one in him eye
an him started to cry
mi tump one in him mout
an him started to shout
mi kick one pan him shin
an him started to spin
mi tump him pan him chin
an him drap pan a bin

an crash
an ded.

Mama,
mORE policeman come dung
an beat mi to di grung;
dem charge Jim fi sus,
dem charge me fi murdah.

Mama,
don fret,
dont get depres
an doun-hearted.
Be af good courage
till I hear fram you.
I remain
your son,
Sonny.

by Linton Kwesi Johnson
33. If I waz a tap natch poet

if I woz a tap-natch poet
like Chris Okigbo
Derek Walcot
ar T.S.Eliot

I woodah write a poem
soh dyam deep
dat it bittah-sweet
like a precious
memari
whe mek yu weep
whe mek yu feel incomplete

like wen yu lovah leave
an dow defeat yu kanseed
still yu beg an yu plead
ill yu win a repreve
an yu ready fi rack steady
but di muzik done aready

still
inna di meantime
wid mi riddim
wid mi rime
wid mi ruff base line
wid mi own sense a time

goon poet haffi step in line
caw Bootah lazy mite a gat couple touzan
but Mandela fi im
touzans a touzans a touzans a touzans

if I woz a tap-natch poet
like Kamau Brathwaite
Martin Carter
Jayne Cortez ar Amiri Baraka

I woodah write a poem
soh rude
an rootsy
an subversive
dat it mek di goon poet
tun white wid envy
like a candhumble/voodoo/kumina chant
a ole time calypso ar a slave song
dat get ban
but fram granny
    rite
dung
to
    gran
    pickney
each an evry wan
can recite dat-deh wan

still
inna di meantime
wid mi riddim
wid mi rime
wid mi ruff base line
wid mi own sense a time

goon poet haffi step in line
caw Bootahlazy mite a gat couple touzan
but Mandela fi im
touzans a touzans a touzans a touzans

if I woz a tap-natch poet
like Tchikaya U'tamsi
Nicholas Guillen
ar Lorna Goodison

I woodah write a poem
soh beautiful dat it simple
like a plain girl
wid good brains
an nice ways
wid a sexy dispozishan
an plenty compahshan
wid a sweet smile
an a suttle style

still
mi naw goh bow an scrape
an gwan like a ape
peddlin noh puerile parchment af etnicity
wid ongle a vaig fleetin hint af hawtenticity
like a black Lance Percival in reverse
ar even worse
a babblin bafoon whe looze im tongue

no sah
nat atall
mi gat mi riddim
mi gat mi rime
mi gat mi ruff base line
mi gat mi own sense a time

goon poet betta step in line
caw Bootahlazy mite a gat couple touzan
but Mandela fi im
touzans a touzans a touzans a touzans
   by Linton Kwesi Johnson
34. **To the labour party**

You sold out the working classes  
Brought the Unions to their knees  
Now you want to win back the voters  
But it's too late, can't you see

You left me with  
An inborn fear of bureaucracy  
A fright when you talk about democracy  
‘Cause I'm tired of all this fallacy  
When things rebounding right out of control  
And it hard to pay the heat bill in the cold

You promised us a government of vision  
You promised you would hear our voice  
It didn't take you long to stop listening  
And taking away our choice

Now you wonder why there's growth in the right wing  
and the bankers have taken all the notes  
But you're still making friends with the city  
as they tighten the noose round our throats  
  by Jean ‘Binta’ Breeze
35.  **Dutty Tough**

Sun a shine but tings no bright;  
Doah pot a bwile, bickle no nuff;  
River flood but water scarce, yawl  
Rain a fall but dutty tough.

Tings so bad dat nowadays when  
Yuh ask smaddy how dem do  
Dem fraid yuh tek tell dem back,  
So dem no answer yuh.

No care omuch we dah work fa  
Hard-time still een wi shut;  
We dah fight, Hard-time a beat we,  
Dem might raise wi wages, but

One poun gawn awn pon we pay, an  
We no feel no merriment  
For ten poun gawn pon wi food  
An ten pound pon we rent!

Saltfish gawn up, mackerel gawn up.  
Pork en beef gawn up,  
An when rice and butter ready  
Dem jus go pon holiday!

Claht, boot, pin an needle gawn up  
Ice, bread, taxes, water-rate  
Kersene ile, gasolene, gawn up;  
An de poun devaluate

De price of bread gone up so high  
Dat we haffi agree  
Fi cut we yeye pon bred an all  
Turn dumplin refugee

An all dem marga smaddy weh  
Dah gwan like fat is sin  
All dem-deh weh dah fas wid me  
Ah lef dem to dumpling!

Sun a shine an pot a bwile, but  
Things no bright, bickle no nuff  
Rain a fall, river dah flood, but,  
Water scarce an dutty tough.
by Louise Bennett

36. **Noh Lickle Twang**

Me glad fe se's you come back bwoy,
But lawd yuh let me dung,
Me shame o' yuh soh till all o' 
Me proudness drop a grung.

Yuh mean yuh goh dah 'Merica
An spen six whole mont' deh,
An come back not a piece betta 
Dan how yuh did goh wey?

Bwoy yuh noh shame? Is soh you come? 
Afta yuh tan soh lang! 
Not even lickle language bwoy? 
Not even little twang?

