

Selected Poems

ELLY NILAND

Elly Niland
Selected Poems

With an Introduction by Lynne Macedo

Original publication details for these poems are provided on the Acknowledgements page 13.

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**Series Preface by the President of Guyana,
H. E. Bharrat Jagdeo**

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SERIES PREFACE

Modern Guyana came into being, in the Western imagination, through the travelogue of Sir Walter Raleigh, *The Discoverie of Guiana* (1595). Raleigh was as beguiled by Guiana's landscape ("I never saw a more beautiful country...") as he was by the prospect of plunder ("every stone we stooped to take up promised either gold or silver by his complexion"). Raleigh's contemporaries, too, were doubly inspired, writing, as Thoreau says, of Guiana's "majestic forests", but also of its earth, "resplendent with gold." By the eighteenth century, when the trade in Africans was in full swing, writers cared less for Guiana's beauty than for its mineral wealth. Sugar was the poet's muse, hence the epic work by James Grainger *The Sugar Cane* (1764), a poem which deals with subjects such as how best to manure the sugar cane plant, the most effective diet for the African slaves, worming techniques, etc. As John Singleton confessed (in his *General Description of the West Indies*, 1776), there was no contradiction between the manufacture of odes and that of sugar: "...a fine exuberant plant, which clothes the fields with the richest verdure. There is, I believe, scarcely any cultivation which yields so lucrative a return per acre as under favourable circumstances, than that of the sugar cane. So bountiful a gift of Providence seems not only calculated to call forth the activity and enterprise of the agriculturist and merchant, but to awaken also feelings of a higher and more refined enthusiasm." The refinement of art and that of sugar were one and the same process.

The nineteenth century saw the introduction of Indian indentureship, but as the sugar industry expanded, literary works contracted. Edward Jenkins' novel *Lutchmee and Dilloo* (1877) was the only substantial fiction on Guiana, and whilst it was broadly sympathetic to the plight of Indian labourers, it was certain of Britain's imperial destiny, and rights over mineral resources. It was not until the period leading up to

Guiana's Independence from Britain (1966) and the subsequent years, that our own writers of Amerindian, African, Asian and European ancestry (A. J. Seymour, Wilson Harris, Jan Carew, Edgar Mittelholzer, Martin Carter, Rajkumari Singh et al.) attempted to purify literature of its commercial taint, restoring to readers a vision of the complexity of the Guyanese character and the beauty of the Guyanese landscape.

The Guyana Classics Library will republish out-of-print poetry, novels and travelogues so as to remind us of our literary heritage, and it will also remind us of our reputation for scholarship in the fields of history, anthropology, sociology and politics, through the reprinting of seminal works in these subjects. The Series builds upon previous Guyanese endeavours, like the institution of CARIFESTA and the Guyana Prize. I am delighted that my government has originated the project and has pledged that every library in the land will be furnished with titles from the Series, so that all Guyanese can appreciate our monumental achievement in moving from Exploitation to Expression. If the Series becomes the foundation and inspiration for future literary and scholarly works, then my government will have moved towards fulfilling one of its primary tasks, which is the educational development of our people.

President Bharrat Jagdeo

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Introduction by
Lynne Macedo



The Caribbean Press

The Guyana Classics Library

INTRODUCTION

The first time that I met Elly Niland was at a poetry event about ten years ago in London's Royal Festival Hall. After listening attentively to each of the performers – including her younger brother, David Dabydeen - a number of us were sitting over a drink and, in the typical, dry style of academics, analysing the event we had just witnessed. Niland's entry into that room was like a breath of fresh air; suddenly we are all smiling, laughing even, and began to talk about the poetry we had just heard in a wholly different manner. Even today, several years and many pleasurable encounters with Niland later, it is that exuberance for life which immediately springs to mind when reading any of her poems, as it so clearly underpins and informs all of her published work to date.

