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Cover painting: Dot Lane

Cover photograph: Bruce Thomson

Book design: Vaughn Dragland

ISBN: 978-0-9681745-7-9

EVENING'S CANDLES

Evening's Candles



*Poems by
Cecil Gray*

CECIL GRAY

LILIBEL PUBLICATIONS

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*For my children, grandchildren,
and great-grandchildren*

and for Irene

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AGAINST THE COLD

However brief your winter is, you know
the nips and bites and tremors of its cold
inside your bones. It's in such icy times
when dreams are frozen the past blazes up
like a fireplace. Bursting sparks flare like
pleasures that showered with golden moments
on days before the snow. You turn your head
and try to shun the present, the chilly
hug of the numbing season, to rich times
when shared excitement giddied us with glee
until we recognised that it was more.
But nothing can slow down the cycle's spin
to fruitlessness, just as autumn's parade
with its martial flags ends in extinction.
As you gaze at the yellow tongues licking
the firewood an old palpitation
returns and you feel you are still able
to repeat old stunts. Then a wintry gust
blows away that dream. Yet when, in the end,
leaves of rust, magenta and gold flutter
and fall, loosened, twisted off, like the loss
inevitably suffered when the years
revolve, there's always the blaze of memory
to gaze into and pick a still glowing
flaring ember to set against the cold.

RAIN

In childhood's innocence the sound of rain
drumming on the roof at night made you feel
cosy and glad to be safe and dreamy.

Like a stream's burbling tumble, showered
pebbles on the house muffled other sounds
and shut out the unsafe world with their thrum.

You'd imagine being there in the rough dark
weather but protected by love and warmth
and care, certain that the dulling tattoo

would keep you snug. And then sleep would enwrap
your make-believe and everything outside
would be banished from the sheltering house.

But the sound on the roof is different now.
heavier, fuller, like a cannonade,
not patter that soothes like a lullaby.

You hear what seems to be screams in the wind
and thuds exploding in the far distance
but coming nearer like rabid thunder.

It seems that you can snuggle no longer,
that demons unheard when you were younger
roam about with a ravenous hunger.

OCTOBER

If you ever come to Toronto, come
in October when the leaves of the trees
turn yellow, magenta, ruby, and gold,
when the air brings a chill but glitters
like marble, and bounty bespreads its span.
Like a free banquet before winter
its fare compensates for white murals
later on, the shivers and helpless chattering.
October's morning wisps of mist quickly
vanish, leaving the day with a gleam like
crystal-clear varnish. We can't help but
stand and stare at the carnival of hues
we walk under taking a route down
leafy suburban roads. Late afternoon the air
twinkles like deep water the sun shines through
and the light gives a sheen to the stoneware
edges. You can watch a stream pleat
silvery tresses as it runs, still hear it gurgle
before its voice is hushed, crusted by ice.
and catch white birds in a retinue of flight
where the sky stretches far beyond the eye.
Come and revel in it all, seizing the time,
for like most given things the heart draws on
for ease, for whatever makes gladness bloom,
October is whisked away. For as you
blithely saunter under its high harlequin
canopy, blind to the offered intimation
that the here and now is all we have, soon
the branches will be bare, the air full of blades.
Take it all in then; a turn of the head and it fades.

BULLETS

The police car came to enforce
the law, to secure peace and order.
It can always be said
he was mentally unbalanced,
that someone had seen a knife
or what appeared to be one
and felt severely threatened.
It might also be true that
a voice had clearly shouted
he must be a terrorist armed
with a deadly suicide bomb.
It seems it was not the time
for subtle delaying distinctions,
as has been said. The bullets
made sure. They were necessary,
an official report said. And yet
doubt clouds the air
and obscures the cause
with the theories put forward.
Guns carried in holsters?
Inadequate training?
Or do such actions come
from something unnamed,
from something much deeper?

PAST AND PRESENT

Gulls shriek like creaking wheels,
flap to a bollard and hold
council for a while. It is that time again.
Sailboats sliding out of the marina make
widening wakes, slicing the lake
into folds like tidal troughs.
A flotilla of ducks chugging on patrol
keeps plucking cheerfully
at nothing, as happy as I am
for the change of season, for the air's
liquid shine like polished glass.
Down the boardwalk weightwatchers stride
in tracksuits happily pacing each other,
and, like them, I exult in warming sunlight,
blue sky, the clean high rolling clouds,
and flowers that open their arms
for the beams' warm caresses.
Summer here comforts the torn
sinews that once bound me to places
where summer is the only weather
and one forgets its bounteous agenda.
I did not know it then, I know it now:
in those radiant days blessing after blessing
came my way spangled with humour,
and pleasing endeavours yielded sweet
satisfactions. Now when the lake turns blue
ripples dance to the same music of zest
till the wicks of evening's candles start to flicker.
But joys gathered and hoarded compensate.
With those busy memories that scintillate
I now place another cache as I walk
muttering thanks for the past and the present.

CATCHING UP

In those simpler times nothing dramatic
nor extraordinary shook up the slow days –
a row between two neighbours, a broken branch,
gave the chatter in a yard banner headlines.
The hours followed one behind another
placidly, bland, unruptured by commotions.
Those were the unsophisticated decades
when on Sunday afternoons everyone wore
their very best and strolled about on parade,
the clanking of street cars was a cheering sound
and nighttime window shopping affordable fun.
We were becoming familiar with freedom,
foreign boots were being shifted, closed roads opened.
Ambitious store clerks aimed to be storewalkers,
boys dreamed of being policemen, girls nurses,
though some voices talked about going abroad
where you found excitement, action and glitter.
But the years rolled on with the same disregard
for up-to-date rites, till shame seeped in like slime
from the television screen for not having
a more fashionable life style from outside,
like Hollywood or New York with TV's glamour.
Their sleek glossiness made us feel left behind,
out of touch with modern styles. Much catching up
had to be done to be abreast of the world.
So the old slow ways faded out unmourned.
We began to swim with the current of change.
Then we saw it meant hearing guns explode,
meant every home had to be sealed like a cell,
burglar-barred, and to walk down a darkened lane
choked you with fear. So freedom was lost again.

