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A Theatre of Violence Behind a Curtain of Paradise

"My work as a writer has been from the beginning ... to capture the desire for the reciprocal basis of truth and liberty and the possibility of freedom ... imagination is the deepest need of freedom."
(Iris Zavala, "A Gaze of One's Own: Narrativizing the Caribbean," *Trois,* 5, 1.2, 1989)

"Fiction is about telling lies, but you must be scathingly honest in telling those lies."
(Marlene Nourbese Philip)

In her essay on *The Iliad,* which she calls the "poem of force", the philosopher Simone Weil speaks to the threat of violence and its effect on the pysche, the imagination, the expectation of freedom and how this threat burdens the soul:

"Here we see the force [or violence] in its grossest and most summary form – the force [or violence] that kills. How much more surprising in its effects is the other force [or violence], the force that does *not* kill, i.e., that does not kill just yet. It will surely kill, it will possibly kill, or perhaps it merely hangs, poised and ready, over the head of the creature it *can* kill, at any moment, which is to say at every moment. In whatever aspect, its effect is the same: it turns [a human being] into a stone. From its first property (the ability to turn a human being into a thing by the simple method of killing him) flows another, quite prodigious too in its own way, the ability to *turn* a human being into a thing while [that human being] is stili alive."
(Simone Weil, *The Iliad or the Poem of Force*, 1940-45, tr. Mary McCarthy)

I was born into paradise. Into a large house on the edge of the Caribbean Sea. Into a household of extended family and servants.

From *Into the Interior:*

I [had] a wetnurse, a goat named Magdalena, who was tied in front of our house at the edge of the Caribbean Sea. Winona [my nursemaid] brought her from her country when my mother's milk failed. For company Magdalena had Winona and me, some chickens who roosted among the mangroves, and a pair of hawksbill turtles, for whom our front yard had been a breeding ground and who stayed on.

There's a family photograph of me sucking the milk straight from her teats like a wolf-child. Romulus or Remus. She was light brown, hairy as her namesake [Mary Magdalene] in the wilderness, with a black ridge along her back, running into her tail. Her eyes were goat-gold. Her teat was rough against my tongue, and her milk was thin and tasted salt like the sea....

Of course the photograph had been staged, an imperial allusiveness to the unlettered tropics. Sent round as a postcard. Did I mention the she-goat was tied to a coconut palm, that I was naked, brown, the littlest savage tonguing her wildness, that there was a full moon lighting the sea, that Winona in her white uniform was standing just outside the frame, waiting?

I begin with the personal. My father's five finger tattoo across my prepubescent, then adolescent face whenever I say something he judges impertinent, smart, wrong. My determination not to cry in front of him, even as the tears well up in my eyes, from the force of his blow. My mother's response is always something like "don't provoke your father." She is never hit; neither is his rage visited on my sister. His threatening behavior continues well into my young adulthood.

There is a violence beyond the physical, of course. When I was about thirteen I started keeping a journal – which my father, with my mother's complicity, invaded – and read aloud to an audience of extended family – on a verandah overlooking the turquoise sea, beyond a grove of coconut palms – idyllic setting.

There is no map

only the most raggéd path back to

my love so much so

she ended up in the bush

at a school where such things were

taken very seriously severely

and

I was left missing her never ceasing

and

she was watched for signs

and

I was left alone missing her never ceasing

and

she was not allowed to write at least she never did

and

I walked the length and breadth of the playing fields

I have never felt so lost

not like that

and

I wanted to be dead that's all

finally

the headmistress and head girl found me

in the stacks

weeping

violently

against spines of biology

running into history

I can see myself in the lapsed documentary of memory

curled up against books, shelves

salting the sea island cotton of my blouse

wanting to lose my

self water tearing down my face, school badge

with cross & crown and Latin motto

my parents were summoned

the word was not spoken

I was told to forget everything

I would never see her again I would never see her again

except with my mind's eye and to this day

golden

they rifled my hiding place

ransacked my words read me aloud on the

verandah

under the impossibile sun

my father uttering

“When you’re twenty we’ll laugh about this.”

that I remember

they took me, on the advice of the doctor who delivered

me

to Doctor’s Cave

which is a beach, not Prospero’s vault,

for weeks

I swam

like Caliban

her feathered legs opening under water salt rushing in me

I was exhausted, they said

excitable

I wanted to be a wild colonial girl

And for a time, I was.

