



THE UNIVERSITY OF THE WEST INDIES

Faculty of Humanities and Education  
School of Education



**An Anthology of  
Caribbean Poems**

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## 1. Death of a comrade

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

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

down  
down  
down  
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 fangled programme  
is a talisman I carry  
everywhere. Love is with me still.

by Mervyn Morris

## 8. Peelin orange

Dem use to seh  
yu peel a orange  
perfec  
an yu get new clothes

But when mi father try  
fi teach mi  
slide de knife  
up to de safeguard thumb

I move de weapon like  
a saw inna mi han  
an de dyamn rind  
break

An if yu have de time  
yu can come see mi  
in mi ole clothes  
peelin

`by Mervyn Morris

## 9. 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

## 10. Valley prince

*(for Don D.)*

Me one, way out in the crowd,  
I blow the sounds, the pain,  
but not a soul  
would come inside my world  
or tell me how it true.  
I love a melancholy baby,  
sweet, with fire in her belly;  
and like a spite  
the woman turn a whore.  
Cool and smooth around the beat  
she wake the note inside me  
and I blow me mind.

Inside here, me one  
in the crowd again,  
and plenty people  
want me to blow it straight.  
But straight is not the way; my world  
don' go so; that is lie.  
Oonu gimme back me trombone, man:  
is time to blow me mind.

By Mervyn Morris

## 11. Little boy crying

Your mouth contorting in brief spite and hurt,  
your laughter metamorphosed into howls,  
your frame so recently relaxed now tight  
with three-year-old frustration, your bright eyes  
swimming tears, splashing your bare feet,  
you stand there angling for a moment's hint  
of guilt or sorrow for the quick slap struck.

The ogre towers above you, that grim giant,  
empty of feeling, a colossal cruel,  
soon victim of the tale's conclusion, dead  
at last. You hate him, you imagine  
chopping clean the tree he's scrambling down  
or plotting deeper pits to trap him in.

You cannot understand, not yet,  
the hurt your easy tears can scald him with,  
nor guess the wavering hidden behind that mask.  
This fierce man longs to lift you, curb your sadness  
with piggy-back or bull-fight, anything,  
but dare not ruin the lessons you should learn.

You must not make a plaything of the rain.

by Mervyn Morris

## 12. The day my father died

The day my father died  
I could not cry;  
My mother cried,  
Not I.

His face on the pillow  
In the dim light  
Wrote mourning to me,  
Black and white.

We saw him struggle,  
Stiffen, relax;  
The face fell empty,  
Dead as wax.

I'd read of death  
But never seen.  
My father's face, I swear,  
Was not serene.

Topple that lie,  
However appealing:  
That face was absence  
Of all feeling.

My mother's tears were my tears,  
Each sob shook me:  
The pain of death is living,  
The dead are free.

For me my father's death  
Was mother's sorrow;  
That day was her day,  
Loss was tomorrow.

by Mervyn Morris



### 13. 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

## 14. 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

## 15. 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 cacophonous chorus,  
we find the ritual of living.

by Kwame Dawes

## 16. 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

## 17. 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

## 18. 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

## 19. 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

## 20. Eye-water

Railway station in the mist  
Dawn is breaking  
I'm barely as high as the dewdrop on the grass  
Bound for another place  
My heart heavier than my suitcase

by Olive Senior

## 21. Gastropoda

You think I've stayed home all my life,  
moving at snail's pace, sneakily living off  
another's labour? You think I've nought  
to leave me behind but empty shell? Come:  
study me. Take my chambered shell apart.  
Brace yourself for whirlwinds  
coiled at my heart.

by Olive Senior



## 22. 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

travels on, searching for  
unencumbered skies, over the  
Cayman Islands, or Liechtenstein,  
or Geneva.

by Olive Senior

### **23. G for green news**

Somewhere, for a brief time  
in this collective pause,  
we are witnessing bluer skies,  
purer water, cleaner air  
and a friendlier world for bees.  
A turning back to roots  
with window gardening,  
backyard planting  
and soaring sales of seeds.