LIGHT

i.m. Alan Moss

Over there where the snow buries your footprints
and the path you made has disappeared, just where
some blazing hues had burgeoned splurging the tints
of a painter's dense palette, another year
leaves its ravages behind. A soft white coat
of bright silvery fur clothes the ground to hide
what the doodles of a moving finger wrote:
another one gone before my cheeks had dried.
Every year the list gets longer. My bowed head
bends lower with the weight of loss. One by one
I see them ripped away, torn from time's thin thread,
and I am left lessened and stunned. Now Alan
is no more, his mild reticent voice no more,
his gift of friendship all that glows. A sad rage
makes me rail in mutiny against the law
that razes the best flowers in a rampage,
in wanton indiscriminate fashion.
But just as that snowdrift covers fallen leaves
I must now place Alan under grief's white sheet,
the shroud a blind spinner repeatedly weaves
when a roaming finger lingers on delete.
Sorrow embalms him now in its memory,
with scrolls commemorating a rare story
and his lifelong communion with books. The ache
will diminish, but not the light his friendship
spread and that still shines on us here at his wake.

UNREAD

If ever lament rose like a dam and brought
the threat of a flood, if ever despair loomed
like a storm and darkened the day, if the eyes
are drawn to the ground, it would be unlikely
to stem from how age has snatched agility
from me, or because of some loss everyone
suffers. We must all expect those decreases.
Regrets have been sparse in the field I furrowed,
like weeds I found useless, not to be gathered.
But now there is one that has burgeoned of late,
spreading its nettles wherever I wander
and wherever I search for the calm of anchorage.
For what I wear now like a hair shirt are years
I allowed to pass not opening covers
of books left languishing in dust on my shelves.

So many books unread, so many doors
never entered, feeling quite sure in due course
there would be time to stroll in their company
as they point to the world's varied landscape.
They waited their turn, and waited, and
waited.

Now sand's running out of its measuring glass
I reach for those pages and find that the light
is fading too fast. I'm too late. I am bent
as I walk with the weight of that error.
I move with that sorrow draped on my shoulder
as the sun sinks down and the air grows colder.

REVISION

He munches now on bits of retrospection,
bites of reminiscences, nibbles sometimes
on the collected brittle crumbs of memories.
You might see his thoughts wander, turning away
from talk of terrorists, from the repeated
ravages faith spawns, endless rapes of reason.
He escapes through a gap rent in time's curtain
secretively into his own past. From tombs
the years have built haphazard resurrections
would sweeten a reverie. He would greet mates
who fed his childhood, meet friends and colleagues that
helped him to fill his life. He chews each memory
letting its remembered flavour trickle down.
But there are times he flips into fallacy,
times when what comes to face him brings tinctures of
regret and he tints the story with a brush
of glory. Those are the versions he retains.
So whenever you notice he shifts out of
the present let him find ease in their re-runs.
Nothing is left for him then but revision
of omissions, failure's list he can never
obliterate. So he simply imagines
what should have happened happened. He sips the wine
of that comfort, having it dull his remorse.
Give him that privilege. Let that be the balm
he needs now as time signals for departure.

WHITEHAIRD WAVES

There are always mountains,
low ones, high ones,
the jewelled sea with long satin beaches
and everywhere lush greenness
covering slopes and crests.
Our islands offer little else
the world would notice, strung
like a necklace worn by the ocean
they lie all day in the sun
so mockers say we have nothing,
nothing the books call History,
no armies of loyal young men
sent to kill anybody,
no claim to space in a museum's memory,
just flowering trees blooming freely.
The flamboyant and frangipani,
poui and lignum vitae,
pink cassia and golden shower
decorate the hills like martial insignia
but the gory wars are not ours.
And as we watch the bombardments,
the confiscation of booty,
wrapped carefully and artfully
in words like democracy,
we might seem cowardly
since we cannot boast of battles
and slaughters that confer glory.
But the June Rose blossoms in peace,
the poinsettia's red is not blood,
the casuarina's beard sways with the breeze
and Royal Palms line long avenues
whatever else might go wrong.

So whitehaired waves roar with applause
when reaching these shores, these calm inlets
with no imperial armadas,
no hoards of appropriated gains.
They throw themselves on the silky sand
glittering like sequins strewn by the sun
along the bay, whispering in celebration
while the battling world stays on course
firing weapons, eyeing someone's acres.

A LIFE

He had waited for a train to Tomorrow
with the same simpering cringe on his face
clutching a tote bag that bulged with his sorrow,
eyes fixed on the future in some fresh place.

He had stood there bracing himself for going
where her spews of scorn could not humiliate
or hurt any more, leaving raised weals showing
as if her whipping was energised by hate.

For years I was involuntary witness
to that thralldom, unable to understand,
until now, why he wore that heavy harness
flagellated by whim's ceaseless reprimand.

With his pain he looked for a fast train to run
out of Today to a station of kindness,
one on the map he had in his pocket on
which every stop was a doodled caress.

But for him no such train came and he found no
time-table with routes of escape. Love kept him
pilloried there, diminished by every blow,
devotion's armourless bewildered victim.

THE VERY FEW

I think of friends I shall not see again
although they turned the pages of my life,
incensed my days with thuribles of care
and cleared my eyes to see beyond the rain.
Like shredded wisps they've melted into air,
diffused by time and distance so my hand
just clutches apparitions as they glow
in memory. There still their voices bubble
with approval, expectations that fanned
sparks of my self-belief. Today I know
it was their faith that made me break my chain.
Friendship's applauding pen wrote that story.

Then we were split by half a hemisphere
and Time began shearing stalks to stubble.
How do I mourn that loss, how now explain
after greying years sorrow's persistence?
Like a recurrent eclipse a pall falls
over my reveries. I have trouble
with memories. Their reappearance recalls
relentless Time scything in the distance,
slashing away, bequeathing grief's bloodstain..
But I cannot fend off one fateful blow,
nor ask the scheduled ferry to tarry.
All I can do with the last light waning
is cherish the very few remaining.

TO A YOUNG POET

When you stare at the sun going down,
or the waves repeating their pleas,
or the early lights of the town coming on
and the veins they make in the trees,

if your head spins around in a frantic fight
to pin thoughts to their words stay as silent
as ice lest murmurings to slow their flight
escape in an unintended lament

overheard by those who pass with their eyes
half averted or down, then whisper and glance
moving along in embarrassed surprise
at your mumble like the madman who rants

at the corner. But you know what was brought
to you by that rainbowed blaze will not live
if the words skipping round, sparring with thought,
slip slyly away like sand in a sieve.

It's language that staples experience,
language that fastens the past in a frame
so we see again its significance.
Everything fades unless given its name.

So take heart my young friend as you mutter
a line or two, testing phrases to seal
what you feel in a poem. Just potter
about in the garden of words and kneel

for hue and scent, then pluck. You have been blessed
with a green thumb for poetry. Use it
for us all. Speak to the heart with the best
words you can, without excess, tightly knit.

