

9/8/23: NATURE ON EDGE

Nature, the great outdoors, was among the few safe spaces during the pandemic. At the same time, we are inundated by news of the imminent collapse of the natural world. Are plants, animals, storms, heat, dust, present in your writing? What description, literary or scientific, of nature has left a special mark on you?

1. **Yashika GRAHAM (Jamaica)**

My mother saves pear seeds
to catch the breed
the inside of deep-sunset pumpkin
to fill the yard with the secrets of its vines,
my mother is a bush woman.

(from "My Mother," *The Caribbean Writer*, 2023)

And my poems are bush poems, grounded in the land and the people who live and work closest to it. I was born in my grandmother's room in an old wooden house in the bush. I was born in the hills of Westmoreland, Jamaica in a district called Berkshire.

And we did not have a great deal growing up, but there was land and I have always been close to the earth, known survival in relation to this land. With no piped water in the district, dry times meant that my siblings and I would have to load up with our gallon jugs and descend the hillsides leading to the spring to catch water for the house. If we were lucky, it meant finding mangoes along the way and it meant avoiding the dangers that lurked in the wilderness. This is where much of my writing comes from.

But as I lived it then, I didn't know that such a life was something to write about. I learned early on that the countryside was a place you only visited, that living there was not the ideal condition, that the city was where excitement, wealth and achievement were possible. The country was the place you came from and always left, so I was often daydreaming, convinced there was an ideal elsewhere.

I didn't know we lived in the hills
until I'd left. Gully girl, people said,
living below Westmoreland's roadsides,
believing we were in the dark depths

But they didn't know that even below them,
we were at the top of another clearing,
that we could see the gorge of Great River,
see the morning before it reached the road,
how it covered Huntly and Ginger Hill in gold.

(from "All The World in One Yard," forthcoming in *Some of Us Can Go Back Home*)

I credit Lorna Goodison (the first Jamaican to participate in the IWP program 40 years ago) for showing me the example that I could write about my own world. By this time I had moved away to live in the city.

Goodison writes that “my prayers are usually for rain/ my people are farmers/” (from Keith Jarret: *Rainmaker, Guinea Woman: New & Selected Poems*, 2013), and I was taken back to dry days in Berkshire. And it is why you will encounter water here, encounter cattle in my poems, find yourself running as I did for there are lessons in a life with nature.

To buck a bull
on your way from spring
is to become strategist,
it is to approach lawd god, me dead
to swing your water jug, to reel, to run.

(from “To Buck a Bull,” forthcoming in *Some of us Can Go Back Home*)

When I relocated to the city, I began to feel that I was now away from the only home I had ever known. I began feeling around in the dark, trying to smell the raw of the river again, see the trees, to remember the names and give myself Directions. Remember...

When you reach Pisgah pause.
Allow the red dirt to orient you.

(from *Directions from the Border, The Caribbean Writer*, 2013)

The earliest writers in the West Indies had a pastoral eye and wrote marveling about the land, not unlike the tourist-focused brochures of Jamaica that still tell of inviting beaches and sand and not so much about the people.

I started marveling at the land too but “we are bodies of water” says Seattle Civic Poet Jourdan Imani Keith, closing the gap between humanity and the “natural world” to suggest that we are not as separate as we might believe. And so to write humanity must be to write nature after all, that we are water, that we are land.

My mother worries for me
that in this city
every pound of yam,
every pint of peas I eat
is paid for.

She questions whether it might
not suit me better to be home.

(from *Sustenance*, *Jamaica Journal*, 2018)

But even the bush woman must know that there is more to the land than plants and I would see more when I looked closer, remembered. There is a tumultuous history, there is scarring and there are secrets that the land holds and that it speaks sometimes slowly. So too the body holds things, sometimes out of fear, like some children do, like I did when I endured abuses. And the land reveals, which we see in the melting ice, the rising sea, the heat; the land is speaking what it has endured. And so too my relationship with home has changed, our romance has shifted to signal that there is much

more to a place than its lyrics...like the things we do not tell. Not yet. There are

Reasons Not To Go Home

The man

who blunders

In

my body

lives there.

Across

the fence

of low-lying rocks

where the land boils

over with black ants.

(from "Reasons to Not Go Home," forthcoming in *Some of Us Can Go Back Home*)

My mother is a bush woman. I write bush poems and the land speaks finally its memory, in heat, in the rising sea, in me.