(From *Sites of Memory,* University of Minnesota Press, Fall 2008)

That sort of invasion is itself an act of violence – it is the culmination of a pattern of abuse. Its effect for quite some time was to silence me. I became voiceless, adrift from language. I was in a sense a colonized child. It would take years to find my tongue. In the words of Marlene Nourbese Philip: “She tries her tongue/ Her silence softly breaks.”

As a young woman I experienced my father’s violence immediately, both physical and emotional forms. From that personal ordeal I moved outward,

gazed into the culture into which I was born,which was my heritage: The colonized island of Jamaica, the history which was hidden: the genocide against the native Arawak, the decimation of the Carib – the "tears of the Indians" – the slave past, the "blood-cloth" put over the wounds of the whipped slave, but also the refusal of female slaves to reproduce – using potions, inducing abortion, reasoning a human being did not receive its soul until nine days old, they also practiced infanticide. Indeed resistance, as well as silencing, disempowerment, can be a reaction to violence, of the violence formed in the system of white supremacy, colonialism, Eurocentrism. Part of the hidden history that I discovered included movements for liberation. Futher disempowerment is achieved through the violence of historical erasure, so that those in the present believe they come out of an aquiescent past. Some of the great revolutionary leaders of the Caribbean were women.

The heart of Jamaica is made of stone – literally. As a girl, and into my young adulthood, I observed Jamaica's metaphorical heart of stone in the commonplace cruelties human beings dealt each other. My need to understand the origins and effects of this reality became a recurring theme in my writing.

I observed cruelty close to home, as well as within my home. I observed it in my girls' school where dark-skinned girls, scholarship girls were singled out for humiliation or punishment. Violence could be the outcome of these cruelties – not in the sense of organized resistance, rather in the act of an individual whose mind becomes disordered because of a lifetime of cruelties visited upon him – a belief in his own inhumanness. I explore this in *No Telephone to Heaven* in the character of Christopher, whose name means the "bearer of Christ." More about this later.

From "Transactions"

"The waters of the Bath rise through the karst, the heart of stone. The

ultimate source of the Bath is an underground saline spring, which might suggest a relationship with the sea. The relationship with the sea is suggested everywhere; the limestone that composes more of the land than any other substance is nothing but the skeletons of sea creatures."

From *Abeng*

"The island rose and sank. Twice. During periods in which history was recorded by indentations on rock and shell."

"This is a book about the time which followed on that time. As the island became a place where people lived Indians. Africans. Europeans."

In *Abeng* I begin with the island and the sea around it, and the secrets, the history that each hold. The novel is a journey through this landscape, a journey through the stone heart created, molded, and nourished – if a stone heart can be nourished – by colonialism.

The theft of history, the loss of knowledge of resistance is a terrible thing. A continuum which might lead to liberation has been ruptured.

One of the leaders of slave resistance in Jamaica was Nanny, also known as Grandy Nanny, which name I presume refers to her as a grandmother of the people. A "science-woman". Nanny was known for her positive magic:

"For instance, when *bakra* [white landowners; referring to condition of the whipped slave – back raw] destroyed the provision ground of the Maroons [referring to the resistance: from the Spanish *cimarrón,* unruly, runaway], forcing them to the brink of starvation, it was Nanny who received a message from the spirit world urging her not to give up the fight; along with the message, she received a handful of seeds, with instruction to plant them. In less than a day these supernaturally-endowed seeds brought

forth a lavish crop of full grown pumpkins".

"[The Maroons] are composed of a number of matrilineal clans which are in turn divided up into matrilineages ... [The] presence of matrilineal descent ... does often correspond to a higher status for women ... and a positive evaluation of women...."