WHAT THEY WERE

Like bubbles they lost their stories
in the ocean from holds of slave ships,
could not quote myths from the land
where the chronicle of man began,
all whipped and branded out of them.
Instead, they learned of Achilles,
and Hector, Odysseus and Zeus,
Perseus and Orpheus and the rest,
and memorised those legends
as if they were theirs. No other
inheritance ever mattered.

They were yoked and driven like oxen
to the trough the schools uncovered.
When they tried to retrieve their myths
and the gods they had long forgotten
it was too late. Their eyes lacked focus.
For when the schools let them out
they didn't know who they were,
didn't even know what they were,
knowing nothing of where they came from
since it was not on the syllabus.

They were told savages roamed its forests.
All the old folk tales of Ananse
were buried in bloodsoaked canefields.
So they have no tales of old gods
yet cannot lay claim to Plato,
Pericles, Ovid or Dante.

All they have is their own lore
about struggle, about living through
the span we are all here allotted,
not with weapons of war, not with
global heartless brigandage, but
with humour and merriment,
content to be off the world's stage.
laughing away every trace of rage.

MARBLES

You had to master the crouch and the grip,
get your knuckles into the ground near the ring
which was drawn with a twig but perfectly round
as if its radius was a string tautly tied
to a circling ship so it shaped an
unflawed horizon. Inside the ring was
the prize, the marbles we staked to be won
by the most accurate fingers in one
of the rites of passage of boyhood,
telling how you'd fare on life's heaving ride.
A victor would don his pride like a tag
that would give him entry to the door of success.

You would test your taw with your thumb and aim
at one you could hit, then test it again before
pitching. If you failed, shame would not let you
blame luck or claim another chance and the game
went on till the ring was bare, all marbles
knocked out and pocketed. When you lost
you placed your fisted knuckles as the target
for a taw's hit like the clunk of a stone
and you dared not flinch or you would be named
a sissy or something worse. So you'd grin
when the pain shot through, not groan or grimace.
In our neighbourhood Jacob was champion
and my folded fist was often his target.
I still feel the crack of his taw on my bone.

HUDDLED HEADS

Time and again a church night clouds my thoughts.

In the high domed cathedral a hymn rose
after the long sermon. Everyone stood
tall around me before dawdling out.
I was in my ninth year and on Monday
nights I was often left alone to mope.
But sometimes pity rescued me from that
and boxed me between bodies in brown pews
squirring and wishing for a quick release.

That night, afterwards, my grandmother
whom I knew wooed no friends, huddled heads
with one of the faithful in the half-dark outside.
They spoke French patois mumbling like sly
conspirators. In the streetlight's glimmer
mystery blurred their shapes, their hushed mutterings,
me, silent with a child's bewilderment.
Back in tow, tumbling home, a question
nagged and nagged. What did it mean that adult
secretiveness? What was my grandmother
knotted in, behind those sneaking whispers?

I never saw beyond her drawn curtain
and never got rid of wanting to know,
but I buried the question in layers
of her love, in childhood's forgetfulness.
The mystery is why I remember it
at all, not much more than a searchlight's flash
that picked up a burble of gargled words
where the shadows spread and swallowed it up.

SHUTTERS

'There are details of days now hard to remember,' he said, 'even years that like swift rivers flowed past left courses unmapped. And though I fish for them all in the haze the net that I repeatedly cast only catches days I do not want to recall.' He said, 'I often hear the streets' toxic gutters gurgling in my head, and feel the dust that blew on my skin from the brown yards then.' He spoke softly. 'Instead, I wish to revive gardens that grew around me later, blooms that burst triumphantly out of untilled ground, the only re-run that matters.'

It seems when loving hands pointed the way out, the only path for him to walk beyond the wall penning him in, he sprinted through the gap to flout unwritten laws that would keep him in a walled stall. Set free he thrived now delighting in fields adorned with throngs of forget-me-nots, in Gothic bamboo arches under cloud-tinted peaks where small springs spawned waterfalls, counting dawn's tints where hummingbirds flew.

'That's all true,' he said, 'but such gifts now drain away from the mind like water through fingers. Hues and faces fade as if mist-wrapped in distant rain.' I listened and watched him, seeing slow shutters closing on stars that once lit his sky, glows that wane and die out of his focus, how he grieved to lose them. I saw him reach for memory's shadows in vain, chasing vague images down time's avenues.

WATERFALL

Reading of it we thought that the waterfall
was a place where jewels shone and shimmered
in twisting tresses that fell down from a height
and plunged into a bubbling basin below.
We imagined spray rising up like white smoke,
catching the sunshine and spewing stars
that glittered and spangled in the haze.
We expected its thunder to roll in the ear
where its fallen plaits somersaulted and coiled.
A book had said it was one of the island's
picturesque places, a gem in the countryside.

So one day Kelvin and I rode our bikes
up a northbound valley road to find it,
past what used to be canefields, past
an old straggly village to a narrow dirt track
and through crowded bushes into a clearing.
And there it was : a meagre strip of water
spilling over a ledge half a palm tree high.
Strands of it wriggled like strings unravelling,
streaking down to a small tree-shadowed pool
that slithered out through the bushy undergrowth.

With our earnest expectations confounded
we looked around disbelieving. Had we come
up the wrong track? Was it, perhaps, the wrong season,
or did we misread glowing words on a page?
Riding back we both pushed on pedals stiff
with glum disappointment. But what was worse
was the loss riding with us in silence.
When we got home the world had changed its face.

31 WEST ROAD

for my children

The house has been flattened, the whole campus changed since then; concrete and congestion raised instead. Yet there was airy space there then where you stretched and expanded. And the house whose walls fostered your dreams had its place where green trees cuddled its modest structure; though it was big to us then since it contained all the measurements of love within its slender border of gerberas. The ackees fell red, cream and black spilling on the driveway near the hedge of bougainvillea whose spiked flame-red petals skirted the lawn. Then at dusk the house seemed to purr, sheltered by St. Catherine's Peak and John Crow Mountain, solemn like deities watching over mortal deeds. And sometimes the projector recreated occasions we kept in storage to feast on. Sometimes, too, a board game like Monopoly or Pokeno had us squealing and clowning. Then came hours in quiet quest of knowledge. But it was love the house breathed and thrived on, love that sustained all its comings and goings. Now that it has not even a ghostly form only memory lets us share in its joys again.

LONDON

for Irene

I taught you London with my older knowledge,
had you complaining when your legs gave out
but east and west, from Hammersmith to Brick Lane,
my joy commended every stride you made.
At night a different play would lead us
to the Olivier, the Lyttleton, all the theatres
of the West End, and even by train northwards
to Hampstead or up through Islington.
We mapped the pubs and bookshops, peered into
quiet side streets, visited galleries.
Each night we sauntered to a chosen restaurant:
Salieri's, The Punjab, The Blue Elephant,
Como Lario. London had become yours too
and a midday classical concert at St. Martin-
in-the-Fields became a definite must.

