Inspired by the archives

With writing by

Andre Bagoo
Kendel Hippolyte
Anu Lakhan
Breanne Mc Ivor
Celeste Mohammed
Alyea Pierce
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Commissioned by Caribbean Literary Heritage

and NGC Bocas Lit Fest

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Contents

Introduction

Alison Donnell

As anyone who has spent time in an archive will know, the information or object of exploration is rarely the full reward of sifting through the stacks. Archival research yields emotional responses that profoundly shape and shade the sensibility of an encounter with the past. This may come from a recognition of how overwhelming or how scant the traces are of a particular person or time, an unpredicted discovery that trumps the original search, or a sense of elation at the serendipity of discoverability. Other times, the missing but anticipated link between people or collections comes into view unexpectedly, and sheds light on a friendship, a journey, a professional connection that makes all the difference.

For me, there is something about the quality of discovery when opening a box of letters or holding the oversized paper of a BBC script that cannot be translated into knowledge gained, because it is more of an emotional encounter with the past. So, while one key objective of the Caribbean Literary Heritage project has been to generate more knowledge about the Caribbean literary past through archival research, another was to raise awareness and interest in the region's archival assets not only as repositories of valuable histories but also as charmed gateways into the imaginings of past experiences. Literary heritage is not passive information: it can only be made and re-made through an active engagement with and reinterpretation of the literary past — indeed, it is created in the process of the present calling upon the past. What better way to create that heritage than to commission writers to work imaginatively with archival materials?

CLH's partnership with the NGC Bocas Lit Fest enabled this element of creative engagement to thrive. With a focus on local and early-career writers, the commissions were coordinated by Bocas Lit Fest programme director Nicholas Laughlin, and writers were invited to roam freely and to follow their creative inclinations in the West Indiana Collection held at The University of the West Indies, St Augustine — although they benefitted hugely from the expert guidance of Lorraine Nero, Senior Special Collections Librarian, who was always at hand.

After our first year of collaboration, we sought to reach writers in their emergent phase, and added a partnership with The UWI's MFA programme at St Augustine. Not only did this energising collaboration, led by Dr Muli Amaye, result in two exceptional commissions by Alexandra Stewart and Alyea Pierce, but it also led two cohorts of MFA students towards the rich resources of the Special Collections — again under the inspiring mentorship of Lorraine Nero.

Like so many creative initiatives, *Inspired by the Archives* was curtailed by COVID-19, which put an end to both travel and archival exploration for almost two years. All the same, the success and the joys of this creative method can be garnered by the pieces in this collection and the accompanying blog pieces (https://caribbeanliteraryheritage.domains.uflib.ufl.edu/blog) that discuss and reflect on each writer's personal experiences exploring and imaginatively engaging with the archival materials of the West Indiana Collection (https://libguides.uwi.edu/c.php?g=11314&p=5904), as well as the devastating loss of an archive, in the case of Kendel Hippolyte's piece on the Folk Research Centre in St Lucia.

I hope that these works will act as multi-dimensional bridges, carrying readers from writings inspired by archives into writers' actual archives, and carrying the joys, the surprises, and the significance of archival traces into writerly minds, where they may also create the futures of the region's literary past. As Alexandra Stewart advocates in her blog piece, the opportunity to be inspired by archives remains importantly accessible. "The archives are a time machine. The door is open. Will you step inside?"

July 2022

Programme note

Nicholas Laughlin

My own introduction to literary archives happened when I was an undergraduate at The University of the West Indies, St Augustine. Via an endnote in Anna Grimshaw's *C.L.R. James Reader*, I learned of a series of reports written by James immediately after his arrival in London in 1932, and published in the *Port of Spain Gazette*. I was intrigued enough to head to the West Indiana Division at the campus library and ask if its holdings might include copies of the newspaper, which had long ceased publication. It turned out that 1932 editions of the *Gazette* were available on microfilm, and I was duly set up in front of a microfilm reader to navigate through many pages of close-set type, tracking down the articles in which James announced his arrival in the then imperial capital and shared his adventures and opinions. I realised that, nearly seven decades after these pieces were first published, only a handful of living people could have read them — they were almost lost texts, but a casual query to a librarian had allowed me to rediscover them.

A decade later, I was able to transcribe and edit those *Port of Spain Gazette* pieces and publish them in a little volume called *Letters from London* (2003). And in the years since, I've explored various other Caribbean literary and cultural archives, whether for reasons of professional research or simple personal curiosity. Sometimes, when luck has allowed, I've been able to sit in a climate-controlled reading room leafing through boxes of catalogued papers: unpublished drafts of James's autobiography at St Augustine, V.S. Naipaul's early family correspondence at the University of Tulsa. On other occasions, I've trawled through the uninstitutional disarray of private archives in a writer's study or artist's studio. I've puzzled over the transcribed private notebooks of Martin Carter, rummaged through boxes of poetry books from the personal library of Wayne Brown, been handed annotated manuscripts by writer friends of my own generation. Increasingly, I've drawn on digitised and born-digital archives hosted online by various institutions, such as the Digital Library of the Caribbean (dLOC). And my own work as a writer, editor, and festival programmer has generated many shelf-feet of paper, and many thousands of

digital files, which I've come to accept constitute my own archive, barely contained in bookcases, boxes, and hard drives.

I love all the things that people love about archives: the sensory elements, the various textures and rustles and scents of paper, the satisfying heft and thud of old books, the delights and puzzles of handwriting and antiquated typography. The thrill of reading something no one has read for decades, of recovering something forgotten, feeling an intimate connection with a long-gone author. I love books derived from archives — diaries and letters and notebooks are genres that obsess me — and dearly wish that published Caribbean literature included more of those.

So when Alison Donnell first emailed me in 2017 to propose a partnership between Caribbean Literary Heritage and the NGC Bocas Lit Fest, I required no persuasion. The objective was to use the platform of our annual festival to stimulate discussion and awareness of the importance of literary archives, sharing the research of CLH and encouraging writers of the present to think about the value of their own papers and files. We agreed on a three-year partnership that would bring members of the CLH team to Port of Spain for the NGC Bocas Lit Fest, to lead a series of formal discussions and informal conversations. But what excited me most was the chance to commission new writing in the form of short fiction, poems, and essays directly inspired by existing literary archives, and demonstrate that archives are not the province of scholars alone, but a valuable resource for creating new work in sometimes unexpected forms.

The following pages offer a sample of the highly varied results. Some of the writers produced pieces that directly draw upon and rework information gleaned from particular documents — such as the poems by Andre Bagoo and Alyea Pierce that reimagine episodes from the lives of Eric Williams, the historian and first prime minister of Trinidad and Tobago, and Kathleen Warner, "Aunty Kay", the actress and broadcaster who hosted a long-running children's programme on Radio Trinidad. Celeste Mohammed's short story, set in Trinidad during the Second World War, is based on the wartime experiences of the singer and actor Edric Connor, who appears in this piece in a fictionalised incarnation.

Anu Lakhan's response to the archive of Eric Roach is a letter addressed to the late, tragic Tobagonian poet. Alexandra Stewart's metafictional piece tells the story of a young writer exploring a collection of historical photographs (with a plot twist few archivists would condone!). Exploring the archive of Nobel laureate Derek Walcott, Breanne Mc Ivor found herself fascinated not just by the content of his papers, but by their formal aspects. She produced a fictional narrative that doesn't actually refer to Walcott, but takes the form of a journal by an aspiring writer. As Mc Ivor explains in her essay here, this narrative eventually evolved into a full novel, *The God of Good Looks*, scheduled for publication in 2023. Reading the book, no one would guess that Walcott was its original seed — an apt example of how archives can inspire new work that defies expectations.

In the final piece, which serves as a coda of sorts, Kendel Hippolyte mourns and eulogises the St Lucia Folk Research Centre, whose irreplaceable archives and collections of artefacts were destroyed by fire in March 2018. Weaving together personal reflections with the voices of friends, strangers, and even the illustrious dead, this lyrical essay meditates on the importance of memory to a people and a society, and in creating a civilisation. It reminds us that physical archives are precious and fragile, and also that archives are not "memory itself" but "a gateway into memory." It poses a question that haunts every archive: "Can you lose what you don't know you've lost?"

One thing I do know we've lost, thanks to COVID-19, is the final round of *Inspired by the Archives* commissions originally planned for 2020. With libraries and archives closing in the early months of that pandemic year, and the necessity of first postponing that year's NGC Bocas First Lit Fest and then reinventing it in an online format, our partnership with CLH ended prematurely. But the work made by these seven writers, collected here, forms its own archive of the imagination. For me, the best result of this partnership would be more creative writing, in diverse and unpredictable forms, styles, and voices, extending the astonishingly rich tapestry of Caribbean writing through engagement with the archives of our past.

July 2022

The Agony and Ecstasy of Eric Williams (With Appendix)

Andre Bagoo

There were two eclipses of the sun in 1962, both not visible in Great Britain. On the morning of August 31 of

that year, the day Trinidad and Tobago gained its Independence, he was up at 8.45 am, which was relatively late for him. That night,

he smiled. He packed his bags. He penned a letter. “Erica darling,” he wrote. “Just a few lines before I leave for Tobago to wish you all

good luck as a citizen of Independent Trinidad and Tobago. I hope you had a wonderful ceremony in London and that you represented

me adequately. This is the first letter written by the Prime Minister of Trinidad and Tobago. See you on Friday of next week. Be good,

take care and all love from your Prime Minister Daddy.” He was a symbolic man. His diary entries before August 31 are in black ink.

Then, from Independence Day everything is the national colour, red. He was fond of ballet. He loved music. On Boxing Day, 1976, he

listened to Beethoven’s 6th Symphony, five sonatas, a violin concerto, piano and violin concertos by Tchaikovsky, a piano

concerto by Rachmaninoff, and a violin concerto by Mendelssohn. The second-to-last entry in one diary was a note of an expense:

he paid $260 for the purchase of speakers. His hearing aid cost US$400. His spectacles $187. On September 2, 1976,

at precisely 1.45 pm, he met officials of the Federal Republic of Germany, the government of Belgium, the government of

Venezuela, and USSR government representatives who happened to be in Tobago. In that year, he wrote in a black German-made diary

that had PRIME MINISTER on the cover. It was the year Trinidad & Tobago declared itself a Republic, but he made more entries in the

diary about a man named Johnny:

Jan 17, drugs, O'Halloran – $100.00
Feb 10, drugs, O'Halloran – $100.00
Feb 23, drugs, O'Halloran – $40.00
March 29, drugs, O'Halloran – $145.00
April 28, drugs, O'Halloran – $107.00
June 4, drugs, O'Halloran – $100.00
June 10, drugs, O'Halloran – $25.00
July 12, drugs, O'Halloran – $100.00
July 13, drugs, O'Halloran –$93.00
Nov 4, drugs, O'Halloran – $214.00
Dec 1, drugs, O'Halloran – $220.00

According to reports Johnny, "had a beautiful voice and beautiful large brown eyes." Johnny wore only white or cream-colored suits,

drove large American cars, had Irish charm. "I've never done anything

wrong in my life except fight cocks and love women," Johnny once

said. Many have made similar claims before. Johnny was a drug. Eric was his big Daddy. He put him in Cabinet. He fought for him. He made him

executor of his will. Nothing could cure what they had. On November 11, after paying Johnny $214.00 for drugs, Eric underwent an electro

cardiogram. Something was happening to his heart. Or something was happening to his mind. (In 1991, doctors in Japan discovered that you

can die from a broken heart.) He had many doctors: Dr Bartholomew, Dr Aqui, Dr Lee, Dr Mc Shine, Dr Joseph, Dr Wyke, Dr Ince, and "some

Japanese doctor," according to one source. But no doctor ever discovered the cause of his greatest torment. No doctor found out why he was deaf.