(Steady and Bilby, *The Black Woman Cross-Culturally*)

Contrast this with what becomes the official version regarding the Maroons, written by Bryan Edwards, planter-historian, pro-slavery, author of a history of the British colonies in the West Indies, published in 1796:

" ... the Maroons, like all other savage nations, regarded their wives as so many beasts of burden; and felt no more concern at the loss of one of them, than a white planter would have felt at the loss of a bullock ... [This] spirit of brutality which the Maroons always displayed towards their wives, extended in some degree to their children. The paternal authority was at all times harshly exerted ...."

This is simply nonsense. But a serious racist nonsense used to justify slavery, condemn resistance, hang a drop cloth over history. To lay a foundation for violent repression of a people. As with the "bit", the iron device fitted into the mouth of the recalcitrant slave, rendering that slave speechless, a silence descends on history, replaced by the colonizer's version.

In the Maroon woman the identities of warrior/mother become inextricable. This warrior/mother is apotheosized in Nanny. In the novels *Abeng, No Telephone to Heaven,* and *Free Enterprise* I am concerned with recovering a history centered in the rebel spirit, she, and he, who resist, motivated by a love of their people [ref. Che], by revulsion to the violence visited upon them, by the absolute knowledge that this is unjust and deserves only resistance.

In No Telephone to Heaven I respond to the infamous alms-house (poorhouse) fire of the mid-nineteen-eighties set by some thugs in the

pay of one of the political parties of Jamaica to discredit another. In this fire almost two hundred old women perished. I was struck by the self-destructiveness of such an act. These old women were once science-women, warrior/mothers, members of matrilineal societies, until Eurovision obscured the history of the island. They were sources of power, but their Africanness, the source of their power was demonized, renamed "savage". In the following passage from *No Telephone to Heaven* I attempt to restore to these old women what was once theirs, and to describe what they have become. [identity eidon, fufu, patoo, obeah, myal, gunga, second sight, magnanimous warrior title taken from Aimé Césaire poem to one of the leaders of the Haitian revolution].

"Magnanimous Warrior!"

She in whom the spirits come quick and hard. Hunting mother. She who forages. Who knows the ground. Where the hills of fufu are concealed Mother who brews the most beautiful tea from the ugliest bush. Warrior who sheds her skin like a snake and travels into the darkness a fireball. Mother who catches the eidon and sees them to their rest. Warrior who labors in the spirit. She who plants gunga on the graves of the restless. Mother who carves the power-stone, center of the world. Warrior who places the blood-cloth on the back of the whipped slave. She who turns her attention to the evildoer. Mother who binds the female drumhead with parchment from a goat. Warrior who gathers grave-dirt in her pocket. Pieces of chalk. Packs of cards. Bits of looking-glass. Beaks. Feet. Bones of patoo. Teeth of dogs and alligators. Glass eyes. Sulfur. Camphor. Myrrh. Asafoetida. Frankincense. Curious shells. China dolls. Wooden images.

She writes in her own blood across the drumhead. Obeah-woman. Myal-woman. She can cure. She can kill. She can give jobs. She is foy-eyed. The bearer of second sight. Mother who goes forth emitting flames from

her eyes. Nose. Mouth. Vulva. Anus. She bites the evildoers that they become full of sores. She treats cholera with bitterbush. She burns the canefields. She is River Mother. Sky Mother. Old Hige. The Moon. Old Suck.

Rambling mother. Mother who trumps and wheels counterclockwise around the power-stone, the center of the world. Into whose cauldron the Red Coats vanished.

What has become of this warrior? Now that we need her more than ever. She has been burned up in an alms-house fire in Kingston. She has starved to death. She wanders the roads of the country with swollen feet. She has cancer. Her children have left her. Her powers are known no longer. They are called by other names. She is not respected. She lies on an iron bedstead in a shack in Trench Town. She begs outside a rumshop in Spanish Town. She cleans the yard of a woman younger than she. She lies on a bed in a public hospital with sores across her buttocks. No one swabs her wounds. Flies gather. No one turns her in the bed. The pain makes her light-headed. They tell her she is senile. They have taken away her bag of magic. Her teeth. Her goat's horn. We have forgotten her. Now that we need her more than ever. The nurses ignore her. The doctors make game of her. The priest tries to take her soul.