Niland was born in her grandmother's house on the Corentyne coast of Guyana in 1954 and moved to the UK in 1967. As a mature student she studied at Hillcroft College and then went on to read for a Modern Arts degree at Kingston University, before completing her formal training as a teacher with a PGCE. Since 1971 she has lived in Kingston, Surrey with her husband and children, where she continues to work as a teacher of English in a local school. However, unlike many of the (predominantly male) poets who emerged from Guyana in the latter part of the twentieth century, Niland did not begin writing poetry until well in her forties, which makes her achievements as a poet all the more remarkable. Her first collection of poetry, *In Retrospect* (2002), was nominated as Best First Book of Poetry and runner-up for the Guyana Prize for Literature in 2004, her second collection *Cornerstones* (2005) won the Guyana Prize for Literature in 2006 and her third collection, *East of Centre* (2008), was funded by the British Arts Council. That is not to suggest, however, that writing poetry is something that has come easily to her; as she so tellingly explains in a poem from her first collection: "This writing of stuff is joyless and hopeless/...But I have a grim determination to continue/ It's about motive and value./ So let the clichés fall on fallow ground./ And I'll write slowly, celibate and sober."¹

The selection of poems which are included in this new volume have been taken from each of the three collections mentioned above, and are designed to illustrate the many facets of Niland's skill as a poet, together with her key thematic preoccupations. Her literary influences are diverse – Shakespeare, Marvell, and Beckett are all acknowledged – as is her style, which is in turn delicate or robust, sardonic or compassionate, but always humane and filled with an irrepressible spirit. In addition, there are clear traces of what she so aptly terms “that amalgam of influence”², a Guyanese childhood; her adult life in Britain; and the creolised Indian culture of the Caribbean. As a result, she writes as fluently in Creole as she does in Standard English, freely switching between the two even in the same stanza (‘All Saints Junior School’, for example), and clearly relishing the linguistic dexterity that springs from her Indo-Caribbean heritage: “It is old days and ways/...The plaiting of streams of language/ ...Where diversity is our culture/...This language puts a shape on my experience.”³

Niland first began writing the poems that were to become *In Retrospect* as a response to the profound sense of grief brought about by the premature death of two of her sisters. As she explained in a 2007 interview: “*In Retrospect* is [about] lament, a love, a loss...”⁴. In both ‘The Texture of Existence’ whose final line provides the collection’s title and ‘In memoriam Suzette Sabrina’, she explores the darker side of emotions heightened by these bereavements, yet never in a self-pitying or despairing manner. Instead she uses the very tangible power of language to give form and meaning to events that sustain and heal, rather than smother the wounded human spirit: “You vanished in the grey-white-dust-storm/
And brought to light/
New words.”⁵ The ability to deal with death is transformed into a source of life, a theme which she returns to and expands upon in later poems such as ‘Spacious’ and ‘White Days And Red Roses’: “Death is incurable, and it’s lifelong!/
But it’s not such a devouring monster./
At least, it’s fair: respects neither wealth nor stature./
And restores a sense of perspective to life.”⁶ Her most sardonic take on the nature of loss is contained in ‘Lose Not Your Colour’ from the *Cornerstones* collection, where the doomed struggle against mortality is given a characteristically, irreverent twist: “When

my time comes to leave this world/ When my tide goes out to sea/ I'll have one last cough – before departure, and a final pee./...So fuck the pantomime of grief, the legendary facts./ Fuck exaggerated fiction too."⁷

The creative output of Niland is, however, by no means confined to wholly personal concerns such as those outlined above. Whilst the theme of death or loss may have been the catalyst that opened up a path to her poetic imagination, there appear to be no clearly definable limits to the kind of subject that interests her and can provide the raw material for her poetry. Niland has talked about the way in which she becomes inspired to write as something that happens instinctively, almost on a subconscious level: "Poetry. It is a line or a word I hear to start with."⁸ The result of such spontaneous inspiration is a rich and varied outpouring of work that fears no boundaries: no topic is deemed too trivial or grand for her attention; no memory too sacred or painful to share; no emotion too raw or profound for her incisive humour. Neither is she in any way constrained by the politics of gender, race or religion – she is as much at ease in writing from the perspective of a child ('All Saints Junior School'), mother ('Churail Picknie') or canecutter ('Blairmont Sugar Estate: Assam I'), as she is in tackling the horrors of the Middle Passage ('Female Cargo'), the beauty of a flower ('Hibiscus Tree') or the loss of faith ('E-Mail to God').

