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Write down the vision and make it plain, so that he who
readeth may run.

– from The Book of Habakkuk

INTRODUCTION AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My first book was a collection of short stories and it has occasionally baffled me that I have never returned to that genre. Looking at the pieces gathered here, I see now that I never left it. In a sense these are short stories even if they can't be called "short-fiction". The exception is the earliest piece collected here "A Kind of Silence", but even this short story, towards its end, moves into a nonfictional mode.

There are those who say the short story is a natural genre for Caribbean writers but I find that argument a little patronizing. Proponents of the view say it is something about oral cultures and stories told by firesides and wise grandmothers and Anansi, and how all these things lend themselves to short rather than long fiction. Now there might actually be some truth to all of that, but I rather think that the Caribbean's gravitation towards shorter pieces has to do with time and resources and publishing houses – things which writers of long fiction need to sustain their craft, and to which Caribbean writers have not had ready access. Instead we have written pieces that can fit inside newspapers or magazines or whatever small space has been offered us.

The pieces collected here were written in a variety of places – the earliest in Jamaica, a couple in Iowa, some in Glasgow, one in the Philippines, and so on. Two of these essays were posts on my blog. They are products of movement and migration, as obsessed with the Caribbean as with what it means to live and write away from home.

If on one hand these essays embrace narrative and exist on the border of the fictional "short story", on the other hand they embrace polemic and exist on the border of prophecy. I imagine these as the sounds a man might make who has been living out in the wilderness, trying sometimes to shout and sometimes to whisper to the world in

which he lives. As a collection, these represent something of my vision of the Caribbean seen from up-close and sometimes from afar, a vision I have been obsessed with writing down.

They are mostly occasional pieces, written on request for particular events or in response to particular situations. To those magazine editors and newspaper editors and conference organizers who made these requests, I would like to say thanks. So often, we are not short of things to say; we are only short of the spaces (however small) in which to say them.

- “The Texture of Fiction” originally appeared in *The Edinburgh Review*.
- “These Islands of Love and Hate” originally appeared in *The Glasgow Herald*.
- “A Kind of Silence” originally appeared in the anthology *Moving Right Along: Caribbean Stories in Honour of John Cropper*.
- A larger essay, “The Art of Tongues, the Craft of Prophecy” eventually downsized itself to the current “The Women Who Carried Pencils behind their Ears” and originally appeared in *PN Review*.
- “A Smaller Song” was originally part of a presentation as the Bridget Jones Travel Bursary recipient at the Society of Caribbean Studies Conference. It subsequently appeared in my collection *A Light Song of Light*.
- “But in Glasgow, There are Plantains” originally appeared in *The International Journal of Scottish Literature*.
- “Imagining Nations” originally appeared in *Moving Worlds*.
- “Writing with Elephants” appeared first in *Newbooks Magazine*.
- “The Grief Spaces” was a commissioned travel essay for the US State Department.
- “A Smaller Sound, a Lesser Fury – a Eulogy for Dub Poetry” was a presentation at the Scottish Universities International Summer School.
- “Maybe Bellywoman Was on di Tape” was originally a keynote address at the Shadows and Shorelines conference at the University of Reading.
- “The Spaces between Poems” was a commissioned piece for

the National Association of Literature Development's Spring conference "The Spaces Between Us".

- "In Defence of Maas Joe" and "An Occasionally Dangerous Thing Called 'Nuance'" were originally posted as blogs on my website, keimiller.wordpress.com.

THE WOMEN WHO CARRIED PENCILS BEHIND
THEIR EARS
(2007/2012)

Every writer is asked the same question over and over – who are the other writers that have influenced you the most? Put like that, the answers are easy enough for me: Lorna Goodison, Emily Dickinson, David Malouf, Kamau Brathwaite, for starters. But I think, better put, the question would be more amorphous – something like “who are the people or what are some of the things that have shaped your voice?” Then our answers wouldn’t be so easy. We would have to think through a more complicated genealogy that included songs, movies, grandparents, radio hosts, snippets of overheard speech. In my case it would include a few preachers and prophets, and also a wall.

There is Sister Gilzene – a thin elderly woman from the starch-stiff church I used to go to as a child, and whose eruptions of tongues into the sobriety of Sunday morning service was always smoothed away by a deacon, as if the old woman’s glossolalia existed in the creases of her purple frock – as if it was coming from her bunched shoulders and not from her mouth.