They were luminous days with what seemed boundless
enchantment to sustain our itineraries.
Year after year the town was our carousel
as we circled happily round founts of pleasure.
Then you began taking me to places I'd missed:
a church with stained-glass windows, a small square,
Neal's Yard, a university museum.
You seemed determined to find new stomping grounds
wherever they were in that ample city.
Our times there glittered even more with fun
wandering through untrodden settings.

But as the years continued totting up my score
they wrote me debtors' bills and my own legs
cried they were giving out. Some days I started
late, most days I was slow. Then on long pulls
sought restful stops like a disabled climber.
Yet when I trudged along beside you or behind
there was the same excitement that we shared
all through our London years. The city knows
each time we walk its streets what has endured,
knows what it gave us that the heart safeguards.

PLAYING FIELD

There must be bones here buried beneath the years
since sugar cane plantations straddled the land,
from accursed days my great-great-grandfather
on my mother's side was a slave. Fluent whips
must have danced about on his skin leaving
hieroglyphs for others to read. Late relief
came when he found a hiding place in the ground.

So his bones are now somewhere – perhaps under
this field for footballers, cricketers, joggers –
free of his irons, clutched by the earth's tight hold.
I imagine him back watching us as we play.
When I bowl an off break I see him drive it
back to the boundary; when I take a corner
kick he just jumps out and punches it away.
Under the grass here where sugar cane once grew,
where blood sometimes fed the soil, those who cropped
and gathered lie with their unremembered pain.
And the list of what they endured has been thrown
like a weed into a compost of dead leaves,
tossed in the heap of unwelcome memories.

Now, quite innocently we play here, counting
runs, scoring goals, weighted with no reminders
of field hands, no plaques, no monuments, no books
that tell how they built an empire's cities.
No, my great-great-grandfather has etched no name
on a cenotaph, no known claim on History.
The rich grass here keeps his buried story
in its place, with long interred iniquities
that do not disturb cricketers at their game.

THE HOUSE

The house is now breaking free
of its incubus of melancholy
and breathes an air as clear as
mountain water. The past
is peeled of mottled, noxious crusts,
the present pristine still. And now
to be happy I must begin again
and greet a different morning.

Perhaps I'll amble through a suburb
of deep delight with its grass
lush and green, a quiet street,
fingers of soft sportive air
playing on my face, the sky
a child's dress of blue and white
blessing with solace my easy saunter.

I'll leave the doors wide open,
the gate unlocked, leave a light
on at night to say I'm here,
and as I listen to the passing feet
perhaps there'll be a tap, a gentle rap
suggesting what had never come near
might now be signalling to enter.

The open house begins to breathe
again, as if lost faith no longer
clogs its throat. The senses register
tremors of hope, mild signs promising
time's recompense. The future
starts to crystallize and yet

when memory's homing birds
gather at dusk with them you'll see
the shadow of a well-sustained
performance crouched in a dark
corner of a room, listening
to anguished howls of disbelief.

IN THIS AGE

In this age of take-what-you-can-for-yourself
I remember our bygone Christmases
when friends went around from home to home singing
'We've come to wish you a merry Christmas' on
the night of the eve with a boundless feeling
of goodwill to all. Those were the years joy came
from very little. Few had more than a ham
and a home-made black cake. But the heart became
a guardian angel of the world and it gave
everyone its blessing. To honour the time
chairs were varnished and new cretonne curtains found,
and though songs were sung about sleighbells and snow,
discounting the green abundance that was ours,
what was felt was an overwhelming sameness
with mankind. So it wasn't money we spent
in the malls, nor Christmas trees we didn't have
that kept everyone open-armed with gladness.
No, it was sharing the gift of elation
around, spreading exultation like perfume.
It must have been something inborn that flowered,
something inside that embraces spring from.
Yet it seems rare now, hard to find in this age.
so when it blooms gladness goes on a rampage.

BULLY

On Monday he dared me to fight him,
said I was only a coward,
a sailor's son and a bastard.

On Tuesday he blocked my way
and stopped me from drinking some water
at the tap in the schoolyard.
I was cornered and jeered at.

On Wednesday he booted my bookbag
away down the steps after school
and jumped like a rabid hyena
doing a ceremonial dance,
senseless rites of a dunce.

Thursday he waited with toadies
and he locked my neck in a vise
while they chortled and whinnied,
jackals on a feast of power.
Every squirm I tried squeezed me tighter.
For a while I could not breathe.

On Friday I knocked his teeth out.

CHANGED STORY

I sit in my corner savouring the words
of a great poet. They're what I feed on
now I have come to the shallows with sails
close-furled, out of the winds that brought me here.
Every page I read stirs time like a waft
flipping over leaves like the script of my life
and I re-enter days long fully spent
when I battled to steer through waiting troughs
and keep a course out of deadly currents.
Again and again the poet's lines lead
memory back to shared familiar places,
to faces and voices of a season
when our islands were blooming with buds
the imagination sprouted, when out
of the dusty needy yards artistry
thrust up shoots. The empire's serfs now claimed
an equal right to create depictions
rendering in their own way what they dreamed
and lived with. Even in me confidence
rose in a rush like the surge of a sea,
lifting my eyes to a wishful vision,
changing my story to a fruitful tale.
Now thoughts of an ocean return, billows
I rode to an unexplored horizon.

THE ANSWER

The sun is making a landing west of Negril
and the gem-studded bay is losing its jewels.
The sky lights a bonfire to hearten the dusk

so the blaze would dispel the onset of darkness
and plead for an ease from the day's lacerations
with the hues of a mock rainbow celebration.

On the shore fishermen who had fished for freedom
for centuries are now hauling in fresh catches.
Everywhere old ropes and fences had been heaped as

firewood to fuel flames of the future. Hope
for an unbiased social order had flared up
from Port Morant to Green Island and the clear air

had reverberated with voices of protest
till change snapped the shackles of caste and birth. But then
savagery seized the land fed by fairy-tale dreams

that could not be made real in the space of a day
and guns spewed despair on towns and villages.
So Bob Marley's reggae wailed *I Shot The Sheriff*,

One Love, and the heartache of *No Woman No Cry*.
Now as this sunset like a wilted flower dies
and all the silver of the sea changes to lead

the tears keep on flowing. Yet, dancing and laughter,
the answer courage flings back, defy the ordeal.
Ears cocked for gunshots, the country grins in anguish.

LIMOUSINES

No longer do processions follow hearses
through the old town's streets to the cemetery.
It's trendy cars now and darkened limousines,
and hidden sorrow mere strangers must not see.

