

## A SNAPSHOT HISTORY OF LEEDS



56 COWPER STREET



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As Grandma said,  
*New broom sweeps clean*  
*but the old one knows all the corners,*  
so brick by brick  
I rebuild a house that once stood in Chapeltown,  
56 Cowper Street,  
a Victorian terrace with a green front door,  
my grandparent's home,  
where I slid down the staircase banister  
into laughter and now into memory.

I try to remember all things special,  
like the Canadian gift of an oil-painted portrait  
of my dad and Aunt Sylvia  
hanging against midnight-blue  
circle-print wallpaper in the lounge;  
Grandma's rose-porcelain tea sets;  
her crystal and dust-free silverware –  
for viewing only.

This seven-bedroom house signified  
*Importance* in the ready hands of my  
Jamaican family, blood spiced with Africa  
and something of the colonial past.

Grandma grew roses and dahlias  
in the front garden, picked gooseberries  
to make jam and wine; Grandad dug tuff dirt  
in the back yard, planted potatoes and cabbage.  
Their tea they sipped from ceramic mugs,  
blue for Grandad, red for Grandma,  
except on special occasions, when Granny liked  
a teacup with a saucer.

Every day, full-cooked breakfast from the kitchen –  
nutmeg-spiced condensed milk,  
smooth cornmeal porridge,  
salt fish and callaloo, fried dumplings –  
filled hungry bellies;  
and the ritual of meals  
at the oak dining-room table  
with family and familiar friends,  
each with a story  
from which lessons were to be learnt,  
now brings smiles.



GRANDMA

## HOMESPUN

My stays at Cowper Street were long –  
sometimes up to a year of Grandma's "kidnap" –  
to compensate for my father being overseas,  
so I was split between  
my mother's looser apron strings  
and Grandma's homespun rules  
of do's and don'ts and decency,  
when chores were regular and never shirked  
for skipping ropes, jacks and hot rice,  
when skylarking carried the repercussion of:  
*Stand up straight, pull your socks up!*  
*Never mind playing outside wid dem pickney.*  
*Dem favour leggo beast.*  
*Go find a book and read.*  
At Cowper Street,  
love's strict hand nurtured studies,  
mental arithmetic and recitation on the spot,  
but Grandma also styled party frocks  
on the Singer in her bedroom  
and quilted the foundations of our kinship  
for generations; told me of her great-grandfather Quashie  
and her Welsh-East Indian grandfather, Jabez,  
who gambled away the family's Jamaican land,  
and of her first and second husbands,  
her six children: five names beginning with the letter 'D',  
the first born with an 'S';  
these stories stitched tightly to me.