My genealogy would include Sister Sybil as well, another old woman, though larger in size than Gilzene. Hers was a great expanse of breasts and body and sound. She belonged to another church – the one I escaped to, before I escaped church altogether. It was a church that made space for eruptions, and when I used to go there, Sister Sybil’s uninterrupted tongues always had in it the resonance of thunder and the music of rain.

Sister Sybil has even made cameo appearances in my work. Sometimes by name:

Whenever Sister Sybil raise the red banner
the air change, the tempo change, the mood

change, and inside that place, God
begins to happen.¹

And sometimes by image alone:

Because of her mountain breasts
she has learnt a peculiar walk, a duck-stride
to balance herself. It is hard to see anything
but the stern shifting of those mountains
when in flat, battleship shoes
she marches across the aisle.²

Sister Sybil had a talking parrot – maybe it is still alive – a vicious green thing who would demand peanuts then snap at your fingers. Strange the way she seemed to gift everything around her with language. Perhaps then Sybil, as in sibilant, or at a stretch, syllables. She was neither lovely nor lovable. She believed only in her God and the wretchedness of all mankind. I avoided her because even back then I never looked the part of a good Christian boy. My dreadlocks were particularly offensive. Whenever Sister Sybil spotted me she would try to lay heavy hands on my hair and pray.

It was Sister Sybil who once said to my friend when she was barely an eleven-year old girl, “Child! Me and de devil was fighting for yu soul last night!” Apocalyptic drama queen. She walked off after that, withholding from my friend the answer to the question that would haunt her for years – “Who won?”

My genealogy would include some whose names I have never known, like the bus preachers who would climb up onto the number 75 buses at Half-Way-Tree, their sermons lasting at least the five miles to Papine where I, caught up in their cadences, would have to reluctantly disembark. I remember one in particular who, in rebuking a woman for her less-than-noble career, accused her of dancing on tables and in skirts so short that he was able to see right up into her “birth-ina” – and it was this soldering together of words (not his condemnation) that made me appreciate that he was a wordsmith and that I belonged to his tribe.

My genealogy would have to include – most bizarrely – a concrete wall which despite its proximity to the sea and to salty air seemed never in danger of crumbling. In fact, this was a growing wall. The man who was forever adding to its height was quite clearly deranged.

He wrote urgent messages onto the wall, hoping perhaps that the government or at least his neighbours would one day read them and heed his warnings. On Sunday evenings my father used to drive us out to Port Henderson for fried fish and bammy, and on the way back we would drive very slowly by this wall, and although we used to laugh, I think secretly we also found it beautiful. It was why we kept coming back. And it was something of a loss when the government really did seem to read it, or took notice of its height which broke every town planning rule and regulation, and so ordered it destroyed.

And the church women of my youth (Sister Gilzene and Sister Sybil), and the bus preachers on the number 75 bus, and that ever-growing wall, all belong to yet another genealogy. Each one of them, in their own way, is descended from a family of Jamaican “warner women”, those prophetesses of doom who used to carry pencils behind their ears. The pencils were supposed to represent a readiness to receive heavenly messages. Warner women would then pass on these messages to earthly citizens. Warner women connected the immediate worlds around them to what they understood was a larger truth.

Warner women would never confess to what I now understand is a complicated and a learned aesthetic – a careful craft of prophecy, a meditated art of speaking in tongues. One is not supposed to admit to artistry in what is supposed to be divinely inspired. And yet it is as much the art of these women, as it is that of Emily Dickinson, David Malouf and Lorna Goodison, that shapes my voice.

From the women who carried pencils behind their ears I learn that one is allowed to speak without irony – that most favoured mode of Western (and particularly British) writers, as if its use is the only way to signal a sharp and a nuanced intelligence, as if we have to always undercut the things we say and the things we most deeply believe in, lest we be accused of being precious or earnest. From the women who carried pencils behind their ears, I learn that it is okay to be loud and exclamatory, that power doesn’t always come from restraint and quietness, that sometimes power comes from power, and that some things are worth shouting about. From the women who carried pencils behind their ears I learn how to hold on to grief and onto myself and how to tremble at the strain. From them I even learn the use of metaphors – moons sinking in blood, alligators unable to walk

on roads, as if to say – if you’re going to draw for the impossible, then make your imagination wide. Sometimes, it’s as if I have inherited their pencils and have begun to write down their visions.