In times before alleys would brim with people
in mourning garb, many of whom did not know
who lay in the coffin in the house of hymns,
consoling words, embraces and spattered sobs.

There were no funeral homes with piped music,
no parlours with live organs. But raised voices
sent appeals heavenward. All doors were open
to any who came offering words of care.

Like pallbearers, all of the neighbours lifted
up one's loss and made it lighter to shoulder.
Now grief is a private matter and it drives
from funeral parlour to graveyard shunning

the wake's recalled stories and rites of sorrow.
Sadness now rides with glitzy motor hearses
with a car or two keeping up, unnoticed,
as if a life's tale was now worth no applause.

Bereavement used to be a shared affliction
in that time in that place, though you kept the tears
dammed as you shuffled to match calamity's
onrush with your jaw bound shut, your teeth clamped tight.

With faithful feet behind you swallowed the howls
about to erupt, trudging doggedly past
faces that lingered on the pavements to send
you comfort, showing they know it must be

piece of your life to be lowered and covered.
As they gazed, sundry strangers used their eyes
to say 'Take courage', to counsel you that grief
is a long dark road that all must stumble through.

You would not have chosen even if you could
a limousine's sealed up carapace to hide in
for you would have missed kindly hearts reaching in.
In that small town death encompassed everyone.

HOLDING IT CLOSE

I have seen many a town with a fountain
in the heart of a Square with greyish stone seats
for resting meandering feet, with pathways
in all directions for wandering again.
A Square that was mine had a fountain too
that streamed now and then thin silvery sheets
over cast-iron mermaids, and green moss grew
on their scaly tails and their breasts. On some nights
band concerts would draw us all from the streets
and the Square quivered and hummed.

Then there were days
when caressing winds blew ruffling the manes
of trees, shaking their leaves and waking some men
with loveless homes somewhere, to continue
to argue how they would run the Government.
You would hear the clacking traffic of feet
criss-cross beyond sunset, then catch in the lights
the unprized men slinking out, into the mind,
sinking in memory.

Now it seems like aeons
since I plotted a way through that Square, my head
swirling with eddies of freshly found notions,
from the Public Library; ages since I left it
far behind. But it was there I once began,
like a nomad, to read without aim or plan
books I found. Now it stays deep in the winnings
I carry and rises at times to the top of my musings.

Then I still go from a gate
through the centre using the mind's sextant,
still cruise around at a concert by moonlight
passing the fountain that burbled its scant
downflow. And on those walks the derelict men
are still there trying to hide being unloved.
I expect it's different now, improvements
have been made. So I'm glad that I've kept it
just as it was in my head, holding it close,
letting it be what was once my nurturing haunt.

KITE

It was not often that I had a kite
so I remember the times I did,
how it went boring up like a rocket
then slid sideways skipping hurdles
till it plunged like a meteor
aiming for earth, before it rose again
with a laugh, and wriggled back up.
Once it was green and yellow,
another time red and black.
We danced together like the thread
along which my guiding signals went.
It would toss its head like a horse
with the rider's reins drawn tight
shaking its mane and rearing.
I preferred it alone, king of the wind,
and dreaded the days more kites appeared.
I remember that ones with slivers of glass,
the broken-off flakes that were called *zwill*
fixed in their tails like Samurai blades,
came swooping across and severed my thread,
how right and left my maimed kite twisted
then spun and spun downwards, downwards
to some strange and faraway place.

I wondered sometimes how it fared there
and would it be the same if I drifted
and landed among strange distant people.
Would it matter what colour my skin was,
that my pocket was empty? Would I have
to change my history? In any case,
I thought, another place
should be better if I could
fly a kite every day and the thread
would never be cut.

PAGES

We saw how he visited the photos.
He would flick over a page and linger
enrapt for a while somewhere in the past.
The well-thumbed album was where he went now
for the faces and places that once blessed
his days with unstinted friendship and grace.
So he turned pages slowly retrieving
from time the happiness shared from being
with them all, the joy in common endeavours.
One with his children would set him aglow
carried off to another world as if
elation unsteadied his head like wine.
Then he left those pages for the priceless years
when close to his side gladness went everywhere,
when love paddled with him beyond all reefs.
But there were also times he flipped the page
quickly as if it burned and his eyes got
misty and seemed ready to spill plashes
of salted sorrow from memory's chalice.
We saw how he rushed back to the present
again where love still paddled at his side.
Stroke by stroke together they ride the waves
vaulting the tides that swell and fall and rise.

CROSSROADS

I have come to this place before, or
to its replica somewhere, saw the four
dead dials of the wooden clock tower,
one for each cardinal point,
tell a tale of a bygone hour,
of ravages history wrought with its power.
I drove past the chapel on the hill
where Sundays repeat their psalms of comfort
and have come to the town's weatherworn heart,
to walls that are cracked and old paint like wax
has greased them black with age.

Four asphalt roads converge here
and the pavements repeat heavy clumps of feet
slogging to market to sell what was won
from tilled acres miles away. The faces
seem tired and grim, seem beaten and bowed,
furrowed by toil's gouging scalpel. They go by
as if in surrender to laws that intern them.
In their haggard appearance I see despair.

A stray gust of restless dust billows up in
a rising spiral like a bewildered prayer
then settles back down in accustomed silence.
I muse on how the lifters of stones to build
a pyramid earned only mouthfuls of shards.

Then I hear full-throated uproars of laughter
and a tumult of chatter, chuckles and blabber.
Unshackled smiles open wide so that all
the lines despair might have lodged in
disappear, and the faces are beaming suns.
With that to remember I steer for a road
out of the roundabout away from the hill,
lighter in heart and wearing a grin, knowing
there's a life there history can never kill.

FLIGHT

Knowing something of his story I followed
his slow and pensive pilgrimage down the shore.
He was shambling along the dusk-gold sand
of evening, lugging disenchantment's baggage.
He trudged like a convict thinking of escape.
Once, he was one of a corps pledged to reverse
what history had done. That was what he thrived on,
turning their dreams into a new kind of life.
With that vow he'd made a difference, squeezing
the pus of self-contempt from deep-set thrusts.
Then desires changed and he was out of place.
He paused where the green-black roots of the mangrove,
like a ship's hawsers, still sink through the shallows
just where the chattering stream meeting the foam
goes silent, its bubbly gurgles swallowed up.
He kept watching the breakers rush to the arms
of the bay, white crests somersaulting to froth
and I knew he did not want to leave it all
but could not bear the isolation, the wound
rejection made. He had to retreat somewhere.
So a cruise ship, all blazing eyes, leaving port
for its next scheduled stop held his gaze at length
and I felt how he longed to be at its rail.
As if it knows, the surfing tide sizzles in,
mounting the broad fringe of the darkening sand
and collapses with a prolonged tired sigh.
Evening's muffled sounds are settling to rest.
This is perhaps his last saunter on this shore.
Taking his love for his island safely wrapped
in his heart he will soon be waving goodbye,
trying to see through the misting in his eyes.