An yuh sista wat work ongle 
One week wid 'Merican 
She talk so nice now dat we have 
De jooce fe undastan?

Bwoy yuh couldn' improve yuhself!
An yuh get soh much pay? 
Yuh spen six mont' a foreign, an 
Come back ugly same way?

Not even a drapes trouziz? or 
A pass de rydim coat? 
Bwoy not even a gole teet or 
A gole chain roun yuh t'roat.

Suppose me las' me pass go introjooce 
Yuh to a stranga 
As me lamented son wat lately 
Come from 'Merica!

Dem hooda laugh afta me, bwoy 
Me could'n tell dem soh! 
Dem hooda sey me lie, yuh was 
A-spun time back a Mocho.

Noh back-ansa me bwoy, yuh talk 
Too bad; shet up yuh mout,
Ah doan know how yuh an yuh puppa
gwine to meck it out.
Ef yuh want please him meck him tink
Yuh bring back someting new.
Yuh always call him ‘Pa’ dis evenin’
Wen him come sey ‘Poo’.
   by Louise Bennett
37. New Scholar

Good mahnin, Teacher – ow is yuh?
My name is Sarah Pool.
Dis is fi-me li bwoy Michal
An me just bring him a school.

Him bawn one rainy day, ma'am, it
Was comin awn to night –
Ugly baby grow pretty fi true,
For dis one was a sight.

Him bawn de week when Rufus
Jack-fruit tree did start fi bear,
Is dat same mont Oby pig dead
– But me figat de year.

We call him Mi, Mike, Mikey,
Jay, Jakey, Jacob, Jack,
But him right name is Michal Jacob
Alexander Black.

No treat him rough, yaw, Teacher;
Him is a sickly chile:
As yuh touch him hard him meck nize –
Some people seh him pwile.

Teck time wid him yaw Teacher –
If him rude an start fi rave
Dis beat anoder bwoy, an him
Wi frighten an behave.

For nuff time when him rude a yard
An woan hear at all
Ah jus beat de bed-poas hard, mah,
An yu waan fi hear Jack bawl!

Now dat yuh know him lickle ways
Ah not havin no fear
Dat anyting wi mel him, so
Ah lef him in yu care.
   by Louise Bennett
38. **Harlem shadows (1922)**

I hear the halting footsteps of a lass
    In Negro Harlem when the night lets fall
Its veil. I see the shapes of girls who pass
    To bend and barter at desire’s call.
Ah, little dark girls who in slippered feet
Go prowling through the night from street to street!

Through the long night until the silver break
    Of day the little gray feet know no rest;
Through the lone night until the last snow-flake
    Has dropped from heaven upon the earth’s white breast,
The dusky, half-clad girls of tired feet
Are trudging, thinly shod, from street to street.

Ah, stern harsh world, that in the wretched way
    Of poverty, dishonor and disgrace,
Has pushed the timid little feet of clay,
    The sacred brown feet of my fallen race!
Ah, heart of me, the weary, weary feet
In Harlem wandering from street to street
    by Claude McKay

39. **The Castaways**

The vivid grass with visible delight
Springing triumphant from the pregnant earth,
The butterflies, and sparrows in brief flight
Chirping and dancing for the season’s birth,
The dandelions and rare daffodils
That touch the deep-stirred heart with hands of gold,
The thrushes sending forth their joyous trills,—
Not these, not these did I at first behold!
But seated on the benches daubed with green,
The castaways of life, a few asleep,
Some withered women desolate and mean,
And over all, life's shadows dark and deep.
Moaning I turned away, for misery
I have the strength to bear but not to see.
    by Claude McKay
40. Adolescence

There was a time when in late afternoon
The four-o'clocks would fold up at day's close
Pink-white in prayer, and 'neath the floating moon
I lay with them in calm and sweet repose.

And in the open spaces I could sleep,
Half-naked to the shining worlds above;
Peace came with sleep and sleep was long and deep,
Gained without effort, sweet like early love.

But now no balm—nor drug nor weed nor wine—
Can bring true rest to cool my body's fever,
Nor sweeten in my mouth the acid brine,
That salts my choicest drink and will forever.

by Claude McKay
41. Last lines

This is the last line I draw.
Alright. Draw the last line.
But I tell you, yonder
is a next. No line ever last
no death not forever.
You see this place? You see it?
All of it? Watch it good.
Not a jot nor a tittle
going lost. Every old
twist-up man you see,
every hang-breast woman,
every bang-belly pickney.
every young warrior
who head wrench
with weed, white powder,
black powder, or indeed
the very vile persuasion
of the devil (for him not
bedridden you know)
every small gal-turn-ooman
that you crucify on the
cross of your sex
before her little naseberry
start sweeten,
I swear to you,
every last one shall live.
Draw therefore, O governor,
prime minister, parson,
teacher, shopkeeper,
politician, university lecturer,
resonant revolutionaries,
draw carefully that
last fine line
of your responsibility.

