

## *Inheritance*

O Christ, my craft and the long time it is taking!

*Derek Walcott*

### *I*

In the shade of the sea grape trees the air is tart  
with the sweet sour of stewed fruit rotting  
about his sandalled feet. His skin,  
still Boston pale and preserved with Brahman  
devotion by the hawkish woman  
who smells cancer in each tropical wind,  
is caged in shadows. I know those worn eyes,  
their feline gleam, mischief riddled;  
his upper lip lined with a thin stripe  
of tangerine, the curled up nervousness  
of a freshly shaved mustache. He is old  
and cared for. He accepts mashed food  
though he still has teeth—she insists and love  
is about atoning for the guilt  
of those goatish years in New England.  
A prophet's kind of old. Old like casket-  
aged genius. Above, a gull surveys  
the island, stitches loops through the sea and sky—  
an even horizon, the bias on which  
teeters a landscape, this dark loam of tradition  
in which seeds split into tender leaves.

## II

The smudge of colors spreads and dries in the sun.  
The pulpy paper sucks in the watercolor,  
and the cliché of sea and a fresh beach  
seems too easy for a poem. He has written  
them all, imagined the glitter and clatter  
of silver cuirasses, accents of crude  
Genoese sailors poisoning the air,  
the sand feeling for the first time the shadow  
of flag and plumed helmet—this old story  
of arrival that stirred him as a boy,  
looking out over the open plains,  
as he cluttered the simple island  
with the intrigues of blood and heroes,  
his gray eyes searching out an ancestry  
beyond the broad laughter and breadfruit-  
common grunts of the fishermen, pickled  
with rum and the *picong* of *kaiso*,  
their histories as shallow as the trace  
of soil at the beach's edge where crippled  
corn bushes have sprouted. That was years ago;  
he has now exhausted the jaundiced language  
of a broken civilization.  
These days he just chips at his epitaph,  
a conceit of twilights turning into  
bare and bleak nights. He paints, whistling  
Sparrow songs while blistering in the sun.

### III

The note pad, though, is not blank. The words start,  
thirteen syllables across the page, then seven  
before the idea hesitates. These days  
he does not need to count, there is in his head  
a counter dinging an alarm like the bell  
of his old Smith Corona. His line breaks  
are tidy dramas of his entrances  
and exits, he will howl before the darkness.  
This ellipsis is the tease of a thought,  
the flirtatious lift of a yellow skirt  
showing a brown taut thigh—a song he knows  
how to hum but can't recall the lyrics, man—  
an airy metaphor—taken up  
by a flippant sea breeze going some place  
inland, carrying the image, snagged  
by the olive dull entanglement  
of a thorny patch. At eight he lays  
the contents of his canvas book bag  
on the sand, organizing the still life  
like honed stanzas. He scoops the orange pulp  
of papaya, relishing the taste of fruit, this bounty  
harvested from the ant-infested fragile tree  
that bleeds each time its fruit is plucked.  
The flesh is sunny. He knows the fishermen warn  
it will cut a man's nature, dry up  
his sap; that women feed their men pureed  
papaya in tall glasses of rum-punch  
to tie them down, beached, benign pirogues  
heading nowhere. He dares the toxins  
to shrivel him, to punish him

for the chronic genius of crafting poems  
from the music of a woman's laugh  
while he chews slowly. A poem comes to him  
as they sometimes do in the chorus  
of a song. It dances about in his head.  
He does not move to write it down—it will wait  
if it must, and if not, it is probably  
an old sliver of long discarded verse.

