

Selected Poems

(1999-2010)

MAGGIE HARRIS

Maggie Harris
Selected Poems

With an Introduction by Lynne Macedo

Original publication details for these poems are provided on Acknowledgements Page 12.

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**Series Preface by the President of Guyana,
H. E. Bharrat Jagdeo**

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SERIES PREFACE

Modern Guyana came into being, in the Western imagination, through the travelogue of Sir Walter Raleigh, *The Discoverie of Guiana* (1595). Raleigh was as beguiled by Guiana's landscape ("I never saw a more beautiful country...") as he was by the prospect of plunder ("every stone we stooped to take up promised either gold or silver by his complexion"). Raleigh's contemporaries, too, were doubly inspired, writing, as Thoreau says, of Guiana's "majestic forests", but also of its earth, "resplendent with gold." By the eighteenth century, when the trade in Africans was in full swing, writers cared less for Guiana's beauty than for its mineral wealth. Sugar was the poet's muse, hence the epic work by James Grainger *The Sugar Cane* (1764), a poem which deals with subjects such as how best to manure the sugar cane plant, the most effective diet for the African slaves, worming techniques, etc. As John Singleton confessed (in his *General Description of the West Indies*, 1776), there was no contradiction between the manufacture of odes and that of sugar: "...a fine exuberant plant, which clothes the fields with the richest verdure. There is, I believe, scarcely any cultivation which yields so lucrative a return per acre as under favourable circumstances, than that of the sugar cane. So bountiful a gift of Providence seems not only calculated to call forth the activity and enterprise of the agriculturist and merchant, but to awaken also feelings of a higher and more refined enthusiasm." The refinement of art and that of sugar were one and the same process.

The nineteenth century saw the introduction of Indian indentureship, but as the sugar industry expanded, literary works contracted. Edward Jenkins' novel *Lutchmee and Dilloo* (1877) was the only substantial fiction on Guiana, and whilst it was broadly sympathetic to the plight of Indian labourers, it was certain of Britain's imperial destiny, and rights over mineral resources. It was not until the period leading up to

Guiana's Independence from Britain (1966) and the subsequent years, that our own writers of Amerindian, African, Asian and European ancestry (A. J. Seymour, Wilson Harris, Jan Carew, Edgar Mittelholzer, Martin Carter, Rajkumari Singh et al.) attempted to purify literature of its commercial taint, restoring to readers a vision of the complexity of the Guyanese character and the beauty of the Guyanese landscape.

The Guyana Classics Library will republish out-of-print poetry, novels and travelogues so as to remind us of our literary heritage, and it will also remind us of our reputation for scholarship in the fields of history, anthropology, sociology and politics, through the reprinting of seminal works in these subjects. The Series builds upon previous Guyanese endeavours, like the institution of CARIFESTA and the Guyana Prize. I am delighted that my government has originated the project and has pledged that every library in the land will be furnished with titles from the Series, so that all Guyanese can appreciate our monumental achievement in moving from Exploitation to Expression. If the Series becomes the foundation and inspiration for future literary and scholarly works, then my government will have moved towards fulfilling one of its primary tasks, which is the educational development of our people.

President Bharrat Jagdeo

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The Caribbean Press

The Guyana Classics Library

INTRODUCTION

The writer, performer and tutor Maggie Harris was born in New Amsterdam, Guyana in 1954 and attended Berbice High School. In 1971 she moved to the UK and, as a mature student, studied at the University of Kent where she achieved both a BA Honours in African/Caribbean Studies and a Masters Degree in Post-Colonial Studies. She has published five collections of poetry to date – *Foreday Morning* (1999), *Limbolands* (2000), *Dancing with Words* (2001), *From Berbice to Broadstairs* (2006) and *After a Visit to a Botanical Garden* (2010), and also written a memoir entitled *Kiskadee Girl* (2011). Harris has received numerous awards for her work, including Kent's Outstanding Adult Learner in 1994, a Leverhulme scholarship to research performance poetry in Barbados in 1999, awards from Meridian TV, the Arts Council New Writing, the T.S. Eliot Student Prize from Kent University, and Kingston University Life Writing. In addition, her *Limbolands* collection won the Guyana Prize for Literature in 2000. Harris also created the first live literature festival in East Kent – *Inscribing The Island* – was a founding member of the 'Write Women' group, has performed her work in Europe and the Caribbean, and has been widely anthologised.

Much of Harris's work is concerned with what a reviewer of *Limbolands* aptly described as 'a collision of cultures'¹, and this desire to explore and articulate cultural and racial hybridity is evident throughout the poems which form this new volume. Representing a cross-section of her writing from the past eleven years, these poems illustrate the myriad ways in which her skilful use of language – both Creole and Standard English – is employed to explore a range of issues such as motherhood/motherland; identity; exile and alienation; and to (re)imagine events from the Caribbean's turbulent past. It would be hard to underestimate the importance of re/memory² for Harris, who clearly draws upon the diversity of her Guyanese background as a major source of nourishment for both her creative imagination and the hybrid, trans-cultural sense of self that informs her poetry. As she writes: "I come from borrowed names, given names, names of dispossession/

...I come from skin and bone, Portuguese skin, African bones/
buried in forgotten oceans"³, and it is this ability to straddle
different worlds and mindsets that makes her poetic voice so
distinctive.

By opening this new collection with a poem entitled 'Origins', Harris immediately draws our attention to the centrality of this concept to her body of writing. Some of the most powerful images about ancestry and belonging are evoked in those poems which explore the notion of what it means to be an individual of Caribbean origin, someone who must deal with all the cross-cultural; racial; and geographical collisions that such a heritage entails. "Trace me that line of ancestors on that shore/ Ibo, Hausa, a Madeiran fisherman drawing his nets off a reef/ Waters that flow from Chechnya and the Nile".⁴ In 'Mapping', for example, the child of a 'brown-eyed Mama and grey-eyed Dada' struggles to find a sense of self from within that indeterminate space of mixed racial heritage: "Dr. Ferdinand.../...slap me, lift me, cry me, write me, label me/ like a cocktail: 'Mixed'.../...centred me neatly in limbo".⁵ That notion of limbo – the inability to neatly slot into a pre-defined area of belonging, particularly for the "mixrace/ whiteface gold hair girl"⁶ - is one that Harris revisits in several other poems, most notably in the aptly titled 'For all the seeds planted by men in foreign soils and left to harvest themselves'. "Lord Jesus, since mih Daddy gone/ It seem that Ma don't want we/...She say she cyant stand blue eye/ Is like he lef he ghost behind/...No-one want white man pickney".⁷

This dialogue about the shifting nature of identity is by no means confined just to those poems that are specifically located within a Guyanese context. In 'Solomon's Wisdom' Harris provides the witty but poignant perspective of a Caribbean migrant to Britain, a 'confuse woman' who worries about her future in 'the motherland': "You see Solomon, mih old grandad he own plantation/ Mih old granma she work plantation/...So I thinking hard about repatriation wondering/ Which pieca me going to go through which gate?"⁸ Many of the issues which inform ideas about racial and cultural difference are given further consideration in 'Alien In-Transit (or *Travelling on a Guyanese Passport*)'. Even the typography of this poem - specifically the diminishment of 'I' to 'i' - is uti-

lised to draw the reader's attention to the all-pervading sense of isolation that the narrator experiences in an airport interrogation about their right of entry: "that I should be so audacious as to claim/ expect, believe/ a focused i, a real i, a truthful i/ is challenged with sharp rapier thrusts".⁹

Harris has continued to foreground the freedom of her poetic imagination to question the relevance of a fixed sense of self in works such as the title poem from her 2006 collection, *From Berbice to Broadstairs*. Once again faced with those seemingly endless questions about belonging – "'Come far?' The taxi driver asks"¹⁰, she resists assimilation into any preconceived concept of identity: "'You're the only Caribbean I know' she says/ and my tongue rolls back in my throat/ 'Guyanese', I whisper, 'Guyanese'. /Guyana, not Ghana, South America, not Africa./ I am neither a small island girl nor am I a region."¹¹ That one word 'Guyanese' may encompass all aspects of the heritage from which Harris draws her strength and inspiration, but clearly the clash between a Caribbean imagination and an English context is one that resists easy resolution within the confines of her poetry.

Harris has lived in the UK for more than forty years, yet her poems constantly remind us that memories of a Caribbean past not only shape her own sense of identity but also inform the ways in which she relates to contemporary Britain. In 'Palm Houses', a visit to a seemingly ordinary Botanical Gardens in Wales quickly alters into something far more evocative, as the narrator becomes transfigured into and through the Caribbean-like flora which it contains: "I enter, a native daughter, barefoot/ mouth open like a bromeliad/ the hair on my arms rising/ like cactus spines."¹² Another of her poems which is tellingly entitled 'On the Limbo Trail, 2', uses the unlikely medium of a train journey to further explore the transformative quality of memory. Beginning with a Caribbean setting of the late 1950s, the poem gradually shifts both time and location to England fifty years later, yet all through what ostensibly appears to be a single journey: "And so we go, shunted away on runners taking us/ From here to there, and in our ears still clickety clack/ And in our noses steam/ And in our heads dream..."¹³ This blurring of boundaries between the physical journey and that of the path to self-aware-

ness, of what it really means to have taken the journey from Guyana to Britain, are all encompassed in those dramatically shifting images which, despite everything, cannot stifle the creative imagination: "You could still dream though; stare out the window."¹⁴

The exploration of the ambiguities inherent in her position as a migrant writer may be a major theme in her writing, but it is only one of several which thread through Harris's poetic output. Remembering her *own* past in Guyana is closely allied to re/memembering *her country's* past, with the intermingling of diverse races and cultures through a history shaped by colonisation, slavery and indentureship. In 'I, Breadfruit', for example, she takes the bold step of writing from the perspective of the vegetable itself, which was first taken to Jamaica on *The Bounty* as a food source for the African slaves. "I, Breadfruit, am Traveller/ Eyes bright and Mouth shut/ Am Survivor extra-ordinate/ Mister Fletcher, Captaine Bligh/ You have writye me into Historye Booke!"¹⁵ It is not just the subject matter but also the very specific type of language used – a kind of broken, 18th century form of English – that makes this particular poem so memorable, providing the reader with a highly creative glimpse into a little-known aspect of the region's history.