It was, perhaps, deafness that lead to his passion for music, that heightened all of his other senses: touch, smell, taste, that protected him

from what others had to say, that gave him the written word. On February 13, he spent $230 on groceries, and finished reading

The Dying of the Light by Professor Arnold Rogow.
He spent $100.00 on cosmetics and drugs on March 10

donated $60.00 to church collection, and saw Johnny at the end of the day. On September 11, he noted there was a

violent shower. He spent $20.00 on laundry on October 6. On January 15, 1981, the year of his death, he bought $862.83

in flowers. The next day he had Cabinet. On January 28, 1981, he spent two hours cleaning the louvers of the

empty bedrooms in the prime minister's residence. On the final Valentine's Day of his life, he was up

at 7.15 am, spent the day annotating a publication called *Rebellion, Revolution, and Armed Force*, and read

a Harvard energy study, among other things. He spent $100.00 on "Valentine"; $72.00 on milk (as a child milk

had been a luxury). He spent $255.00 on meat on March 17, 1981, (see Appendix) and $5.00 on the dog. His last

haircut cost $10.00. The last entry in his diary was made seven days before he died. He noted a final expense:

Insurance $320.00

The Premier closed the diary, as if he had secreted what remained of his soul in black ink (he had dropped the red soon

after Independence), the diary's paper lined and divided into boxes, his life now chaptered and dog-eared, his passions

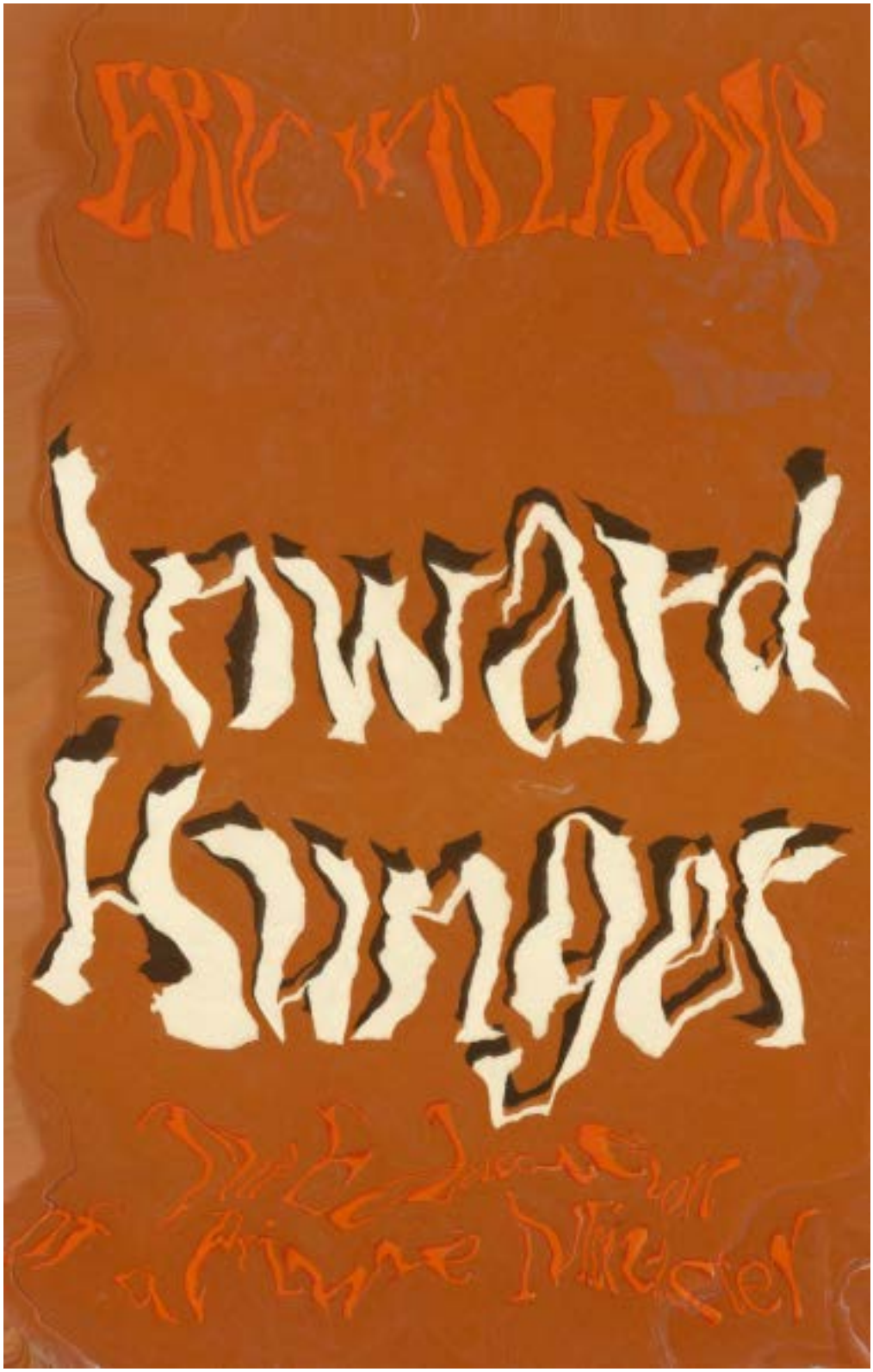
prorogued by the thought of who was coming for him. Days passed, in which he wore the same, soiled clothes. And wrote no

more. Then, on the last Sunday, he blasted all the records and

sat alone imagining the moment when he fell as a child on the

football field and the world was just an empty stage and all he could hear was the symphony of a life he had not yet lived.

APPENDIX: THE EDUCATION OF A PRIME MINISTER



Snow Woman

Anu Lakhan

Dear Eric,

This little is too little. There. Is that what you wanted to hear? It's not enough. It's never enough. We're not doing this right. The problem is I *am* a snow woman. I didn't lie to you — no, not about that — you're not *that* charming. I'm not from a not-Trinidad-and-Tobago place. My heart does not know changing seasons.

Still, somehow, I am a snow woman.

And you said you didn't want one.

I am from that coldest of places: the past. I know walls of ice surrounding my cave and ex-animals on the ground to create the illusion of snugness.

I hate when a mammoth dies. But no matter how much I hate the hunt, I let the beautiful creature feed me from one never-ending winter to the next. I've tried eating the parts I least like so I will be unhappy. I have tried eating what I love the most so it feels sacred. I have tried starving. Nothing works.

I know you think this has something to do with my excuses for not eating vegetables but I tell you true, that is the least of your troubles. As a snow woman, a woman who has stayed in a rock for a month at a time because I could not dig my way out of the ice, I am not for you.

You and our island, as it is now, need some other kind of woman. Not one who has not seen a green leaf, a day of sun, a hot ocean.

But as you see, I am not what you thought. You must find another.

How I Wrote My First (Publishable) Novel

Breanne Mc Ivor

At the age of seventeen, I'd completed what was to be my breakout literary novel. I'd written novels before, handwritten things in copybooks that my classmates read and later a work of science fiction that I knew was no good almost as soon as I typed the last word. But *this* was the book that would make me a proper writer. I asked my mother to read and critique it, which she did. And then I critiqued her critique so savagely that she never read another thing that I wrote. She didn't understand good writing, I argued, with all the misplaced confidence of a seventeen-year-old author.

That book was to be one of many failed novel attempts that littered my life. I wanted to write a great work of literary fiction. But the best I could do were blobs of words that eventually petered out into blank pages. As I got older, I could sometimes tell how bad the writing was as I typed and there were times when I gave up mid-sentence. I turned to poetry and short stories instead — shorter forms that were easier for me to wrap my head around. It would be years before I went back to novel-writing.

In summer 2023, my debut novel, *The God of Good Looks*, will be published by Harper Collins in North America and Penguin Random House in the Commonwealth and UK. "Real pinky-in-the-air publishers," one of my friends said as she congratulated me. This was my *at last* moment; the thing I'd been working for my whole life. The novel follows disgraced model turned fashion magazine editor Bianca Bridge and brilliant but temperamental makeup artist, Obadiah Cortland as they struggle to navigate the beauty industry, and each other. Privately, I think of it as the handbook to makeup, scandal and revenge. One of the questions I get asked the most is what inspired the novel.

The unlikely answer is Derek Walcott.

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Four years ago, I was commissioned as part of the collaboration between the Bocas Lit Fest and the Caribbean Literary Heritage Project to write a piece that was "Inspired by the Archives." I was excited to take part in this project from the moment the email hit my inbox and I only began experiencing my first doubts as I drove to the archives. I was driving with my dear friend, a much more accomplished writer, who had also been commissioned to take part in the project. "Who do you think you'll write about?" he asked.

I hadn't a clue.

My friend explained that he would be writing about Eric Williams, T&T's first Prime Minister. He'd called ahead and asked the Alma Jordan Library to have Williams's journals ready for him. Now, this friend had worked for ten years at one of the country's foremost newspapers. His sheer knowledge of Williams was staggering. On the drive, each detail of his archivally inspired piece reminded me that I had not done this sort of preparation. I had not called ahead and ordered any archives. I had not even decided which author would inspire me. Not to worry, I soothed myself, as I listened to his carefully laid plans. I would read the writing of some of our greatest literary minds and inspiration would be strike me like a bolt of lightning.

After days in the archives, my friend had seemingly filled a notebook on Eric Williams, while nothing I read had given me the faintest electric shock, to say nothing of lightning bolts. Reluctantly, I asked the librarian if there were any Derek Walcott archives. She looked at me as if to say, "you asking answers," and I was presented with a list of Walcott Archives. At Last Poems by Derek Walcott — Box 8, Folder 19. The White Devil — Box 8, Folder 15. The Muse of History — Box 8, Folder 19. Black Notebook — Box 3, Folder 1. Omeros (of course) — Box 25, Folder 10. And so on.

I had studied Walcott during my undergraduate English degree at Cambridge and done my best to avoid him during my master's degree in Literature and Society at Edinburgh. He seemed too intellectually intimidating: a Nobel Prize–winning titan of Caribbean literature, whose writing was suffused with cleverness and complexity that I feared was going over my head. But, having yet to be struck with inspiration, I figured I had nothing left to lose in diving into his archives. I selected his Black Notebook because it seemed to be the most accessible. And maybe his personal notebook would show me a softer, more unguarded side of the man.

Instead, the Black Notebook revealed that even in writing not meant for publication, Walcott was casually brilliant. He conducted a self-interview that went like this:

> W: Why have you succumbed to this self-interview?
>
> W: For the money. Also it's more relaxed and easier than real writing. Also since I was last in Barbados I've changed my attitude towards a lot. I don't like all the debasement that goes with tourism; which is really a superior form of prostitution in which you sell your country instead of yourself…

Surely, I thought, no person is so clever in the privacy of their own notebook. I've kept my own version of Walcott's Black Notebook and the thing is a mess of barely legible handwriting with scrawls and strikethroughs that I struggled to make sense of even as I revisited it to write this essay. "IDEA," I'd written after transcribing part of Walcott's self-interview. "A series of interviews with myself — fictionalised."

It's a far cry from Walcott's impeccable note making.

I called the fictional interviews "Becoming Breanne Mc Ivor" but that "IDEA" went no further, since it sounded grandiose and pompous, as if becoming Breanne Mc Ivor were

anything worth celebrating. I swiftly tried a number of fictional names for a character who would be better suited to the piece. In my own notebook, I wrote:

> Becoming Brittany March
> Becoming Bethany Black
> Becoming Bethany Mc Alistair?
> Becoming Bianca Black?

I think the question marks kicked in because I was getting progressively less sure about whether this was a good idea at all. "What is the whole plot?" I asked in my notebook. "Character visits the archives?" I speculated, with a complete dearth of creativity. "Something to do with this project? Novel? Character is a model?"

"Character is a model?" turned out to be the best idea I had.

I began my piece:

> B: Why have you succumbed to this self-interview?
>
> B: For the money.
> OK, really? For the conversation. For the record. To remind myself that although I spent yesterday near-naked, being slathered with chocolate syrup and squirted with whipped cream for a Valentine's Day photoshoot, I'm not some dumb model.

I was off writing about a world I knew: makeup, modelling, and the local fashion industry. Underneath were undercurrents of more serious themes: classism, colonialism, respectability politics, reputation and ostracism, masking and masquerading, the definition of beauty and, at the heart of everything, power. Still, I worried about whether I was writing a silly piece. My friend and the other writer commissioned to produce "Inspired by the Archives" pieces were Literary Writers, with a capital L. Walcott himself

was a Literary Writer. He was one of THE Literary Writers to emerge from the Caribbean. In my lowest moments, I imagined Walcott rolling wretchedly in his grave at the thought of his work inspiring a story about the Trinidadian beauty industry. The ghost of Walcott whispered in my ear, "I deserve better."