## IV

The old men in the rum shop are comforted  
as they watch him limp along the gravel  
road, wincing at the sharp prod of stones  
in his tender soles, the knees grinding  
at each sudden jar—just another ancient  
recluse with his easel folded under  
his arm, a straw hat, the gull-gray eyes  
seeing the sea before he clears the hill.  
They know him, proud of the boy—bright as hell  
and from good people. There is no shared language  
between them, just the babel of rum talk  
and cricket sometimes. Under his waters  
he talks of Brussels, Florence, barquentines,  
Baudelaire, rolling the words around  
like a cube of ice—they like to hear  
the music he makes with tongue; the way  
he tears embracing this green island,  
this damned treasure, this shit hole of a treasure.  
Sometimes if you don't mind sharp, you would think  
him white, too, except for the way him hold  
him waters, carry his body against the sun  
with the cool, cultivated calm of a rumhead.  
Him say home like it come from a book;  
hard to recognize when him say home  
that is this dry beachhead and tired earth  
him talking. They like it, anyway, the way  
they like to hear "Waltzing Matilda" sung  
with that broad Baptist harmony to a *cuatro*  
plunked, to hear it fill an old song night.

## V

If he is my father (there is something of that fraying dignity, and the way genius is worn casual and urbane—aging with grace) he has not lost much over the years. The cigarette still stings his eyes and the scent of Old Spice distilled in Gordon's Dry Gin is familiar here by the sea where a jaunty shanty, the cry of gulls and the squeak of the rigging of boats are a right backdrop—but I have abandoned the thought, the search for my father in this picture. He's not here, though I still come to the ritual death watch like a vulture around a crippled beast, the flies already bold around its liquid eyes, too resigned to blink. I have come for the books, the cured language, the names of this earth that he has invented, the stories of a town, and the way he finds women's slippery parts in the smell and shape of this island, the making and unmaking of a city through the epic cataclysm of fire, eating the brittle old wood, myths dancing in the thick smoke like the gray ashen debris of sacrifice. It is all here with him—this specimen living out his twilight days, prodigious as John's horror—the green uncertain in the half light. When we meet he is distant, he knows I want to draw him out, peer in for clues. He will not be drawn out,

he is too weary now. He points his chin  
to the rum shop, to an old man, Afolabe,  
sitting on the edge of a canoe, black  
as consuming night. I can tell  
that he carries a new legend in his terrible  
soul each morning, a high tower over the sea.

## VI

I could claim him easily, make of him  
a tale of nurture and benign neglect;  
he is alive, still speaks, his brain clicks  
with the routine of revelations  
that can spawn in me the progeny  
of his monumental craft. These colonial  
old men, fed on cricket and the tortured  
indulgences of white schoolmasters  
patrolling the mimic island streets  
like gods growing gray and sage-like in the heat  
and stench of the Third World; they return  
to the reactionary nostalgia  
during their last days—it is the manner  
of aging, we say, but so sad, so sad.  
I could adopt him, dream of blood and assume  
his legacy of a divided self.  
But it would ring false quickly; after all  
my father saw the Niger eating out  
a continent's beginnings; its rapid  
descent to the Atlantic; he tasted  
the sweet *kelewele* of an Akan  
welcome, and cried at the uncompromising  
flame of *akpetechi*. The blood of his sons  
was spilled like libation into the soil, and more:  
in nineteen twenty-six, an old midwife  
buried his bloodied navel string, and the afterbirth  
of his arrival, at the foot of an ancient  
cotton tree there on the delta islands  
of Calabar. My blood defines the character  
of my verse. Still, I pilfer (a much better word),

rummage through the poet's things to find the useful,  
how he makes a parrot flame a line  
or a cicada scream in wind; the names  
he gives the bright berries of an island  
in the vernacular of Adam and the tribe.

## VII

I carry the weight of your shadow always,  
while I pick through your things for the concordance  
of your invented icons for this archipelago.  
Any announcement of your passing  
is premature. So to find my own strength,  
I seek out your splendid weaknesses.  
Your last poems are free of the bombast  
of gaudy garments, I can see the knobs  
of your knees scarred by the surgeon's incisions  
to siphon water and blood from bone;  
I stare at your naked torso—the teats  
hairy, the hint of a barreled beauty  
beneath the folding skin. I turn away  
as from a mirror. I am sipping your blood,  
tapping the aged sap of your days while you grow  
pale. You are painting on the beach, this is how  
the poem began—I am watching you watching  
the painting take shape. I have stared long enough  
that I can predict your next stroke—your dip  
into the palette, your grunts, your contemplative  
moments, a poised crane waiting for the right  
instance to plunge and make crimson ribbons  
on a slow moving river. These islands  
give delight, sweet water with berries,  
the impossible theologies  
of reggae, its metaphysics so right  
for the inconstant seasons of sun and muscular  
storm—you can hear the shape of a landscape  
in the groan of the wind against the breadfruit  
fronds. I was jealous when at twenty, I found

