

Littérature de l'Asie et des Caraïbes

Texte n°3

Extract from: *In the Castle of My Skin*
Author: Georges Lamming

One

Rain, rain, rain ... my mother put her head through the window to let the neighbour know that I was nine, and they flattered me with the consolation that my birthday had brought showers of blessing. The morning laden with cloud soon passed into noon, and the noon neutral and silent into the sodden grimness of an evening that waded through water. That evening I kept an eye on the crevices of our wasted roof where the colour of the shingles had turned to mourning black, and waited for the weather to rehearse my wishes. But the evening settled on the slush of the roads that dissolved in parts into pools of clay, and I wept for the watery waste of my ninth important day. Yet I was wrong, my mother protested: it was irreverent to disapprove the will of the Lord or reject the consolation that my birthday had brought showers of blessing.

It was my ninth celebration of the gift of life, my ninth celebration of the consistent lack of an occasion for celebration. From a window where the spray had given the sill a little wet life I watched the water ride through the lanes and alleys that multiplied behind the barracks that neighboured our house. The white stalks of the lily lay flat under the hammering rain, then coaxed their roots from the earth and drifted across the upturned clay, into the canals and on to the deep black river where by agreement the floods converged. The water rose higher and higher until the fern and flowers on our verandah were flooded. It came through the creases of the door, and expanded across the uncarpeted borders of the floor. My mother brought sacks that absorbed it quickly, but overhead the crevices of the roof were

weeping rain, and surfacing the carpet and the epergne of flowers and fern were liquid, glittering curves which the mourning black of the shingles had bequeathed. No one seemed to notice how the noon had passed to evening, the evening to night; nor to worry that the weather had played me false. Nothing mattered but the showers of blessing and the eternal will of the water's source. And I might have accepted the consolation if it weren't that the floods had chosen to follow me in the celebration of all my years, evoking the image of those legendary waters which had once arisen to set a curse on the course of man.

As if in serious imitation of the waters that raced outside, our lives – meaning our fears and their corresponding ideals – seemed to escape down an imaginary drain that was our future. Our capacity for feeling had grown as large as the flood, but the prayers of a simple village seemed as precariously adequate as the houses hoisted on water. Of course, it was difficult to see what was happening outside, but there were paddling splashes of boys' feet and the choke of an engine stuck in mud.

The village was a marvel of small, heaped houses raised jauntily on groundsels of limestone, and arranged in rows on either side of the multiplying marl roads. Sometimes the roads disintegrated, the limestone slid back and the houses advanced across their boundaries to meet those on the opposite side in an embrace of board and shingle and cactus fence. The white marl roads made four at each crossing except where the road narrowed to a lane or alley that led into a tenant's backyard. There were shops at each crossing: one, two, sometimes three, and so positioned that the respective owners could note each other's customers. And wherever there were shops there was a street lamp ringed to a post, and always much activity, and often the stench of raw living. The lamps were fuelled with gas and lit at six every evening. When the lights went on, little boys like a bevy of flies assembled around the lamp-post for gossip and stories. Elsewhere in a similar manner men gathered to throw dice or cut cards or simply to talk. The spectacle repeated itself at each crossing where there was a street lamp ringed to a post. The roads bore names – Murrell, Alkins, Hunt – and a curious one-way affection grew between the villager and the road he lived in; just as a mutual antipathy sometimes passed from dwellers in one road to those in another. Now and again those who lived at Alkins would contrive a secret conspiracy against those at Murrell, and the verdict was

always the same. The people in Hunt's Road, those in Alkins would declare, were a lot of so and so's.

There was a public bath for men and women with a perpetual stench of disinfectant pervading the air, and everywhere limestone constructions like roof-less ovens for the disposal of garbage. But most notable was the wood of mahogany trees through which the trains passed from the city on their excursions to the country. There were days when the village was quiet: the shoemaker plied lazily at his trade and the washerwomen bent over the tubs droned away their complacency. At other times there were scenes of terror, and once there was a scene of murder.

But the season of flood could change everything. The floods could level the stature and even conceal the identity of the village. With the turn of my ninth year it had happened again. From the window I looked at the uniform wreckage of a village at night in water. My mother said it was a shame, as was everything that displeased her. And even after many years I would try to fix her label. What precisely was a shame? Was it the weather or the village or the human condition in which and in spite of which the poor had sworn their loyalty to life? But so she said: and having said that, she would suspend her judgment and in an attitude of prayer remind me of blessings that may have missed my memory.

I went away from the window over the dripping sacks and into a corner which the weather had forgotten. And what did I remember? My father who had only fathered the idea of me had left me the sole liability of my mother who really fathered me. And beyond that my memory was a blank. It sank with its cargo of episodes like a crew preferring scuttle to the consequences of survival. Moreover, my mother began to sing, which always happened when I tried to remember. Her voice was clear and colourless. It could indicate but not control a tune which I recognized only through the words.

'I can't get it right tonight,' she said.

No answer.

'You know, we haven't had rain like this for a long, long time.'

No answer.

'You listening?'

'Yes.'

Then she broke into a soft repetitive tone which rose with every fresh surge of feeling until it became a scattering peal of solicitude that soared across the night and into the neighbour's house. And the answer came back

louder, better organized and more communicative, so that another neighbour responded and yet another until the voices seemed to be gathered up by a single effort and the whole village shook with song on its foundation of water. My mother was pleased with her unacclaimed but generally accepted supervision. She lit the big brass lamp that hung from a beam bridging the slopes of the ceiling. The space of the ceiling directly over the lamp wore a surface of soot. The lamp swayed in its cradle of wire, a bowl of polished brass, as the flames sputtered along the blue burnt edge of the wick. Standing beneath the flowered brass bowl that contained the fuel, my mother regulated the pitch of the blaze. The smoke circled the flames within the chimney and later settled on the wet ceiling. The light pushed its way about the corners of the house and the partitions in their dying response looked a dismal wreck in reflection. It was the uncertain light one feels on the passage from sleep to conscious waking. The clock shelved in one corner kept up its ticking. My mother retreated to another part of the house where the silk and taffeta designs of her needling were being revised and reversed. I soon followed like a lean trail of smoke tracing a radius round its red origin. And for memory I had substituted inquiry.