I ignored him. It was easy to ignore him, because the story had grabbed me by the scruff of my neck and was racing along with me at breakneck pace. Even after I submitted my commission, I kept writing. "Sat 10 Nov — 13,000 words," I recorded in my notebook. By the time I was done, I had almost 100,000.

Walcott's writing had given me a way into literature that I never had before. While Bianca starts by conducting a self-interview, what she ends up doing is writing a journal. Before this commission, it had never occurred to me to write journal entries. But, once I started, it was addictive. Bianca dated her entries, so I could use the calendar to help me develop the plot. What was she doing at Carnival time? When did she meet Obadiah? Why hadn't she written for a few days?

In all my prior abortive novel attempts, I had tried to force a book out of something that probably shouldn't have been a book. I wanted to be the sort of intellectually intimidating writer who dealt with Big Ideas, a bit like Walcott himself, but also like the new crop of Caribbean authors: Kei Miller, Marlon James, and Monique Roffey.

Here, the words came thick and fast and easy. Walcott had said that his self-interview was, "more relaxed and easier than real writing." That was exactly how I felt; I certainly never considered what I was doing "real writing." I felt sure that there was no market for a book about makeup. My templates for successful Caribbean writers were all Literary and they didn't write about women being squirted with whipped cream and slathered with chocolate syrup. When people asked what I was writing, I felt a needle of shame when I answered them.

Despite this shame, this is the first piece I wrote where I dredged up interests that I'd long decided weren't suitable for a literary writer. The truth is that I *loved* makeup — I'd earned a certificate in Advanced Professional Makeup Artistry after all — and I loved beauty in general, devoting long swathes of my time to reading *Vogue* articles and watching skincare tutorials on YouTube. But I'd always felt as if this part of my personality was less serious and therefore had no place in my writing. Maybe because this novel was written in the shadow of Walcott's own personal notebook, or maybe because my original idea was to conduct self-interviews with myself, I poured all my feelings onto the page without censoring what I'd previously adjudged to be frivolous.

I wrote compulsively, late into the night after work, and in coffee shops on Saturdays. I was writing to get to know Bianca and Obadiah, to try to do them justice and to answer the questions I was forming about them. Would they every understand one another? Could they find a way to be happy? Could they reconsider who, or what, deserved to be called beautiful? I used the novel to excavate some of my own experiences and, along with Bianca, I learned that it was a misconception to assume that because someone loved fashion they were a sort of featherbrained person, incapable of tackling more weighty issues. Maybe the line that divided "serious" literature from the rest of writing was more blurred than I thought? Or maybe it didn't matter what sort of book I was writing, once it was authentic to my country and my lived experiences.

•

I still don't know if my mother will read my first novel in 2023. I'd dedicated my first collection of short stories to her, and she still hasn't read that, so my hopes aren't particularly high. But I think I've let go of that earlier defensiveness around my work. I'm no longer trying to write what I think will be a great book, although I hope that I've written a good book. Instead, Derek Walcott led me on an unlikely journey through the thicket of his words, back to myself, and to my first novel — the most authentic thing I've ever written.

Hart's Cut

Celeste Mohammed

The old man's open shirt flapped in the wind, his spread arms forming a wiry line as he shouted up at me, in my perch, the cab of a green four-ton American truck.

"Why? Eh? Why?" he asked.

He swivelled, scarecrow-like, faced the truck in which I was seated, then the other parked alongside, and when no answer came except the bored rumble of engines, he turned from us and made two giant steps back to his wooden house, which I'd come to take apart. There, the youngest boy had been standing this whole time, hugging the doorpost, in pants that showed his ankles and a shirt that showed his belly. He was too old and too tall to be sucking his thumb like that.

The man, Mr. Noel — after two weeks, I knew him well enough — yanked the boy's wrist and dragged him out to face us. Head-scarved women with older children, huddled at the roadside, began to whimper and bleat, "No, no, no … Oh God, no Gus, don't bring the child in this!" They called the boy's name, incited him to run to them, but the child let himself be pulled, even as he kept turning to the women with a quizzical look. I could tell he was accustomed to obeying his father, now he wasn't sure why the women were asking him to do otherwise. I felt his confusion as if it were my own.

What the ass was Mr. Noel trying? It was March of 1941. He and his family were the only people left on these lands in Hart's Cut. They were standing in the way of the Americans' new naval base and, in that sense, he *knew* they were standing in the way of victory. Victory against the German U-boats already out there in the South Atlantic taking down passenger boats, or it was rumoured, even nearer, in our very own Gulf, aiming at our

petroleum installations. The world was two years into war, sacrifices had to be made here in Trinidad like everywhere else. The Noels would have to move — just like every other farmer and fisherman I had evicted since taking this job in February. He wasn't special, he should know that by now.

"Forget me!" Mr Noel yelled, shaking the child's shoulder like a rag doll. "What you doing to this boy? Thieves! Yankee thieves! Go back where you come from!"

There were no Yankees here, though. Just me and five of my best men. But, to Mr. Noel, I was as good as one of those damn Yanks because I had been their face this last month. I was flattening so they could build. They were desperate to get on this island and they'd found me — a man who was desperate to get off it. The War was bound to end one day and whichever way it went — Britain or America — I would have enough Yankee dollars by then to board a ship. This tiny island-colony was no place for my big, black, baritone dreams — I belonged on a stage somewhere, with white people clapping. And Mr. Noel waving his son around, this morning, was not going to block my way.

I made to get out of the truck. Did he want me to beg? Did he want one last great performance before his clan? Did he want it remembered that he didn't go easily? Country-people like Mr. Noel loved drama. I'd learned this long ago, growing up on my own stretch of coast down in Mayaro.

Then, he stooped for something in the grass and came up with a cutlass. Every house in this area had at least one, and everybody in the house knew how to use it: to open a hole in the soil for seed, to open a common fowl's neck, to open a coconut, to fillet a fish or loose a net. But now, Mr Noel didn't seem to know what to do with the blade. He raised it to his neck, lowered it to the boy's, causing gasps and shrieks from the female crowd, then back to his own neck, then finally he pointed it at the trucks, his arm trembling.

I froze with my hand on the door handle.

"This is our land! We ain't going nowhere!" he declared.

He began to pace then, swinging the cutlass wildly, shouting his justifications, reciting the history of his entitlement going back a hundred years, unaware that to everyone's eyes he simply looked stark, raving mad. The child was crying, I couldn't hear him over the engines, but I could see his black molten face, his wild glances toward the women who still beckoned to him, "Run, run." He wouldn't run, I just knew it, he wouldn't leave his father.

"Edric, do something, man!" said my driver, jerking his thumb toward the cab of the other truck where "plain-clothes" Constable Sandy, who always travelled with us and was pistol-armed and ready, sat, awaiting my signal to subdue, arrest or diffuse anyone who got in the way of our eviction work. I was the Americans' Expeditor, after all. Many had threatened me during this last month, but none had lifted a finger — much less a cutlass — until today. Why did it have to be Mr. Noel to push things this far?

I'd come to this house every day for fourteen days straight, trying to convince him to move his family, peaceably, to the new lands prepared for them down the road at Carenage — not seafront land, not as arable as Hart's Cut, but still land. Mr. Noel had tolerated my visits as opportunities to counter-argue why he should not be moved. From the seat of his mule-and-cart, he'd driven me and this same little boy around, shown me the site of his grandfather's house, the site where he himself was born and his navel-string buried, the church where as a child he'd worshipped, and the cemetery where his ancestors now slept. In his whole forty-five years, he had barely left this stretch of coast, except to go to sea.

I'd figured he needed a witness, someone to show all he was sacrificing for the War effort. So I had listened. But with every passing visit, it became impossible to do so without thinking of my own father and our family's plot in Mayaro. Its ferns and multi-coloured

crotons and thorny bougainvillea and transgressing guinea fowl. My childhood bedroom windows opening out onto three-quarters of a mile of coconut palms and beyond them the Atlantic Ocean. A stretch of coast where no one was poor and no one was rich because the ground always gave and if the fishermen caught, we all had fish, and if the hunters caught we all had wild meat.

Every day, for fourteen days, I'd left Mr. Noel's hut, jumped in my truck and driven, with a headache, back to my little office the Americans had built, thinking myself some sort of traitor. I'd had the confidence to follow my scholarship to the City because I'd always known I could return to my family and that stretch of coast in Mayaro. That land would always be there for me. So I'd been able to sing through the hardest days in the Railway Workshop, against the noise of the engines and boilers, and then on evenings sing on piles of timber at the harbour's edge, watching the horizon and the masts bobbing against that straight promising line. Wasn't I now ripping this boy from a mooring I myself had once enjoyed?

"Edric!" The truck-driver said my name again and in my head I heard the crackling cowboy twang of my boss, Lt. Thomas, who just yesterday had asked, "What the devil's going on down there, boy? The old man's dug in his heels? Well, you speak that monkey-patois … do something. Back in America, this would've been over … quick! But this ain't America."

No, this wasn't America. This was Trinidad, in the British West Indies, and the Americans had to be good neighbours, they had to follow house rules and the number one rule was: don't make trouble with the natives — unless you absolutely have to. But then, how to move a man with a cutlass at his son's neck?

I hopped from the truck and the jabbering women fell silent. I felt I had landed on a vast stage, suddenly the lead, in the middle of a scene where I'd been given no lines. I raised my palms and tried to cross the grass without disturbing a single blade. I wanted my

movements to be fluid, to calm Mr. Noel, so I could get close enough to wrap an arm around the boy, ease him behind me, shove him toward the women.

But Mr. Noel swung the cutlass in my direction. Tip to the boy's neck, then back at me, then the boy again — so he went, threatening us.

"Put that down," I called.

"Tell your men to back off."

"They won't, if you keep this up."

"Tell them."

I made a hand-signal and the drivers killed their engines. In the sudden quiet, it took only a whisper for my next words to reach Mr. Noel.

"We had a deal yesterday. Why you change your mind? Talk to me, nah?"

I was no more than ten feet away, maybe one more step and I could grab his wrist, wrench the cutlass down — I was the younger, bigger man by far.

Then, unexpectedly, Mr. Noel squatted on his haunches, tossed the blade aside and stared at the dirt.

My impulse was to lunge at the weapon, send it far with a mighty swing of my foot. But it felt like the wrong time for a big move. I squatted too and waited, listening with my forehead, with my toes, with my fingertips — never more alert.

The boy stood over us, mouth wide, thumb grasped between his teeth. While tears and snot streamed down his face, he made a droning noise that reminded me of the machines in the Railway Workshop.

Mr. Noel began tugging at a clump of grass, his lips pursed and the tendons in his neck raised. He tugged until the earth released and its flesh showed black and moist among the roots.

"How they could tell us we can't come back here for 99 years? Not even to clean my father grave? Not even to dig my cassava or throw my net? How?"

I shook my head and sat back on the ground. "That's not true, Mr. Noel. Remember what I said: you can come back every year on All Saints to put candles. And *they* will tend the graves. It's the US Government, man. Mr. Roosevelt is that New Deal fella, he'll keep his word."

"I still feel allyuh hiding something. Too much things I still don't know. It too quick —"

"Ask me, ask me anything. But, let the boy go, now, nah? He don't need to hear we talkin' business," I said.

"No, he stayin' right here!" Mr. Noel pulled the boy down to sit on the grass. "They expect me to leave all this for that choke-up piece of dirt up the road? What I supposed to do with that? Nuttin' can't grow there." He tossed the clod of earth over his shoulder.

The child had gone silent, digging his finger in the hole. The cutlass not at his neck, he seemed resigned, like most country-children, to whatever manhandling was coming next for him.

My heart, though, was so far up my chest, my throat felt sore.

