

# **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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Cover design by Cristiano Coppola  
Cover image: Dreamstime

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Published by the Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sports, Guyana and the Yesu Persaud Centre for Caribbean Studies, University of Warwick, at the Caribbean Press.

**ISBN 978-1-907493-34-8**



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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'<sup>1</sup>, 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/memory<sup>2</sup> 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"<sup>3</sup>, 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".<sup>4</sup> 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".<sup>5</sup> That notion of limbo – the inability to neatly slot into a pre-defined area of belonging, particularly for the "mixrace/ whiteface gold hair girl"<sup>6</sup> - 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".<sup>7</sup>

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?"<sup>8</sup> 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".<sup>9</sup>

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"<sup>10</sup>, 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."<sup>11</sup> 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."<sup>12</sup> 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..."<sup>13</sup> 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."<sup>14</sup>

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!"<sup>15</sup> It is not just the subject matter but also the very specific type of language used – a kind of broken, 18<sup>th</sup> 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!"<sup>16</sup> Those first, free steps towards a new world order<sup>17</sup> 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.”<sup>18</sup> 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.”<sup>19</sup> 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”.<sup>20</sup> 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?”<sup>21</sup> 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”<sup>22</sup> 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...*".<sup>23</sup>

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### Notes:

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





**SELECTED POEMS**

**(1999-2010)**

**MAGGIE HARRIS**



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

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Some of these poems have been published in *Foreday Morning*, *Limbolands*, *From Berbice to Broadstairs*, and *After a Visit to a Botanical Garden*. *The SHop*, (Ireland), *Poui* (U.W.I.), *Equinox*, *Poetry Review Newsletter*, *Agenda* and *Poetry Wales*.

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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 Englun.

# 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 piffling 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 nevu seh goodbye  
ah nevu 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 nevu 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 Tescos  
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.