by Pamela Mordecai
Inside she sits and spins, decanting gold and silver from her wrists. Her fingers bleed. Day and then night. Myriad windows perch above her head, brilliant birds. Through them she cannot see the river pirouette from a valley hung high, tumble, kneel deep into a basin blue as chiming bells set in obsidian rocks. Night, and then day, but she cannot observe the stars, the sun. She scoffs air, laps sweat off her chin. Straining to listen, finds she cannot hear even the wind. The walls leach marrow from her bones. The room adjusts around her shrinking frame of mind. She teases out a winking thread, curls it about a spool, then wheels and comes again. Rich filaments bite through her skin as she construes the pile of unspun wool, rovings of thought, symbols of winding cord, strings she makes hum, imagine up a poem to twist the tongue, cable to match a letter to a sound, a drill that interweaves syntax of word and necessary word, a song to bring a measured meter to the hands that drum on ancient wood. But this can’t be a life. Flapping flamboyant wings the windows preen and squawk, a flock cruising landscapes she will not see again. The river in the rising sun spits, spurts, explodes resplendent as a veil let fall to hide a bride. Marry she won’t locked in this tower where time goes. Her green flesh crawls fluted as wrinkled sea. Once she was brown and curious in the world, Now her illumination is a crusted bulb on a high wire. How did she come to this, within without an inkling of out, intent on weaving meaning as she strips it from herself? And still she feeds the iridescent mound so thick and plentiful it steals the light. And are you sad alone? Not when I spin. And are you sorry for the yarns you make? No, for they keep the children warm. What if you die spinning a thread? Die, yes, but never dead …

by Pamela Mordecai
43. **Cat-rap**

Lying on the sofa  
all curled and meek  
but in my furry-fuzzy head  
there's a rapping beat.  
Gonna rap while I'm napping  
and looking sweet  
gonna rap while I'm padding  
on the balls of my feet

Gonna rap on my head  
gonna rap on my tail  
gonna rap on my  
you know where.  
So wave your paws in the air  
like you just don't care  
with nine lives to spare  
gimme five right here.  
Well, they say that we cats  
are killed by curiosity,

but does the moggie mind?  
No, I've got suavity.  
When I get to heaven  
gonna rap with Macavity,  
gonna find his hidden paw  
and clear up that mystery.

Nap it up  
scratch it up  
the knack is free  
fur it up  
purr it up  
yes that's me.

The meanest cat-rapper you'll ever see.  
Number one of the street-sound galaxy.  
by Grace Nichols
44.  For forest

Forest could keep secrets
Forest could keep secrets

Forest tune in every day
to watersound and birdsound
Forest letting her hair down
to the teeming creeping of her forest-ground

But Forest don't broadcast her business
no Forest cover her business down
from sky and fast-eye sun
and when night come
and darkness wrap her like a gown
Forest is a bad dream woman

Forest dreaming about mountain
and when earth was young
Forest dreaming of the caress of gold
Forest roosting with mysterious eldorado

and when howler monkey
wake her up with howl
Forest just stretch and stir
to a new day of sound

but coming back to secrets
Forest could keep secrets
Forest could keep secrets
And we must keep Forest
by Grace Nichols
45. I like to stay up

I like to stay up
and listen
when big people talking
jumbie stories

I does feel
so tingly and excited
inside me

But when my mother say
“Girl, time for bed”

The is when
I does feel a dread

Then is when
I does jump into me bed

Then is when
I does cover up
from me feet to me head

Then is when
I does wish I didn't listen
to no stupid jumbie story

Then is when
I does wish I read
me book instead

(“Jumbie” is a Guyanese word for “ghost”.)
by grace Nichols
46. **The edge of night**

Watchman by the seawall koker
twenty years I met him on my walks
seawind and sunset I see recalling him.
He smoked his curly pipe, we talked
fireflies sparking in the low, protected fields.
I often thought what a life he’s lived
but what a life is any life that’s lived.
He was old when he began this job
guardian of the tidal gates of town.
Got away from a rum-soaked father’s home
wandered far to other lonely lands
and home again he never built a home
or had one woman or concerned himself with God
“Ah live from then to now an’ don’ remember how.”
Eyes far away as stars beyond our counting
an old man stranded on the edge of night.
Long ago he was a forest guide
went with Museum teams in Essequibo
and made a name for his strange collections.
One day he brought for their inspection
a black and shiny scorpion whose helmet-head was gold
They honoured him, he was named discoverer
the keepsake plaque engraved in Latin script.
I tell him it is beautifully done
he gestures, the sea in tumult rises at our feet.
   by Ian McDonald

47. **The Bone-trip**

Bone-trip, he called it, his brutal name
for dying: “The bone-trip is always hard.”
I remember his face lit by fire,
cracked into a thousand creases
as he bent over, hardening nails:
he repaired boots for working men in Gentle Street.
One day his smiling partner wasn’t there.
“Well, bruds gone to make his bone-trip now.”
Wiped his sweaty face with rag,
went on nailing the rough, strong boots.
Cruel, I remember thinking, fifty years ago.
And it is now, my God, now, it is now.
   by Ian McDonald
My friend from Guyana
was asked in Philadelphia
if she was from “Iguana.”

Iguana, which crawls and then
stills, which flicks its tongue at the sun.