In all three of her collections there are a number of poems which deal with some aspect of childhood or schooling, often with a sardonic twist in their tail. For example, in 'Berbice High School' from the *In Retrospect* collection, the context is largely sober in describing the child's terror and pain at being caned on the hand by the 'sadist' teacher. However, despite the implication that this is anything but a one-off occurrence, Niland still manages to lighten the tone in the closing stanzas, and even raise a smile in the reader by subtly twisting the nature of the imagery from physical pain to that of an end of term report: "Degraded. D graded./ Fled./ Never to return."⁹ The effects of being pressured to do well at school are re-examined in 'End of Year Report' from *Cornerstones*. In contrast to 'Berbice High School', this poem is written entirely in Creole and expresses the exasperated aspirations of a par-

ent who ironically equates an improved lifestyle with the (desire for) an enhanced academic performance in their child: "Mattie pickny deh a fetch water/Them eat dhaall and rice daily/...Them get good marks!/Is so yuh stupid?/ Yuh come 8th out of 28?...A yuh eat too much, belly too full/...A yuh wear too much leather shoes and socks."¹⁰ The implication for the child in question is, of course, that anything less than 1st would not have been good enough, and we, as readers, feel all the weight of parental expectation that rests so heavily upon their young shoulders.

Whilst the theme of scholastic failure can still be traced in the more recent *East of Centre* collection: "At home I prayed with my eyes open, prayed/ To be bright, remember one answer right"¹¹, not all of Niland's childhood poems deal with the negative aspects of a colonial schooling system. The *Cornerstones* collection also contains a pair of poems, 'Charting the Waters. I & II' which are concerned with the positive effects that an inspirational teacher can have on their class. In stark contrast to the teachers that relied on the cane to 'improve' their charges, "Miss King" makes clever use of language to actively encourage her pupils to do well: "You are the bright future./ Our uncharted fleet of words./ You must pattern and plot your observations. Learn to read/ And write."¹² As a result of Miss King's inherent belief in their abilities, the potential of her students is greatly enhanced: "She enabled us to inhale exciting new words, allusions,/ Apt associations./ Words clung to pregnant minds/ And the urchins like flowers, swelled."¹³ This image of the children's minds opening out like petals as the poem itself comes to a close, provides an effective counterbalance to the earlier representation of education as a potentially stifling and damaging force.¹⁴

As with so many of the issues that Niland tackles in her poetry, the role of religion is another theme in which different and competing levels of cultural complexity operate. Christianity played a pivotal role in the kind of educational system that was imposed upon the children of what was, in Niland's childhood, still a British colony, and its presence is manifest in both 'Hymn For Four Seasons' and 'All Saints Junior School'. However, these nostalgic, childhood memories of "Morning

Assembly and prayer"¹⁵ operate in stark contrast to those contained in 'E-Mail To God', in which an older, infinitely more sardonic voice states: "...I'm scared and losing my faith./ There's no comfort in prayer. No hope."¹⁶ Although its very premise – a computer link to God – and tone are both decidedly tongue-in-cheek: "The e-mail has been scanned for honesty and has been certified cliché free."¹⁷, there is no escaping the depth of feeling which such a crisis of faith has roused in the ironically-named 'Orinoco_Online': "Please don't forsake me/ I do still try"¹⁸.

Christianity was, of course, by no means the only religious influence upon Caribbean society, and for the Indo-Caribbean communities of Niland's childhood, creolised Hindu beliefs and customs continued to form an integral part of their cultural identity. In 'Seeing Red' from the *Cornerstones* collection, Niland poignantly explores the web of emotions which are stirred by such memories. Throughout this poem, the senses of sight, sound and taste are skilfully intermingled, all sparked off by the image/sound of that one colour/word 'red': "Red flags remind me of Jhandis./...Jhandi flags remind me of taasaa and taablaa music/ And the Pandit, paann leaf in hand./ ...Flags blowing to-and-fro like hungry children/ Poised to feast on aaloo in geera and masaala."¹⁹ What is particularly significant about this poem is that it is rendered in Standard English, subtly highlighting the distance between Niland's own generation with their Christianised, Anglicised schooling, and that of the 'old ones' for whom such events continued to remain 'Sacred'.