Know that every cutting  
you put into the ground,  
every seed you dig in,  
feels like a little tickle  
on the skin of Mother Earth  
leaving her smiling  
and wanting more.

by Olive Senior

## 24. U for underlying conditions

A pandemic is a democratic event, we are told,  
the great equalizer: which makes us all equally at risk.  
But the toll keeper knows who goes first – the aged  
and sickly, the immunocompromised and those  
on the darker side who are being taken  
disproportionately quickly.

It is not the melanin, no, Death had no prejudice.  
But it can unmask society's pathology, laying bare  
the sickness that was always there: the social and  
economic inequalities that provide Death  
with one's address.

Studies show: *Disempowerment makes people ill.*

Factories might be closed, but the manufacture  
of inequality never ceases. Communities of colour  
are the most exposed. As the pressure of  
underlying conditions increases, they are the ones  
most quickly summoned to pay the toll.

by Olive Senior

## 25. C for contact tracing

When I see 'contact tracing' it makes me want to write a  
letter to someone I lost long ago, who left no forwarding  
address, vanished without a trace. Feel sorry now that I  
did not hire a private detective or some such cliché.

But nostalgia counts for nothing when everything is  
driven by exigence: contact tracing a kind of policing  
to tag everyone who had contact with someone testing  
positive in the hope of stopping a viral spread.

Contact can never be considered again as simple touch  
and go. Someone will find out you were close once.  
Yes, the whole world is communicable. And yet with  
71 million displaced, so many can still vanish without a  
trace.

by Olive Senior

## 26. Hatch

what if  
i didn't want out  
if happy in here floating  
from one end to the other  
in this wachamacallit one day  
opened just a peepshow crack  
jump back girl back from the  
sound of breaking blast from the  
light let in once lines get crossed  
there's no turning back flood waters  
sweep me through the hatch hello  
world tap crumbling walls  
shell out set me up  
for life  
for breaking

by Olive Senior

## 27. And what of the headlines?

In a perfect  
equilibrium  
like snow  
and silence  
I await  
your gentle  
coming  
– Calling  
of voices  
across  
silence –  
Beyond the vapors  
of your breath  
other voices  
calling  
    calling  
across  
delinquent fences  
from the gutters  
of the all-night  
streets  
My anxieties  
are  
fanned  
alive.  
Last night a girl screamed.  
Thirty-eight shutters  
flew shut. Everyone  
watched television  
until it was  
all over.  
This morning they  
wash blood from the streets  
making virgin paths  
for early risers  
    - the knife  
    rose  
    and fell  
    rose  
    and fell  
    like the rhythm  
    of your  
    breathing  
Now in the quiet dawn  
you ask me  
Why are you anxious  
Why are you sad  
Why mustn't we talk  
Of Love?

by Olive Senior

## 28. Apartment life

The man downstairs needs music loud  
to fill his head  
The music is so white  
any day now  
it will snow and snow

already it is snowing  
on TV screens across the nation. Soon  
it will snow

red in the lane  
where the shoe-less unemployed  
nine-to-five faces grow and grow

In the concrete yard I  
will a crack to open wide  
invite a Kingston Buttercup inside  
nothing's tougher – than the janitor  
with weedkiller and

the lane where  
the school-less unemployed  
nine-to-five faces grow and grow

Upstairs the lady preoccupied  
with makeup and her boyfriend's wife  
(tells her to get out of her life)  
asks: who do these women so?

I only know  
the Kingston Buttercup retreats  
for underground for snow keeps falling  
on television screens across the nation

while (in Living Colour)  
the school-less unemployed  
nine-to-five faces grow and grow

by Olive Senior

## 29. 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

### 30. 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



### 31. 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

### **32. 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

### 33. 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 t  
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

### 34. 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 *dutty wine* with a clean heart.

by Kei Miller

### 35. 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

### 36. The broken (II)

Or maybe broken is the way we love.  
As if meeting someone else, one soul searches  
the other for openings – a way to enter.  
Even God's limbs had to be torn  
before the world could sing him. Mother,  
if growing up it seemed I did not love you,  
it is because I did not know I loved you.  
It is because you were rock on every side  
and I did not see a way to enter.  
And maybe I grudged you your strength,  
blamed you for my softness. But if I only knew  
it was breaking you – O mother, my love  
would have risen up like Jesus, large,  
to hold you large, and heal you large...  
so large the space between us.