The backdrop of slavery provides the context for several other poems in this collection such as 'Onwards', 'In the Wake of the Santa Maria' and 'Free Coloured, 1810'. The latter work celebrates the onset of freedom that has just been granted to a mixed-race woman – part of an ever-growing element of Caribbean society of that time due to widespread (and largely unsolicited) sexual liaisons between white 'Masters' and their black, female slaves. "My honourable father he/ set me at table wait/ he know full well I was his seed/...He not to blame for he had need/ to keep his name from stain/...Sweet Liberty! That pen and word should be/ so glory be and sun no longer own my face!"¹⁶ Those first, free steps towards a new world order¹⁷ in which 'pen and word' can finally give voice to the dispossessed, emphasises Harris's belief in the immense power of language, and its unique ability to link the present to previously untold stories from its vanished past.

The strong ties which bind Harris to the past, present and

future of the land of her birth – her motherland – are mirrored in their intensity with those poems which deal with family relationships, particularly those between daughters, mothers and grandmothers. As Dieffenthaler has commented: “A central concern...[in Harris’s poetry] is a meditation on motherhood and its post West-Indian condition...Harris’s poetry [itself] becomes a kind of motherhood.”¹⁸ Poems such as ‘In my Mother’s house there are Many Mansions’, ‘Warrior’, and ‘I am a Guyana Woman’ openly celebrate the affection between (grand)mother and child whilst, at the same time, highlighting the generational shifts in ways of dealing with an ever-evolving world: “How were you to know that times would change/...That the time for swords, too, would pass/ ...again we need/ the time for words, for praise-songs to the elders/ for memories to weave within the skins of our children.”¹⁹ It is interesting to note that as in ‘Free Coloured, 1810’, the primacy of language – ‘the time for words’ – is singled out as the most important gift that a child can inherit from its ancestors.

Not all the relationships that Harris writes about are, however, so straightforward and in ‘Fifteen’, ‘Blame’, ‘Words Across the Water’ and ‘Grandmothers of the Morning’ she articulates more anxieties about the nature of the maternal bond. “So what can I tell you/ that you don’t already/ know/ ...You walk your own road; I’m the mother dragon breathing fire from the hill”.²⁰ As a migrant mother who lives in England she worries, with just cause, that her daughters will be unable to continue that matrilineal link to the (mother)land of her own birth: “of course i am to blame/ how can one chant praise-songs to fields and plains/ your children never claimed/ ...so if my children dance to other drums/ and speak in different tongues/ whose fault is it but mine?”²¹ Harris’s poems acknowledge that there are no easy answers to such musings, yet the repetition of the line “My daughters walk the deserts of unknowing”²² provides us with an apt and poignant refrain.

It is apparent that the character of the migrant experience is viewed by Harris as but another level in a complex relationship with the mother/land, one which constantly reconfigures the links between her (female) narrative voices

to multiple yet receding points of connection with their Caribbean heritage. It also seems likely that Harris will carry on exploring such matters with an increasingly confident voice, and continue to articulate a desire for 'home' that is forever filtered through a lens of distance. As Barbara Dordi has so aptly observed: "...*Maggie Harris may have lost her accent but Guyana has her firmly in its grip still...*".²³

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University of Warwick

Notes:

- ¹ Dieffenthaler, Ian: 'Review of Limbolands' p.1, www.maggieharris.co.uk, accessed 26.7.11
- ² Using the term as defined by Toni Morrison, and a central feature of her novel *Beloved* (1987).
- ³ 'I come from', p. 24.
- ⁴ 'Origins', p. 15.
- ⁵ 'Mapping', p. 25.
- ⁶ 'The Limbo Walkers', p.35.
- ⁷ 'For all the seeds planted by men in foreign soils and left to harvest themselves', p. 33.
- ⁸ 'Solomon's Wisdom', p. 53.
- ⁹ 'Alien In-Transit', p. 79.
- ¹⁰ 'From Berbice to Broadstairs', p. 85.
- ¹¹ Ibid.
- ¹² 'Palm Houses', p. 90.
- ¹³ 'On the Limbo Trail, 2', p. 92.
- ¹⁴ Ibid.
- ¹⁵ 'I, Breadfruit', p. 18.
- ¹⁶ 'Free Coloured, 1810', p.21.
- ¹⁷ The trade in slaves was abolished by the British in 1807, although full freedom from slavery was not finally granted until 1838.
- ¹⁸ 'Review of Limbolands', p. 2
- ¹⁹ 'Warrior', p.41.
- ²⁰ 'Fifteen', p. 48.
- ²¹ 'Blame', p. 52.
- ²² 'Words Across the Water', p. 95.
- ²³ Dordi, Barbara: 'Review of From Berbice to Broadstairs', p.52, www.maggieharris.co.uk, accessed 26.7.11

SELECTED POEMS

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MAGGIE HARRIS

This book is dedicated to Berbice High School which opened my ears and mind to the joy of language.

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ORIGINS

Yes, track me the scent of my skin on a coast off Paramaribo
Where a trade wind blowing its precious cargo
Doesn't know that one day they'll build rockets
From behind those trees and aim for the moon
Where this captain is sailing his ship by the stars

Trace me that line of ancestors on that shore
Ibo, Hausa, a Madeiran fisherman drawing his nets off a reef
Waters that flow from Chechnya and the Nile
One single ice-flow melting
From the tundra

I am listening for the soft pad of a footfall morning
A Yamomani and Macusi morning
A grandfathers-who-don't-know-their-name-yet morning
Skins melting into ochre forests where young men
Are rubbing tinder sticks in the sun
And women drape skins even as you

Drop soft-pawed from the rocks
Spine bristling with porcupine quills
Into new centuries of prayer flags and eddoes
And turbans mimicking a call

Land on the prow of this ship
And watch the Captain as he stares at the stars
Thumbing his salt-water map
His wolf-eyes holding the moon

Yes, track me the scent of my skin on a Paramaribo morning
Where an archipelago whispering the rosary
Calls so enticingly.
But, tread water, wait.
I don't wish to arrive yet, not just yet.

PROJECT EXOTICA

*"There is no country which yielded more pleasure to its inhabitants ... it hath many plains, clear rivers, and abundance ...
Guiana is a country that hath yet her maidenhead..."*

Raleigh writing *The Discovery of Guiana* (1595), adding to the myth of Paradise, El Dorado, 'hills with stones the colour of gold ...' sailing the land for his Queen.

The transfer of exotica did not quite make it into the lands of people walking their barefoot walk in forest which

bit

stung

crawled

sniped

sliced

sucked blood and flesh of

sailors

Cimarrons

plant hunters

pork-knockers

or those simply going along for the vibe.

Virgin. Pristine. Even now the TV crews mythmaking.

Instead try

dutty brown water

bush

anaconda

piranha

ringworm

Piaiman.

Hear the breadfruit sigh
the water lily rinse her legs in slime
the venus flytrap open her river mouth wide
in the simulation of passion
and in swim the carcasses of desire.

Did he foresee the firstborn fuchsia open her eyes
into a sterile Kew?
The banana, freed from his blanket of blue
tremble in a black hold in a cargo boat
stretch his yellowing self in the aisle
of the Church of Waitrose
alongside
sullen green beans from Kenya
the troubled demeanour of a pawpaw
an agitated pineapple planning her vengeance
for the moment a soft palm will cup her into tomorrow?

Did he foresee Demerara Rum and
Amerindian casryp
smothered in towels and smuggled
through Customs?

Or did his Far Eye dream of high-colour women
propagated by the races of conquerors
ripened like guavas in the sun
weighed down with gold from Diyaljee's

walking into Bata shoe stores
with the undulating walk of crocodiles
basking their river-soaked skins
under the midday sun?

I, BREADFRUIT

I, Breadfruit, am Beautyful Bountye
I am slice of Historye
From Pacific they fetch Me
Carry me roll on wild Sea

I, Breadfruit, am Beautyful Bountye
I hear talk of Big City, West Indies
Across far Water, Money Tongue talk
Across far Water, Money Foot walk

I, Breadfruit, am Beautyful Bountye
I am Sustenance, Sea-seasoned and
Withstanding of Salt
I am Drum too, Boat, Glue

I, Breadfruit, am Traveller
Eyes bright and Mouth shut
Am Survivor extra-ordinate
Mister Fletcher, Captaine Bligh

You have writye me into Historye Booke!

I, Breadfruit, am bound for Stomach of black Men
First Jamaica Man not love Me
Because he not free
Black Men Lip seal like Liberty.

But! There be New Century!
They all learn love I Breadfruit!
I Breadfruit will sing Name
Koqo, Tamaipo, Samoa, Uto Wa

Havana, Aravei, Tatara, Yampae.