Can you remember how to love her?

I return to the personal: When I was a girl in Jamaica one of my classmates at the girls' school I attended was absent one Monday morning. The schoolmistresses gathered us in the chapel and told us that this classmate and her family, with the exception of her elder brother, had been slaughtered by a "casual laborer". We accepted this man as menace,

monster. The incident, the beginning of a series of incidents, was all over the newspapers and on the radio – we did not have tv. I pushed this knowledge, this loss, the sense of "it could have been me", down down down. Years later, a young woman, I was with a male cousin in a bar in one of Kingston's hotels. He introduced me to a young man he knew and the young man and I went dancing the next evening. During the course of the evening, in the manner of someone who must speak of events lest they be forgotten, he revealed that he was the brother of my classmate – murdered with their mother and father and the woman who worked in their home those years ago. Again I pushed this knowledge, his loss, down and down and down and thought I had forgotten all about it. I left Jamaica and returned to London, where I was in graduate school. But this history would not die. Although I thought I had forgotten it, it had entered into my body.

There are three central characters in *No Telephone to Heaven:* Christopher, Clare, and Harriet. These characters inhabit the theatre of violence which is the Jamaica they know. Each has experienced violence, directly or indirectly. A theatre of violence behind a curtain of paradise.

I use the novel and these characters to explore the origins of this violence, horizontal and otherwise, and its effects as they become actors in their lives.

"The love of our neighbor in all its fullness simply means being able to say ... 'What are you going through?'" (Simone Weil, *Waiting on God*).

This question lies behind and underneath most of my writing.

When I took on the character of Christopher I realized I had to explore what lay behind his explosive fury on that one night when he slaughtered a family and the woman who worked for them.

Christopher's fury is the apotheosis of a life lived under the weight of cruelty. There are many images of cruelty in the novel. Of lives distorted by violence, behind the curtain of paradise.

How different is Christopher's response to seeing boys diving for coins alongside the cruise ships in Kingston Harbor from that of the tourists who toss coins over the side of the ship and gaze down at the boys. The tourist as audience, the native as entertainer – always. Skinny, brownskinned boys diving into the turquoise depths where slave ships were once anchored, ancestors brought ashore. The trick is to catch the coin before it descends into those depths, joining with links of chain.

When I began to write the murder scene in *No Telephone to Heaven* I wasn't thinking of the murder of my classmate and her family. But as I wrote that scene the floodgates of my memory opened and everything came rushing back at me: the headmistress's comments, the newspaper accounts, later meeting my classmate's brother. These memories were stored inside of me. I broke into a sweat as I wrote. I wept. Murders were not uncommon in the Jamaica of my growing-up; nor are they uncommon today. Paradise is drenched in blood. Especially blood spilled horizontally – bar fights, domestic abuse, gay-bashing, political assasination, as in the stoning to death of the poet Mikey Smith. "I am the stone that kills me", the poet Edward Brathwaite writes, in a lament in Mikey Smith's voice, imagining his final moments on Stony Hill.

But those long-ago murders touched me because I knew one of the victims, because she easily could have been me.

I needed to try to understand the wellspring of this violence and so I wrote backwards, using the lives of boys like Christopher I had known. I needed to remove beast and monster as his name and to humanize him. I needed to do for him what Aimé Césaire does for Caliban in his version of *The Tempest, Une Tempête*. When Prospero claims the death of Sycorax, Caliban's mother, Caliban explodes – as Christopher explodes when he is ridiculed in his attempt to bury the remains of his grandmother. But Caliban does not murder, his explosion is insightful eloquent. Christopher is speechless; he embodies silence.

Caliban: "... you only think she's dead because you think the earth itself is dead. ... It's so much simpler that way! Dead you can walk upon it, pollute it, you can tread upon it with the steps of a conqueror. I respect the earth because I know it is alive, and I know that Sycorax is alive".