By Kei Miller

### 37. What the evangelist should have said

An American evangelist, preaching salvation,  
said it was like being on one side of a river, Jesus  
on the other, arms long as forever reaching  
to lift you over. But we only knew hope river,  
sally waters river – only knew rambling brooks  
running through the cane as river, a thing  
you could jump over, or make a way across  
on stones. We had no imagination of Mississippi  
or Delaware, rivers so wide they held ships.  
A saviour with magic arms was pointless.

What the evangelist should have said, was:  
is like when de river come down just like suh  
and you find yusef at de bottom,  
slow breathin unda de surface, speakin  
in bubbles, growin accustomed to fish  
and deep and dark and forever – salvation  
is de man with arms like a tractor  
who reach in fi pull you out of de river,  
press de flat of him hands gainst your belly  
and push de river out of you.

by Kei Miller

### 38. 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 covered. 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

### 39. 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



#### 40. Nigger sweat

‘Please have your passport and all documents  
out and ready for your interview. Kindly keep them dry.’  
(Notice in the waiting-room of the US Embassy, Visa Section,  
Kingston Jamaica, 1982.)

No disrespect, mi boss,  
just honest nigger sweat;  
well almost, for is true  
some of we trying to fool you  
so we can lose weself  
on the Big R ranch  
to find a little life,  
but boss, is hard times  
make it, and not because  
black people born wutlis:  
so, boss, excuse this nigger sweat.  
And I know that you know it  
as good as me,  
this river running through history,  
this historical fact, this sweat  
that put the aroma  
in your choice Virginia  
that sweeten the cane  
and make cotton shine;  
and sometimes I dream a nightmare dream  
that the river rising, rising  
and swelling the sea and I see  
you choking and drowning  
in a sea of black man sweat  
and I wake up shaking  
with shame and remorse  
for my mother did teach me,  
Child, don’t study revenge.  
Don’t think we not grateful, boss  
how you cool down the place for we comfort,  
but the line shuffle forward  
one step at a time  
like Big Fraid hold we,  
and the cool-cut, crew-cut Marine boy  
wid him ice-blue eye and him walkie-talkie  
diss walk through the place and pretend  
him no see we.  
But a bring me handkerchief,  
mi mother did bring me up right,

and, God willing, I keeping things cool  
till we meet face to face,  
and I promise you, boss,  
if I get through I gone,  
gone from this bruk-spirit, kiss-me-arse-place.

By Edward Baugh

#### **41. 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. Maybe, 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

## 42. 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

### 43. Recompense

Remember how Janet get up in history class and say she not black and we laugh and tell her fi sit her black backside down but Janet say we too fool for school; she half Scottish. And somebody tug on Janet plait and say look how yuh head tough and Janet say don't make that fool you; naked eye don't see the blood. In 18-something her great great great somebody step off a boat and 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) and she not letting Scotland get away scot-free; she laying claim to that money that build bronze statues & columned empires on cobblestone streets and she say bet you when Scotland issue apology and say all half-breeds line up here for recompense, all a we who black and 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. And somebody in Janet family must've been drawing a family tree because she swear is Scotland her father people come from. And we laugh and ask Janet if she sure is not Ireland or England. We say, Janet sit down, yuh can't even find we own Clarendon on Miss Dawson' map. When we graduate, news fly on a paper plane tell we that Janet went to London to study but money run out and she couldn't find not one white Family and, Lord have mercy, we hear she turn all shade of black.

by Tanya Shirley

#### 44. 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

## 45. 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



## 46. 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

## 47. Eating words

eventually  
you learn  
to swallow words  
not spit them out  
or use them as missiles  
but chew them at full tilt  
escape, that way, the insipidness  
of cynicism and rancour  
push them deep, into your gut  
let them attach themselves  
to the walls of your stomachs  
to the villi of your intestines  
to die their quietly  
eventually.