SLOW DARKNESS

Slow darkness falls like a thickening haze on this long evening. Objects disintegrate into edgeless smudges that in a while will deepen like black holes, just as the past has become powdered ash. Now remembering loss you gaze away instead to the last bloom of light where a backdrop is washed over with a spate of hues the sun spreads in a swathe with its eye half-shut. A broad band of tangerine is stretched across its canvas, a crimson string streaked on it. To the right a bulbous island of cloud with silver for half of its rim is almost black against the flared background of sky. You try to stay with it. You stand to take it all in on a reel being wound for replaying. But you remain in the dim depriving deepening dusk the far glow cannot lighten. Orange-gold strands strewn by the sinking sun are not enough. Gone are dear friends of your fruit-bearing noon leaving the way bleary and pathless. Slow evening's candle is going out, pattering on. You have come, you know, to the end of your run.

F. M. SERRIES

After Miss Maingot came F.M. Serries
(I never knew what that F.M stood for)
chubby and pure as a Father Christmas.
He taught us with his heart, his nine-year-olds,
pretending to be stern and absolute.
We saw more. I remember lessons called
Dictation and Mental Arithmetic.
I remember poems were read aloud,
how we found delight in what he brought us.
He thought, it seemed, I was bright and sent me
up to the Head's Special Class to get a chance,
rare as it was then, to win a free place
in a secondary school. Dreams blossomed.

But one day I was ingloriously
thrown out like a lower caste intruder
and had to walk a gauntlet of shame back
to Mr Serries, registering his face
crumpled with sorrow and seams of pity,
his eyes meeting mine with shock and solace,
ashamed of the Head's flagrant cruelty.

That is a moment I wrap myself in
sometimes. I circle back to that dark day
and see him flinching in pain for a lamb
that was hurt, feeling the burn of the gash,
unsure the salve of time would heal the wound,
and I long to tell him that he was wrong
to worry, his caring heart gave me hope
that fed long years to come. His name is signed
on every blessing I have counted since.

A PATCH OF GROUND

At the front of a house you passed every day
was a small tended square of ground that the eye
seized on for ease from the drab despairing grey
hopelessness spread around, and you looked to the sky

for relief from the gravelly dusty yards.
That small piece of ground abounded with flowers
you've kept folded in memory's drawer like postcards.
In a dreary world watering cans' showers

had made an oasis. You recall moments
it seemed there to challenge you by its presence.
From jasmine, gardenias and roses scents
hovered at the hedge, a lingering incense

regaling the cracked carapace of the street.
It was a fertile patch for dreams. Walking past
that small claim on delight wishes slowed your feet.
It seemed like a new day the future forecast.

In that pause you anticipated the day
when hope watered gardens all along the way.
Healing of dispirited hearts would begin
and assuredness bloom where debris had been.

Then the house was sold. A cement mixer came
and in a brief day gave it a concrete face
over the graves of the flowers. And the same
scraps of paper and skins littered the place.

INNOCENTS

We didn't know how innocent we were,
Winston and Donnie and Ray and the rest.
We drew out of day the sweetness we found
perambulating together through the town,
inattentive to far away tumults,
turmoils and turbulences, intent on whirls
of fun, raucous with laughter.
We were never part of what was being done
in countries we never thought of knowing,
of entries in ledgers history was keeping.
Small places like ours with no bombs or guns
counted for nothing. So none of that scramble
crossed our minds. It was enough just to root
for a team in a game, to vie for cheers
imitating Frank Sinatra. Years
came and went while we remained homespun
except in escapades the streets offered,
until we joined some friends abroad and saw
how green and blind we were, saw how ghettos
swallowed us up like prisoners of war
and hisses hunted us. We lost the taste
of freedom and sneaked around unsure which law
to follow. Police cars tracked us down
for walking like free men. So we learned
not to laugh. Innocence was stabbed in a hallway
where disillusionment bled under the door.

SMOTHERED

Since the flora they grew with was native there they never noticed it. It was not mentioned in the books they read so they thought it was not worth attention, as they'd learned to envision their own place in the world they knew. Not a cheer but a laugh would follow if anyone wrote of mangoes. Apples, for them, was the sanctioned subject. Anthuriums were seldom given the sort of admiration they lavished on roses, and when the yellow poui donned its coat on the hills in April, adorning heaven, some stayed blind wishing it were magnolia or lilac. What thrived around them brought no pride, no claim, no elation. They had learned to spurn homespun things.

And it might have remained that way.

But one of them spoke of freedom, of the mind's need to recant doctrines that made them betray their own existence. He hacked the creed that binds such captives to their whipping posts. And so they began to stand straight, to celebrate the names of trees and flowers waving proud flags. History's seige was being weakened, the blindness of shame's eyes being illuminated. That raised light was enough. They now saw their value measured no less than their censors'. No longer tethered or homeless, they firmly asserted the right to praise the immortelle, the poinciana, the denigrations of history all smothered.

GATHERING SPEED

It was a little bench and its pronged
double-legs were held together by two
slim slats, but for what he needed to do
it was just the thing. For his small self
it was enough, that bench his mother
clambered on to dust the shelves.
He used it to find his own fun. He turned it
upside down and, sitting astride the slats,
held two legs for steering. Then pushed
and chugged, tooted and shunted
across the small room and back.
It was his squat cross-country train.
Smoke no one could see puffed out
as the wheels clacked-clacked on the tracks.
When she saw that, his mother would
glance about for grooves in the floor,
marks of an engine pounding its way
through the room's desert country.
But he was always careful, easing
his flimsy weight as he choo-chooed around.
He saw how she watched him as if
a cloud had darkened around him,
as if she felt helpless observing it.
But he didn't know how to explain
he was really content, to tell her
never to worry about it, the way
he had to trundle and push and shunt alone.
Loneliness finds a route map to follow.
He was gathering speed, doing just fine.

EARLY JANUARY

With the soft sunshine in early January,
the rainy months far ahead; with the mountain road
to the bay braced for loose landslides and the sky

still a high pale blue; with the ferrying route-taxis
sharing jokes about pretentious stuffed shirts; with all
I took with me when I left, plus the evening's ease

on walks around the Savannah, nothing is changed
in that image of Port of Spain I store away
to protect it from time's impatience with sameness.