For I am Brother Gourd, Calabash of Home
I, Breadfruit be most Beautiful Bountye. Aye

(Breadfruit was the cargo on The Bounty, meant for the slaves of Jamaica. They didn't like it at first but now it is one of the staple vegetables in the Caribbean)

ONWARDS

the hands of women are like water running, dipping calabash full
calabash ladle Guyana water running sandbank red

woman-sway of sexuality soothed like billy-can water
carried up from the river into the cry of a sakiwinki
into the call of a kiskadee
the tickle of the tide erasing every footprint in the sand

the hands of slave women rinsed repentance into the scars
cleansing, easing, seeming to forgive
the power of a silent tongue growing from generations
O n w a r d s

through green walls tall the rivers passed time
from an unseen mouth through lengths, through breadths
of crabwood, greenheart, mora trees; riverbends lost
in their twists and turns their lazy s n a k i n g
O n w a r d s

the faces of women rose like water
under the thatch of red mud houses their palms rose up
serrated fingers, panelling their anguish
stifling their waiting cries
for husbands who were pork-knockers
for husbands who sailed ships
for husbands who escaped the whip to learn to wield the whip

and whilst the river grew silent-tongued and swollen
with their power, they formed themselves into tributaries
unlocked those voices their mothers had stored
and continued the journey
O n w a r d s

FREE COLOURED, 1810

My master set the seal and I was free.
I parading in my Lady's hat
along the boulevard, beneath the palms
head high as legal coloured, me.
Forgive me you who ignorant of life
this place not knowing of
long journey long it take to
wash the cast of black off my white face.
They say these words make legal
me for white in country now are scarce
and for fear of numbers fear
of hate fear of heat and I agree
my brothers do not smile when they skin teeth.
My honourable father he
set me at table wait
he know full well I was his seed
ling quite unfitting for the field.
He not to blame for he had need
to keep his name from stain
and other massas worsen than I could
tell you Lady, of this country's cruelty
whether be the England, Dutch or Spain.
But *I* am Lady now of this accursed place
and honour be my name and moral my race.
Sweet Liberty! That pen and word should be
so glory be and sun no longer own my face!

IN THE WAKE OF THE SANTA MARIA

We read of the Santa, the Pinta, the Nina
in the cool of a timbered school-room
under threat of the cane we pattered
Amo, Amas, Amant

Like others we left the sweet smell of cane
black rain across a blue window
wild cane across our young backs
in the name of education

Nobody wanted to hear, Las Casas
Nobody wanted to hear

Like others I wake in the night silent screaming
quiet, so the children won't hear
like others woken ancestors ago
to the sound of the thief in the night

manacled, tossed into a belly black hold
over newly charted seas
half a life climbing coconut trees
white shirts like sails fanning palm leaves
scanning the skies for the Indies

Truth, like woman, is adaptable.
The price of Shakespeare on brown lawns, seesaws,
was to fall, ripe fruit on the wayside
spending hours of life in a dream.

Woman, nurturer, carer, floating
swell of surreal wave
one arm for a child and one for a dream
washing up in a close embrace.

Dreamstates paint pollution blue
where manacles rust below
past oil-slicked Santa Marias
and bright brochured Bequias.

I ignored the cries of my mothers
on my dream-state return
Are you too at my shoulders Las Casas?
My father is turning his back -
In the black of the hold did you know could you see
that one day I would stare out of multicoloured eyes
and try to write about you?

I COME FROM

I come from borrowed names, given names, names of dispossession

Hawker, Harris, Princess *Margaret* waving her white-gloved hand from the motor cavalcade.

I come from faces, earth & sun faces, tamarind faces, watermelon teeth;

from hands: rough carpenter's hands, smooth Nivea-creamed hands, blue-veined & cutexed, hands that reached for the cane.

I come from skin and bone, Portuguese skin, African bones buried in forgotten oceans.

I come from trade.

I come

from the ringing of bells, the clapping of hands

from foreday morning drums over a Pentecostal backyard

from cutlasses and ships

from red bauxite pyramids of barges

from that name, *Captain*, cutting through those rivers

they charted, navigated, christened, 'Home'.

I come from the wind.

I come from dreams of paradise

From dreams of paradise I came.

This poem was inspired by one of the same name by Jo Roach.

MAPPING

Welcome body, let me trace you
journey over loose belly, baby belly
knife scar, sizzle kisses, Mummy kiss, Daddy kiss
sugar-cane lash, suckle-baby breast.

Long time journey from Madeira, Africa,
brake at Goree, confuse at currents and name change
Gold Coast, Accra, Kwakwani, Kent
tree limb splintering, fall in the ink, fall in the water

shell ears listening, remembering
brown-eyed Mama and grey-eyed Dada, rockababy songs
on a hammock swinging to Jim Reeves and Elvis and Satchmo
Gospel calling, the Swanee river

parchment and skin
contours rising, falling
lovers roosting, calling
planting kisses on the plateau, soak up in the rainforest

Dr. Ferdinand dimpling his thumbprints on my ass
slap me, lift me, cry me, write me, label me
like a cocktail: 'Mixed'. Birth certificate: 'Mixed'.
pen wobbled on the x, centred me neatly in limbo.

Fall in the ink, fall in the water
eyes of blue and heart of steel
darling, how come the golden hair?
Some white Bajan in a Berbice chair.

And all the time they rocked me, straightened my nose
with their fingers, powdered my skin with Johnson's Baby
some heart was beating a Senagalese drum rhythm
humming a Malian harmony

strings and skins I have no name for

missing

missing

missing

and only these anklebones carry a memory
that has no name.

IN MY MOTHER'S HOUSE THERE ARE MANY MANSIONS

(for my mother Eloise Dolores)

Mansions?

Her eyebrows lift to sculpt that perfect arch of cathedral doors
through which her mantillad head had ever bowed,
the tap of sandaled, Cubaned, stilettoed heels
beating on stone and greenheart floors.

We beat bleating paths to her door;
her faith, solid as St Peter's rock
counsels, intersects words like *trust*, *hope*.

Her skirt was ample enough to hide beneath
its fifties flare defined by its time
covered thighs that leant against sinks
bent besides mangles, spread to birth us.

Later they buckled under the weight of blind old women
staggered with dishes up long hospital stairs
bowed in English pews, sinews taut against the cold.

In my mother's house there are many mansions.

Many rooms empty of sound are rich in image:
petals in a brass bowl, a candlelit altar
a row of china dolls on her bed, her dancing with a glass
of Banks beer miming to Frankie Avalon ...

The lacquered floors, creamed with Mansion Polish
mirrored the red of the Sacred Heart, the blue of His eye.
Her passage through rooms jangled like wind chimes,
rosary beads, gold bangles ...
we could always hear her coming.

In my mother's house there are many mansions.

Her path to our doors now is always well laden
a dish of cook-up rice, a packet of tea
a jar of casryp, a pumpkin ...
her Guyanese ways have remoulded their shape
fanned their feathers to fit
like the Corentyne house of her childhood
whose mansions breathed away its walls
welcomed both Virgin and Spirit

incanted new sacred spaces
where our feet now pace.

These now are the rooms we enter
like Alice we fall, we sink, we grow
in my mother's house the card walls fall
floors shift to doors, pause on shores.

In my mother's house there are many mansions
there, by the grace of God, forever wander I.

GIRLCHILD

Girlchild could tell a mango from a guinep
a soursop from okra
a star-apple from same
could suck tamarind sweet from ripe
or green and hot with bird-pepper
she could tell you who the Hermits were
and who was in America Hit Parade
what wet-look boots were
and who had just come back from abroad

but she couldn't tell you where wild tamarind grew
or how to propagate them
couldn't tell you when star-apple season was
or how long hibiscus cheese-and-bread take to grow
her ears rang with church bells
with *don't don't don't*
with jangles from Radio Paramaribo
and fairy stories from far-away books

when asked some decades later
of the totality of knowledge
her off-guard answer ran -
only the wild and the sinful,
never girl children, ran barefoot
on the backdam

FRANCESCA

Francesca bared her American bottom
white and unashamed, to our indrawn breaths of horror
at the Blairmont pool where estate cane trash
blew over Berbice River

In our culminated modesties, (Hindu and Catholic)
we extricated bathing suits from beneath blue jeans and towels
like brassieres from under nighties
with dexterity.

Francesca turned my mother's face pale
cycling to we house Christmas Day
the bicycle bell and the sound of my name
piercing the Sunday-quiet of our street
while flip-flops up front-steps revealed
hotpants and midriff top, indecent wear
for the Lord's Birthday

I loved Francesca,
she awed me with her dos
while I strained under a million don'ts

Francesca and I spent Saturdays
playing Smokey Robinson, 'The Tracks of my Tears'
drowning out the fish seller, the Angelus bell
and Indira's mother downstairs yelling
Get yuh lazy head outa that book
And start the blasted cooking!

We'd cycle over Canje Bridge in miniskirts and laughter
where Indian children turned to stare
and past rum-shops where our daring
swiftly turned to fear.

Francesca brought shame on my head
(and to her colour they said)
our unison against the world
was feeble against such structure.

She disappeared like they all did
back to where she came from
where her quest for freedom blazed a trail
with smoking guns of sun-burnt legs
and tracks of Motown
leaving me the poorer, and the richer.

LITTLE COLOURED GIRL

Little COLOURed girl throw stone
throw stone
roll hit black water
lookie see lookie stone come back hit
little coLOURed girl shouldn't throw stone

Little CoLOuRed girl blow leaf
blow leaf
fly fall Papaground
lookie see lookie see
leaf come back
fly back
hit
little coLOURED girl shouldn't blow leaf

Little coLOured girl roll bead
roll bead
spin twist blue eye
lookie see lookie see
bead come back
spin back
hit
little COloured girl shouldn't roll bead

Little ColouUred girl start dance
no shoes
feet fly Papaground
lookie see lookie see
foot fly
hand clap
Dance mih girlchile
Dance
Dance
Dance!