a slim volume of poems you had written  
before you reached sixteen. It has stitched in me  
a strange sense of a lie, as if all this  
will be revealed to be dust—as if I learned  
to pretend one day, and have yet to be found out.

## *Hoarding*

*For Sarah Maguire*

She is hoarding poems these days, the ideas  
anyway; keeping them for a later time  
when her language will be distilled to the pine  
lacquer of aged metaphors—efficient as ancient  
music, the composer at her height. She is  
sure of this, that she grows swollen and graceful  
in time, her poems sweetly succulent and free  
of the gristle of youth. It is a miserly art,  
keeping the gems for later. Truth be told,  
she returns to old poems with regret, a pained  
annoyance at the too rash youth casting  
amateurish molds, filled with the bubbles  
of inexperience, ideas that in the raw clay  
are simply gifted, the stuff of higher verse,  
but caught in her too careless craft,  
contort grotesquely, failed artifacts.  
She has fallen short and will not forgive  
youth for such waste. So these days,  
in deference to the seventy-year-old,  
white-headed slack-breasted dowager poet,  
she foregoes the poems, the elegies too delicate  
for her meager gifts, still uncertain. She knows  
so little now. She makes lists of poems  
to be written: a memory of a mango's taste,  
the imperial grace of lilacs, the melody  
of a Handel hymn, a lament for the beloved dead.

## *Ska Memory*

*For Neville Dawes (1926–1984)*

The streets of this city are spaces where the body recalls  
the saunter of pleasure and fear, where the possession  
of the groove, the maddening tattoo is a relentless language.  
In this dusty city, sudden as the klaxon calls, the drum  
rolls a clatter of a garbage bin and the engine jumps into frenetic  
yelps from its belly. We dip and move, while a horn-man tilts his hat,  
draws deep and blows a soft hill rising into a mountain, the shape  
of his woman's pubis at half light, the echo left by a lost pea-dove,  
fading into time, and we know we are traveling into a history  
older than these streets, a history kept in a song, smelling  
of old sweat, iron of dried blood, the bitter reek of bodies.  
Alive now, I count the thirty-six bars, a circle of order  
and madness, calculating the genius of a rift that clears  
the mountain then faces greenly into the night. Those arias  
are thick-lipped and dark like me, they are the old rag  
of a bluesman. You told me once to listen to the way  
a melody could collect memories, could flesh and swell  
and bleed, and though you are long dead, I thank you for it.

## *Holy Dub*

. . . round  
my mud hut I hear again  
the cry of the lost  
swallows, horizons' halloos, found-  
ationless voices, voyages

*Kamau Brathwaite*

### *I*

Let us gather, then, the legend of faith,  
truth of our lives in this crude foment of days.

We are so afraid to look to the sky, so cowed, we whisper  
of straight paths while a nation grows fat on its own flesh.

Our gospel—our testament—makes martyrs of us.  
*Another life,*  
scribbles the scribe, his parchment sucking the blood  
of root dyes.

We keep these hymns we've sung through time as stations of our  
journeys.

*Come to the waters*  
*There is a vast supply,*  
*There is a river,*  
*That never shall run dry.*  
*Hallelujah!*

## II

His afro recedes, creeping towards the nape creaturely,  
his forehead is a veined, leathered casing.

The lamplight is guarded by the soot-stained,  
wafer-thin glass, with its simple web of doilies

in pale yellow paint—such basic  
craft, such splendor in useful things.