In History we learned that Lucayans
ate iguana, that Caribs
(my grandmother’s people)
ate Lucayans (the people of Guanahani).
Guiana (the colonial way,
with an i, southernmost
of the Caribbean) is iguana; Inagua
(southernmost of The Bahamas,
northernmost of the Caribbean)
is iguana— Inagua, crossroads with Haiti,
Inagua of the salt and flamingos.
The Spanish called it Heneagua,
“water is to be found there;”
water, water everywhere.

Guyana (in the language of Arawaks,
Wai Ana, “Land of Many Waters”) is iguana, veins running through land,
grooves between green scales.
My grandmother from Moruga
(southern-most in Trinidad)
knew the names of things.
She rubbed iguana with bird pepper,
she cooked its sweet meat.

The earth is on the back
of an ageless iguana.

We are all from the Land of Iguana,
Hewanorra, Carib name for St. Lucia.

And all the iguanas scurry away from me.
And all the iguanas are dying.

by Christian Campbell
49. **Oregon Elegy**  
for I. H.

I once told a friend, who was going  
to Oregon for Christmas with his girlfriend,

he’d be the only black person there  
and, in fact, if you shuffle Oregon,

like a seasoned minstrel, it spells Negro  
but with an extra O as if to make

a groan, nearly a shout, perhaps  
a moment of fright: O Negro in Oregon!

He died laughing and told me  
that’s word-lynching, and I wondered

if we could also lynch words,  
string them up, sever them,

tattoo them with bullets and knives;  
if we could hold a barbecue

for language swaying with the branches,  
soon picked to silence by crows—

words soaked in coal oil  
than set ablaze, a carnival of words

sacrificed over rivers, from bridges,  
from trees, too-ripe words dangling

from branches just beyond our reach.  
Like Alonzo Tucker in 1906,

shot twice, then hanged  
from the Fourth Street Bridge

by two hundred men arched into one  
white arm because (we wonder,  

we know) a white woman said  
he raped her. I want to tell my boy
blacks weren’t wanted in Oregon at first, but what do I know, I’ve never set foot on Nez Perce land where exactly one hundred years after Tucker, he could go west to one edge of America because he loves his woman enough to be the very last Negro on Earth. by Christian Campbell
50.  Last night.

got a peek
at the moon
last night
and didn’t think of lovers
got a peek
at the moon
last night
an saw
a man with a load on his back
got a peek
at the moon
last night
an cried

by Oku Onuora
51.  Black Power April, 1970

In April she turned seven.  
The city was an army of arms, uplifted –  
fists, tight, punching hard at heaven.

What did it all mean – becoming seven,  
and Port-of-Spain an angry sea,  
heaving, demanding release?

Sister preached a mad Sermon on Hair,  
led blind prayers to the Virgin for peace –  
her lenses as black as her fear.

Corralled in a rosary of responses,  
she saw again the white of her father’s shirt,  
sailing to work. More than anything,  
she wanted to march beside him, cuffing  
against the wrong she could not tell him,  
shouting, “Power!” until the whole sky fell.  
by Jennifer Rahim

52.  After hospital visits

She comes in like a wilted flower – spent,  
slightly limping on a wounded ankle  
that each year seemed less able to carry  
her small frame on her heart’s ready business.  
Missions my father baptised her goings  
to care for grandchildren – days at a time.  
Something like pain trembled in his voice.  
He needed her much more than he could say,  
but bore her absences as he did his suffering,  
bravely – waiting as she once did for him  
when his many goings were not about love.  
Now, she is the woman of his sixth station.  
After hospital visits she collapses in his chair  
puts her feet up, and is no more broken –  
bridge that bears his not too late love of home.  
by Jennifer Rahim
53. **Anger bakes**

Some mornings she is silent.  
Her hymns raise no staircases  
to lift darkness off our backs.  
The kitchen is not a chapel then.  
It sounds of the swash-swash  
strokes of the broom, the rough  
I-mean-business handling of pots,  
the counter’s groan as she makes  
smooth dough of flour and water.

Those mornings we try not to hear  
her quarrelsome bracelets pick bones  
with the blame-bruised enamel bowl,  
but strain our brains for her deep-throated invocations “I lift up my eyes  
to the mountains...” If verses fail  
to save, if bakes curse in hot oil  
we beg the sun “Please, sleep late!”

Flour cannot rise without hymns.  
Fried bakes, flat and hard as river stones,  
must be sawed open and chewed for hours  
while, like exacting bakers,  
we weigh and sift her silence.  

by Jennifer Rahim
54.  The felling of a tree

When the air is a sharpened blade
cutting nostrils clean like cutlass steel,
the bush-planters pass the sleeping houses.

Sometimes alone, sometimes in pairs,
they lumber up the mountain road
tall-tops pounding the asphalt smooth.

Sometimes I awake and follow them,
knowing they go beyond the road’s end
into the depths of bearded trees
where tallness is not neighbours’ fences
and bigness is not the swollen houses
that swallow us all.

I follow - slowly – my thinking measured,
my steps behind clobbering boots, steady
certain that if I stay in their neat clearings

I will never see, and I want to see the trees.
I want to hear their long silences speaking
the untold plenty of leaves.

I follow, drinking the air like water,
my steps a soft conversation with blades
that cut paths through the asphalt.

I follow, the strength in my thighs a newness
that makes my feet sprout roots,
and I think: this is what tall means.