FOR ALL THE SEEDS PLANTED BY MEN IN FOREIGN SOILS AND LEFT TO HARVEST THEMSELVES

Lawd Jesus bring mih Daddy back
Ma say he gone ah Englun
I promise i an gon fight no more
Mek he come back from tha Englun

I siddown hey in dih bottom-house
So Ma won't catch me crying
She send 'Natus for a quart o rum
Soon she temper will be flying

I an mind if i get the cane
For walking lika big woman
I gon watch mih mouth, na answer back
Just you come back from tha Englun

I an gon eyepass no more
I gon mind mih business
I promise to work hard at school
And help Ma in dih house

Lord Jesus, since mih Daddy gone
It seem that Ma don't want we
She lash out wit the wild cane
If we so much as watch she

She say she cyant stand blue eye
Is like he lef he ghost behind
She say we is her cross to bear
And no-one else will want she

No-one want white man left-overs
No-one want us white man pickney
No-one want Ignatius and me
They call we whitey-shitey

Lawd Jesus bring mih Daddy back
At least sos he could tell we
Why he leave us Ma and we
And walk and gone ah Englan.

THE LIMBO WALKERS

For my father, Captain James Harris

I sit with my father by the river
He is dead, we both know that
The Berbice River wets his feet, not mine.

I point my fingers to the far bank
A line of travellers wait
The Berbice waters move to greet them.

Some have already braved her
They stride mid-channel
Growing taller
Disbelief dissolving with each step.

I turn my face from river to Daddy
He answers me with liquid eyes:
Those are the Limbo Walkers.

i siddown wit mih fadda by dih rivuh
he dead dead we know dat
dih Berbice waters wetting he feet not mine

ah point mih finguh cross dih oddah side
traveller dem lining up an waiting
dih water she licking dem toe slow slow

some brave already
dem eye ah fall out see dey cyan walk pon de water
dey lif dey head up high like sugarcane
dem spirits rise up high hise straight up to dih sky

i turn watch mih daddy
he say, is dih limbo walkers dem

These then are the limbo walkers!
(limbo did mean a different ting one time ...)
dey grips pile up high pon dih riverside
dey mouth flappin like fish in dih air
dey eyes runnin on dih water
waitin dere turn to walk her

i sit wit mih daddy by dih rivuh
he dead we both know dat
i visit him in dreams
in dese he sharing miracles wit me
miracles dat in life he din have time to free
dat time he captain tugs and chauffeur barges
longside Kwakwani shores
he long trips away from home
makin fun fuh we twistin momma finguh easy easy

we dint have time to talk
we chilren mouth dem
flap like fish
we fraid o' daddy
daddy walk long
tall in he job
an big like captain

is only now we makin time
to watch the Berbice runnin fas
to watch she eddies spiral splints o' bark an mangrove leaves
an floatin ferry boat an people dem wit ease
is only now we makin time
to name she colours
red for bauxite, gold an blood
blue an yellow boat oil spinnin
runnin out from underneath dih stellin

we dint have no time to talk
we chilren mouth dem
flap like fish
we fraid o' daddy
daddy walk long
tall in he job
an big like captain

all dis wilderness, only dih rivuh lef wile
dey cyant tame she
train she or chain she
sometime a image cross mih mind
she's a girl chile runnin
naked wicked and wile

we din have no time to talk
we chilren mouth dem flap like fish
we fraid o' daddy
daddy long gone
tall in he job an big
like captain

dih same way how she carry he
pon dem bauxite trips
dat he captain ships
up to dat Kwakwani
dih same way she hising me
wit mih bag an grip
chain belt swinging from mih hip
board the ferry Torani

we dint have no time to talk
we chilren mouth dem flap like fish
we fraid o' daddy daddy walk long
tall in he job an big like captain

when he dead dey say go girl
hise yuh tail outa dis place
dere int no room fuh no mixrace
whiteface gold hair girl
find yuh education
lef dih Berbice to she own pace
wash mih footprint lef no trace
i gone to another worl

we dint have no time to talk we chilren
mouth it flap like fish we fraid
o' daddy daddy walk long tall
in he job and big like captain

an is limbo mih limbo misself
an mih walk like crab on land
an when dey ask where do you come from
mih mouth it flap like fish is choke i choke
an dey gimmih glassa water.

LILIES OF THE FIELD

Years later, when the scent came
it was always lily-shaped
incarnating through wardrobe doors
the dining-room window

During the wake when the cocktail of rum
and prayers had threatened to display the bier
it was lily-of-the-valley they sprinkled on ice
and lilies of the field we became

POETRY

And it was at that moment Poetry arrived
in search of me*. Arrived like a new Yamaha
spewing warm dust and stones
up from the unpaved road

It tunnelled into my entrails
like a dybbuk, lassoed me so I fell
was dragged like a grazed steer
bucking on Rupununi plains

It bubbled up from the void
on the front porch where Grand-Daddy voice
rising, chastising, and into the lull
of Miss Moses reciting a passage from *Maud*

It arrived and hoisted my self
into black leatherette and hot steel
kicking rhythms running
outa my Daddy's blues

and a steelpan practising downyard.
It cleaved a way through the stones
and feathers spitting from my throat
into a new me skinned and bleeding

under a South American sun.
Before she came I was barely there
barely there at all.

*Pablo Neruda, *Poetry*

WARRIOR

(for my grandmother Angela Carmelita Petronella Brazh)

You passed me the sword and wept
knowing how your own mother had passed you sheaves of corn
and you had had to borrow scythes to slice the undergrowth.

The scars were on your feet still
from battering paths clear through fields of stubbled cane
so you lined mine with banana leaves and reeds

pulled from the riverside,
bound them with that mud whose gullies bore the trace of so
many warriors:
the Yoruba, the Akan, the Ashanti.

You sprinkled me with water made holy by the priest
but in your back room charged the spirits with my safety
invoked Yemanja and Kali, and sacrificed Demetrius, your cockerel,
with one quick, sharp slice of the throat.

Recorded into the praise-songs of my leaving
was the news that I left not as a bride,
my charging from the tribe was that of warrior scout

and many more would follow
(some on the arms of borrowed men
who promised them a northern El Dorado).

How were you to know that times would change
beyond all comprehension?
That the time for swords, too, would pass
would fly by in one short generation and again we need

the time for words, for praise-songs to the elders
for memories to weave within the skins of our children.

Last night I dreamt of you: you had crossed the water
just like Yemanjá -
but this time,
what you passed me
was my pen.

I REFUSE TO CALL YOU MOTHER

The landing was easy, one straight flight
ignorant of Icarus
home to the mother country
airport yards busy with the diesel throb of progress
smooth concrete, bright lights,
motorways ribboning
no anacondas, no red dust
slicing through rainforest

believing the initiation rite to be language
i soon fell, a stranger to the smell of things
recognising no Prospero, no Narcissus

i cried then, for my own land
where swifts and condors soar
for the angry red of rivers, corials on the shore
calypsos and name places, like Kaieteur
and in this wild lamentation i beat fist to breast
and felt a fool

but -

you sent great winds before me which i was slow to see
Saharan sands and hurricanes that raked you in their wanderings
pinned me to your fallen oaks
to listen to your wooded heart beneath its tarmaced tomb
they were migrants too, and i an Ariel released
traced you like a lover, stroked moss and belly-bark
and Pan, gauche and dark
in chalk and downland grasses

and you - a tad coquettish in your trick of seasons
wearing at your will autumn's copper or summer's maniacal fetish
led me to the slaughter, vixen-trapped in brash bright headlights
copper-toned and brush-red moon-honed road

but even though your parallels seduce
i refuse to call you Mother
knowing the misuse imbued in such a name
instead I say canoe, not corial
kingfisher for hummingbird
learn those fisherwoman's ballads of the sea
released, my sapling tongues emerge
and hymn and rap
and swing and shout:
herein my native land
herein
my
native
l/
and

FIREFLIES

The instances of immigrants
are drawn from half-remembered breaths
where sepia is fringed by new tomorrows;

passages dismembered, dance out into this light
where mirrored incandescence
beat graceful soundless wings
are fireflies beneath a skin
that flutters, paper-thin.

Here subterranean halls
are stacked like breakers' yards:
paper bags and grips,
new suits, our clan smell.

Here lie those who chose
walked, didn't run
planned, paid, prepared
rinsed rich watercolours with the flatness of palms -
potters teasing straight lines
from abstractions of vision.

Beyond this be dragons:
villages with beaches,
unpolluted springs
rice fields, coco-palms...

Wet, smooth, cemented
we are crafter and crafted
we are clay
flour balls, dough
rolled, curled like conch-shells
fantailed for translations.

Here - my lover says - a mango from your country;
its force-ripe too-sweet juices
dribbles on its journey
re-enters those dark passages
those kitchens made of wood
those textured subterranean halls
where fireflies light the darkness
those villages of words
and photographs scalloped by wood-ants
die natural deaths, instead of languishing,
martyrs in sepia.

In the dark of my wardrobe
my tapestried stilettos glow
a special phosphorescence
their mirrored incandescence paper fireflies
seeking brass, wood, water.

Here - he slices neatly with a knife
and slides a trembling segment down my sacrificial throat.