The Dungle, the garbage dump, the concrete jungle, an actual place, is the place of Christopher's upbringing. A dead landscape if ever there was one, except for the human beings scurrying over its ridges. An extremely far remove from the alive and magical landscape of Caliban's mother, Sycorax, of Nanny and the Maroons. Nanny is an empowered grandmother of the people, whereas Christopher's grandmother, like the women burned to death in the alms-house fire is a radically disempowered one.

After the murders, which are never solved, Christopher, the bearer of Christ into the New World, is left to wander. From *No Telephone to Heaven:*

Christopher slept in Maypen Cemetery until they dug it up to pour foundation for more concrete jungle. Glass cities rose around him. The country fell around him even more. He spent his days and nights getting old on the street, retreating from New Kingston to the shanties, shacks, back-o'-wall parts of town he knew, gray boards cotched against each other. His teeth went. Old women offered him tins of watery coffee. He stared at their generosity. ... Christopher walked on. His clothes turned from khaki to crocus sack. His buttocks were visible through a split in the cloth. At the back of a Chinese shop he sucked sugar from a discarded sweetie wrapper. A man drove him off with a firecracker. His hair snaked. ... He leaned on a staff, a length of pipe he found ... in an alley. Some men in knitted caps saying they knew Bob gave him smoke. Eyes red, exploding. His mouth pulled on the spliff, smoke wreathed him. People say him favor mad. Him favor prophet. He talked

when his eyes spun. ... I am Neger Jesus. I am Neger Christ. Shadow-catcher. Duppy-conqueror. I am the beginning and the end. The bright and morning star. ...

And then came a night when old women burned. [Christopher] promenaded, legend now, song now, recognized by spectators drawn by the light and the heat and the terrible smell. Back and forth he walked in front of the fire, old women falling, alive, aflame, into the street. He howled, ran toward the fire, face lit by the heat. Their wisps of hair, thin dresses burned as wicks in the night. He howled. "Dis not de fiah bawn of mi powah!"

Indeed it is not. A grotesque display of horizontal violence, this inferno was set by one political party to discredit another.

Christopher and Clare lead parallel lives in the novel. Their lives collide twice – in both instances through acts of violence: the murders; and at the end of the novel, the fantastic slaughter which takes place in the hills above an American movie set. "Everyone we dream about we are", I wrote at the end of my novel *Abeng*. I am part Clare and part Christopher. I wanted to rescue each from the excesses of the violent society in which they found themselves but in the end that was impossible. Whether actual or potential, violence sears the individual, harms his and her soul.

Mary Wollstonecraft was an influence on my thinking, writing, before I

had ever heard of Grandy Nanny. I had to excavate for knowledge of Nanny but Wollstonecraft I found in the library of my girls' school. Her title, *Vindication of the Rights of Woman,* captured me. Wollstonecraft was drawn to her subject by firsthand knowledge of domestic violence. She moved as did I from the personal into the political. Wollstonecraft as a very young woman blocked the entrance to the room where her mother slept to keep her safe from the rages of her husband, Wollstonecraft's father. I end my novel *Into the Interior* with a magically realistic encounter – the unnamed narrator and Mary Wollstonecraft, passing into another realm.

[MW ref. suicide attempt. VW. Storni. stones –]
[Frankenstein/Wollstonecraft, Mary Shelley] [Golden Guinea]

From *Into the Interior*:
I was staying at my great-aunt's hotel surrounded by water. The sea in front, the falls behind the converted great house. The wooden jalousies were turned down against the heat of the day, and the ceiling fan in the bar slowly stirred the air. Crawford, the barman, was polishing glasses. All was apparently tranquil.
I was walking on the white glass sands, looking down. A piece of blue glass, sharpness smoothed by the action of the sea, lay at my feet. I picked it up. The word *nuit* was etched into it. I fingered the letters.
I put the piece of glass in my pocket.