When I go back it's only into my memory
where the town's the same as the days when I hurried
to school. In early January you entered

a new class while the cool breezes continued and
Carnival was in the air and the steel music
we invented was tuning up for the parade.

I never go back to the real town now, fearing
the dust of destruction. For when a new year dawns
the used up one is demolished and hallowed bricks

get ground to grit. So I protect the Port of Spain
I knew in undamaged recesses of the mind.
There I can ramble the narrow lanes of Belmont,

skirt the Savannah and drift down to the harbour
telling myself each time I'm visiting my life
touching walls still standing, if only in my head.

For good or ill that town had schooled me. It had taught
me its lanes and its ways so I knew every line
of its face. That is what I want to turn to still.

PHOTOGRAPH

She sat on a chair in the yard with the grey
stone wall behind her, straight-backed like an empress,
her head defiant, her dignity unbowed.
I was just sixteen then, an unfledged day-old
photographer so she kept her eyes steady,
angled on my little Brownie camera.
Framing her there I wished she would always know
unspoken words were just as eloquent when
from a son who rejoiced in love she bestowed.
Till then I had not seen raw wounds she bandaged,
had not discerned the ways pain pursued her.
She sang and laughed like life's happy winner
while out of the dusty desert she travelled
no oases sprang, no restful shade trees, no palms.
The photograph came out well and sits squarely
right here on my desk now I am past ninety.
Through all the years her gaze has followed every
challenge I have had to meet, urging me on.
She had never accepted less than my best.
I close my eyes sometimes and shoulder the weight
of her coffin, hearing the thuds of the clods
on the lid, bearing sorrow's enduring freight.
But I look up again and light on a trace
of a quiet triumphant smile on her face.
I pray she knew any credits I've won
came out of the dreams for me she had lived on,
that she could see in this chair a son whose war
was fought with her flag raised to even the score.

LATE SUNDAY

Late Sunday afternoon when light started
to weaken was the best time to wander
alone, finding places unknown fringing

the town. Some days I went to Sunday School
and learnt a list of sins though I could not
place them all. Often I just meandered

eastwards, looking out for unfamiliar
lanes and alleys to where the town became
what everyone called the country, although

they could see no change, nothing was different.
There, far from my school, Morton came to mind,
he who suffered the tag of 'country bookie'

month after month for not being a 'town' boy.
As one outside of the mob I observed
the cringes and the wincing he tried

to hide though he seemed to shrug off the taunts.
But one morning he spewed like an oil well
words and phrases that bespattered the walls.

For that he was expelled, though no one else
was punished. It seemed secret exemptions
were listed with Sunday School sins I learnt.

My mind was still young then. I had not known
that inequalities would override
the words of sermons told to innocents,

had not known how pious words ensnare
allegiance but flout their own decrees.
Later I learned how such exemptions worked.

I never saw Morton again but I
kept wondering where he had gone to shun
the pain, if he found fairness in that world.

GOING HOME

He goes and locks the cupboard near his desk,
straightens his tie and puts his jacket on.
The school is empty now, squadrons of boys
all gone, just the routine tasks to be done
to leave it all secure. Another day's
run, another day of satisfaction
sharpening the blades of the mind, waking
the feelings held inactive in the soul,
handing out keys to the lives they could live.
He descends the stone steps and shuts the gate
as he leaves, briefcase with answers to mark
carefully carried, stepping firmly on.

Few who watch him pass that same hour,
head high, understand his joy as the time's
potter fashioning the shape of their world
day by day, giving the future its form.
He is going home now but to no one
to share his sense of achievement, no one
with embrace or welcome. He will prepare
his dinner, eat it slowly as usual,
wash up, and mark exercises, alone.
He takes that as a price he has to pay
keeping his thoughts away from discontent,
from an ache that sometimes bores to the bone.

ACROSS THE BRIDGE

There, looking east, is that familiar skyline
with St. Paul's enduring dominant dome,
there where the view from this bridge curves around.
Unfailingly dusk's amber lights are coming on
and silhouetted edifices are softer now.
As we gaze along both sides of the river
in the gathering half-dark other buildings we see
seem strung with lamps that glow in the gloom
of the smokey light. The Thames wears a metal
vest and flows past to the Globe where
Shakespeare had his stage, and along the Embankment
it makes brief curlicues where the boats are moored.
We are heading across the bridge to a play
at the Lyttleton to let fiction give truth
a truer face. The town's footsteps are bustling home;
buses and cars go by. We catch the diffused light
losing its hold on facades, and just there Big Ben bongs
the hour and the world listens. In some far lands
that used to mean the toll of subjection, racial rules.
We swat that away from the mind like a gnat.
Here we are headed for the Lyttleton now,
bouncing on with quickening anticipation
eager to surrender to the playwright's art
and be drawn through the throes of the baffled heart.
We descend just before Waterloo Station
down the worn lamp-lit steps to the Embankment,
pass the stalls of secondhand books and enter
the National. The foyer has no blur of dusk
left, only light, chatting patrons, expectation,
there for Arthur Miller's "Death of a Salesman".

FISHERMAN

He's on an ocean heading home alone
but losing all he'd gleaned. Words float away
like froth that waves absorb, their substance gone,
as with each one an idea goes astray.

He no longer remembers shoals he found
and stored in the laden hold of his mind.
Nearing its shore his skiff has run aground
and leaks its catch. And though he seems resigned

to natural loss and now makes do with what
stays barely active and available,
and so appears contented with his lot,
a sentence launched falls in heaps of rubble.

I see him grope at foam rings and I fume
about the rules of time's relentless court
having him flounder blindly in the spume
for truant words to reinstate a thought.

Grounded in shallows now what he utters
no one can wait to hear. Words had always
engineered his life. Now his mind stutters
as phrases vanish through the spreading haze.

ONLY A GAME

Wrapped in time's cold cloud now only their blur
can be discerned, and only by those who
had known them, those who remember their names
with a skip of the heart, recounting when
Worrell, Walcott and Weekes flayed the bowlers
of England, of Australia and India,
and gave us a throne on top of the world.

We, once sugar's fieldhands, wore cricket's crown.
From slavery's embers a red leather ball
was placed in the hands of Ramadhin,
and Valentine and Hall that sent wickets flipping
behind baffled batsmen. We knew pride then,
pride that grew even more with the feats of
Richards, Holding, Lara, Kanhai, Marshall
and all who ribboned us with renown. But
the greatest of them was Garfield Sobers.
The world will not see his like again.

Now we bend our heads in sadness. Those who have
known nothing of glory cannot rue its loss.
But we few who still remember know the same
exultation of old each time a name
replays the days of triumph. If we groan
it's not because time has dispersed their fame
but because of the onset of blindness,
blindness that mocks it as only a game.