FROM THIS SAME VERANDA

(or, *Liming*)

From this same veranda Miss Beaumont order her lime juice
Cool and sweet in the heat
Slow ships roll on the tide

From this same veranda Great-Grandmother runs
Apron full of limes
There's a new breeze on the skyline

From this same veranda Pastor calls my fathers up
No more talking drums, no sunset gatherings
Underneath them limes

From this same veranda Grandmother sweeps new dust
There's a rocking roll in her low-slung hips
And a morning light in her eyes

From this same veranda my mother hold that baby tight
Deep-voices Louis Armstrong, partify the psalms
Whilst

From this same veranda I watch my blue jeans swing
On the washing line, my toenail polish shine
And in no time

It getting crowded up here with fathers and mothers
Sisters and brothers, grand and godmothers
Aunty niece from Toronto, Chicago, Accra
North Island, Berbice, Castries
And Brighton, England

But y'know - there's always room for one more - so
From this same veranda I call my child
Darlin' shove up that rocking chair, come
Join us up here for a lime

FIFTEEN

(for Angie)

Fifteen

I remember Fifteen
weighed down with soul
feeling
carrying
mouthfuls of pain
running
holding
breath in
up the stairs

Fifteen

In the picture
that I carry
you are three
gold curls
tumbling
sweet
baby-blue eye face
your infant
English accent
rolling Ds
around Dub
and Cs
around Calypso
trading my memory
dancing Marley reggae
under pretend banana trees

Fifteen

I remember Fifteen
bicycle burning streets
wriggling hot
and Catholic
cool Trade Winds
wet kisses
hungry boys
coming from
or going
overseas

Fifteen swayed

high, low
pubescent beauty
matchstick legs

New Amsterdam streets
priests, nuns, Americans
temples, weddings, cane
English women playing bingo

fairy light bright Covent grounds
minutes walk away
from rock-steady dancehalls
and rumshops where
women sold their love away

Fifteen
your Fifteen
computers, Adidas, discman sounds
hugged the schoolyard walls
Your Fifteen learnt of partings
the breaking down of doors
the breaking of promises
Sunday afternoons waiting

hate spinning out of mouths
once only meant
for kisses

My Fifteen
followed
a coffin
sought shelter under trees
Fifteen seeking shelter under real banana leaves

Fifteen
jumping up from nowhere
hit me in the face
with your colt like beauty
disguising inner grace
you cut
bits of paper
draw, fold
colour, paste
write breathless
running poetry
trillion word essays

and divorce
like death
hurts like
Fifteen
weighed
down
with soul
feeling
mouthfuls of pain
running
holding
breath in
up the stairs

and I pray
you won't lay down your violin
for a Sainsbury's concerto
on a rush of trolley wheels

At fourteen I thought you my baby still
but how do I know what you thought
what you touched, what touched you
in those long schooldays
in that wakening between perception's guise
and Momma's baby's eyes
in that space between what you thought
and what you said to me?

You hated boys, thank God!
you may escape the waiting
the sweep of your face to the window
your ear to the sound of the gate
the dry teenage cough in the street
the hope, in a bicycle bell

No re-readings of Barrett-Browning
No relish of Tennyson's *Maud*
No sharp swift jump from Nancy Drew
to the Count of Mills and Boon

Fifteen

A curtain falls over your eyes
There is
No giggling
No tumbling
No wild somersaulting
No pasting
No sticking
No singing in tune
No violin playing
Only No and Not and Nothing

You are In Love

and I'm the mother dragon
breathing fire from the hill
and mother dragons never understand

But! there's so much
I want to say!
To tell you of Love
tell you to beware
what sets the feet a-dancing
and the heart hang crying
from a string

To tell you of Love
of early morning waking
of staring out of windows
listening for that sound
that dry teenage cough in the street
the hope, in a bicycle bell
I want to tell you of Love
as you flick through magazines
where The Facts of Life scream out
in bold black lettering
cold red words
ABORTION! AIDS! SEX! All you need to know!

But my Catholic heart recoils,
and part of me is pleased
These things are being done for me
They're sparing me the need

So what can I tell you
that you don't already know?
What can I tell you
that I think you need to know?

You walk your own road daughter; I'm the mother dragon
breathing fire from the hill.

BLAME

of course i am to blame
how can one raise goddesses if we can't spell their names
of course i am to blame
i made so many promises describing rain
real rain, ejected from a sky
twice as large, three times as hard
as these piffing raindrops here
which trickle and then disappear

of course i am to blame
how can one chant praise-songs to fields and plains
your children never claimed
of course i am to blame
i told so many stories, nancy lies
Anansi tricking crocodile
mongoose and mancrow
brother crab and others they don't know

of course i am to blame
i am ashamed, i bow my head in shame
i didn't know Kanaima's name
Yemanja never came, but then again
i did not come prepared, was ill-advised
self-willed, a child
promised to a mothering
not stranded, exiled on these shores

so if my children dance to other drums
and speak in different tongues
whose fault is it but mine?
of course i am to blame
i never knew Kanaima's name
Yemanja never came
of course i am to blame

SOLOMON'S WISDOM

Solomon, wise in the ways of the world
Come settle this thing for a confuse woman
They spitting out thing about 'repatriate'
Shoving all o' we through the departure gate

Man this thing it spinning in mih head
Making mih so dizzy like I fall down dead
You see, I is an assemblation:
Mih one foot white, the nother one brown
Mih two eyes blue, and mih belly button colour is vermilion

You see Solomon, mih old grandad he own plantation
Mih old granma she work plantation
She, black as the night, he kinda off-white
While we children range from ivory to brown

So I thinking hard about repatriate wondering,
Which pieca me going to go through which gate?
Mih one foot ready for go run to the sun
The nother one say he ain leaving town!

Mih right hand hold on to the fatherland
While mih blue eye them ah roll to the motherland
So Solomon man, tell me whuh for do
This mix-up woman in front o' you

SOLOMON sighed and as he wiped his eye he said:
I won't be able to help you BOYO
They've asked me to leave as well!

I AM A GUYANA WOMAN

I am a Guyana woman
My mothers rubbed oil
 Into my skin
Sang songs to the slap
 Of clothes on stone
Carried water before the connection
Before economics broke the connection

I am a Guyana woman
My English daughters
Rub lotions into their skins
Recipes stolen from the forest
Where rivers run with mercury
 Seep into ocean floors
Economics create pollution

From houses on riversides
 Children had played
Sliding their bodies dirt dry
 And mango smooth
Into currents cut by canoes
 Cool water
 Once pure

I am a Guyana woman
My mothers
Rubbed oil into my skin
Sang songs to the slap
 Of clothes on stone
Lit candles to lengthen the day
Opened books that I should learn
 So that I should leave
So that I should always have running water
 So that I should never have
To slap my clothes on the stone

O Guyana
My voice is a river
I run
To renew the connection

LAST-YEAR-DOLLY WRITES A LETTER

Well dear you,

I got your news about your coming visit
what a turn-up for the books!

is about time yuh remember me
yuh pack up and yuh gone so fast
yuh nevuh seh goodbye
ah nevuh even see a drop o' water in yuh eye

before yuh cyan seh JesusMaryJoseph
yuh fly pass, yuh fly out, yuh gone
yuh lef yuh cyat yuh dog yuh bicycle yuh frens
even dih coolie boyfren
and yuh lef me

yuh tek *she* doh, that flypass kissmeass
Barbie dolly who waltz in here one Christmas
and nevuh lef, tek up residence
like some govment house jackass

yuh tek *she*, hole onto *she*
wearing dih fancy dress yuh mek she
on yuh granny sewing machine up Kwakwani
an year after year in dat Englun
is *she* yuh stick pon top yuh Chrissmus tree

but I know she wusn't no angel
she wus (God forgive me) a slut
small enough to fit in yuh case
but big enough to flaunt her butt
back to whey she come from in dih furse place
i know i wus jus hard plastic and rags
mih one eye drop out long since
dih nail polish yuh paint on mih flake off

mih nice hair frizzup in dih sun

yes i know i wusn't no beauty
but nevu mind, i know yuh still love mih even doh
yuh nevu sew mih no new dress like slutbarbie
cos yuh seh i too big

but yuh still coulda find mih a teeny place in dat
big brown suitcase
after all, yuh daddy guitar go
and you cyant even play *he*
as fuh dem two bigass American dolly
dem gone too, sit up pon yuh sisters lap
in dih aeroplane smiling like some doolally tomfool
who lost dey call

but y'know, nevu mind
nevu mind slutbarbie, dih guitar
or dem yankeedoodledollie
squatting like jackass pon yuh desk

i know is ME ME yuh love dih best!
so see yuh soon, my faraway mommy
loveforeveranever
xxx Last-Year-Dolly (Andrea)

ps: when yuh coming please to fetch mih a new dress
anything in lime green will do
tank you
xxx L.Y.D.

SUGAR (SEQUENCE EXTRACT)

Sugar

Sugar - water for shock
Sugar - bags in Gopaul shop
Sugar - sail South China sea
Sugar - sweeten Indian tea
Sugar - smooth little Padriac hair
Sugar - stalks stabbing the air
Sugar - crumbs, Granny table, ants
Sugar - cake, flambeaux lamps
Sugar - cane, verdant, green
Sugar - coating, polio vaccine
Sugar - baby, Rosetti locks
Sugar - daddy, Yves St Laurent frocks
Sugar - sweet Margie Riley singing
Sugar - still, rum vat rippling
Sugar - lump melting on tongue
Sugar - trash, black rainfall over town

SUGAR-WATER FOR SHOCK

Aunt Tita

Caught fire she did, straight up
Kero stove, long nightie, old
perfect combo really, considering
the wicker and the drapes
the mahogany love-seat polished to glass

Dee caught a glimpse of her face
from our upstairs window *contorted*
she said, as they wheeled her
in the ambulance and couldn't resist
taking a poke at me always refusing to kiss her

we all get old child, you'll see
but all that mahogany and brass
didn't marry up with the smell
of Limacol and camphor
her Johnson's skin thin and blue like litmus

could never imagine her sat there
with Mr T. him in his courting suit
and her in organza like the photo
back to back smooching; too late now
and even watching our Dee cry felt like shit

for asking, *the love-seat, did that go too?*

SUGAR BAGS IN GOPAUL SHOP

Recently he had developed a fear of tall buildings.
Retirement had been good, a piece of real estate
in the Washington suburbs, quiet neighbourhood, golf course nearby

Of course it wasn't the same, what was?
He had been a Big Man; Chief Accountant
shaker of hands with Prince Phillip, Carter, Castro.