By Paulette Ramsay

## 48. Sonny's lettah

Brixtan Prison  
Jebb Avenue  
Landan south-west two  
Inglan

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 miggles a di rush howah  
wen evrybody 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 awn to Jim  
seh him tekin him in;  
Jim tell him fi let goh a him  
far him noh dhu notn  
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 coudn stan-up deh  
and noh dhu notn:

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

#### 49. If I waz a tap natch poet

if I woz a tap-natch poet  
like Chris Okigbo  
Derek Walcott  
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  
iill 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 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 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 ethnicity  
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 bettah 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

## 50. 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



## 51. 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

## 52. 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-spen 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

### 53. 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

## 54. Harlem shadows

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 slippared 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

## 55. 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

## 56. 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

## 57. 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 wrinch  
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

## 58. Yarn spinner

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



## 59. 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

## 60. 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

## 61. Iguana

for A.T.

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

## 62. 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  
then 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

### 63. 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

#### **64. 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

#### **65. 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

## 66. 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

## 67. 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



## 68. 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

## 69. 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

**70. Cut language!**  
(for Stephen )

Wrapping your tongue  
round words  
Stephen man-  
oevering  
“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

## 71. 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

## 72. To Gran... And no farewell

I didnt 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

### 73. 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

## 74. 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

## 75. 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

## 76. Poetry caan nyam

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 tamgerine, tamrind and tomato  
'R', fi radish, raspberry 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

## 77. 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  
Reality 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

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And question a bubble wid answer

by Yasus Afari

## 78. 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

## 79. 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 nkrumah  
hannibal akenaton malcolm garvey  
haile selassie  
dis poem is vexed about apartheid rascism 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

## 80. 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

## 81. 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  
oppressa-man

man vex  
who yu gwine shoot nex?  
hey you big tree  
"small axe"  
ready

by Mutabaruka

## 82. 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

### 83. On knowing someone: The epistemology of destructiveness

*(After George Laming)*

I know you:

These are the dreaded words.

The 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 your mind  
and the power of your dreams.

By Earl Mckenzie

## 84. 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

## 85. 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,

Pierre, a phantom sea fraying  
over Antarctica, Fiji, Belize, India

of those still in the rote, a liturgy of dunce,  
whose one cardinal point, Tropicana

Sugar Estate, so close we could smell the sugar  
in process, whistled its shift change,

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



## 86. 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

## 87. "So Jah sey"

Dread song. "Not one of my deed" the words said  
(and it hurt every time i heard Bob sing)  
"shall sit on your sidewalk and beg your bread."  
No, Pa, i'd think, never. My eyes would sting.  
And yet it could have happened. Easily.  
i burned to live a different kind of life,  
more wild, more free – in fact, the kind that he  
had lived, even with children and wife.  
My simmering rage would boil sometimes, would spurt  
hot scalding words on him. i'd almost leave.  
But i knew he'd turn beggar. And that hurt.  
Why? Pride? The thought that when he died i'd grieve?  
No. but somehow he had become my son,  
my seed. And i, a tree now, couldn't run.

By Kendel Hippolyte

## 88. Now the guitar begins

### *I. Last Song*

There is a field with no light.  
Not the faint shimmer of stars,  
not the sliver of a moon.  
This night, there is a man  
walking guitarless in the grass,  
no song in his pocket,  
no tune on his tongue. Empty  
your voice for hum,  
it will be no use.  
In this field, there is this man  
and not even hint of wind  
can stir the tall weeds  
through which he moves.  
He will lie down, smell  
the earth fresh from rain.  
He will listen to crickets,  
a music he cannot understand.  
He will close his eyes.  
He will sleep.  
He will not get up

By Shara McCallum

## 89. Facing it

Always the same questions  
of blood and break breaking,  
eaten in communion  
with what we know – this chair,  
the candle flickering.  
With what we don't – the dark  
outside the window, night  
ashen life the voice of hands.

If I could again be a child  
at my mother's side,  
I would believe in the stove,  
the lit room; in her skirt  
swishing against my face  
as I crumpled the hem in my fist,  
made my hand a flag to wave  
my mother's love into my skin.