It would be impossible to end any consideration of Niland's work, however brief, without further mention of the way in which she utilises humour to undercut the darker aspects of human experience that several of her poems explore. This is particularly apparent in a number of her Creole poems where verbal dexterity forms an integral part of the Indo-Caribbean voice: "It is sharing a sameness/ Where humour is the bridge"²⁰. In 'Bad Lucky Moo-Moo', for example, the narrative of an unwanted pregnancy is rendered almost as farce, as the young girl reinvents the story of the Immaculate Conception to try and excuse her 'slack' behaviour. "Mooma, I never sleep with no rangotang/ man.../I tek me rock cake and

mauby, sit under the sapodilla tree./ And me fall asleep./ Jumbie must be come and work obeah./...And now... I expectin."²¹ The far more contentious issue of sustained marital violence is also tackled head-on in both 'Lilac Veins and Still Waters' and 'Cent Ice'. Whilst the language in these poems is necessarily much more sombre than that employed in 'Bad Lucky Moo-Moo', there is no escaping the bittersweet humour in lines such as "Yuh full a sweet mouth an jigger foot./ Got more mangle than me dog, more purr than me cat."²² In fact, whatever her subject matter – be it the disappearance of a husband in 'Pitch Lake Prayer, Trinidad', or the disrespectful behaviour of a stepson to his grandmother in 'Bloodclots', Niland's careful balance between language and form is able to convince us that, despite everything, they are all events and characters worthy of our attention.

LYNNE MACEDO
University of Warwick

Notes:

- 1 'Poethood (2nd Gear)', p. 60.
- 2 'Cartography', p. 64.
- 3 'My Creole Identity Card', p. 28.
- 4 *Stabroek News*, 13 August, 2007, p. 14.
- 5 'In memoriam Suzette Sabrina', p. 50.
- 6 'White Days And Red Roses', p. 53.
- 7 'Lose Not Your Colour', p. 72.
- 8 *Stabroek News*, p.14.
- 9 'Berbice High School', p. 26.
- 10 'End of Year Report', p. 27.
- 11 'All Saints Junior School', p. 21.
- 12 'Charting the Waters. I', p. 24.
- 13 'Charting the Waters. II', p. 25.
- 14 Parallels can clearly be drawn between such a view of the colonial education system and that expressed in Merle Hodge's novel *Crick, Crack Monkey* (1970).
- 15 'All Saints Junior School', p. 21.
- 16 'E-Mail To God', p. 75.
- 17 Ibid.
- 18 Ibid.
- 19 'Seeing Red', p. 68.
- 20 'My Creole Identity Card', p. 28.
- 21 'Bad Lucky Moo-Moo', p. 30.
- 22 'Cent Ice', p. 35.

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'Charting the Waters. I', 'Charting the Waters. II', 'End of Year Report', 'My Creole Identity Card', 'Churail Picknie', 'A Family Eclipse', 'Lilac Veins And Still Waters', 'Bloodclots', 'Me Hear Time Got A Bicycle Now', 'Tribes And Tributaries In Quebec', 'The Loss of Love is Irevocable', 'Pitch Lake Prayer, Trinidad', 'Rama's Rum Shop', 'White Days And Red Roses', 'Seeing Red', 'The Sage And The Onion', and 'Lose Not Your Colour' in *Cornerstones* (Dido Press, 2005).