I cleared it and said, “Mr. Noel, I am here. I will personally take this house apart, plank by plank, as if it is my own, and rebuild it for you in Carenage. I will pack your belongings myself in that truck. You have older sons, big hard-back fellas, I will get them labour-work with the Americans. I will get you motors for your boats, so you can go fish further places. I will see to it you get compensated for everything: every coconut tree, every house, every net.”

I had been saying a version of this to every family I’d evicted. But what I’d never said was that I had no control over the amount of their compensation — that was between the Americans and the British Government, and since Britain had already collected her fifty war-ships in exchange for these lands, she didn’t care too much about what happened to a few island fishermen, like Mr. Noel.

He suspected this, didn’t he? I saw it in the way he stared at me, as if assessing my sincerity, or else my daftness.

I was scared he might move to retrieve the cutlass, but more even than that, I was scared he would keep refusing to leave. What would I do then? I risked a glance back at the trucks, and my gaze travelled between them, to a stolen bit of horizon. As a boy, I’d seen the sun come up every day from my bedroom window, and it had always seemed to me a promise. Out here, working for the Americans, I felt so much closer to that golden line but, to reach it, I’d been making all these other promises, to all these other people and I needed them all to believe.

“You can start over,” I said to Mr. Noel. “It will be easy. Come, let me help you.”

“You so … City men like you … education and thing … you wouldn’t understand. You have no roots, so you find it easy to leave one place for a next one.”

I had *not* found it easy to leave my village in Mayaro. Big boy of sixteen, I had cried that day when the whole school had come to see me off on the bus, my mother and I. My father wasn't there, he hadn't wanted me to take that scholarship, and I had never forgotten his reproach, "Whenever he gets that college education, he will give it to *himself*. Go away and come back here with a white wife and break up this family, ruin our ways." Mr. Noel seemed to be leveling a similar accusation now, he was calling me empty and selfish — but not everything is that simple.

"You're wrong about me. I'm from Mayaro. My father was a fisherman and a shoe-maker." I blurted this out before I could stop myself. In all our talks, I had never revealed to Mr. Noel, or any of these evicted people, anything personal about my life, but I wanted him to know now that I, too, had sacrificed.

He lost no time in using my words against me.

"What you would tell your father, then? If was your father sitting down here?"

"Same thing," I shrugged. "Move."

But I knew my father wouldn't have moved. In the oilfields of Guayaguayare, I'd seen my father fight and knock men cold in order to get at their pockets, to get at the money they owed him for shoes. How much more wouldn't he have done to defend our land, to stop some pawn of the white man from breaking up our family?

I'd had enough of Mr. Noel. My hurt had turned to anger that he'd held out so long and taken so much of my time, so much of my thoughts, and pushed me back beyond the dollars and the straight sense of things, to Mayaro. He'd pushed me right up against my powers as Expeditor. I hadn't wanted this. I hadn't wanted to find out how far I would go to clear this land, to tow this line, to follow its sheen. I hadn't wanted to know these things about myself, but now I was sure: all I cared about was the boy.

I rose slowly to give everyone in the trucks ample time to see me. My movement was so graceful that Mr. Noel seemed to view it as natural, me stretching my legs or something.

Then, I grabbed the boy and ran.

I sprinted to a rhythm only I could hear, not toward the trucks but away — toward the women, now wailing again — so Sandy could have a clear shot, if necessary. I listened as Mr. Noel scrambled to find the cutlass, scrambled to his feet. I listened to the screams of the women and the report of the gun, a single, "Plax!" I ran through their headscarves and their reaching arms and their trailing fingernails, left the boy, and circled back behind the solid shield of the truck door. It was only then that I dared to look.

Had I killed a man?

Mr. Noel was alive, and unharmed, his shirt trailing in the wind like a cape, as Constable Sandy roughed him up and led him away to the other truck. We tied his hands with rope, and he sat sandwiched and sullen between a dresser and bed, all the way to Carenage.

Years later, after peace had come, after I'd already boarded a ship for Britain and known some success on the stage there — enough to put those years of compromise behind me — I returned to Trinidad to play Carnival and there, read a small square in the local newspaper: two men shot and killed for fishing in a restricted zone near the American Base. They were originally from Hart's Cut, the article said. I wondered then, with no small measure of guilt, if Mr. Noel, and perhaps his son, had tried to go back home.

Three poems

Alyea Pierce

NOVEMBER 1939

I.
Kathleen "Auntie Kay" Warner was baptised twice in her life:
First, by the Church
Second, by the Sea

II.
A hymn can be a life vest in shipwreck
Melodies loosen tar-oiled voices clogged silent
This is the moment between life and death
Listen to the choir girls sing
Sing along loud
Sing along boundless
Sing along to remember to breathe

III.
The *Simón Bolívar* lit up the Sea
Mined by Germans
this journey home became a feast for those below
& a funeral for those above

VI.
How does one feed their soul?
Bread & marmalade?

Third class soup?
Saving First-Class babies from the blood & moaning?
Protecting the yutes from gangs & shootings?
This lifeboat was built for stronger waters than only of the Sea

V.
Auntie Kay's daughter, Sheila
wrote a letter to account for histories
buried deep beneath the mud
She clung onto a piece of floating wood for almost an hour
praying & fighting & surviving —
Something blk folk call inherent to the bones

DEAR TOMORROW,

I saw you waiting in the wings
standing by as the trumpeter finished dreaming up notes with her hands
& two young ladies sang in white —
I saw you.
Anticipating the curtain to close before I could swim into you
but
this body is made of flesh bones & too much love
to not have one more day
This body gambles bones for years even if the bombs and black Sea tried to call it home
This body knows thangs
This body sits at the table when company comes & names herself:
medical student pianist dancer singer actress broadcaster teacher
This body can save you with scalpel speech song step or swag
Choose ...
This body watched her life in review & saw you,
Tomorrow

WONDERS

My body is gladiator
My body is the Colosseum ruins
My body still stands after years of war
My body is a story of hope
My body is this world's lighthouse
Let her lead you back home
My body is a bull
My body is power
My body can hide you within its seams
My body is my property
My body is a beautiful battlefield
We have won
& We will dine like Kings and Queens tonight
My body is the glass vase mommy would not let you touch
until your hands blossomed in age
& your heart learned to handle with care
My body is love
My body is the underground railroad
holding every secret within its body like a water stain ring trapped
in the mahogany of your grandmother's kitchen table
I cannot scrub these narratives out of me
My body is power
My body is history
& you have tried to keep her story out of these textbooks for too long
My body stands loud
real loud tonight
My body is power

Postcard Women

Alexandra Stewart

The lady at the front desk, nametagged Marcia Johnson, grinned up at Kyra with big white teeth, “Always nice to see a new face.”

Kyra smiled politely and signed the form requesting the Michael Goldberg Collection. She chose Folder 1. Who knows? If she had time, she’d check out Folder 2 before she got back to studying. She deserved this break. Well, maybe deserve was a strong word, considering she hadn’t actually started studying yet.

“Have a seat; I’ll go get the folder for you.”

Ms. Johnson, she realised, had that mauby-sweet older woman’s voice that could make you feel at home just about anywhere. Unlike the library, all the seats around the large centre table were free. Still, not wanting to disturb the no one, Kyra eased into her chair. She was surrounded by large wooden bookshelves that seemed to be still alive somehow. As though the thing that had once made them trees hadn’t died, so they were still breathing. Kyra shuddered and tucked her hands into the tunnel pocket of her hoodie. When did it get so cold?

The clack of heels made her look up. Ms. Johnson gingerly placed the fat navy blue folder down.

“Be extra careful, and remember before you leave, you have to return it to me exactly as I gave it to you.”

"I will," Kyra nodded. Her granny was the same way about her treasures: jewellery, postcards, photographs, letters. She'd make Kyra wash her hands twice, dry them three times, and after all that she would flutter over her shoulder saying: *You know how long I have dis? Dis older than you and yuh mother. Don't smudge it, eh. Watch how yuh holding it. Arite, I go hold it, you just relax.* It was the postcards Kyra found most fascinating. She'd thought there'd be more sending and receiving of them when she got old enough to travel, but it seemed like no one bothered anymore. Not when they could send a selfie or video instantly from anywhere. Too bad phone screens don't have that smooth papery smell.

Kyra flipped the binder open. There were four postcards on every page, secured inside a clear plastic holder so that you could see both the front and back. Kyra bit her lip to trap a squeal of excitement. She was curious now, to know what messages people had written to each other. These postcards were way over a century old. She'd get to read a message from more than a hundred years ago. Touch the swirling letters. Imagine the yellowed cards; shining white.

"What do you think this one wants?" A small voice asked.

Kyra looked around but Ms. Johnson was nose deep in a book behind her desk and there was still no one else here.

"She's probably just a maco like the rest of them."

"Excuse me?" Kyra said, turning around to face Ms. Johnson head on. If the woman had something to say, she could stop hiding behind her book and say it.

Ms. Johnson's head jerked up, "You need something, sweetie?"

Kyra's eyes bulged. That syrupy tone was nothing like the voice she had heard.

“Oh girls! Looks like we have a listener.” The words came from behind her. Kyra spun around and looked down at the folder. Obviously she was losing her mind. Her gaze locked on Postcard 55B.

The caption read ‘**Type of East Indian Woman.**” The young woman couldn’t have been much older than Kyra. She wore a cream-coloured sari patterned with vibrant roses, and a green veil with the same floral design and a border of gold. The veil was draped on the crown of her head, half covering her hair, flowing over her shoulders into a knot around the waist. Silver bangles clung to her wrists as though they too were skin, and she stood in front of a bamboo wall with her hands carefully posed — one arm tucked under her breasts supporting the other elbow so that she could rest her cheek on the point of her index finger and let her chin sit on the curve of her knuckles. But in centre of all this flowing softness, those deep sea trench irises were sharp enough to split diamond.

Kyra flipped the postcard over to read the words at the back. Her jaw screwed shut.

In smooth black ink and perfect penmanship, a single question was sprawled across the back.

What would you do with her?

Kyra scoffed. The person’s audacity was astounding. The postcard had been addressed to a Thomas H Carolly, Broadway, New York City. She wondered vaguely what his answer may have been. She flipped back to the postcard. Well, that explained the woman’s fuming expression completely. Only those who have been forced to keep quiet learn how to squeeze the noise out of their rage. Learn how to tuck it behind a scowl and thick slanting brows; how to curse with their teeth clamped together.

“I still remember the way he laughed when he was done,” the woman confessed.

Kyra screamed. The kind of strangled yowl a cat would make if you stepped on its tail. She scrambled out of the chair and away from the table. Ms. Johnson flew to her feet, rimless glasses lopsided and barely hanging on to her nose. “What is it? What happen?”

Kyra’s lips trembled and she pointed desperately at the folder.

The woman in the postcard laughed and laughed. It was the sound of wind chimes in a hurricane.

Ms. Johnson peered down at the postcards, lips twisted in concentration. Then she looked up at Kyra waiting for an explanation.

Her tongue went dry. Throat suddenly scratching. Couldn’t Ms. Johnson hear the voices too? The laughter? Of course, Kyra couldn’t ask that question out loud.

“Silverfish.” she blurted. “I saw a silverfish.”

Ms. Johnson shot her a disappointed frown.

“Young lady, you’re in a library,” she announced with a wagging finger. “Conduct yourself appropriately.”

Kyra nodded. She’d be conducting herself right out the door. Clearly the late nights and attempted study sessions were starting to get to her. She moved to close the folder.

“Wait!” Kyra froze at the command. “I’m sorry for scaring you.”

This could not be happening.

“It’s rare to find a listener,” the voice continued.

Okay, so this *was* happening. But Kyra was not going to stand there and listen to a postcard.

"You're not going crazy."

Maybe she would listen to the postcard for a little bit. She lowered herself down onto the very edge of her chair and eased the folder open again.

"Why can't she hear you?" Kyra whispered feeling ridiculous.

"Because that Ms. Johnson is never listening," the postcard woman replied. Her mouth was the only thing that shifted, and every time she stopped speaking it was as though she hadn't moved at all. Her lips were a ripple on a frozen lake.

Forgetting to whisper entirely, Kyra demanded: "But how it could be rare to find a listener, we're in a library, for Pete's sake?"