Just when my lips begin to savour my salt,
he looks back. Seeing me grow branches
draws out his cutting steel and slashes my feet,

since girls can never become trees.
Turning, I run down the mountain weeping
like leaves after rain-forest showers.

by Jennifer Rahim
55.  Love After Love

The time will come
when, with elation
you will greet yourself arriving
at your own door, in your own mirror
and each will smile at the other's welcome,

and say, sit here. Eat.
You will love again the stranger who was your self.
Give wine. Give bread. Give back your heart
to itself, to the stranger who has loved you

all your life, whom you ignored
for another, who knows you by heart.
Take down the love letters from the bookshelf,

the photographs, the desperate notes,
peel your own image from the mirror.
Sit. Feast on your life.
    by Derek Walcott

56.  The fist

The fist clenched round my heart
loosens a little, and I gasp
brightness; but it tightens
again. When have I ever not loved
the pain of love? But this has moved

past love to mania. This has the strong
clench of the madman, this is
gripping the ledge of unreason, before
plunging howling into the abyss.

Hold hard then, heart. This way at least you live.
    by Derek Walcott
57. Cut language!
   (for Stephen)

Wrapping your tongue
round words
Stephen man-
overing
“spinsters and
bachelors”

how many learn to spell
but never practise
words
my grandson

you will be
wordsman
claiming this English
language
other people’s
anguish

claiming our
patwa

switching easy
when reason calls
“I saw the lightning
leaping through the house
I heard the thunder clap
an Nanny bawl out ‘Jiizas Krais’”

Children across the wall
offend
and you defend
with “gwe bwai
no bada wi”

didn’t I tell them
everytime
bilingual is the lick?
    by Velma Pollard
58. Confessions of a son

My father lost me
somewhere between
the smell of leather
shoes and the enchantment of untying laces

Waiting to cross swords
with the tyrant
who would cow her
I man watched
hovering over
Mother

(I four feet high)
standing on tiptoe

Half century later
still I do not know
if culture curbed concern
or if he loved less
than he needed love

I store for her
affection without question
for him respect
with unlove
waiting for compassion
   by Velma Pollard
59. To Gran... And no farewell

I didn't wish to see the moth-marks
where your Khus Khus smelled
the high weeds crowding the forget-me-nots
or alien fingers
handling knives and spoons
kept sheening in brown calico

and so I let the years
make jumbie chain-links
ages long before I brought
bright florets for your grave

One room remains
and one small fretwork shard
among the rotted beams
ingrown with baby grass
remembers still the august Entry Hall
tributes of broken china
lean-to tables
and an old man shambling out and in
cursing the vultures
who would snatch the land...

I round the corner
eager with my shrubs
the grave at last...
then unbelieving shudder
Corpie’s tomb
Naomi’s garden square
and yours that now
my mind will never hold
no single adoration
no peculiar tears
some well-intentioned
madman with his spade...
all now one vast sepulchraic mass

I crush the shrublets
tramp them underfoot
and with a heart
too swollen now for tears
descend the slope
without adieu.
by Velma Pollard
60.  **Punctuation marks**

Punctuation Marks
Where sea and land meet, begin there.
The ampersand, the join, is a fault
which caused jagged peaks to rise –
from the ocean’s floor -
spanning a vacant gulf.
On any map of the world there are footnotes
reminders of nature’s force.

Long ago, nomads, fragile as their pottery,
skimming waves, trekking from south to north,
stopped once too often for wood and water
and perished.
From the pre-ceramic Cibony
to the ceramics of Saladoid and Suazoid
we know them by their shards.
Common island caribs, sunk in a murderous tide
that flowed from east to west
bearing assassin and poets
discoverers of the New World.

Come nearer, focus on one dot of an island
I was born there, on the rim of a volcano
on the edge of a large full stop
where the sand is black
where the hills turn a gun-barrel blue
where the sea perpetually dashes at the shoreline
trying to reclaim it all.
    By Philip Nanton
61. Fishing

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

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

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

by Mark McWatt
62. The Earth is Our Friend
(Garden of Creation)

The earth is the garden of creation
Purposefully clothed with lush, green vegetation.
Roots!

Firm enough to prevent critical soil erosion,
All elements working in union,
For natural joy and satisfaction.
The earth is a friend, we are the friends of the earth

The cyclic function of the earth’s ecology is no mystery.
Like the organs of the human body,
Each working in perfect harmony,
In this our environmental community,
of which the guardians and keepers,
are the children of humanity.
The earth is a friend, we are the friends of the earth

The rivers, like blood streams flowing into the oceans
Returning secretly to the fleshy bowels of earth’s creation
Evaporating to the atmospheric breath of life
Sun, moon and stars
Solid, liquid and gas
Land, sea and air
Flesh, blood and spirit.
The earth is a friend, we are the friends of the earth

Like the lungs of man
The trees breathe to keep the earth alive
Yeah! The Sun, like a devoted Father
Working from sunrise until sunset
And the Moon, like a loving Mother
Working from dusk until dawn
Shining with the sweet embrace of her children, the stars
The earth is a friend, we are the friends of the earth