He is writing himself into a brittle savannah,  
and the mother's calm song he hears is the meaning of faithfulness.

*Too-too bobbii*

*Too-too bobbii.*

Her sound carries for miles while her choleric  
child fatigues the night with a wailing counterpoint.

The remembrance of old blood makes his skin  
accept the sun. The livery is long burnished.

The music of lullabies turns about the poet's head.  
His skin has grown darker here—*obroni* black man.

He speaks Ewe, understands the pidgin of mosquitoes.

### III

Between click-filled night and pink dawn,  
Beethoven's miserable lament

circles the bungalow that squats beneath the naked  
mesh of a *yoyi's* canopy. He finds comfort

in this music, so like the orange dry of the grass lands,  
the deep blues of memory. In the symphony's turn

is a thick sweetness of cheap wine and the substance  
of fresh bread, still warm, broken by rough hands.

He records the gospel of the desert people,  
poor folk whose mornings are oblations to light.

This poet is a *griot* in search of a village. He will forget  
all dreams come sunlight. He fears this most.

For decades they will remain myths of a better life,  
until he reaches the wilderness of his last dawns,

in a too cold loft over Greenwich Village where he will  
try to make verse like they used to make psalms:

to last and last.

## *Liminal*

I should have been born in the epoch of flesh  
mongering, the time of moral malaise, to hear  
the blues crawling from the steaming dungeons  
of first blues folk; their lyric moaning  
against the encroaching gloom;  
I should have heard the iambic ebb and roll  
of sea lapping against an alien shore,  
the boom of wind in sails, the quick-repeat  
auctioneer's scatology, that maddening knocking.  
But I've arrived in this other time, waiting  
upon an old woman's prayer, to carry the tears and laughter  
so long preserved in the tightly knotted hem  
of her skirt where she keeps herbs, a broken tooth,  
cowrie shells, kola nuts, and the soft lavender  
of a wild flower's petals; aged good and strong.  
I am gathering the relics of a broken threnody,  
lispings psalms—all I have—and crying salt and wet.

## *Timehri*

After all, it is not about the dialects of this edge  
of a bloody century, it is the texture of spirit  
caught up in the earth. I am a door if you catch  
the earth rhythm of my dream, and this music  
is below me, below us all. We are standing on a pliant  
floor, while the bass of the song trembles  
everything; it is here in this moment that light,  
color, and *timehri* whisper.

I arrive at the dusty graves of my ancestors  
somewhere in Ewe country looking for names and dates,  
hieroglyphs of belonging. There are no names on the stones.  
I find my feet trembling as the women's dirge startles  
the tambourines; and God is brilliant in the morning sky;  
Jesus stirring the dirt, his terrible music swirling.

## *Memory: An Abstraction*

*After Shostakovich's Quartet #10, Opus 118 by Aubrey Williams*

1

At the edge the dusk silhouettes a tree's delta  
of branches over a spot of red sky.  
In the middle the sun is a smear of bone white.  
Yellow streaks of egg yolk and the solid vertebrae,  
spotted vermilion with flesh, frame everything.  
This image too, uncertain as the music  
that traps the seasons in myth,  
finds its constant peace in my dreams.

2

The waterfalls thunder while ghosts whisper their ragged  
tales, strips of old cloth flitting in the breeze  
despite the groan of the storm in the pound of water.  
Above, the sky breaks into shadow. We cannot find our way  
back for the charts betray us. We rely on the stars,  
but cloud cover mutes the night with flat silence.  
We cannot travel in the daytime so we shout and listen.  
We have stumbled into language, touching the stones  
with our bare feet—these cool humped alphabets sprayed  
with water beneath a gray unfeeling dawn.

## *Caricature*

Naked, standing at ease, a man  
about to be shot at the edge of an ocean,  
his body is old, the eyes morose,  
the flesh on him is loose.