She could feel the heat of Ms. Johnson's glare at the back of her neck. Kyra cringed. If she wasn't careful she'd get put out.

The woman sighed, "You think a listener is just someone who isn't talking?"

Obviously not.

The woman continued, "It's more than keeping quiet, it's quieting your inside voice to focus on someone else's."

Well, now she sounded just like granny. Next she'd be saying that God gave everyone two ears and one mouth because he meant for people to listen twice as much as they talked. Kyra wanted to laugh. This didn't make any sense.

“Wait. How come you speak English like me?”

“I don’t.” The denial was quick and firm and in what sounded exactly like English to Kyra.

The woman in Postcard 55B shrugged. Kyra blinked at the movement of her shoulders. Impossible.

“Listeners understand,” she said. Yes, the words made sense, but no, Kyra did not quite understand. At this point, however, that seemed to be a recurring theme.

She continued, “But I think women have a common language.”

Kyra rubbed her temples. What was the remedy for hallucinations? There must be a bush tea for that. A cold rag and three-day nap would be a good start.

“Youmfhalftoelpus”

These words came muffled and distant and from an entirely different mouth. Kyra’s eyelids split wide open like automatic doors. Another woman had spoken. She flipped through the pages searching for the source of the garbled noise.

“I’m here.”

Kyra stopped.

Postcard 19B was a black and white photograph. A round faced woman in an ornate sari. She stood with her elbow resting beside a flower basket, both on top of a white pillar that was about waist height. From wrist to elbow she wore a sleeve of bangles, and held her own hand.

A nose ring rested on the peak of her lips and another one was hooked to a delicate chain. The chain hung like a hammock between the puffy curve of her nostril and the jewellery in her right ear. Her eyelids were more than halfway down, as though she couldn't bear to fully open them. A soft frown kept her lips pinched. There was some unnamable sadness trapped behind those clenched teeth.

"You have to help us." Her voice was quiet. The song of a shy bird.

Kyra didn't reply. She had become distracted by the words under the picture. The typewritten label read: **A wealthy** Indian **woman awaiting her husband.**

"Indian" was the only word written in pen. It was inserted above something that had been vigorously scratched off. Kyra squinted. Tilted her head to the left. It was just about six letters at most. There was an L in the middle and it seemed to have started with a C.

Kyra's cheeks filled with sand. All of a sudden her tongue was the Sahara desert and the word was a cactus at the back of her throat. Granny would have grabbed her face and scrubbed her mouth with a whole bar of blue soap if she'd even dared to think or whisper the C word, and yet here it was. Permanently printed on a postcard. A slur. Casually used as label. It seemed that someone had tried to cover it up. To soften the blow. But wrapping a bandage around a cutlass does nothing for a bleeding wound. And there is no ink thick enough to bury a word so sharp. A word that had been first uttered over a century ago, but was still echoing and echoing and echoing.

Beneath the label, there was a sentence, written by the same hand. A message to the recipient of the postcard.

"Here's another one to add to your collection."

Kyra flinched. Gut twisted into knots.

“You have to help us!” The woman was more insistent now, voice trembling with desperation and urgency.

“Tell me how.” Kyra was willing to do anything.

“First: you have to get us out of here.”

Anything except for that.

“I can’t,” Kyra said immediately.

“They say if you carry a postcard back to the exact place where the photograph was taken you can open a door — ”

“That’s not how life works,” Kyra objected, painfully aware of the irony. She was talking to a postcard after all. The impossible had already happened. Why would they be wrong about this? But it didn’t matter if they were right. They were asking her to risk too much. If she got caught, no one would call this a rescue; they’d call it a robbery.

“Please, you must take us with you.” The words were wet and anguished like they had bubbled up from a shipwreck. These women had been trapped for so long. Who knew when another listener would stumble upon them? If Kyra didn’t help, it might be decades or centuries before someone heard their voices. She was all they had. It should have been someone else. Someone braver.

“I really should be studying” Kyra blurted. It sounded stupid when she said it out loud. What did talking postcards care for exams? Not postcards, women; real women trapped

inside. Could she really leave them behind? Kyra chewed on her bottom lip; teeth scraping pink skin. Her throat was closing up just imagining how tight and small it must be in there.

"She's just like the others. Only cares about her own freedom." The woman from Postcard 55B had a voice that cut through the folder easily. The carailli bitterness of her tone made Kyra hot with shame. She didn't dare flip back and meet the fury in those pitch black eyes.

The woman said, "The only thing worse than the people who can't hear us are the people who listen and ignore."

•

"Everything is as you found it?" Ms. Johnson asked sternly. The sweet auntie aura was gone now. She closed her novel and adjusted her glasses.

"Yes," Kyra said, wiping the sweat from her forehead. The fewer words she spoke the better.

Ms. Johnson narrowed her eyes and reached for a pen to sign off the form. Then she paused, hand hovering and slowly put the pen down. She opened the folder, flipping through the pages one at a time. Kyra sucked in her cheeks. Was it something in her face? Was it the quiver of her voice? Kyra had tried not to look guilty. She had also tried not to look like she was trying not to look guilty. She had hoped that an innocent expression was somewhere in between. Perhaps now was the time to start calling on every holy name she knew. Ms. Johnson flipped another page. Kyra exhaled, fingers tapping against the counter. The clock in the corner of the room dragged from tick to tock. Ms. Johnson was still going. If she reached to page fifteen then, Kyra was busted. Her chest tightened. Just one more page.

"Ms. Johnson?" She all but yelled. The woman jumped losing her grip on the folder and allowing it to fall shut.

“Not so loud!” she snapped holding her chest looking entirely flabbergasted. Kyra apologised sheepishly.

“I just wanted to say … thanks.” She trailed off.

Eager to get her out, Ms. Johnson put a hasty scribble on the signature line and shooed at the door.

•

She was finally outside the library, but Kyra was still running. Bag thumping against her back. Lungs bursting. Throat full of *What now? What now?* The other students paid her no mind. It was exam season. There was always someone in a hurry. Luckily for Kyra, it is difficult to tell the difference between someone who is running to and someone who is running from. When she reached the bus route she jerked to a stop, taking heaving breaths. She still needed to put more distance between her and the crime scene, but had no idea where to go.

“Where am I taking you?” she asked, looking down at her belly. The postcard women were safely tucked inside her hoodie pocket. Of all the times to be silent, the women chose now. Kyra wanted to scream.

The maxis kept blowing their horns. Kyra waved them away. She needed a destination first. She fished out the postcards; all three of them. When she had finally caved, the two women insisted that she bring along a third postcard, a woman labelled “West Indian Type.” Kyra didn't understand why. The woman hadn’t said a single thing.

“Tell me where?” she demanded. The woman standing beside her shot her a concerned glance.

“I don’t remember yet.” The woman in Postcard 55B’s voice was a mere whisper.

Kyra’s eyes stretched wide. A scandalous laugh bubbled past her lips. She didn't remember?

“Memories go bad when you don’t think about them, and it was so painful I — ” Her eyes fluttered close.

“So you just forgot everything?” Kyra asked, feeling hysterical. “Do you even know your names?”

The women said nothing. A maelstrom of emotion rolled like thunder in Kyra’s chest. In the burgeoning silence, she heard what they could not explain with words: the way they had been buried alive. That every ounce of their energy had been used to hold on to their voices. Before they had ended up in the Goldberg collection they had travelled; from hand to hand, from wall to scrapbook to desk drawer to journal. They had been forgotten and remembered. Discarded and found. Over and over. They had watched the world they knew swallowed by a new world. A world with loud metal cars everywhere and unbelievably tall buildings and even taller women.

Women who were the daughters of their daughters. Women with faces like theirs. Women wearing what only men were allowed, talking and leading and devouring the world. They wanted to be among them. They wanted to know that kind of freedom.

A free woman knows just what to call herself. Their given names were not as important as the names they would choose when they found freedom.

Kyra took a breath, desperate to slow her racing heart. It felt as though she’d been there with them.

At the next round of insistent beeping, Kyra bolted towards the nearest maxi. No point in standing around. What if Ms. Johnson was calling the campus police right now? Kyra shoved the postcards back into her pocket. She needed to think, and she couldn't do it hyperventilating at the side of the road under midday sun.

Kyra leaned against the window, praying the maxi man wouldn't notice and get vex. She needed to rest her head somewhere. Her temples were pounding; brain heavy with panic.

"Brunswick Square," a voice croaked. It scratched and cracked as though each syllable was a shard of glass. Kyra didn't bother to look around. The way her morning had gone she knew to check the postcards first. Still, this voice was unfamiliar.

She spread them out on her lap, eyes narrowing on the third one. Surely a broken voice like that hadn't come from her. Postcard 51A was labelled "West Indian Type." The day her photograph was taken she had stared up at the camera with large eyes. Her irises were deep and full of challenge. Hair was mostly hidden by a head wrap that was tied using a technique that Kyra had never seen before. Chunky silver earrings and what seemed to be three layers of a beaded pearl necklace. She was dark-skinned and had a face that reminded Kyra of her mother. Those big cheeks that became the perfect frame for a shapely nose and that mouth curved upward with an almost smile. It was the sort of smile you gave to someone who thought they were funny and thought you were amused but who was, in fact, wrong about both things. She looked like the type to laugh boisterously for ages after a good joke was told.

The woman began again, "Bruns-"

"I heard you," Kyra said, eager to spare her the repetition, "but I don't know where that is."

Was that somewhere down South?

“It’s in town,” the woman from Postcard 19B chimed in helpfully. Kyra narrowed her eyes. So now she had something to say. Well it was just as well, they were headed that way. Kyra had been planning to go to her grandmother’s house in Petit Valley. If anyone would believe this ridiculous story, Granny would.

A quick Google search showed her that Brunswick Square was now what she knew as Woodford Square. Sure enough, Kyra knew how to find that. But this picture didn’t look like it was taken in the square.

“Where exactly?”

“Greyfriars church.” she croaked. “Mr. Morin.”

Unlike the others, no part of her moved when she spoke. It seemed only her voice was left.

“She’s the one who told us of the door,” Postcard 55 said, “listen to her.”

Kyra nodded. Now she had to figure out who exactly this Mr. Morin was supposed to be.

•

“One tuh go. One tuh go.” The taxi driver hustled her towards his car. When she slid into the backseat she realised it was in fact only her and a lady in the front seat. Kyra rolled her eyes. It was always the same lies with these drivers.

“I’ll pay fuh the backseat,” Kyra said. The taxi man nodded gruffly and hopped in. He bounced the starter and pulled out into the traffic. Kyra was relieved for the extra space; she didn’t need anyone sitting beside her asking questions. She spread the women out on the empty seat beside her. Apparently they hated the darkness of her pocket. It reminded them too much of the closed folder.

“Let me see,” the woman from 19B asked eagerly. Her low-lidded eyes were wide open for the first time. Kyra chuckled at her excitement. Town would have no doubt been different in their time. She held them all up against the window and smiled at their gasps of surprise.

Kyra’s eyes narrowed when she noticed a few words written on the back of the woman in postcard 51A. After having seen the inscriptions on the others, she was curious to know what this writer had thought about the “West Indian Type.”

“What did they say about you?” she mused aloud.

“Don’t look.” the woman rasped. But Kyra was already peering down at the sentence.

“Do not!” the woman screeched. It was too late. Kyra had read it. Her whole body clenched. Toes curling under themselves. Cheeks between her teeth. Such ugly words. Kyra blinked rapidly, trying to keep her eyelashes dry. The entire Caribbean Sea had somehow filled the cup of her eyelids and was trying to high-tide her cheeks.

“I’m sorry.” Shame made her face grow hot. She was afraid to face the woman but didn’t want to see the words anymore. She turned her over even as regret swelled in her chest.

The woman’s mouth had opened in a silent cry.

“They’re just words.” Kyra rushed to offer comfort. The taxi man took his eyes off the road to look back at her. Kyra jerked her chin forward as if to say watch the road. The man adjusted his red cap, let out a wet steups, and muttered something about St. Ann’s people. The lady in the front seat made a show of shoving her forehead closer to her phone.

The woman in Postcard 51A was gasping, throat pulsing violently.

“I’ve carried this,” the woman heaved, “on my back ... for more than a century.”

