

Kei MILLER

From *There is an Anger That Moves*.
(Manchester, 2007)

The Broken (I)

'Kei, I've noticed in your work an interesting narrative posture – the constant absence of an I'

– Tanya Shirley

I.

All that time I was writing about coffins
filled with johncrow feathers,
bells that chime five minutes past the hour,
smoke and tall hats. I was hiding
behind sleight-of-hand, behind birds
and unruly clocks - metaphors
that said nothing honestly.
My sister who is contemplating tattoos
asks how I choose my words.
She says hers will be everlasting,
the world being so full of the wretched
who carry lost lovers on their asses,
outdated mantras on their arms –
how awful, to be permanently tied to ruins.
The only word worth sewing on your skin
she says, is your name
or perhaps, 'God'.

II.

If I were to write honestly
I would write about fat,
about close fitting linen shirts
that once hid the soft fact of breasts.
I would write about the love
of men and the fear of stones
which in my country is the same thing.
I would write about the fear of inheriting
sugar, and the fear of lumps,
lost teeth and doctors.

I would tell you how for months
I stopped writing or opening doors
because it was me, on the other side,
wanting to be let in.

III.

Tanya, on that island of podiums
I saw myself suddenly,
big boned and asthmatic,
and my important tongue went cold.
I was avoiding my voice,
full and divided like cupboards:
the school I left,
the way I gave up on god,
the way I gave up on drums
which is the same thing;
a voice full of all my names
and full of the day he came to me
in a space between tracks - silent,
angelic. His name is not important here
but he is beside me
and is a hymn.

Tangent a

My life has been asphalt and gravel
like all lives, though
I wanted it to be different.
I wanted to wear shoes
without a constant pebble in their bellies.
But the dying bequeath us all their roads;
slipping from their beds into eternity
they tell us: walk good.

My grandmother only worshipped in tents.
She believed
something was arrogant in stone
and in cement –
*as if one could ever reach, as if life
was not asphalt and gravel,
forty years of wilderness and circle,
as if we should not be able*

*to fold up our churches
take them with us on our backs.*

Tangent b

When the televangelist came to Jamaica,
Heroes Circle became one big tent, shivering
with tambourines, swollen with sickness
as if hospices had been emptied of the not-dead-yet.
In that awful congregation of yellow eyes,
sunken faces, dirty bandages and deep
coughing, people were holding their faith
bigger than mustard seeds. And a blind woman
being pushed through on a gurney, shouted
“I believe! I believe!” to ward off the darkness.

When the televangelist left
and all of the well went home singing It Is Well,
they packed up the sick like rags; and a man,
blind to all the offense of his youth
told the blind woman he had pushed through
“Faith, sister. You never had enough faith.”

Tangent c

I used to pray for hurricanes. I had never seen one
but could imagine how, in the wonderful
non-meter of its rhythm, the freeness of its verse,
houses could be picked up and turned
into nothing. One June, a woman standing in mud
confessed to news cameras that during the storm
she lit candles in each corner of the house
and prayed; that’s why she was spared.
But while announcing her faith
a small pile of zinc and board sailed
down the gully. She turned around to run,
to chase her house, to chase her god.
It’s the same thing.

IV.

I am trying to tell you how I got here;
why I would have thrown away faith
if it was something we held like pens.
But faith is interior as bone;
it is the way I stand
and the way I turn my head.
It cannot be left out –
the day I waved a red banner
and tongues broke like water
from its vase. It cannot be left out –
the rhythm I once played on a djembe drum
that made missing men dance home,
finally, to their sad children.

V.

Today, a frog with a padlock through its mouth
leapt through a courtroom downtown,
and every witness fled into the streets,
their testimonies suddenly locked
within their throats; police refused
to take the frog in for dissection
to find inside the stories it had swallowed.
Tanya, I think of the poems I have written
and the ones I haven't. I think of our country
and all the unsaid things. This plague
of frogs and padlocks rising around us,
the Hope River turning into blood.
I am piecing it all together now - each line
proceeds before I do,

VI.

each line is another stone out of my throat.
It cannot be left out – the day I kissed him;
the years spent in the company of another heartbeat
I cannot love completely in this country.

But he is a hymn. On your favourite CD
the overwhelming moment is in the space
between tracks, full of the last song's echo and full
of what is to come. That is how he came to me.

VII.

He has broken every coffin and scattered the feathers.
He has smashed every clock. And what I thought
was wood and nails and varnish and velvet
and hour-hands, turned out to be silence.
So I break. I break the rule. I break
the ground we will dance on;
I break my mother's heart; I break the fast –
it did not work. I break the chain – lines end
with me. I break the body, the bread, the words.
I break the ceiling. I break the bone and the jaw
and the habit of hiding. I break the stone. I break the curse.
They are broken. I am written.