*I once was lost*  
*but now am found*, she hummed.  
And we were, she and I.  
And I believed in the night  
more fiercely, believed  
in my mother, my hand wrapt  
in her skirt, moving back and forth  
across my face, her face, the face  
of God, the face I loved.

By Shara McCallum

## 90. Catching crabs

Ruby and me stalking savannah  
Crab season with cutlass and sack like big folk.  
Hiding behind stones or clumps of bush  
Crabs locked knee-deep in mud mating  
And Ruby, seven years old feeling strange at the sex  
And me horrified to pick them up  
Plunge them into the darkness of bag.  
So all day we scout to catch the lonesome ones  
Who don't mind cooking because they got no prospect  
Of family, and squelching through the mud,  
Cutlass clearing bush at our feet,  
We come home tired slow, weighed down with plenty  
Which Ma throw live into boiling pot piece-piece.  
Tonight we'll have one big happy curry feed,  
We'll test out who teeth and jaw strongest  
Who will grow up to be the biggest  
Or who will make most terrible cannibal.

We leave behind a mess of bones and shell  
And come to England and America  
Where Ruby hustles in a New York tenement  
And me writing poetry at Cambridge,  
Death long catch Ma, the house boarded up  
Breeding wasps, woodlice in its dark-sack belly:  
I am afraid to walk through weed yard,  
Reach the door, prise open, look,  
In case the pot still bubbles magical  
On the fireside, and I see Ma  
Working a ladle, slow –  
Limbed, crustacean-old, alone,

By David Dabydeen

## 91. tracks

the walk across the island  
was not sponsored

it took years

sun was there  
or moonlight  
with its crablike stare

canes wore arrows

pointing

to a mountain's  
caustic sores

shores  
imprisoned  
from our restful gaze

squatting  
for survival

screwing up  
for smiles

the lines  
on our faces

tightened

with the times

by Jean 'Binta' Breeze

**92. On your passing**  
*(for C.L.R.)*

you left me  
on a day of doubts

for once  
your sun sharp answers  
did not cut through  
my clouds

I sent my love upstairs  
did not dare come

from the landing  
I could smell  
your passing

an old time smell  
a smell of cedar  
and hard changes  
a smell you find  
in families and friends

and even now  
I am not struck by absence  
you filled time so well

a drop from the overflow  
could quench  
a thirsty mind  
for years to come.

by Jean 'Binta' Breeze

### 93. Homecoming (One)

is dat day  
wen yuh put yuh key  
in yuh own front door  
an wipe yuh foot  
from de dus  
of all unwelcome

settle yuh children  
roun yuh table  
full of good wholesome  
food  
an sing to dem  
loud as yuh desire  
but mostly sof  
so dem dreams  
will not be frightening

den yuh put yuh foot up  
ease yuh bones  
ready  
to meet the dawning  
of dem opening eyes

dat day  
wen yuh tek awn life  
an know  
yuh have de will  
to mek it  
an a man don't mes

dat day sister  
wen yuh reach over  
de blues  
an it don't matter  
wedda outside  
cowl or hot  
stony or smood  
high or low

for inside warm  
wid all the loving  
from yuh heart

dat day, sister  
name



Homecoming

by Jean 'Binta' Breeze

## 94. It's good to talk

When I called you up  
I wasn't lonely  
It was just the thought of sharing words with you  
hearing you across the distant mountains  
talking bout the sill things we do  
no important message to deliver  
no illness among family or friends  
no funerals  
no weddings  
no baby's christening  
no murder  
no divorce  
no baptism  
just thought we'd have a little idle gossip  
like do you know that Johnny's selling crack  
and Auntie Lou's not making no more pudding  
cause she fall dung on de step  
an hurt her back  
Cousin Agnes gone to live eena Miami  
an Clarice rent a spot an build a house  
the primary school just get it first computer  
an de Baptist church manse bun dung from de gas  
well nothing else much happen to de road works  
dem say de money run out and it stop  
de MP withdraw from the next election  
an Miss Amy build a room upstairs de shop  
well with me you know that nothing really changing  
a new man might pass through but not to stay  
I like my life alone just independent  
but ah glad yu marriage working out with Jay  
stay well me chile, an don't let nothing bother you  
everyone to dem own order, so John say  
anywhere you go, chile  
is the same creation  
anywhere you go, chile  
same way people stay.

by Jean 'Binta' Breeze

## 95. For the mother and child

Blood seeped down  
into the veins of our Earth

and I held my child and cried

for a mother and child  
woke that Tuesday to die.