There is nothing sexual in the dumb  
hang of his dark penis, in the clump  
of pubic hairs, in the way his thighs,  
cellulite and dark patches of scarred skin,  
touch. He has a woman's hips.  
His hands, when he brings them to his face, seem  
small, useless, all too soft, and he looks  
ordinary enough to be a condemned man.

This is the face he sees at twelve midnight:  
cheeks rounding, eyes tiny, too far buried,  
forehead dry, taut, and starting to crack.

He wears white briefs, a T-shirt, a Seiko watch  
to bed at night. Sometimes she turns to him,  
holds him, sometimes not. He lies here staring  
into the black until he sees the weft of coconut  
fronds, unfolding above him, and hears the sharp  
cracking of rifles above the groan of the ocean and wind.

## *Sanctuary*

From here the village is cradled in the slopes,  
smeared into restless rings by a palette knife,  
the trees bending into swirls of blackened green-blue  
edged with amber like the heads of saints.

A burnt-out cedar rises full,  
its jagged steeple pricking the night.  
This spill of moonglow makes the zinc in the roofs wave  
as if nothing is permanent, nothing but these patterned hills  
fading against a play of stars that run paths in loops  
while the sickle moon longs to be a sun, all yellow,  
spectacularly blurred against my bruised cornea.  
With one eye closed, everything mists into a whirl of stars  
until I too am looping into its infinite streaks,  
forgetting that behind me  
you are still weeping,  
rehearsing my betrayal.

There is no comfort in the rotted cedar's holiness,  
no open door of forgiveness. I feel the moon on my skin.  
Somewhere a radio gently carries a melody from another country,  
the swooping, nonchalant dance of a love letter in the breeze.

# *Genocide*

*After Olmec-Mayan—May Confrontation by Aubrey Williams*

*Across the flame the skulls quarrel.  
We listen to them like we listen to wind.*

1

The artificial village grows confused when it spills  
into the crude haphazard of the centuries-old hovels. The sundial sits  
on an open plateau overlooking the village. Here history  
is offered for a modest entry fee in Northern Irish currency.

They arrive despite the news of bombs shattering  
the scarred muscle of Belfast's heart. I can see the blood

of bare feet rotting in potato-blighted peat. I read time:  
the arc of the sun in a knife's shadow. I am reading someone else's myths.

2

The Irish learned quickly to scalp neatly, grateful always for the long  
sable hair  
that wrapped thick around bloody fists. Killing turns into habit as  
pragmatic

as the slaughter of prairie dogs spotting God's open fields—the bounty  
of suffering and sweat—old as bitter ale, old as the black salty blood of  
lambs.

3

I trace patterns on the rugged cured hide of an old cow.  
It is not my culture, but this dialect of genocide,

this forgetting and retrieving with the drum,  
this swirl of spirits, this dogged faith

in the whispering of trees, this blurred memory,  
this broken village where everything is eaten by hunger

is my birthright. My craft  
takes to the flame and color well.

I see no eyes, just the heads, the off-white jaws  
going, the rabbit teeth chattering sudden death.

4

The air reeks after rain. The bodies rot.  
Naked graves. Bones are tombstones.

The flies hum a sound, a drone of breaths,  
last breaths while skin pulps, then falls away.

It is morning and a cow rots where a pasture thrived.  
Dandelions glow painterly against a fence.

All flesh turns black.  
See the toes?  
Black.

## *Sun Strokes*

*For Sena*

1

My daughter tells me that the sun is a ball of gasses;  
that flames are hard to define, but heat she understands:  
pressure plus gasses equals heat.  
These equations, she explains — she is six this month.

2

Bonfires around martyrs were merciful — why my daughter  
knows this is beyond me.

Wet straw stuffed into the dark cleavages in the bramble  
before the execution

caused the smoke to kill — a few coughs, then an airless, painless death  
while the muttering

priests repeated Hail Mary's full of grace — my daughter tells me  
most of this. A prelude

to an impossible question, I fear. But she has no questions,  
she just asks, *Did you know?*