If we protect the earth,
Then, the earth will protect us
Clothe, feed and shelter us.
The earth is the garden of creation.
If we keep the earth alive
Then we will stay alive,
The earth will keep us alive.
The earth is our friend,
We are the friends of the earth
by Yasus Afari
Now if the hunter ever tell the story of the hunted
Then the hunted will be robbed of it's honour and glory
Soh I and I have to shape our own reality
Preserve our own dignity and identity

Now I write my poetry to rewrite history
Burn illusions and fantasy
Shape and create my own destiny
And create my own reality

Now at the College of Arts Science and Technology
I mix and match Rastafari philosophy with dub poetry
Only to disappoint mi friends and family
And same time my girlfriend Twiggy left me
Twiggy left me, Twiggy left me

Soh the summer holiday, mi goh home to mama
A speng inna mi walla-be gun-foot-trousers
Mi buckers and tam, buckers and tam, buckers and tam
Di neighbour dem start seh
But look 'pon sister Derrie good, good bwoy doh eeh!

When mi walk up to mama, mama seh
But look 'pon mi good, good pickiney bwoy, doh eeh!
Wonder if a education tun him inna idiot
Then mama tun to mi and seh
Tonie, why yu nah goh cut off yu locks and goh look wuk!
Really and truly, weh yu really plan fi duh wid yu self!?

Mi seh mama, I plan fi live off a dub poetry
Then mama look 'pon mi and seh
Bwoy, yu eva hear seh poetry caan nyam!?
Poetry caan nyam, poetry caan nyam
Mi seh yes mama! Mi a goh show yu seh poetry caan nyam
Bwoy a turn inna idiot
Poetry caan nyam, poetry caan nyam
Like 'P', fi pineapple, papaya and pumpkin'
'Cause yu grow mi as a real ole country bunkin'
'O', fi orange, ote eatie (apple)
'E', fi eggplant
'T', fi tangerine, tamrind and tomato
'R', fi radish, rasberry and rose apple
'Y', fi yamm, like Saint Vincent, yellow yam and mosella
Soh mama if yu feel disappointed
It's alright, don't worry
'Cause I and I a show yourself
Poetry caan nyam, poetry caan nyam
And mama, I and I still love
So mama look 'pon me and seh
I and I!? Soh a two a onnu a walk now!?

Walla-be gun-foot-trousers
Mi buckers and tam, buckers and tam, buckers and tam
Poetry caan nyam, poetry caan nyam
Poetry caan nyam, poetry caan nyam
Poetry caan nyam, poetry caan nyam
Poetry caan nyam, poetry caan nyam..
   by Yasus Afari
64. **Wine Pon Paper**

If reggae inna the dancehall
That mean dancehall fi inna reggae
And if dancehall inna the reggae
That mean reggae fi inna dancehall

Mi si pen all a wine ‘pon paper
When girls a give out dem numba
Dem seh haul and pull-up mi selecta
Fah the word sound have up the power
Now lata is already greater
Lyrical riddim a dance ‘pon paper
And question a bubble wid answer
And when the ink and the vibes start flow
The stanzas them start fi grow
So the fruits and works start show
And mi people dem glad fi know

If reggae inna the dancehall
That mean dancehall fi inna reggae
And if dancehall inna the reggae
That mean reggae fi inna dancehall

Wi have music, dance and comedy
Story telling, fashion and poetry
Now thoughts and words bring reality
Rrealty shape wi identity
So wi think and make things happen
Now action brings the reaction
And set the whole ting inna motion
So if yu don’t plan to fail
Don’t fail to plan
Just join wid mi inna the celebration
Mek wi sen out a good vibration

If reggae inna the dancehall
That mean dancehall fi inna reggae
And if dancehall inna the reggae
That mean reggae fi inna dancehall

Mi si pen all a wine ‘pon paper
When girls a give out dem numba
Dem seh haul and pull-up mi selecta
Fah the word sound have up the power
Now lata is already greater
Lyrical riddim a dance 'pon paper
And question a bubble wid answer
And when the ink and the vibes start flow
The stanzas them start fi grow
So the fruits and works start show
And mi people dem glad fi know

If reggae inna the dancehall
That mean dancehall fi inna reggae
And if dancehall inna the reggae
That mean reggae fi inna dancehall

Wi have music, dance and comedy
Story telling, fashion and poetry
Now thoughts and words bring reality
Rreality shape wi identity
So wi think and make things happen
Now action brings the reaction
And set the whole ting inna motion
So if yu don't plan to fail
Don't fail to plan
Just join wid mi inna the celebration
Mek wi sen out a good vibration

If reggae inna the dancehall
That mean dancehall fi inna reggae
And if dancehall inna the reggae
That mean reggae fi inna dancehall

Mi si pen all a wine 'pon paper
When girls a give out dem numba
Mi si pen all a wine 'pon paper
And question a bubble wid answer

Mi si pen all a wine 'pon paper
When girls a give out dem numba
Mi si pen all a wine 'pon paper
And question a bubble wid answer
by Yasus Afari
65.  Toussaint L’Ouverture acknowledges Wordsworth’s sonnet

“To Toussaint L’Ouverture” (2006)

I have never walked on Westminster Bridge
or had a close-up view of daffodils.
My childhood’s roots are the Haitian hills
where runaway slaves made a freedom pledge
and scarlet poincianas flaunt their scent.
I have never walked on Westminster Bridge
or speak, like you, with Cumbrian accent.
My tongue bridges Europe to Dahomey.
Yet how sweet is the smell of liberty
when human beings share a common garment.
So, thanks brother, for your sonnet’s tribute.
May it resound when the Thames’ text stays mute.
And what better ground than a city’s bridge
for my unchained ghost to trumpet love’s decree.