She slipped a membrane and slid into the interior. She was on a street that stretched grey alongside the River Thames. It seemed to her the past had no color: But then she's been used to looking at paintings struck with crimson and lapis and gold. And she'd spent a lot of time at the movies where the

past was writ fifty feet high and garish in the extreme. Played by Errol Flynn, witness at her christening, again.

This was something else. She thought not a dream because she could touch the cold iron of a balustrade in front of a townhouse.

In front of me a woman was walking, her skirts brushing the cobblestone street. She was walking and muttering. Her head was down. A chill rain was falling. This is not a dream, I thought, as the cold and wet hit my face. I shivered. The rain was gaining strength. I thought I would follow the woman in front of me, who seemed not to know she was not alone.

She herself was an opportunistic nomad, the scientist's term (but which branch?) for an omnivorous traveler, rootless. She collects terms like these, with which she will try to define herself. Poor thing, she chips away, trying to find the form inside the stone. Haven't the past months proved this? The woman she was following seemed to have direction. The rain was becoming downpour and the fog was tickening. Suddenly the woman in front of her came to a stop.

We were at Battersea next to the river. I glanced up the street to see if I could find the Russian restaurant. Of course it wasn't there. The woman in front of me lifted her skirts and began to walk down the bank into the waters of the river. But there were thick marshes between the bank and the riverflow and she could not get very far.

All of a sudden she turned around. The rain shone on her face.

"Will you come with me as far as Putney Bridge? It is not possible here."

"Of course," I said.

"Wait a moment," she said, "I'll find a ferryman."

And soon she was back with a man who said his boat was moored about a hundred yards away. He asked for payment in advance, which she gave him. Above his protests she convinced him she would command the boat to and from Putney Bridge. We got in. She sat at the tiller facing me and I took the oars.

The rain beat at us and the Thames was rough.

She wore a sort of top hat and a heavy dark cloak over her dress. Her boots and the hem of her clothes were muddy and bits of marsh clung to them.

“What do you mean to do?” I asked as if I knew her.

But she was intent on the horizon and gave no answer as I rowed us upriver.

After a while she spoke. “Where do you come from?” she asked me.

“I was born on an island in the Caribbean.”

“Saint Domingue? Of course not; then we would be speaking French.”

I knew the place as Haiti, but said nothing.

“Why are you here?” she asked.

“I really don’t know.”

“Killing time, I suppose.’’

“Something like that.”

“I’ve been in Paris the past few years. Because of the Revolution. These are tremendously exciting times, and no less because of Saint Domingue. Do you know it?”

“No, l’m afraid not.”

“You really should, you know. You should see it for yourself. To see what might happen. What might spread.”

This must be a dream. But then I felt the blue glass of *nuit* in my jeans pocket, felt again the coldness of the rain against my face.

“Are you my mother?’” I asked

“Oh, no,” she laughed. “You have no mother save for language. Besides, I am far too young to mother you.”

And so she was.

“But everything is of a piece,” she said.

I could see that we were drawing close to the bridge.

“The women of Saint Domingue wear spirit levels on chains around their necks, signifying equality. The idea of seizing it for yourself, you see.”

She had me wait in the boat when we got to the bridge. She began to walk across the bridge, then mounted a railing and jumped, feet first, into the black waters. Her wet clothes, her boots, the weight of her pulled her down, and she sank out of sight.
I stood up and pulling off my turtleneck and slipping out of my jeans dove over the side of the boat. It was terrible and cold. I went under the black surface, down and down and down. The golden guinea [the coin minted fresh for the slave trade] slid off my neck and was carried out to sea.

It gave me heart when I found that mirages could be photographed, that they resulted from the bending of light and were imaginary only insofar as every real thing was imaginary.
The Fata Morgana was one of these, the work of the witch Morgan le Fay.
I wanted to find the island on the map that was not there.
So I followed her under the water.
And this time she was not rescued to die of childbed fever, her daughter releasing her from the stone.
This time we were greeted by the mermaids of the unfathomable deep, those responsible for language.
When I came to I was washed ashore.

The two women exit the theatre. They enter another paradise.