She whimpered as the flashbacks unfurled. Those hands held her down. Callus-free but rough in manner. She remembered sobbing into the mahogany desk, the scent of the wood and the flickering of the candle lamp. She had never gotten a good look at that person’s face, but she had felt their pen. Felt it pierce through the paper and into her body. Every stroke sliced through skin, flesh, and bone. She remembered the moment when the words seeped into her bloodstream. Since then, she could feel them thumping through every blood vessel. With every pump of her heart the words echoed.

A chicken — in tin jewellery.
A chicken — in tin jewellery.
A chicken — in tin jewellery.

They had squealed with laughter while writing. She was nothing but meat to them; something that belonged on their dinner plate.

“Just words” the woman sputtered, “Just words are enough.”

•

The church had been destroyed. The outer walls gave a small hint of what was once a grand structure, but the skeletal remains of that ancient building were now being used as a carpark. The lady inside the small security shed was watching Kyra suspiciously. No doubt she was wondering why Kyra had been pacing up and down the pavement for the last ten minutes.

Kyra didn’t know what else to do. After she had shown the women what had become of the church they had been completely flabbergasted. All except “West Indian Type”, she had just blinked mutely at the endless rows of cars. She hadn’t made a single sound since the

taxi. Kyra had bitten her cheek and decided to do everything she could to set this woman free. She had to earn her forgiveness.

Based on her research, the church used to be a landmark to find some guy named Felix Morin who used to run a photo studio nearby. But that was during the mid-1800s. Where was it now? Or rather, where had it been then? Kyra had trekked up and down and inside the nearby buildings. She had held up the postcards trying to find the right position but nothing happened. No portal had opened. No glowing door. No wobbling vortex. She had endured the weird looks from customers and staff. In the last place, the stink eye from the security led to her being escorted out. Now she was back at the once holy parking lot trying not to look like she was about to liberate someone's car.

"This whole plan buss," she mumbled to herself. It had been a waste, coming here.

She held them in both hands, "I'm sorry."
They exploded into a chorus of objections. She didn't want to let them down. She had really believed that somehow she could help them fix things. She wanted them to live their true stories; to write their own messages and not have to carry the ones written by others, but she couldn't help. She had failed; just like she'd be failing her exam tomorrow. They whimpered softly in stunned grief.

Kyra groaned miserably. "There's nothing I can do. It didn't work. I'll have to put you all back."
The words made her heart revolt. Could she really just abandon them in the library again?

The woman with her mother's mouth wailed. The gut-wrenching cry made Kyra want to vomit. This is the sound a dying body makes when you say there is no resurrection. The woman's glassy eyes roved about wildly. Her body trembled the way a statue would before it moved for the first time. With great effort her arms came loose. Every movement was a struggle; a sudden jerk of limbs. There was no flow, only a desperate staccato. The woman

beat her fists against the postcard as though she was behind a glass screen; as though she could smash her way out. She did not want to spend eternity in these four corners. She wanted to run and feel the wind; to smell a bubbling pot on the fire; to hold children in her arms; to sink her toes into sand; to finally learn how to swim.

The woman's fists dropped limply to her sides. Defeat warped her lips and the light in her eyes dimmed. There was no going back and no escaping into this future. What was the use of a voice with no one to listen?

"No reason to hold on now," she said. Was she going to let herself fade into non-existence like the other silent postcards had?

"Wait." Kyra almost shouted, "No, don't do that. Don't give up."

"Why? You clearly have."

"I —" Kyra floundered for an excuse and then took a breath. "It was a moment of weakness. You'll stay with me till we figure this out."

There must be something or somewhere else they could try. Kyra was bound to them now. They had called her a listener. Maybe that was how she'd start. She could help to release — not the women in the postcards — but the women they were without the camera's flashing eye. The women they were when they weren't told how to pose. When their bodies were slack and free; stomachs relaxed and arms loose. When their lips weren't pursed and eyebrows were softened. When they took the necklaces off and hid them. When they danced barefoot to the sound of nearby drums; when they sang with their mothers in the kitchen; when they held their nephews and kissed every inch of face; forehead, cheeks, and chin. When they mourned their grandparents; when they dreamed; when they blushed and cried thinking of marriage; when they rubbed their swollen stomach or when they prayed.

She was sick of calling them by their file names. They were not just numbers and letters for a place in a folder. They had been flesh and blood like her. They had cried and laughed in her same Trinidad and Tobago. They had breathed air from the same kind of trees she walked past to get to school.

"I will help you to remember" Kyra swore. She would not give up until they had their names again. If they chose new ones, she would be the first to say them out loud. Even within the four corners of a postcard they would find freedom.

TYPE OF INDIAN WOMAN. TRINIDAD.

Cadman 2/7/11 Wilsons Ltd. Trinidad.

4⁰⁰/

POST CARD.

What would you do with her

Cadman

5394

TRINIDAD

Thomas H Carroll

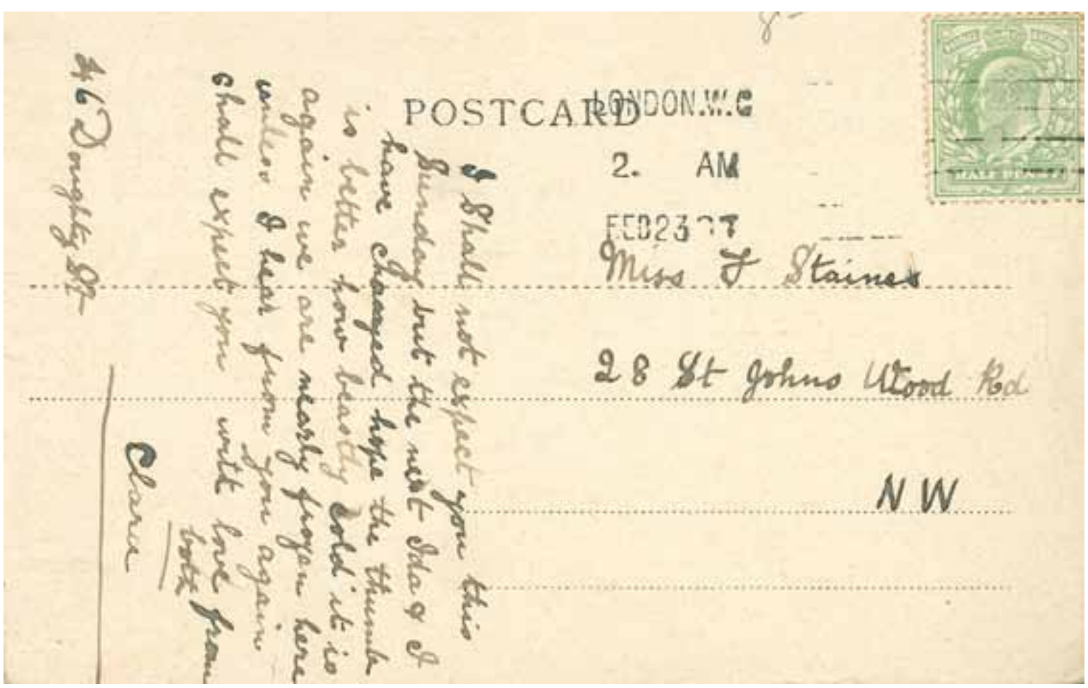
258 Broadway

Newyork City

U.S.A. Newyork

Trinidad. A wealthy Indian Woman awaiting her husband.

Here is another for your collection



WEST INDIAN TYPE.

POST CARD

8—

STAMP

This space may be used for communication.

The ADDRESS only to be written here.

a chicken - in Tin Jersey

The Knowles Smith Bros. & Co. Port of Spain. Trinidad.
Printed in Germany.

Folk Research Centre: The Fire's Light

Kendel Hippolyte

The Folk Research Centre, located on Calvary Road, Castries, was destroyed by fire, according to official reports.

Emergency officials received the report at 10.19 pm Sunday, March 25, 2018 and units from Gros Islet and Castries were dispatched.

The building was found partially engulfed in flames when firefighters arrived, and despite their efforts the building was completely destroyed.

There were no reports of loss of life or injuries.

The cause of the fire is currently under investigation.

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Ma Titeen:

"Come children, come. Gather round the fire."
"Ma Titeen, it hot!"
"And sparks flying!"
"Children, the heat will not kill you. The sparks will fall on you, yes. But they will not burn you. Not the sparks from this fire. And the light from this fire is the light we need to see our way. Come."
"Alright, Ma Titeen"
"Everybody, gather. We starting the story. I di Kwik!"
"Kwak!"
"Once upon a time, it had a place they call Folk Research Centre. All kinds of people get accustom to it and they take it into their lives — so easy, they just used to say 'FRC'. You see like how so many people cannot bother make their tongue stretch and twist and say 'Monsignor Patrick Angus Butcher Anthony' and they does just say Paba? So, same way — FRC."

****

The Poet's journal:

Somewhere in the mid-twentieth century in Saint Lucia, it seems to me (but perhaps it seems so only because I was born in 1952), a fissure appeared. Or perhaps it's that it began to be even more apparent in the 1950s. Or more likely, it's that each new generation always looks back to its arrival into the world-welter as a period of breaking from the past; whether on a large scale or small, whether dramatically or subtly.

A fissure … in what? In the transmission of knowledge of ways of living ("values" is the too-easily said word) from one generation to the next. The fissure was, naturally, most apparent in the capital, Castries. In more and more homes, the wicks in the Home Sweet Home kerosene lamps were lowered for the last time and the light switch, to the right or left of the front door as you entered, was clicked on smartly and brilliant electric light filled the room; without the least flickering shadow, even when an early night breeze came through an open jalousie window.

Saint Lucia, like most of the world, was struggling through a transition that was centuries old, country after country and people after people encountering it in the unfolding of their histories. The transition is too vast and complex for all its aspects to be comprehensively named within any one framework of vocabulary but of course there must be attempts: village to city, rural economy to industrial, communal to individual … these are flailing and inadequate lassos of language that the reality always slips out of. But what is always true is that in all transitions something is lost, something is discovered, something dies, something is born. All transition is a transforming. And then it is the looking-back, seeing clearly what was, which allows one to gauge the meaning, and therefore the worth, of the transition. This everyday phenomenon of looking-back — over the day, over the life, over the generations — we call memory. It is unutterably mysterious — yet taken as normal, a given.

But what happens when memory diminishes — whether gradually, as in the inevitable, subtle disappearances and alterations of aspects of tradition even within stable societies; or disjointedly, as can sometimes happen in jagged transitions between the ways and words of one generation and the next; or suddenly, from the rip of a catastrophe? Is it then, on a social scale, as it is individually in some manifestations of aphasia, when the words for naming things are simply no longer there, a section of the brain de-activating, going dark, as it were? Is this what happens after the Folk Research Centre fire?

Voices in streets, workplaces, homes, the inside-spaces:

"Choops! … Look, is not dat I eh sorry de place burn, you know. I sorry. But! … Really, wha's de use of a place like dat for a man like me? If it dere, if it not dere — what? Da eh putting two cents in my pocket, dread."

"But what caused the fire? There's talk going around about arson. Is that true?"
"I doh know. Nobody know."

"That's the troubling thing. Nobody official saying definitely yes or definitely no."

"The silence is deafening."

"Well, whatever the cause … it's happened. Maybe it's time now to salvage something from the disaster. Mount Pleasant is a great location for something that can earn some substantial tourist

dollars. Maybe a high-end restaurant … High-end condo development. Something along that line. Fantastic view of the harbour!"