By John Agard
Foremother II: Mary Seacole

from i was a little girl
my feet itched at the water’s edge
watching the waves ebb
ships coming and going

i observed my mother
sniffing and sorting herbs
forever blending and tasting
her brow knitted in concentration

find your gift she insisted
help someone be star or lantern
my hands carried the moon
even when night was dark

i would not be land-bound
robbed by womanly constraints
oh panama i come fingers liniment
sleep on clean sheets and stomachs well fed

there is and always will be a difference
between a woman and a lady but i was both
my face and heart unveiled to every man
my bedroom eden before the fall

i was persuasive i could charm
and not even a misguided nightingale
would deter me from administering
what i know to ally and enemy equally

i would leave treasure map for daughters
who would surely follow on my heels
listening keenly to the winds that beckoned them
herbal plants stored securely in their suitcases

by Opal Adisa Palmer
67.  **Dis poem**

dis poem
shall speak of the wretched sea
that washed ships to these shores
of mothers cryin for their young
swallowed up by the sea
dis poem shall say nothin new
dis poem shall speak of time
time unlimited time undefined
dis poem shall call names
names like lumumba kenyatta nkumah
hannibal akenaton malcolm garvey
haile selassie
dis poem is vexed about apartheid racism fascism
the klu klux klan riots in brixton atlanta
jim jones
dis poem is revoltin against 1st world 2nd world
3rd world division man made decision
dis poem is like all the rest
dis poem will not be amongst great literary works
will not be recited by poetry enthusiasts
will not be quoted by politicians nor men of religion
dis poem s knives bombs guns blood fire
blazin for freedom
yes dis poem is a drum
ashanti mau mau ibo yoruba nyahbingi warriors
uhuru uhuru
uhuru namibia
uhuru soweto
uhuru afrika
dis poem will not change things
dis poem need to be changed
dis poem is a rebirth of a peopl
arizin awaking understandin
dis poem speak is speakin have spoken
dis poem shall continue even when poets have stopped writin
dis poem shall survive u me it shall linger in history
in your mind
in time forever
dis poem is time only time will tell
dis poem is still not written
dis poem has no poet
dis poem is just a part of the story
his-story her-story our-story the story still untold
dis poem is now ringin talkin irritatin
makin u want to stop it
but dis poem will not stop
dis poem is long cannot be short
dis poem cannot be tamed cannot be blamed
the story is still not told about dis poem
dis poem is old new
dis poem was copied from the bible your prayer book
playboy magazine the n.y. times readers digest
the c.i.a. files the k.g.b. files
dis poem is no secret
dis poem shall be called boring stupid senseless
dis poem is watchin u tryin to make sense from dis poem
dis poem is messin up your brains
makin u want to stop listenin to dis poem
but u shall not stop listenin to dis poem
u need to know what will be said next in dis poem
dis poem shall disappoint u
because
dis poem is to be continued in your mind in your mind
in your mind your mind
by Mutabaruka

68. Sistas Poem

Sistas a feel yuh pain
Is a shame
Sistas a feel yuh pain
Some men is to blame

Suh yuh breedin agen
An im gwan wid im fren
Lord, wen it a guh en'

Yes a feel yuh pain
Is a shame
Sistas a feel yuh pain
Some men is to blame

Yuh stay at home
Him gwan guh roam
Lef de yard
Seh im gwan abroad
Many years pass de luv’ nah lass
Yuh breedin once more
Anadda man fi sure

Yes a feel yuh pain
Is a shame
Sistas a feel yuh pain
Some men is to blame

Male an' female he made us all
To gedda we stan' nun shall fall
De burden of life all mus wear
De joy of life all mus share

Yes a feel yuh pain
Is a shame
Sistas a feel yuh pain
Some men is to blame
Sistas sistas ’ave no fear
Som a we breddas really do care
To move forward yuh afi andastan
In disyah ammagiddion u afi stan’ stran

Yes a feel yuh pain
Is a shame
Sistas a feel yuh pain
Some men is to blame
by Mutabaruka
69. **Wailin**

juke box play
. . . an’ “stir it up”
in de ghetto
yout’ man
    “run fe cova"
hot
hot
hotter
“curfew” in a trench town
gun a blaze:
    crack
“trench town rock”

juke box playin
. . . ’an wi sayin
“long time wi nuh ’ave nuh nice time”
yout’man
    watch yu step
mek-kase stop
    “screwface”
“lively up yuself”
and “come reason now”
yout’man
    watch yu ways
“simma down”
    stop frown

play music
play in a “mellow mood”
    music is food
in de ghetto
yout’ man
    spread out
    stop bungle
inna “concrete jungle”
    watch it
in de ghetto
hot
    ..... hippies smokin pot?
wha dat?
yout’man
    throw wey de
molotov bomb
opressa-man
man vex
who yu gwine shoot nex?
hey you big tree
    “small axe"
ready
    by Mutabaruka
70. **For a defeated boxer**

Doing roadwork early in the morning
you imagined the music of the word “champ”
addressed to you;
pounding the speedball you could see
the belt around your waist;
punching the bag you could see
the headlines
announcing the glory you brought
to yourself and country.