He missed the life, wouldn't deny it;
seeing the old city glide past the tinted windows
the dark glasses of the black chauffeur.

He'd done well for a *coloured* man, instilled that
into his kids and hadn't he been proved right?
all living well in NJ and Toronto except the girl

who wouldn't listen and went for that black boy instead.

He watches his wife move slowly
round the kitchenette preparing a little home food
to whet his appetite.

Had she known about the others? The little secretaries
squealing on the mahogany desk
the Canadian girlfriend, Denise in the house by the seawall?

Of course he loved his wife dammit.
And He was still Big. Showed the relatives round Manhattan,
Staten Island, Lady Liberty, the World Trade Centre.

And now his grand-daughter wanting to
research our history, Poppa ... picking at scabs
with her University pen.
How had he come to this?
From scooping those golden grains in his grandfather's shop

To his flourished signature across the Atlantic, all the way to
Tate and Lyle.

Now, viewing the world through a TV screen
his wife dropping a saccharine tab into his tea,
he could almost feel himself dissolving.

SUGAR STILL, RUM VAT RIPPLING

Barbados in the rain, the Malibu factory
We clamber up hot steel to view the still fermenting
And I see her face reflected, that young girl missing
Since last Thursday, her body found in the cane-field

I can't bear to think of her running from him
Scorpions and centipedes, the cane rat, her bare feet
The hard scratch of the leaves, the chocolate earth
Her blood seeping down into limestone

Did she beg him not to leave her there, with all those ghosts?
Did the cane stretch their young necks for a glimpse of her throat?

My daughter taps impatiently, her corn rows neat
Holiday beads swinging as she moves.
The rain stops
The air is still.

SUGAR TRASH, BLACK RAINFALL OVER TOWN

They've killed the dentist
the news is on the internet
pictures of his wife
clutching a neighbour
crying as if her life depended on it

It was the bandits they said
strange word bandits but
this is South America and
before sugarcane stretched
from here to Brasilia
plenty bandits roamed this way
Columbus, conquistadores ...

But this was no way to end it
gunned down
in his own surgery
on a foreday morning
his wife asleep upstairs

Remnants of my first teeth lie
somewhere in that red soil
and the beginnings of my fear
lie back and open wide, this won't hurt
you could hear the screams
across Main Street.
He slapped my sister once.

He'd had the chance to leave,
his son begged him from America
Get out Dad, but no
this was Home
this small mosquito strip of coast
within the shadow of the cane
which fell when the fields burnt

like black rain.

He farmed chickens on the Corentyne Coast
the first to freeze them
stored them in his garage
behind the surgery
a daring venture amongst country people
who bought their fowls live and fattened them
in their own backyards while the children whined
Ma don't kill she, we don't want eat she

But of course we would
fowl curry taste good
and our country's history groomed us well
in paradox, the bible and the cane

Still, he shouldn't have died that way
sugar-sweet blood seeping
into the soil
into the thin crowing
of a fowl-cock morning.

BLUE-EYED GUYANA BOY

I wanted to write about Donald
whose blue eyes were left on the road
that Corentyne Highway, in 1984
*the young spend their time looking forward
the old looking back; whilst my vision's
still sharp, let me think on*

That country boy in a family of girls
his Mammee crouched over the kerosene stove
his Da on the front porch, reflecting
on returnees bringing their voices back
from over the seas, in a flash of black leather
and a grip of new clothes.

The porch looked out on that road
once a track where cartwheels turned
bearing broken limbs of sugar-cane.
Then tarmac came, and speed,
motorbikes and diesel, country buses
full with folks greedy for civilization.

Buses with names on the side,
Conqueror, or *Justify*, loud music
and jewellery blazing, just like the one
that cut him down that school morning.

And I'm thinking of all the things he's missed:
the first MacDonalds, the pull of a fag,
the feel of girls, hip-hop.
Then there's others: guns and knives,
Race; that last the hardest, seeing as
Mammee's fadda fadda had shipped in from Madras
and Da's dadada had left Accra in chains
and somewhere too, along the line
blue eyes had rolled down Plantation Hill
from some English second son.

That golden skin, that tamarind skin
that mud-brown, calabash, red-earth skin
would have been sliced to ribbons just defending;
and I wouldn't remember him now
a generation and an ocean later,
a flash of white teeth and blue eyes shining
as he fetched me a bucket to bathe that time I brought my grip
to their Corentyne front door.

GRANDMOTHERS OF THE MORNING

Mama

dying slowly in that Berbice bedroom
images of the worlds she'd known
flickering behind darkening eyes -
the river in the mosquito season
high tide on the sandbank
the morning light clean
as Columbus' sword

a bevy of bats in the mango tree
fireflies above the porch
a kerosine lamp swinging
Massa's cold blue eyes

*Read me that passage again, Jimbo boy
that verse from Solomon*

Mummy

mermaids have no place by the mangle
only maids
with hands wiry and unclasped
unlike yours welded in prayer

Gene Pitney and Jesus on the airwaves
A town without pity
evangelical, those red fifties
colouring your vision

so even now, decades later
the thought of Cuba
fills you with rage

Mother

through the waves of the morning tide
her dead sister's head breaks
*why you left mih girl child
only tek the boy -
fetch she, fetch she o sister mine
or is haunt I gon haunt you
till kingdom time*

Portuguese woman
Black man at her side
rises and gathers Demerara children
into the brown Berbice

Land of many waters

Me

remembering hallelujahs
hurled across a morning
and wearing grand-daughters' kisses
on my face

I board a flight to Havana.

HAVANA

(extract)

I dreamed you ...

... skin peeling
conquistador-gold, cupolas
columns, colonnades

cutting long shadows
on cobbles.

...

I walk, past plaster dust
and rubble, masonry four centuries
tired of standing

of being stood, of being;
steel girders
courtesy of Unesco

rippling with the backs
of workers plastering foundation
between the cracks...

Ashamed, I stare
through a doorway
framing an old man's bed,

his thin feet resting on cardboard
rescued from the street.

...

The Arab restaurant
in Calle de Mercedes ...
through the couscous and the lamb
the trio on guitars, the parrot in the vines
the caged lovebirds,

a crying Canadian child,

one Rhode Island Red runs,
hungry
for your fingers.

...

Hungry.

Even those birds of paradise
sweeping the square in crimson taffeta
paper flowers, photographers and kisses,

Hungry. And hunger meets in a place
patrolled by the guards
dressed in that particular green

favoured by revolutionaries,

guarding the entrances to hotels,
the Plaza Vieja, glass-fronted
perfumed stores whose

top-notch merchandise
belies the embargo; but
turn another corner

another shady street
pavement worn with the heat
of plastic shoes, pass by

the Cuban store for Cubans -

its bare shelves of milk-powder
rationed rice and bread, black beans,
a kilo of chicken.

Havana,

... I had dreamed you
like so many others before me
and on that fast road from the airport

excitement fuelled my blood
like a drug; diesel and dust
and the dry romance

of clapped-out cars and smoke-
propelled exhausts were no match
for the clatter of my heart,

neither was your cracked face.

The breath of the Caribbean,
the prince's kiss.
I sleep.

POWER CUT, BARBADOS

When the light cut they cut through to our throats
frozen for one long moment in the pitch black
not even a howl from the guard dogs outside.
We should have been prepared
all day the thunder rolled and lightning snarled
across a darkening sea
and come night split the sky like fireworks
wild with fear of its own velocity.

The house and beach which tranquil daytime paints
a paradise became a silent tomb
where dark met dark and fear a new companion.
With mouths dry and hearts cold in our chests
we fumbled through drawers finding candle stumps
and torches without batteries, Lisa brightening up
the proceedings with 'light gone, phone dead, dog na bark
If Man come now is dead we dead we done fuh, done fuh'.
I wrote obituaries in my head.

Our laughter, when the lights came on was brash
hysterical in the glare and boom of Baywatch on TV
safe again now girls in red bathing suits
patrolled Pacific beaches and the chorus from the yard
resumed their role, howling at the moon
like wolves celebrating the night.

PARADISE FRUIT

St. Lucia?

Walcott drew me there, essays later
fretwork balconies, the boy returning,
Anna, Castries burning.

We found the beach near Cap Estate
the tropical dream, surf pounding
wide-leafed trees who dropped
their golden fruit like topaz.

I am not a tourist. I
am a Guyana woman re-emerging.
Here, I tell my lover and my child
y'all try this, dounze from back home

we had a tree big big by we back door.
I take the first bite, palms
and jewels glinting, say is all right
this is Paradise, and from up high

birds laughed and cracked their short beaks
on the bark where loose messages flap
Do Not Sit Beneath. Do Not Eat.
Our mouths began to burn.

Shame drops through my bones
I am become Snow White's mother,
Eve.
Take this, here is my body. Eat.

From Gros Islet to Castries Hospital
Francis the taxi driver reassures us
no-one's died. Ushers us
through patients waiting, heads curled

like question marks round doorways
incredulous at tourists
eating manchineel.