End Note

1. “Church Women: War Dance”, *Kingdom of Empty Bellies* (Coventry: Heaventree Press, 2005), p. 22.
2. “Church Women: Mother”, *Kingdom of Empty Bellies*, p. 12

THE TEXTURE OF FICTION (2007)

“It always amuses me that the biggest praise for my work comes for the imagination, while the truth is that there’s not a single line in all my work that does not have a basis in reality. The problem is that Caribbean reality resembles the wildest imagination.”

— Gabriel Garcia Marquez

I would like to offer you a rosary of stories in no particular order or scheme – all of them true, and about the place where I am from. I am from the Caribbean which is, incidentally, a much better thing to say than this other thing that has become popular: I am from the islands. “The islands” seem to me a phrase robbed of any geo-political or historical substance, a shell of a term offered so that the hearer, if not from our quaint and nebulous island (whether it be St Kitts, the Philippines, or Hawaii) can throw imaginary garlands of hibiscuses around our necks, imbuing us with all kinds of exotic baggage, and license and forgiveness. So I am from the Caribbean, and if you are not from there then the stories I tell you now might not make immediate sense. Or you might think I’m lying, or perhaps exaggerating. Sometimes Caribbean logic is its own.

In 2005 there was a woman who was killed twice – the second time at her own funeral. On the first occasion of her death it had been of natural causes. At her funeral the family gathered in large numbers, dressed in black or purple, with hymns in their mouths. But in the middle of tears and slow organ music, there was the sudden explosion of gunshots. Not a gun-salute; a gang war had broken out in the community around them, and then a bullet entered the church. I narrate this slowly, as if the bullet had politely opened the church door, took off its hat, apologized

for interrupting and stated the nature of his business. Obviously this was not the case. It rudely shattered through the stained glass window, splintered through the closed coffin, and found its way into the heart of the dead woman, as if being an agent of death it was drawn immediately to the one life that wasn't. Surprisingly, no one seemed thankful for the dead woman's heroic act – how in pulling the bullet into herself she had likely been someone's salvation. Instead the mourners complained at the injustice of the gang, their insensitivity towards the corpse – that being dead already there was no need for the bullet to make it unambiguous – and how the handsome coffin they had spent good money on was now ruined.

Recently, in my own country, we had a plague of baby crabs. It happened in the parish of St Thomas, in a seaside community. Everyone had gone to bed as usual but woke up during the night when they felt aggressive insects crawling onto their beds and over their feet, or dropping from the ceiling and into their open, snoring mouths. Imagine the spluttering and the flailing arms. Imagine the frantic lights being turned on everywhere until they discovered the tiniest of crabs, thousands and thousands of them, coming in with the moon tide, scuttling into the houses, covering all the surfaces. Doors were flung open and men, women and children ran. That night the whole community huddled on the road, a little distance away from their homes, some of them crying, most of them praying, looking anxiously to the sky to see if God was coming. God did not come, but the sun did, and with its early morning beams all the baby crabs, still scurrying around, were smitten dead. Only then could people return to their houses, rake the remnants of the plague out of their yards and back into the Caribbean sea which had brought them.

There is a haunted house in Guyana that has made me believe in the devil. In truth, I only saw the foundations of this house, because on the day that I got there, it was a week too late. Despite earnest protestations from the community, the house had been demolished. This was a humble peasant's house, by the way, not the sprawling gothic mansion of similar American folklore. The

first occupants had been a rice farmer, his wife and their three children. They lived, I imagine, in relative domestic happiness and turmoil. Then one night, the rice farmer decided it was a good idea to go to the room of his two older children and kill them. He went back to his own room and killed the baby, then his wife and then himself. In every world, in every language, this is a tragedy. So there was shock and there was mourning, and then a year had passed. The year passed and the house became simply what we call, a “dead-lef”, an inheritance waiting to be claimed. Into it moved a cousin of the rice farmer with his own wife and his own two children. They lived in that house in relative domestic happiness and turmoil, until one night the cousin went from room to room, killed his two children, then his wife, then himself. There was shock and there was mourning, and then a year had passed. Another relative moved into this tragic house, lived there for a year with his wife and three children. You know their destiny. One night the man grabbed his cutlass and with much splashing of blood ended the lives of his three children and his wife and himself. In all fourteen people were slaughtered in that house. Eleven murders and three suicides. And if you want to hold stubbornly to the epistemology that makes no allowance for spiritual dimensions, if you want to insist that this was merely a case of madness running in the family, then I might have asked you, months ago, to move into that house with your spouse and your two children. The community in Guyana knew better. They knew that this had something to do with evil, and with a world we cannot always see or smell or touch. I call it the devil, and the community knew he lived in that house which is why they insisted it not be destroyed – not because they wanted evil as their neighbour, but because at least it was contained. To destroy the house was to send the devil back into the world, like a roaring lion, seeking out whom he might devour. When I got there it was too late. The devil had been released.