When the night came
you did not see the punches
that put you down;
you heard the count in a daze;
you saw the referee’s signal;
it was over in less than a round.

This failure of your manly art
sent you sinking to a despair
flat as the canvas.

But this is a place where we all go,
floored by hooks, jabs and uppercuts.
But defeat is victorious only when
we do not see it a Kipling’s impostor.
Having dipped into all our pain
you can climb in and fight again.
  by Earl McKenzie
71. On knowing someone: The epistemology of destructiveness

(After George Laming)

I know you:
These are the dreaded words.

They can mean:
I know you come from a small place
of little significance,
that you once walked barefooted
and carried water on your head;
that you carry still the smell of the canepiece.

They can mean:
I know the decay of your ghetto address
and the odour of your slums;
that you have no known family tree,
that you live by counting red money.

The speaker wants to wield this knowledge
as a destructive power over you,
he who cannot know
the mansions of our mind
and the power of your dreams.

by Earl McKenzie
A Woman in Istanbul tells my fortune

You will live a long life.
You will get what you now so earnestly desire,
for it will be a distinguished life.
There will be a husband, yes; two, maybe three children.
Your children will be much like everyone else’s children.
The same sorrows. The same joys.
Always there is water around you: Tears? Travel?
You will, as you already know, spend much of your time
far away from home. There will be books,
paintings, terrible quarrels with people you do not know –
it would pay for you to hold your tongue,
but we both know you are not that type.
Mistakes? You will make more than your fair share
of them. Grief? Again more than your fair share.
The restlessness that flutters constantly, caged white
bird in the cavity of your chest, will never go away –
though time will help with the fluttering.
You will outlive your husband, almost outlive
one of your children – what pain, what pain.
I see you an old woman, halo of silver-white hair,
children all about you. I see a garden, and you
wearing a dark-coloured smock, faded pink roses.
You are wearing shoes much too big for you –
(your late husband’s?) In your hands, a pair of oversized
shears, and you: the woman who is always pruning.

by Jacqueline Bishop
73. Pierre

It was a boy named Pierre Powell
that was in charge of the atlas

in the cabinet. He also ended days
by shaking the iron bell from principal

William’s window, a work we grudged
him for very little; what cut our cores
twice a week and we had to endure,
was him being summoned to fetch

the key, again from William’s office,
to open the varnished box with the world

map, old and laminated, a forbidden
missionary gift trophied besides the Oxford

Set of Mathematical Instruments and other
things seen only by Pierre and Teacher Rose,

who now only nodded to raise him
to his duty. We waited in quiet

his return, Miss Rose all crinkled blouse
and bones with chalk dust in her hair,

did not stir until he was back, panting
at the door. Another diviner nod

and he opened it, unrolled the map expertly,
kneaded out creases and held down edges

for the ruler our eyes followed,
screeching out countries, and etched

in the periphery, a khaki-pillared Pierre,
with a merchant’s smile, a fixed blur

in our cry of Algeria, Switzerland, Chile,
soon withered away, and we eyed the field

of dry grass outside, a rusty mule,
statue-frozen in the punishable heat,
of those still in the rote, a liturgy of dunce,
whose one cardinal point, Tropicana

and terminated Geography. As if punched
from dream, those of us gazers, spared the map

rolling-up and cabinet-locking ceremony,
saw him, with a cord-strung key, an earnest air

bearing him away in a portal of sunlight.
He was absent, the week before summer,

and when Miss Rose, in rare fashion,
inquired, a girl said he had gone back home.

“Home,” Miss Rose sounded the strange word.
“Home,” the girl echoed and added, “him from Cayman,

Miss, or Canada, somewhere with a C.”
We turned to Miss Rose to clarify Canada

or Cayman, this elsewhere C curdled
to snow in our minds, foreign always spectral,

but she pointed anonymously a crooked
finger and said, “Run to the principal

for the key.” The whole class scattered, paid
no heed that not a single one was ordained.

by Ishion Hutchinson
74. Fire

Before there was time to pull away
or shut the skin
your smile cut my face. Instantly
it healed. But now there’s fire in my head,
in the kindling of my skull.

Air

The wind wrenched at my bones. See,
here, and here. I am loose, puppet, I am
jointed to your hands.
Articulate me gently, whispering.
I swing at the air of your voice.

Earth

Draw the curtains.
Like a place to bury kings
the room is warm and dry.
Our flesh moves to corruption
quietly: achieving night
at those same moments of most pure delight.

Water

I have taken the spit from your tongue.
It is river.
It is sea.
I am drowning. Slowly
the moon tides it away
to lap beside your pillow.
I skip my dreams like stones across its silence.

by Dennis Scott
References


Bishop, Jacqueline. “A woman in Istanbul tells my fortune.”


Hutchinson, Ishion. “Pierre.”


Onuora, Oku. “Last night.” *The Spill.* Retrieved from http://thespillblog.co.uk/2012/08/14/last-night-by-oku-onuora/