‘Where you say my grandmother went?’

‘To Panama,’ my mother answered. ‘It was the opening of the canal. She is now in Canal Zone. It’s time you wrote her a letter.’

‘And my grandfather who was your father?’ I went on.

‘Oh, he died, my child; he died before I was born.’

‘And my uncle who was your brother?’

‘My brother went to America,’ my mother said. ‘It’s years now. The last we heard he was on a boat and then take sick, and is probably dead for all we know.’ Her feelings were neutral.

‘And when my uncle who was your brother and my grandmother who was your mother, when they went away, how old you wus?’

‘Two.’

‘Two years?’

‘Yes, two,’ my mother said.

My birth began with an almost total absence of family relations. My parents on almost all sides had been deposited in the bad or uncertain accounts of all my future relationships, and loneliness from which had

subsequently grown the consolation of freedom was the legacy with which my first year opened.

My mother seated beside me and in front of the sewing-machine must have sensed the change progressing within me. Memory was again pursuing the line of discovery which inquiry had left off. Late as it was, my birthday was still alive. The morning had opened in clouds which had dissolved the noon into a wet and sudden night.

I had had tea and a bun in the backhouse, and the promise of a cake with nine candles. But the candles had been blown out before the cake arrived, and the showers blessing the day had presumably dissolved the promise like the noon. I wore a long face and a murderous scowl.

‘But you can’t ask me to make bread out of stone,’ my mother said.

On recollection I admitted there wasn’t even stone. The neighbour had put her head through the window to speak with my mother. It was then noon.

‘All you hear what happen to Foster? Why the house wash away clean clean clean, groundsel, everything gone clean. They put Miss Foster and the children in the Guard House, and you know how many children Miss Foster got?’

‘And Mr Foster?’ my mother inquired.

‘I was coming to that. Foster swear he won’t leave the old house, and went sailing down the river on the roof. They had to fish him from the Deanery wall with a rope.’

The neighbour closed her window and stuffed the crevices with brown paper.

Since it made no difference whether it was noon or night, I went to the backhouse to play with my pigeon. It was asleep on the rod that served every condition of a bird’s accommodation. I took it down and patted the head and neck. Its claws ringed the index finger of my left hand as I fought open the beak with the other. Then I fed it till the craw expanded to a pleated curve of feathered flesh, and the shoulders drooped and the eyes closed over a film of water. Immediately I emptied a phial of castor oil down the throat, remembering the villagers always said there was nothing better than to eat well and purge clean. I returned the pigeon to the rod and looked round through the gaping roof at the sky which could not distinguish between night and noon. That night the pigeon died and I with a burning shame in my head buried my blessings in the pillow.

My mother lay beside me recounting the incidents of the previous day and rehearsing rough-and-ready plans for the next. In the dark the crevices of the roof were concealed, but occasional raindrops fell against the bedposts in a scatter of specks that dissolved on my nose. I opened my eyes and saw enormous phantoms with eyes of fire and crowned with bulls' horns stalking through the dark. I closed my eyes and the phantoms went. I opened them again, and one came forward hovering over my head in a jeering silence. I struck a blow that sliced the unfeeling figure of the demon, and my knuckles crashed against the bedposts. My mother groaned.

'The kitchen in a state,' she said, 'and maybe rainwater get into the barrel.'

The barrel was the iron drum in which we kept our drinking water. Once a week a sanitary inspector poked his nose into it and scraped the side with his long enamel spoon in search of larvae.

'Take yer head out my water,' my mother once snapped. 'You can put it in the WC if you like but not my water.'

The inspector was offended and made a note in his little blue book.

'Good day,' he said and fled.

I laughed as I recalled the incident. It was an odd little giggle that leapt in my throat, and my mother groaned again.

'The kitchen in a state,' she repeated. 'And the last time you had rainwater you got belly ache. And the inspector comin' tomorrow.' My mother sometimes talked mechanically.

'I wonder what happened to Pa and Ma,' my mother said.

Pa and Ma, I thought. I wondered what did happen to Pa and Ma. They weren't related to us by blood, but they were Pa and Ma nevertheless. Everyone called them Pa and Ma. They were the oldest couple in the village, so old no one could tell their age, and few knew what names they had besides those we had given them, Ma and Pa.

My eyes opened and the phantoms were still there. They were steady under my gaze, but when I closed my eyes they paraded the room from corner to corner. Every night these phantoms that populated my brain came out to frighten me with the freedom which the night had brought them. They danced and jeered through the thick black space of this narrow room. My eyes opened and closed, opened/closed opened/closed opened/closed, but they would not go. I crossed the pillows across my head and clutched the stitched edges of the sheet to my ears.

And my birthday drifted outside in a fog of blackness that covered the land. The lanes and alleys crossed and multiplied below the tides that towed limestone and clay, shingle and brick through the canals and pipes and to the river that ran far and wide into the sea. At street corners the gas lamps winked within their netted cages, and the light leaking past the frosty domes, fell dully on the water. The moon must have struck somewhere beyond the cluster of mahogany, remote and ineffectual. But the hardy poor like their stalled beloved in the distant cemetery slept peacefully beneath the flying spray. All the voices were hushed, the puddles deserted, the gurgle of the wrestling flood submerged. My birthday making its black departure from the land had been blessed with showers whose consolation was my blessing.