My daughter's screams are louder than the surf
rivalling the scratching of this poet's pen.
Is it a folly then, this tale, these words
that fashion beauty out of pain?

TOURIST MARKET

Yuh got a small piece fuh me Mistress?
Me nah eat since last Sunday
Me pickney him a starve
See he belly swell out he navel so
Me milk dry up long time

*Ova here! Down here! Yes, that's me Sis
Me cyant stand up fuh long see.
Yuh wan pieca pine? Guinep?
Sweet mango? Ow bout a pieca sugarcane?
Yuh cyant get that in Hingland rite?!*

English! Hey English! I got a nice gold ring heh
Pure Columbian that's right, bargain jes five EC dollahs
What about some aloe then? Pick fresh dis mawnin
Lord! Look how your lady shoulder bunnup!
Wait, Hold on! You walking away from me?
You tunning you back pon me?!
Is that the manners alyuh larn ova dey?
You prefer spen yuh money in the Govament shop?
Cheups man!! Y'all haul yuh rass.

*Dear Sir, please tuh tek this conch here from me
You will pay twice de price on board
No Sir it is not a protected species
Is Lambi we eat Sir.
Madam, this will look nice on your mantlepiece eh?
Come on Sir, I too old to fish now, you see
Just \$8 Sir. No? 6 then, just \$6 it will fit nice
In your suitcase, wrap it in your towel Sir and
Madam.
The Lord be praised! Bless you Sir, Bless you!
Sir, can I interest you in this nice shell necklace...?*

Road is not beach.
Bikini belong on beach.

Road is not deck on board ship.
Bikini belong on deck, not road.
You walking round my island lika that?
You would like me to do dat?
You would like me to wear bikini in Tesco
And feel up your plantain like dat?
Have a nice day Madam.
Go lang you way.

*Y'all having a nice time?
Havana is a beautiful city, you enjoying her?
You staying long? I could show you round
There's a lot of people like to take advantage
But I have specialist knowledge
I'm a university professor you know
And times are extremely hard*

Please don't walk away from me Sir
Please don't walk away from me
Please don't walk away
Don't walk away

LASHING AND LICKS IN BABYLON

Tonight the lashing wild here in Trinidad
Tongues of fire licking
Pentecostals flaming in the night
From the room pon top the grocery store
They hollering down pon the ground
Pierce the night with tambourine
Drumming, singing
The wicked taking licking from above!

I sit down in Shakira house
Squeeze up on she leatherette settee
Wedge up between the fire from next door
And soca music from she radio
Zion v Calypso
Jordan v Chutney Soca
The Lion and the Sword
Fighting for my soul in Babylon

Yuh come church tomorrow she say
Proper church, Catlick Church
And danced round in she bare feet
While she stirring up the curry

My foot stamping underneath the table
While tiehead tabernacle chanting
In Atlantic breeze - Rise up O Lord
Rise up O Lord Rise Up!
Rise up O Lord Rise Up O Lord Rise Up!
And music jamming -
Checkouthesocacheckoutthesocanow
Checkouthesocacheckoutthesocanow!

Shakira dancing, Shakira dancing
Watch the Jezebels, Lord watch the Jezebels!
Flame a lick we! flame a lick we!
From both sides of the door.

BAJAN WOMAN AT THE FISH FRY

and it's Friday night at the fish fry and Bessie is here again
collecting the glasses from tourists' tight fists
hands outstretched for any small change that might buy a shot
of white rum from the bar across the road to liquefy
the dryness in her throat

she could survive on dregs
on coins dropped out of loose shirt pockets
from Englands carried away by the soca music
by the thought of evenings being warm
by the smiles of bajans
by the sea seducing seducing seducing

and when she holler you ketch a howl of musicality
summoned up from some longtime story
and the ooman looking real like she representing something raw
but it mus be only the fish smoking and come morning
gone she gone and no-one see nor hear nor tell of
no-one name Bessie

gone she gone to some no-name street some back alley
behind some chicken-coop
some backyard flagged by dirty washing
and tin can playing steel band with crab foot
and fishbones drumming them own beat
to naked-skin bare tourist feet strolling cross the shore

ALIEN IN-TRANSIT

(or *Travelling on a Guyanese passport*)

uniformed official filters epidermic layers
out between the pages of my passing
of my passing through this port
this pass port, this passing port
an alien in-transit

he is rolling my identity like dry tobacco leaves
coarse thumbs making indistinct
this stamp of me - an i - some personality
that rests between these pages, leaves
impressions of some vague i floating
in an otherwhere dimension

that I should be so audacious as to claim
expect, believe
a focused i, a real i, a truthful i
is challenged with sharp rapier thrusts
a daggering of questions, cutting, trusting

O duelling interrogator!
Sharper than I!
Swifter than I!
Dancing musketeer of words
Holding fast your sword against my throat!

from somewhere in the halls of this Cathedral
thick with hauntings from the past
gnawing whispers ripple through the queue
littered with smart Gucci cases, Nike caps
beads of unaccustomed perspiration
i've halted their linear progression
to a nether-space beyond where laughing sunshine beckons
dances on the tarmac *Welcome*
new shoes and luggage trolleys inching
falter on this thin red line which screams

DO NOT PASS THIS SPACE. WAIT HERE.
hover on these concrete floors and know
that passage which you think you traded
safe in some glazed office space
with smiles and credit cards
and pictures of blue seas
are kite paper, bamboo sticks
can flutter like this passport page
evaporate beneath the gaze
of some official captaining a landing stage

you too can be an alien
-nated
raft

marooned

a lone i bobbing
on a water-sea of space

unusual refugee
your memory of place mere postage stamp
kaleidoscopes of family, of race
your lover kissing you goodbye
camellias uncurling by a wall
your daughter in her new school shoes
clumsily re-looping her shoelace

one mis-appropriation
one person's small mistake
the I disintegrates
and some official captaining a landing stage
filters you between the pages of a space
some third dimensional
international
confrontational
nowhere space
where aliens in transit
wait, native of no place

OF MORTE D'ARTHUR AND THE WIDE SARGASSO SEA

This library's not for burning, but caught within a memory
as thin as those pale pages - the Sir Thomas Malory -
Edition? Some distant time to this.

Domestic memory mine, sharpened on *The Wide Sargasso Sea*
another wife gone mad with smells of passion and remembered
heat,
wheeling prams through foreign streets in dead of winter.

Morte d'Arthur, the Malory, I'd whispered, leaning
on the pushchair beneath the librarian's eye, chest tight
with expectancy and fear.
There was a Tennyson on the shelf but no, as if *she* had nothing
else to do but descend into basements; why today, why *these*?
Not taken out since 1938.

Later on the sofa whilst the baby slept, the pages turned,
yellowed as my fingers in this climate ... school poetry.
Somewhere in these pages dozed an England offered back
from days of schoolrooms loud with Caribbean prattling -
Lebanese cedars, Tam O'Shanter, Prisoners of Chillon,
lochs and Lochinvars and knights ...

and hours passed, between the nappy changing, the heating on
the hob of tins of baby food from Boots - those dreams again -
not this coarse love between the sheets, but Lancelot's, whose
battle-weary fingers stroked my cheeks whilst lyric language poured
into my ear - not this Southern rasp of *innits* and *awlrightloves* but
silken threads and gossamers and *ye* and *olde* and Avalon and

ladies of the lake rising like manatees with grace.
If the Catholic was still not deep within me, keep
I would have kept them, all three - for three they were,
that magic fable number, each one small and fitting warm
within my palm as if they'd made their home there;
could just imagine one or three white lies -

So sorry, the baby dropped them in the bath, how much were they?

A generation later, returning from the sun, I heard the library burned,
my heart did too, and fell
from battlements too high for me to rescue, knowing that the flames
rushed
through the basement too, and wondered if the last to take them out
had been myself, that Ramsgate morning, 1979.
How close I would have held them; how still.

Ramsgate Library burned in 2000

VALENTINE BIRTHDAYS

(For my grandson Kieren, UK 14.2.2001, and my grandmother Angie Brazh, Guyana, 14.2.1898 -6.8.1973)

Were you to meet, what would you say?
Between your birthdays more than a hundred years
Five generations, and the Atlantic Ocean
Between her Guyana and your England

Would you call her Mother, like we all did
Rushing to meet her over the bridge
The donkey cart waiting as she paid the driver
Four grand-daughters ecstatic at her arrival?

Would she have travelled down from the Corentyne
Or sailed upriver from Kwakwani
Would she have brought her parrot, her Polly
Or naughty Jack, the capuchin monkey?

I can see you now scrambling for her lap
With your Bob the builder truck and your Scoobydoo top
And you'd chatter about Shrek and your new DVD
And your gameboy and what's on the telly

And she'd stroke your blond hair, admire
Your blue eyes, say was a blessing, a St Valentine child
A boy-child, after all these girls, but who
Was Scoobydoo, and what was telly?

And she might ask you who you were named for, St Kieren?
And how she so proud your mummy name Eloise
Like her great-granny name Eloise and

did you know her name Brazh, was Portuguese?
Her family come from Madeira you know,
You think is co-incidence the two of y'all
Share the same birthday? And she'd press
A gold piece in your hand and say

No matter how big the world, how wide the sea
No matter was even a thousand years pass
Family was family. Happy Birthday,
Valentine Boy.

FROM BERBICE TO BROADSTAIRS

'You're the only Caribbean I know,' she says
and my tongue rolls back in my throat
'Guyanese,' I whisper, 'Guyanese.'
Guyana, not Ghana, South America, not Africa.
I am neither a small island girl nor am I a region.