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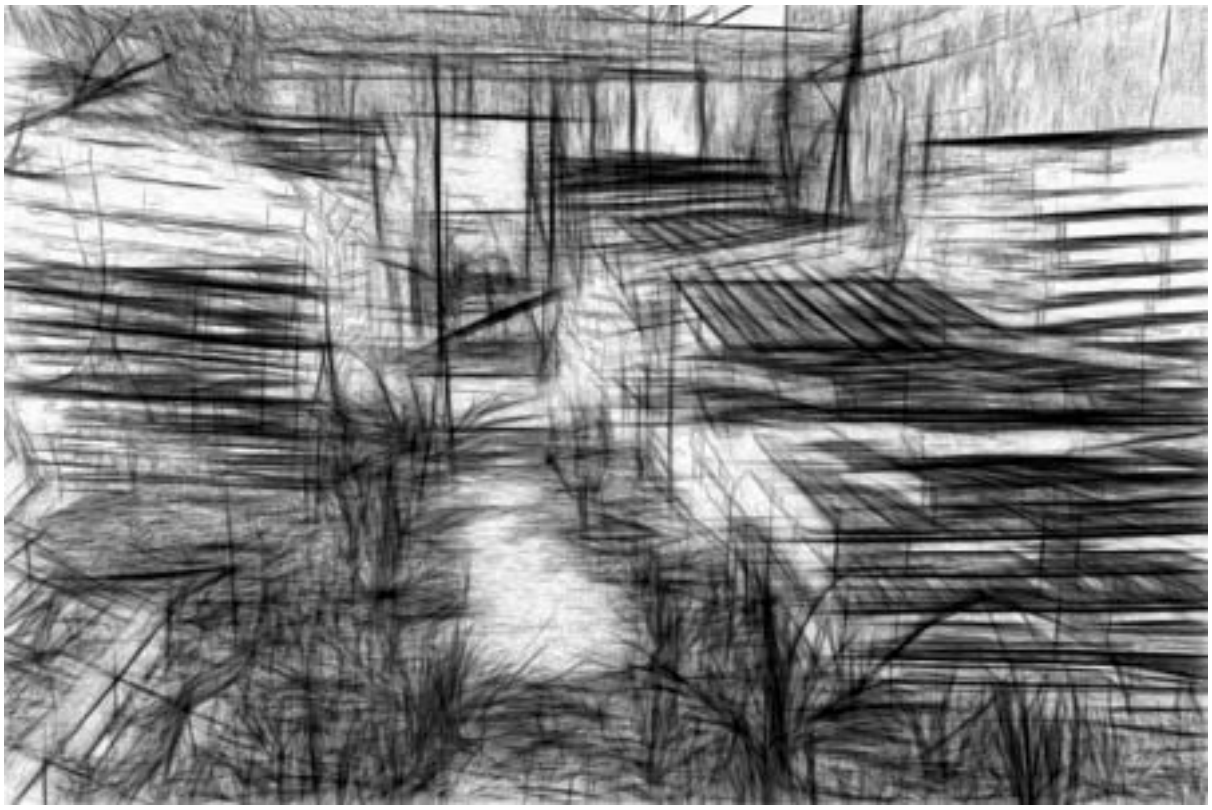
The Poet's journal:

The photographs show virulent red and orange undifferentiated flames swirled within and around and over vertical black shapes. A visual silent howl.

I was speaking, weeks later, to a friend and colleague, a man whose personal history was closely intertwined with the history of FRC:

"After the fire, I couldn't go to the site. Debra telling me, 'You have to go.' I say I cyah go. Debra saying, 'You must go!' … Eventually, Is Debra that practically put me in her car and drive me there."

I understand all too well what my friend is speaking of. No, not true. I do not understand. I only know. Neither of us understand.



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Voices in streets, workplaces, homes, the inside-spaces:

"I eh care what nobody say! Dey burn de place down so foreigners could come and buy de land! Make FRC a offer da it cyah refuse because it on it ass now. All it books, papers, tapes, everything — gone up in flames! De building dere, big gaps in it, like a old fella mouth dat missin' teeth, and only pink gums you seeing and some rotten teeth in the back of the mouth. What you t'ink dem FRC people go say if dey get a good offer? 'No'? You mad!"

"Dread, dem foreigners eh even have to make no big offer! Dey just telling de guavament, 'Acquire dat!' And boom! Dat done! Money pass under de table and — two twos! De place have a different name. FRC — Foreigners Run Country!"

"Someone told me that the day after the last elections — so June 7th 2016, right? — a prominent businessman, who just happens to be the father of the new prime minister, was walking the property in the company of two other men. Obviously foreign."

"Yo! Careful what y'all saying there. Y'all cyah prove it, so shut up. When you end up in front a magistrate and take a jail, i eh spending bus fare to come and visit you, eh!"

"Your mudda go come and visit me! Dread, I eh putting no brakes on my mouth. Tell dem Is I, Kadon-I, say so! Dem big man and dem burn de place so foreigners could get to buy the property!"

"So up to now, no word? The cause of the fire has still not been established? Up to now?"

"The silence is deafening."

****

The Poet's journal:

Beyond political animus, beyond the partisan snapping, there is a baffled, muted rage and sadness underneath the questions. What is the source of it? For many, it is a sense of a deep violation. Like when one heard, not all that long ago, that the collection boxes in the Roman Catholic Cathedral in Castries (the ones where persons dropped their anonymous coins for the charities of the poor and needy) had been broken into. Even if one was not Roman Catholic, or one was anti-church, there was a feeling of sacrilege. Shock at the vulgar shamelessness and shamefulness of it.

For persons who have visited FRC, taken students there, attended events, taken part in the Saint Lucia Studies Conference, that sense of violation hums in a bass register, chest-deep. I know that — almost instantaneously with hearing about the fire — I buried alive my approaching sense of an irreplaceable loss; didn't let it reach me. Wouldn't go to the gathering some days after where Paba was going to present his vision of and plans for a renewed FRC. I felt both numb and cynical. It all seemed quixotic to me, a desperate clinging to teats that had dried, an illogical refusal to accept loss. I had vague wisps of intentions of going to the site, a kind of cultural ground zero, but they never solidified into the bus ride, the walk up the hill, the arrival at the

stoic husk of the stone building and then finally ***seeing*** it. I had, and still have, no name for what in I resisted.

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<u>*Ma Titeen:*</u>

Come, children, come. Gather round. Come, doh back away from the fire. Look into the flames. What you seeing? Spirits there, flickering in these tongues of flame. Look. They talking to us. Listen:

"I am still here. Mwen la toujou."

… Yes, Misyé Harry Simmons. We see you.

"I am still here. Mwen la toujou. Manmay-la di 'Way'."

… Nou ka di 'Way', Sessenne. 'Waaaay.'

"I am still here. In this blessing of baptism by fire."

… Thank you, Mister Derek. For reminding us.

"I am still here. This fire will make a great painting!"

… Mister Dunstan, one of us will paint it.

Children, your answers making my heart glad. And making their spirits glad. I di Kwik.

Kwak.

****

The Poet's journal:

Memory

Say it … Say the word ... Slowly ... Not in your mind ... Not reading it ... But out loud ... Saying it … Lips, tongue, throat, chest … What happens in You, in I, when the word is sounded? …

If memory is as necessary to the mind as breathing is to the body, then memory is the air of meaning. Without memory, meaning — quite simply — cannot happen. By itself, memory is no guarantee of meaning. But without memory, no meaning can be experienced. And the less the memory, the less the meaning. This is so in the most ordinary, mundane, average ways and doings of our days. One act does not automatically and irresistibly lead to another, no matter how much it may seem so.

You get up from the table where you are eating a meal, walk a few steps …
Pause.
The salt or pepper or teaspoon is there.
You do not remember that this is why you got up from the table.
There is no memory to carry you from one act to the next. A momentary blank.

Then, most times, after a few seconds, memory clicks. And you get the salt, pepper, teaspoon, whatever …

Prolonged durations of this state, especially among older persons, is called — at least for now, and within a certain socio-cultural milieu — dementia. Perhaps that brief lapse, that total void for a few seconds, was a momentary dementia? A mild degree of it? No? There may be scope here for a profound socio-cultural debate or this can all be dismissed as overstretching a specific concept. Just fanciful cerebral wordplay. The unavoidable observation, though, is that for a few seconds memory vanished.

And for those few seconds, with purpose lost, meaning vanished.

Sometimes, in that suspension of purposeful action, what happens is not a pause, not stasis, but — action. Tapping feet, looking from one object to the next to the next, muttering to yourself, retracing your steps … active, nervous movements. But movements with a different purpose; not to get the salt, pepper, spoon - because these are no longer in memory — but to find your original purpose, to recover the meaning of why you moved in the first place. Nervous actions, which can even become frenetic. With memory restored, all falls back into place. Purpose. And therefore — meaning.

A society can be like that. Can go through that same process: pause; or slew into more or less frenetic action, trying to recover its lost purpose. If it does, it finds meaning. If it does not, the frenetic action escalates, can go into frenzy. For a person, the return of memory after the pause or nervous activity may take seconds. For a society, it can take years, even decades. And perhaps these years or decades of flailing activity can be seen as mass dementia, though normalized. And its cure is memory.

The Folk Research Centre was (is?) a gateway into memory. Not memory itself, but a portal.

Why "not memory itself"? Because that is within us. But memory of what? And how is it within us? This is what I seek to understand.

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The Poet's journal:

Were we too confident about storage and digital archiving as some have suggested and some loudly denunciated? There is a paradox in this loss which has not been brought into the light. A number of the items which were destroyed had, in fact, already been in storage at the National Archives where storage is more secure. And over the years there had been discussions about digitalising the FRC holdings. Funding and hands-on expert help were far less in supply — as always — than advice, which is always plentiful. The items at the National Archives had been brought back to FRC in an attempt to make its documentation centre/library more functional — a depleted library is of limited value to a researcher. But then it was decided to bring the items back to the National Archives. The theoretically simple issue of securing a van or other suitable vehicle for long enough to make the number of trips required to do so was not, is not, in practice simple. A cash-strapped, skeleton staff organisation is dependent, for some of its operations, on favours and goodwill and a synchronicity of those with practical factors like enough available hands to do the carrying and packing. It is all possible. But the when of that possibility is what is always in hazard until it is done. The timing is all.

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The Poet's journal:

I asked three persons — Paba, Robert, Embert — each deeply connected to FRC, to each write a gut-reaction list of ten "items" of deep significance to them which had been destroyed by the fire. Here are some fragments of each list:

Robert:

1. The Arts Guild Scrapbook.

2. The Harold Simmons books, paintings, artefacts — like the traditional dress from Dominica, his collected writings in manuscript.

3. The clay relief of Sesenne Descartes.

Embert:

1. Interviews with our elders on hours of Umatic video tape — Liza Maxwell sharing stories with a group of trainee teachers at her house in Goodlands; Joseph Wells talking about Kele with us at his house in Vieux Fort; Doodoo dancing, demonstrating and speaking about the many dances of the Koutumba.

2. Piles of high quality blank and white photos taken by Manfred Kremser and his team from the University of Vienna. Pictures of basket making, the pottery, thatched roofs … and … and …

3. Hundreds of photographs and negative film of over three decades of calypso seasons and calypsonians which were captured only by FRC during the heyday of production of the Lucian Kaiso magazine. The lyrics donated by calypsonians also.

Paba:

1. The three portraits of Derek, Harry and Dunstan, which I called '"The St. Omer Triptych". I commissioned the portraits in the 70s; paid Dunstan a few hundred dollars each, while joking among ourselves that one day these portraits would cost a fortune!

2. All the Administrative records of FRC which were not stored in Cloud.

3. A portrait of myself, painted by the late Polish-St. Lucian artist Sophie Messing, which I'd recently donated to FRC. This portrait had great spiritual significance for me because of what happened once during a sitting for the painting.

   The artist had begged me several times to let her paint my portrait. I protested, claiming lack of patience for the number of sittings required. Eventually, I grudgingly yielded. After about three sittings, I insisted on viewing what she had sketched so far since I was getting impatient as I'd warned her. She absolutely refused to let me view the sketch, protesting that this is her professional style, and that she never permits her subjects to view anything but the final product. We argued and bargained. I said there would be no more sittings and that she could abandon the project which she was doing gratis.

   Eventually, we agreed that I would return for one more sitting, after which she would allow me to assess her progress. At the end of that sitting, again she was reluctant to show me the canvas, but realizing that I was visibly upset, relented. Slowly she took the canvas from the easel and turned it towards me. I gasped! My jaw dropped in shock! "I warned you," she said, and asked, "What is it?" Staring right at me from the canvas was the spitting image of my dead grandfather, whom the woman had not known. Stunned, I stuttered, "It's my dead grandfather! How did you know what he looked like?" I stupidly asked. She calmly retorted, "I'm just painting you, that's what I see." She went on to explain that this has happened with several of her previous clients, that's why she's so insistent on not letting people see her unfinished portraits. She asked if I wanted to continue the project. Sheepishly I conceded, and sat through two other sittings without protesting, refusing to look at the canvas until it was finished. In the end, the portrait looked like me, but the artist had gone through my grandfather to me or rather had found my grandfather in me. That portrait was one of the dearest treasures lost in the March 25th fire.