NO WORDS

Nothing about her warned him of her death.
He had seen funerals, knew what they meant,
but saw no thug lurking to snatch her breath.

His infant tongue that called her Darma kept
that name for her ever since its error,
down years of grit and bone through which they crept

blinded by need when just her love gave light.
His days took meaning from her fierce caring.
That's why he cannot submit to that night

when to a question from her ailing bed,
rapt in homework, he gave a curt reply.
The silence that followed those terse words said

lives in his head as if the only sound
he hears is made by the clods on the coffin
taking its final place in the dug ground.

It's a memory he cannot yet bury
except deep in his bosom, and speaks no words
to ease it lest ears hear just a story.

LEAVING

There, just below from the plane's wide wing the blur
is Kingston waving its goodbye. But we rise
to meet the mountains and my own adieu
mists up my view of the land until my eyes
begin to unshroud the vistas that I've loved
drifting away, taking with them all the years
of endeavour that the island inspired.

Instead, along the shore spuming surf now rears
up like clouding sorrow with reproachful cries
as I peer down for valleys and roads I've known,
terrain lush with rich memories moving away :
the small campus house where my children had grown;
the lecture rooms where thought refashioned action;
hills that allayed the days' wounds with their beauty;
the handshakes that opened their hearts like a gate.
My throat tightens. Thoughts of endless loss gore me.

Now as I crane beyond the plane's banking wing
a peak crouches, mist-laced, in behind the haze
like a trust I have betrayed by my leaving.
Yet I must put on a show of bravado,
not carry dejection everywhere I go
bemoaning the loss of the blessings I've left
like a magnate of good fortune now bereft
of his hoard, carrying leaden sorrow's weight.
To the left, with its white collar, the bay
we splashed and frolicked in those privileged years
slips around green headlands and goes out of sight.

I made the choice. Tearful regret waxes late.
I thought I had a filial debt to pay
now cannot tell what punishments await.
With its last silent question piercing upwards,
in a long slow fade the island disappears.
Only throbs of parting stay to greet the night.
Distance swiftly increases. The plane drones on.
In banks of burlled clouds all that I was is gone.

THREE SNAPS

1

My grandmother pulled me along sometimes
to pray for pardon. She wore the penitential
air of a sinner and knelt to be whipped.

She translated symbols of an age-old creed
as if they were facts, and prayed to statues
for deliverance, performing rituals

as instructed. My mother, though, did not see
any merit in such goings on.
Life, she said, flagellated her enough.

2

My grandmother kept a moat of defense
around her and did not allow anyone
to intrude on her independence.

She had fallen in class, saw her new neighbours
as beneath her, and stayed coldly aloof
from the pain of the place. It was fear

of being hurt, fear of laughter at her
descent, and she was known there as
an aristocrat, a make-believe queen.

3

My grandmother was orderly and exact
but let her devotion to me blur
the strict prohibitions of her edicts,

her veto cancelled by her leniency. She
understood a small boy's needs and spun her life
around them day by remembered day.

But did she understand despite her faith
in recipes of magic and her pride
in a lost status, how much I loved her?

HEADSTONES

I cannot visit their graves with plumes of flowers
nor tug at spreading weeds sprouting between some stones.
I cannot clear a headstone of its coat of dust
to let chiselled names receive honoured remembrance.
I've long lost paths leading to plots of ground
where they were placed and covered with the earth
they have become. If I found them new names would tell
of recent occupants. As in life, only briefly
were they paid up tenants of a room.

Those rented graves
had no tombstones with angels, no grooved epitaphs,
and the days were limited for grief to visit
and place its gathered flowers on the raw mound.
After that there was no trace they were here.
Now only love's memory remembers the gate.

So I must take my mourning with me everywhere,
let the mind conjure up a portable graveyard
where I can stand and quietly go over
how their lavish love was the oxygen I breathed.
Since there is no anchored gravestone I can haunt
I just carry their epitaphs where the heart goes.
Now when with fancied flowers I bend my knees,
undiminished as if a whole life had not passed,
clawed grief re-wakens and snatches at my throat
as I carve their names on make-believe headstones
chipping the hardships that all their lives had known.

SCHOONERS

From the closed pages of childhood's notebook
the mind loosens leaves bound in its covers
and the year 1933 falls out.
Some Sunday afternoons in the quiet
stillness of the town I wandered slowly
down to the jetty. The streets were almost
empty, as if time had just died in them.
But, sharing the roads' silence, I sauntered
to South Quay where resting schooners were moored.
I watched them swaying to keep their balance
when the lapping rose, their sails folded down,
their bare masts dancing fitfully, gunwales
bouncing against car tyres placed to take
the bruise when bows brushed the pier. They came from
the other islands with ground provisions
and fruits, and took back cement, rice and rum.
And I was drawn to the lilt of those bows,
watching the prows nod in greeting as if
they knew the story that I learned at school.
In the rich daydreaming mind of a child
as I watched the spars dip their heads like friends
and mooring ropes go slack and tighten back
I imagined the other islands where
once brothers and sisters from far lands were
bound on canefields with sea-moats between them.
Now they are still split by the churning ocean
but those swaying schooners brave the billows,
plunging on free of the old plantations,
plying a different trade between cousins.
I saw them brush cheeks against the quay
like long lost kin recognising their own.
Walking home in the low glow of sunset
I carried the pitching prows back with me
and daring keels that rode over history
laying bonding cables under the sea.

INTO A NEW YEAR

This is Rodney Bay. It is just past midnight
and fireworks are bursting and showering
stars of all colours to welcome a new year.
Like everywhere, St. Lucia is rejoicing
for the rebirth of hopes, the reprint of dreams.
I too dance in greeting, giving calypso
music, its beat in my blood since my first squirm,
full control, trusting that the looming year brings
no stinging slaps, nothing very destructive.

With each hissing pyrotechnic lift-off I
send a small wish, for wishes are all I have
to muster against mudslides or hurricanes.
In the dark of the bay the masts' hanging lamps
sway as the boats tilt and pitch to their own lilt.
But will the year to come also dance over
high breakers? If I could peer through the unclear
night to the horizon, would I find that there
the depths camouflage sand banks under the waves?

I stick to my tempo as I stomp and turn,
shuffle and glide, veer and swerve, letting my limbs
define their own style, free of the old year's sway.
Celebration is called for now, though the dark
peaks of the mountains look down inscrutably.
I will probably dance to the light of dawn
when the shadows disperse. The combo's metre
keeps me going. I wave my arms through the air
spiralling on blindly into a new year.

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