What the evangelist should have said

An American evangelist, preaching salvation, said it was like being on one side of a river, Jesus on the other, arms long as forever reaching to lift you over. But we only knew *hope river*, *sally waters river* – only knew rambling brooks running through the cane as river, a thing you could jump over, or make a way across on stones. We had no imagination of Mississippi or Delaware, rivers so wide they held ships. A saviour with magic arms was pointless.

What the evangelist should have said, was:
is like when de river come down just like suh
and you find yusef at de bottom,
slow breathin unda de surface, speakin
in bubbles, growin accustomed to fish
and deep and dark and forever – salvation
is de man with arms like a tractor
who reach in fi pull you out of de river,
press de flat of him hands gainst your belly
and push de river out of you.

How we became the pirates

In this country you have an accent;
in the pub, a woman mocks it.
you want to ignore her but wonder
how many hearts is she being bold for?
Hate in this place
is restrained as the landscape,
buried, usually, under a polite 'cheers, mate'.
And what a thing to mock –
the way we shape words differently.
But maybe it's the old colonial hurt
of how we became the pirates, dark people
raiding English from the English,
stealing poetry from the poets.
So English poetry is no longer from England.
You swear – *Lady, if I start a poem*
in this country
it will not be yours.

After all you do not know

In this country, having just arrived,
you might be desperate enough
to buy plantains online – after all,
you do not know what is what
or where to find things like ground
provisions, or heat, or the sounds of your people.
At nights you look through the hopeful window
of a computer screen, waiting for Jamaica
to come falling through and fill your flat.
It will happen, you think, if you stay
awake, keep the channels open,
google the right word, like *kumina*,
pocomania or *Elverine*, your mother's name;
if you find a place where you might click
on a hand of plantain, remembering
then, the yellow insistence of morning
food, as if the sun rose from your small plate.

The only thing far away

In this country, Jamaica is not quite as far
as you might think. Walking through Peckham
in London, West Moss Road in Manchester,
you pass green and yellow shops
where tie-headwomen bargain over the price
of dasheen. And beside Jamaica is Spain
selling large yellow peppers, lemon to squeeze
onto chicken. Beside Spain is Pakistan, then Egypt,
Singapore, the world ... here, strangers build home
together, flood the ports with curry and papayas;
in Peckham and on Moss road, the place smells
of more than just patty or tandoori. It smells like
Mumbai, like Castries, like Princess Street, Jamaica.
Sometimes in this country, the only thing far away
is this country.

Your dance is like a cure

In this country on a Saturday night
you are usually the best dancer;
it was not so back home.
Here you can dance
dances that have fallen out
of season, like mangoes in February
or guineps at Christmas. It does not matter
in this new country;
they do not know Spanish Town Road,
have never danced into the headlights
of early morning buses... though,
neither have you; you were never skilled
enough back there. You never entered
the middle circle – like a Holy of Holies –
where only good dancers dared venture.
But in this country, you move like fire
amongst the cane, you move like sugar
and like ocean; they say – you are the sharp
swing of a cutlass, they say –
you are like ointment in a deep wound.
They say your dance is like a cure.

Speaking in Tongues

This poem begins in 1987.

My grandmother dragged us to meet the Lord
under a tent in St. Catherine. From here
I trace the heritage of standing spellbound
as women worship. Always I am on the outskirts.
I remember my grandmother unbecoming
the kind of woman who sets her table each Sunday,
who walks up from the river, water balanced easily
on her head. My grandmother became, instead,
all earthquake – tilt and twirl and spin,
her orchid-purple skirt blossoming.
She became grunt and rumble – sounds
you can only make when your shoes have fallen off
and you're on the ground
crying *raba* and *yashundai*, *robosei* and
babababababba. Years later a friend tells me
tongues is nothing but gibberish - the deluded
pulling words out of dust. I want to ask him
what is language but a sound we christen?
I would invite him to a tent where women
are tearing their stockings, are on the ground
pulling up fresh words to offer as doves to Jehovah.
I would ask if he sees no meaning here
and if he never had the urge to grunt
an entirely new sound. The poem, always,
would like to do this, always wants to break
from its lines and let a strange language rise up.
Each poem is waiting on its own Day of Pentecost
to thrash, to *robosei* and *yashundai*,
and the poem will not care that some walk past,
afraid of the words we try out on our tongues
hoping this finally is the language of God,
that he might hear it and respond.

Like How Sunday Comes

When binghi men beat drums
when dancers breathe fire on the breath of white rum

a strong nigger feeling comes

When washer women walk home on red roads
crowned with hampers of river cleaned clothes
when centuries unroll in their low, steady hum

a strong nigger feeling comes

like how Sunday comes
when all our words are suddenly dumb
and we speak with white-winged tongues,
 sweat like rain, and songs
 like thunder come.
 that's how it is

when binghi men beat drums