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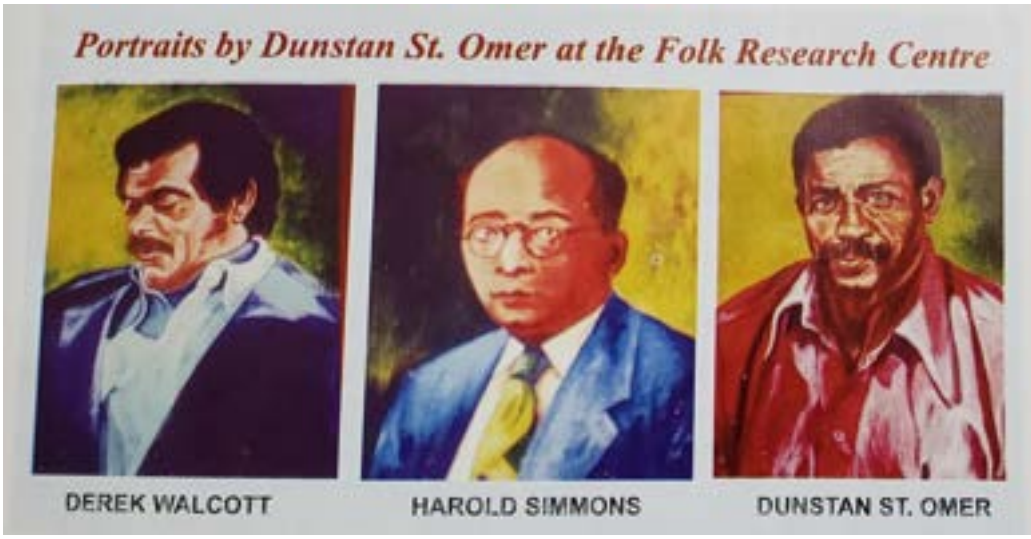

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Ma Titeen:

"Children, we going to do riddles now. Tim-tim!"
"Bwa chèz!
"Ki sa Bondyé mété asou late-a?" (What God put on the earth?)
"Tout chòz!" (Everything!")
"Dachin-la anba tè, mé i ka viv toujou. Ki sa sa ye?" (The dasheen buried in the ground but it living still. What is that?)
"Sé nou!" (That's us.)

****

The Poet's Journal:

The full significance — and value — of that loss will gradually become clearer over the years. With psychic distance, the light of the flames will illuminate the meaning. The crackling sting of its heat will abate. Some clarity will come.

Are there wraiths in the ashes? Are there beings in the surrounding vegetation in the shapes of birds, leaves, insects, twigs on the ground, telling us ***IT*** Is All Still There? That, beyond the

fragments, what FRC has been trying to keep us linked with — IS ALL STILL THERE? IS ALWAYS THERE?

For the younger generation, my 22-year old son's generation, the question I must reflect on honestly: Can you lose what you don't know you've lost? Can something really be missing if you don't know and feel that it's missing?

The questions draw you inevitably, like undersea currents, into the deeper questions, the unfamiliar moving dark of the recurring existential issues: Why are we here? What is this irreducibly mysterious phenomenon of Life — and within that, of human life? What are human lives (and therefore the societies within which these human lives transpire) for? What are we here for? There is no answer that will rationally satisfy the intellect completely. Ever. Centuries of discussion and systematic philosophies bring us again and again to bafflement, to positings of first premises which can always be questioned intellectually. Ratiocination is voracious and omnivorous.

And always, alongside ratiocination there has ever been another mode of comprehending; it carries the blurry label of "Faith". The word covers everything from a blinkered, unquestioning acceptance to an acute, penetrating investigation of reality — but from within another mode than the intellectual. And, like the intellectual, with its own irreducible premises — but experiential. And "Faith" apprehends what the purely or mainly cerebral cannot apprehend.

What does all this have to do with FRC?

The Folk Research Centre came into being out of "Faith". First, Faith that there is an intrinsic purpose to existence; and within that, to human existence. Faith that human societies exist to try to fulfil this purpose. Faith that the efforts to fulfil this purpose (and these efforts have material and non-material aspects) are what civilization is, whether the societies are Kalahari hunter-gatherers or a sprawling megalopolis like London — and keep in mind also that a hunter-gatherer society may sometimes be closer to fulfilling this purpose than a famous city. Faith that within this global mosaic of civilizations, each piece unique, there is a specific cluster of pieces called Caribbean Civilization. Faith that within Caribbean Civilization, Saint Lucia's unique piece is worthy of deep study and the developing knowledge of it is worthy of transmission down the generations.

And this Faith cannot be destroyed by flames.

Here is a saying that has come down through the generations in Saint Lucia:
Sa ki la pou ou, lamè pa sa chayé'y.
What is there for you, the sea cannot take away.

And what is in you …

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<u>*Ma Titeen*</u>:
"Come, children, come. Gather round the flames. I di Kwik … "

Photo credits: All the photographs except the last two are by McDonald Dixon, ridiculously multi-talented writer and visual artist. The photograph of the clay pot — called a kanawi in Kwéyòl (still intact after the fire) — is by John Robert Lee.

About Caribbean Literary Heritage

CARIBBEAN LITERARY HERITAGE is funded by a Leverhulme Trust Research Project Grant, and is particularly interested in neglected Anglophone Caribbean writers (1930–1980) and writings at risk of being lost. We want to understand how fuller literary histories can be told and how their sources can be identified, preserved, and made accessible. We hope that engaging with living writers across generations to raise awareness around the value of their manuscripts, correspondence, and other papers will help to safeguard future literary histories in the making. We also recognise that literary heritage is a living connection between the present and the past, as much as a set of material sources, and are interested in what is relevant and inspiring for readers and researchers today.
https://caribbeanliteraryheritage.domains.uflib.ufl.edu/about/

About the Bocas Lit Fest

Founded in 2010, and based in Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago, the BOCAS LIT FEST is a not-for-profit organisation working to develop and promote Caribbean writers and writing, through an annual literary festival — the NGC Bocas Lit Fest — a series of prizes and fellowships, including the annual OCM Bocas Prize for Caribbean Literature, and year-round projects aimed at writer and reader development. These include programmes for children and young adults, regular workshops and seminars, and the Peekash Press imprint.
https://www.bocaslitfest.com

About the writers

ALISON DONNELL is Professor of Modern Literatures in English at the University of East Anglia. She has an established international profile in the field of Caribbean literature, and has

published widely including *Companion to Anglophone Caribbean Literature* (co-edited with Michael Bucknor); *Selected Poems of Una Marson*; *Twentieth Century Caribbean Literature: Critical Moments in Anglophone Literary and Critical History*, and *Caribbean Irish Connections: interdisciplinary Perspectives* (co-edited with Evelyn O'Callaghan and Maria McGarrity). Her monograph *Creolized Sexualities: Undoing Heteronormativity in the Literary Imagination of the Anglo-Caribbean* was published in Rutgers Critical Caribbean Series in 2022. Her recent works reflect her ongoing commitment to exploring and expanding literary histories, including a special double issue of *Caribbean Quarterly* on Caribbean Literary Archives and her General Editorship of *Caribbean Literature in Transition, 1800–2020* (3 volumes). She was invited to deliver the National Library of Jamaica's 2016 Annual Distinguished Lecture and The University of the West Indies' Annual Distinguished Edward Baugh Lecture in 2022.

NICHOLAS LAUGHLIN, born and based in Trinidad, is the festival and programme director of the Bocas Lit Fest, former editor of *The Caribbean Review of Books* and *Caribbean Beat*, and a co-director of the contemporary art collective Alice Yard. He has published two books of poems, most recently *Enemy Luck* (2019), and edited volumes of C.L.R. James's early essays (*Letters from London*, 2003) and V.S. Naipaul's family correspondence (*Letters Between a Father and Son*, 2009), as well as the anthology *So Many Islands: Stories from the Caribbean, Mediterranean, Indian and Pacific Oceans* (2018).

ANDRE BAGOO is a poet and writer from Trinidad. He is the author of several books of poetry, including *Trick Vessels* (Shearsman, 2012), *Pitch Lake* (Peepal Tree Press, 2017), and *Narcissus* (Broken Sleep, 2022). His poetry has appeared in journals such as *Boston Review, Cincinnati Review, St Petersburg Review, PN Review, POETRY*, and *The Poetry Review*. He was awarded The Charlotte and Isidor Paiewonsky Prize in 2017. His essay collection *The Undiscovered Country* was published by Peepal Tree Press in 2020 and won the 2021 OCM Bocas Prize for Non-Fiction. His fiction debut, *The Dreaming*, was published by Peepal Tree in 2022.

ANU LAKHAN is a writer and editor. Her poetry, fiction and sometimes-experimental literary criticism have appeared in *Poetry* magazine, *sx salon*, *Bomb*, *Wasafiri*, and other Caribbean and

not-Caribbean spaces. She lives in Trinidad and Tobago. Her weekly column, *Head Space*, in the *Trinidad and Tobago Newsday*, looks at issues of mental health and why-we-think-the-way-we-think.

BREANNE MC IVOR was born and raised in west Trinidad. She studied English at the Universities of Cambridge and Edinburgh before returning home. She has been shortlisted for the Commonwealth Short Story Prize, the Glimmer Train Fiction Open, the Fish One-Page Prize, and the Derek Walcott Writing Prize. In 2015, she won *The Caribbean Writer's* David Hough Literary Prize. Her short story collection *Where There Are Monsters* was published in 2019, and her debut novel, *The God of Good Looks*, is forthcoming in 2023.

CELESTE MOHAMMED is a lawyer turned author. A native of Trinidad and Tobago, she graduated from Lesley University, Cambridge, Massachusetts, with an MFA in Creative Writing (Fiction). Her work has appeared in *The New England Review*, *Litmag*, *Epiphany*, and *The Rumpus*, among other places. She is the recipient of a 2018 PEN/Robert J. Dau Short Story Prize for Emerging Writers. She was also awarded the 2019 Virginia Woolf Award for Short Fiction, and the 2017 John D. Gardner Memorial Prize for Fiction. Her debut novel-in-stories *Pleasantview* won the 2022 OCM Bocas Prize for Caribbean Literature.

National Geographic Explorer and Fulbright alumna ALYEA PIERCE uses her creative work with poetry, spoken word performance, audio, and photography to examine oral storytelling and folklore traditions in Carnival celebrations across the African diaspora. She is a spoken word poet and researcher who recently contributed to *National Geographic*'s podcast series *Into the Depths* and has performed internationally from the United Kingdom to South Africa, as well as at numerous TEDx events. Her poetry has been published online and in print, including the *Guardian*, *New York Daily News*, and *The Caribbean Writer* to name a few. You can connect with Alyea on social media at @alyeaspierce!

A history-maker in Trinidad and Tobago's First Citizens National Poetry Slam, ALEXANDRA STEWART is the only two-time champion and the first person to win the competition in

consecutive years. She is one of the most awarded spoken word poets in the Caribbean, and works relentlessly to improve her craft. When she's not on stage, she's teaching the art of spoken word poetry, English language, and English literature. She has also been on five youth outreach secondary school tours, performing for over 60,000 students across the Caribbean.

KENDEL HIPPOLYTE is a poet, playwright and director, and sporadic researcher into areas of St Lucian and Caribbean arts and culture. His poetry has appeared in journals such as *The Greenfield Review* and *The Massachusetts Review*, and in numerous anthologies, including *Caribbean Poetry Now*, *Voiceprint*, and *West Indian Poetry*. He is the holder of a St Lucia Medal of Merit (Gold) for Contribution to the Arts. His book *Fault Lines* won the OCM Bocas Prize for Poetry in 2013.