I remember a tree in Jamaica that bore as its fruit, prophecies. That’s what it seemed like to me. The tree was in a dust bowl right outside of my high school and there must have been a man or woman who used charcoal to write words like “Repent” or

“The Prime Minister must fall” or “Know ye this day who you shall serve” on squares of cardboard. These cardboard signs were hung up in the tree, and the branches had become overburdened with them, like a mango tree in season. Sometimes the wind would rattle these words, and the cardboards would hit against each other, such a strange and terrible sound, as if angels were crowded together, back to back, and were beating their wings.

I should I tell you about Queen Elizabeth II who came to Jamaica recently, and how in preparing for her arrival the government thought they should clean the city streets of litter, dog shit and dirt – and also of mad people. Maybe they thought they were being thorough because mad people were a combination of litter, dog shit and dirt. They rounded them up from around the city, put them in a truck and drove them miles and miles away, eventually dumping them by the edge of a poisonous lake, hoping, no doubt, that they would go for a swim and drown themselves. I do not know whether to prophesy with charcoal and cardboard the downfall of a government that could organize such a thing, or to praise the incredible distances that those women and men were able to walk, and the clear and precise sanity of their radars, so that one by one they found their way back to Kingston, in grand evening gowns of filth, ready to curtsy for the queen. Her royal highness’s arrival was greeted by another small scandal – a power-cut at the house of the Governor-General. It was not so much the power-cut that was scandalous, but that the generators failed to chip in. Still, many thought this was fair, because on that night the queen, like everyone else in Jamaica, had to eat her rice and peas in darkness.

I will end with a story that makes me sad even now. Earlier this year, I saw a friend who seemed almost unreasonably happy. I commented on his joy, his buoyancy, and he said it was true – he was putting himself in a good mood because he had to, because the day had been such a horrible one. He told me that he knew it was going to be a horrible day because he woke to the news, broadcast over the radio, of a family from an inner-city community who had been burnt out of their houses. My friend works with an agency that lends support to families who, by some misfortune,

are suddenly without homes – so hearing the news that morning he was prepared for a hard day ahead. And yet, he wasn't. The news he heard when he entered his office and I will tell you now – and also tell you that this slight correction of the details has not been broadcast on any radio station in Jamaica – has not been written in any newspaper, because this story is not newsworthy.

The family was not exactly a family. It was a house of four young men who the community suddenly suspected were gay. They gave them only an hour to leave – to grab whatever they could and then turn their backs on what had been their home. There interposes this sad and simple law of physics: they could only take with them what they could carry. In sixty minutes how can anyone take complete stock, how can anyone consider carefully and rationally the inventory of his life? An important certificate will be left hanging on the wall, a crucial receipt will be forgotten in a pants' pocket, a fat envelope of money and a passport still in a drawer, incriminating evidence embarrassingly left under a mattress, life-saving tablets and a prescription still sitting on the night stand, a book of phone numbers on a table. How overwhelming it must be, the impulse to turn around, even to risk turning oneself into salt. Something that was left behind did bring one of the men back, and the community was waiting. They held him. They placed long rods of iron into the bonfire that had only recently been the house he lived in and then pressed these sizzling pieces of metal into his dark skin, burning through to pink soft mush, burning him until he collapsed. And though in this branding there were no actual words left on his ruined skin, every scar he now wears says: *Faggot. Battyman. Sodomite. Leave!*

If you ask me why I write stories, or novels, or poems, I would tell you it is because things that are real in my country, things that are factual, things that have happened and that continue to happen, have always had for me the quality of the unreal – the texture of fiction. This is what happens when you live in a country that is not the centre of the world; you become blessed with a kind of double vision. You see your life from the inside, and also from the outside – both locally and globally. You are conscious always of the reality of what you are living, and also the strange narrative of it. You become conscious of how this might be

observed – sometimes unlovingly and without empathy – if you do not find a way to tell it right. In a way, this is how every writer the world over lives – this quality of being inside and outside at the same time – of living a life while floating above it, observing, taking notes. Often times I find there is no need to invent or to create. There is only the need to see, and then to tell.