I held my child and cried  
for the mother and child in Haiti;

for the memory of Toussaint,  
Dessalines;

for the Haitians never mentioned in the books;  
for the Haitians with the monkey on his back.

Pat Robertson (and the others), tell me, if you know,  
why was the black man's God a devil?

Why was there a price  
for the air you breathe in Haiti?

Blood seeped down  
into the veins of our Earth

and I held my child and cried.

by Ann Margaret Lim

## 96. Give me a God

*but silent, absorbed and on his knees  
as men adore God at the altar, as I love you  
don't blind yourself, you'll not be loved like that.*

Robert Lowell, "Will Not Come Back"

You say none will ever love me like this,  
the way you do, silent, absorbed, on your knees.  
I say, I've had enough glibness to fill  
all the kitchen-counter romance novels.  
I don't need someone on his knees sounding  
his brazen love to me; it's trite, and glows  
like tinsel town, it's just an overload.  
Give me a god like the sea or gloomy clouds  
to love; the folding, unfolding mountains  
to search, to comprehend, to serenade,  
to sow golden marigolds on, and  
a spring to dip my careless feet.  
Oh give me the woods to run to, away  
from all this clanging of men's mortal love.

by Ann Margaret Lim

## 97. Girl with my face

I see you in the obituaries –  
the girl my stepmother mistook for me  
and blew the horn, 'cause 'I' saw her  
and never came.

To see you, who the librarian thought  
had already come for your report  
when she saw me;  
to see the girl with the bow legs I had,  
but the voice for ballads I never did;  
to see you, the girl with my face,  
in the obituaries, jolts me.

I pray your parents never see my face.

by Ann Margaret Lim

## 98. Brother

At nine, I picked flowers for your birthday,  
wishing you were playing in the garden, or on  
the verandah, taking the ladders off the fire truck,  
arranging them to rescue  
the child trapped in the room.

At seventeen, I come home from the mission tent,  
clutching the hope of a miracle  
like a crystal in my hand that drops  
and splinters when I see you – still  
as you were before the crusade.

At twenty-four, I stand in the morgue  
of the hospital you were born in.  
They screwed up, again: a girl shares  
your cold chamber. But I resent more  
your botched delivery.

Norvin, when you died, I walked in a whirlwind.  
Your father? Glass splintered, senseless,  
barring me and your mother from the cremation.  
For more than a year your mother  
seemed obsessed with ovens:  
putting in the beginnings of puddings, pies,  
tarts; taking them out completed.

Sometimes I see you, once in a boy  
at a school I taught – the same living hair  
cut close to the scalp, the same smile.  
Norvin, my brother, I kiss your black brow  
and wish my world was like my daughter's  
where a tear drop would bring you back.

by Ann Margaret Lim

## 99. Memories

The last time I say her  
in person, not a photograph,  
she was in the box beside me  
in Cleopatra braids  
popping gumballs in the cinema.

I called my stepmother mommy  
and she said: *Tell her*  
*you have only one mother, me,*  
*and she is Aunty M.*

At the table, at dinnertime,  
I delivered the message.  
My father delivered  
chopsticks to my forehead.

She'd call from Venezuela,  
and I'd pack bags, and wait for her.

I remember the barrel  
with the biggest doll I'd ever seen.

I remember nights without a mother.

by Ann Margaret Lim

## 100. Yesterday

Once I gulped a container of pills  
wishing to never come back  
to a room, a house without my mother.

The day after, searching for something  
in my eyes as he put the glass or milk  
to my lips, my father asked:  
*Why did you do it?*

I could only look at him.

by Ann Margaret Lim

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