Behind me a continent is screaming
through the clipped teeth of conquistadores.
From Berbice to Patagonia howler monkeys sing
of the black navel of Rainstorm
her emerald belly bleeding.

'We're looking for a black artist
for our Culturally Diverse Project.'
'Potagee,' I whisper, 'Potagee'.
Well actually I'm a Berbician,
just follow the scent of sugar.

Beside me an island is bowing
under the weight of memories
- the Wantsum*, Kurdistan, Zimbabwe, Croatia ...
Palms pause above a drum,
fingers over strings.

I remember another word for asylum:
the Berbice Madhouse.

The digger's chewing up the earth
between Broadstairs and Margate
between Broadstairs and Ramsgate
those stamp-sized cabbage fields
that make us feel distinct; becoming stone and glass
and steel, tarmaced shopping precinct.
Digger planting concrete embryos, monolithic missiles where

girlies in their wedge-heeled shoes
flit fast-paced through the H&M store
clicking text messages to their mates next door.

Shop, shop, shop till you drop
Love, love Westwood Cross.

'Come far?' The taxi driver asks.
'Broadstairs,' I say. 'Berbice,' I whisper.
Broadstairs, where Long Live Bleak House
the jeweller fits gold taps to baths where Dickensian characters

lived and laughed and come Friday night
gob out 'F *** Yous!' over Harbour Street.

Broadstairs, where house prices still trade
on imagined gentility - strolling on the promenade
admiring the sea, cool coffee bars and incomers from London
plastering artistic impressions on canvases
already breathing their own rhythm
imprinting their own dreams
exhaling the salt of centuries
each high tide snatches
never to return.

But walk down Joss Bay Road
on an early autumn morning
up through the farm to the lighthouse
down to the sand and cliffs
where the English Channel charges

stand for a while and dream -

you might just hear a smuggler laugh
or a parakeet scream.

* The Wantsum River originally divided the Isle of Thanet from the rest of Kent

ANANSI HIT BROADSTAIRS

(an ode to Broadstairs Folk Week)

Anansi hit Broadstairs running
all eight feet ringing with bells
a yellow tam pon he dreads
scuttle down the High Street
checking out The Albert, The Rose
the garden at Bombers
then down through the York Gate
slide in the Tartar Frigate

He buying a pint and question the landlord -
'Seh man, I hear something call Folk Week does happen here.
You have my brudders from Africa, Ireland and Hingland
causing hurricane; djembe and clogs, morris and fiddlers
jamming up the town wicked to Kingdom Come?!

Man, I ketch boat, bus, and plane to land here
but the place so quiet!
Is only sea I hearing - tell me, is lie they lie 'bout
Multiculture and Torchlight procession?'

The landlord give Anansi another pint and say,
'Mate you late!
Folk Week was last week!'

But ... those who know Anansi know he always gets the
last word ...

'Brud, no way Anansi late,
Anansi come early, ready for next year!'

MARY DANCING

Mary rolling back the rug and slipping
Albums outa dem sleeves
Lord Kitchener, Mighty Sparrow
Hot! Hot! Hot! by Arrow

She trying to get we up dancing
Pulling we outa we chairs
But Granny want watch Cliff Richard
And Desiree patting she hair

'Everybody *Hot! Hot! Hot!*' Mary shout
Punching the air with she fingers
The children giggle and watch she wiggle
Caribbean down to the floor

She wukkin up a sweat
And wukkin up a fete
Steven join she with he wine glass
And Michael leave he sausage roll

'Everybody *Hot! Hot! Hot!*' she shout
And this time she get a chorus
And in one quick shake of a duck tail
Everybody join she on the floor

Yonnette remember she can move
Lizzie get down in the groove
Granny take a swig of brandy
And Aimee mix her funk with ballet

Hot! Hot! Hot! and Ethel Road front room
Become Republic Day
Become Water St and Main St
And Mashramani Day
Is Jouvert and Diwali
Masquerade and Phagwah Day
And Mary is the steel band
Mary is the float

Hot! Hot! Hot! we shout
And punch we fingers in the air
Go on Mary! Go on girl!
You dancing for we all.
Go on Mary! Go on Girl! You dancing for we all!

PALM HOUSES

Away from the chalk faces of Kent I go
looking for palm houses -
Botanical Gardens, black soil, heat falling
like rain down my neck.

I enter, a native daughter, barefoot
mouth open like a bromeliad
the hair on my arms rising
like cactus spines.

I must remember I am a guest, must pause to admire
the profusion of colour, the infusion of scent
the architecture of banana leaves etched
like Caribbean parasols on the fine, glass ceiling.

They pay me no mind, carry on in their own merry way
the fan-tail palm spreading herself solicitously
the bougainvillea readying herself for a wedding
the fruit flies dancing in the stench of rotting pineapples.

Still, I envy those gardeners their intimacy
their daily sojourns into this Cathedral;
they're the first to see the bromeliad open her morning eyes,
the philodendron disentangle his sheen from the vine -

And the palms,
Oh God, the palms ...

MONTBRETIA, WALES

In search of poetry I wandered Ireland
head full of mist and myth
Boland, Heaney, Kennelly ...
and girls with Cork and Kerry accents
slipping out of cars on narrow country roads
to tumble through hedgerows in search of wrecks.

Their laughter sliced the air like bees
and lens foreshortened squares of blue
over heads of corn through singing stable doors
askew with age and longing.
And there you were ...
shot through with summer, rampant in the hedgerow

Gold with song. And I sang, *Belong*.

I gathered up your name
and a miniature bouquet
to press between words as yet unsung.

And your name came back to me
when islands later on
I stumbled on this garden wild with sheaves
and *you* house-hunted *me*
your leaves precise as spears, your head aflame
with madness, wild frantic, blazing poetry.

ON THE LIMBO TRAIL, 2

Trains. Back in 1959

They ran from Rosignol to Georgetown
Full steam ahead, First Class, Second Class, Third.
All had their place, from the Indian woman
With the chickens to the Negro preacher
From Surinam trying to find the English word
For dumplings.

Those little white girls in white socks, white shoes
Leaning out the window, warned to keep
Their arms inside; outside *Bad Men* hid
In the banana leaves, cutlass ready
To slice those little arms advertising gold bangles.

From 1972 to 2009 trains changed their style.
(I must not forget to add that we're in England now.)
The carriages with sliding doors and slide-up windows
The clicky clackety ride on the tracks all
Stepped aside for open-plan streamlined design
Sealed windows and push-button toilet doors
You never really trust will not open and expose
Your backside.

You could still dream though; stare out the window
Watch the countryside and back gardens, fiddle
With the notebook in your hand, eat your sandwich slow
And try your best to ignore the drunk singing Cat Stevens
Loudly two seats down.

But then came the mobile phones my dear
And that wonderful refrain, "I'm on the train".
And as well as the interruption into your dreaming
Came the fact that nobody seemed to mind
Sharing all their business with the world
From who shagged who the night before
To breast implants, to women checking their men

CWMPENGRAIG, PLACE OF STONES

Where yuh navel string bury is not necessarily home
Dis gurl gon walk my grandmother say
And walk I walk from Guyana to West Wales
And leave I leave that place of oceans and slave bones
For bruk down cottages and hills where people still pray

And come I come with my forked tongue split syntax
Of Hinglish and street Creole to wander lanes
With no names and no map where even
Sat-nav wuk hard to find being alimbo
Beyond satellite beyond stars

And stars and dreams of stars and songs
Called these Welsh from home
To cross oceans to a continent
Of the imagination

And is peel dis country peel like onion
Garden cups my cottage in its fists of seasons
Caring nothing for my ignorance
Of names, pronunciation, language

And History running in the stream right there
Beneath the stone: mill-worker foot-bottom still indent
Ghost voice talking story wild a catch afire
How he catching boat with intention get the hell outa dis place.

It nat fuh him to know some gurl would bring his story
Right back here and tell him tales of sugarcane
And captains tracing latitude and longitude
With quadrant, quill and octopus ink

Is laugh he would laugh true true
Whilst that stream keep gurgling
Stones keep tumbling
Underscore the footfall of my feet.

WORDS ACROSS THE WATER

My daughters walk the deserts of unknowing

My grandmother beating her clothes on a stone
would never have conceived of mobile phones

as neither could Daddy, on MV *Radio City*
property of the Reynolds Bauxite Company.

Only the radio linked the miles, rode the tides.

This is a dry place, a dry dry place

Here are the names of those rivers they shared:
the Berbice, the Kwakwani. Few know them.

Those tales ... blood and sugar, women on riverbanks,
the forest waiting, a captain sailing

his tugboat past abandoned plantations
with such beautiful names: Plantation Catherine, Liliengrad...

Beautiful blood-red names.

*No amount of megabytes can hold these memories
No battery can charge itself enough*

It was the beauty of words that first lured.
El Dorado's sonic whispering, "*Guiana, Land of Many Waters*"

along un-navigable rivers, cutting channels into creeks
and new beliefs: white Gods, Rosicrucians, merpeople,

Currents strong enough to turn, enter oceans
the channel of my sleep.

My daughters walk the deserts of unknowing
This is a dry place. A dry, dry place

Ariel's soft Disney soles never bleed on the shore
in ribbons of blood on jagged stones or glass

*No amount of megabytes can hold these memories
No battery can charge itself enough*

Alice's tears do not have the force of Rainstorm's
whose seawalls crumble and gutters overflow

and alligators wash
through the villagers doors, the the gun-men killed

that innocent boy just for the price of his mobile.

And where once women waited weeks for the mail-boat
for quinine, and sardines, oil and rope

And where once only the radio played over the sounds
of the rolling waves

my daughters text, my daughters text
in micro-seconds round the globe.