'To British Guiana', 'Birds of Paradise', 'Birds of Paradise 2', 'Female Cargo', 'Fort Zeelandia', 'Webs', 'Cascade', 'All Saints Junior School', 'School Lane — Rosehall Village', 'Personal Pronouns', 'Way of Life', 'Way of Life 2', 'Crabwood Creek', 'Treasures of the Deep', 'Blairmont Sugar Estate: Assam 1', 'Blairmont Sugar Estate: Assam 2', 'Deferred', 'Cartography', 'Journeys', 'Landing in Guyana', 'Water Lilies', 'Hibiscus Tree', and 'Hymn for Four Seasons' in *East of Centre* (Dido Press, 2008).

TO BRITISH GUIANA

Cold greedy men
Loaded with money
Hollow
Of fears and yearnings.
England's merchants.

We, lost to view
Made links but
Chained together
Our ties, fragile, died.

BIRDS OF PARADISE

Quarter moon in her hammock
On Northern slopes of the Serra, close
To Lisbon and its coast, surrounded by
Countryside, and wooded hills nearby. In
This captivating place, bundled, stood Birds
Of-Paradise in enamel buckets, steeped in

Water with chemical clouds. Waxy stems
Bled, slashed from their roots at dawn,
With sharp blades. Lifted before sundropped
Their orange mouths opened nevertheless.

Wearing cellophane veils they shone
In different lands, shrunk in their prime
Colour-coded. Rubber-banded. Bound.
For smell or ornament.

BIRDS OF PARADISE 2

Unpacked
They'll stretch
Out. Clinically
Dead when cut.

Eyes blind,
Heavy with money,
Lines of lips aloof,
The merchants
Wait at the mouth
Of the Tagus.

Bright birds in flight. A yellow and orange fleet
From Sintra sailed away in a purple canoe-like
Structure. Females, with stiff blue tongues, leaves
Like small bananas—thick, glossy, green.

FEMALE CARGO

Blossoms of truth swayed
Swelled broken like waves
Red threads glittered
On black backs
It rained
Atlantic blows.

FORT ZEELANDIA

At the fort
The bottle
I bought
Did not
Have a
Slave ship
In it.

WEBS

The sap sucking ended
Leaves without trees set out
Drifted about seeking shape.

In no rush, seeking branches
Possessed nothing, not even weight.
Wrapped only in sable skins of identity
Unfocused, spinning like dry tamarinds
Through the disintegrating kingdom.

They blew across seas, as before
To be grounded in webs of triangles
Or circles that spread.

CASCADE

(for Cheryl, Gaye, Stephanie and Jill)

The mind wandered for a moment
Drifted, returned home, untied. Soon
Disappeared into memories of the time
There was a cascade of change in the garden.

That Friday when it was haloed
A thousand blossoms with day woke
Saw pencils of lush light beaming
On long white spikes of candles
In the horse-chestnut trees.

Heat shimmered, pierced
Noon ground. Flowers
Bruised, drooped their
Heads and fell as a
Congregation of silence.

When Monday broke
Easter lilies sprang
From the soil—gathered
In forgiveness
To remind us that we

Are. We are, all
Only Lent to
Each other.

ALL SAINTS JUNIOR SCHOOL

(Fort Wellington)

School lessons lacked colour
No ending, no beginning

Blue skirts, red shirts, bare feet

Monday—drill day
Twelve pence one shilling
Two and six pence half a crown
Twenty shillings one pound
Twenty one shillings one guinea

Morning assembly and prayer
“God be in my head and in my under
Standing and *can I be taller please*”?

Her face, tight as a vine as I whisper.
Given a hundred lines to zip shut my lips.
And, “Stop fiddling or I’ll dash a lash on yuh.”
Discipline flowed like lava lake.

A test.
A milk-white shame sheet ahead

Fourteen pounds one stone
Two thousand two hundred
And forty pounds make a ton
How many stone in a ton?
“I can’t remember.” Through
The water in two eyes,
“No mind for figures.”

At home I prayed with my eyes open, prayed
To be bright, remember one answer right
Prayed to be blessed, not to see morning light.

SCHOOL LANE – ROSEHALL VILLAGE

Outside. A lean-to washhouse. A coconut fibre mattress.
The mule and cart. The latrine.
Inside. Two pitchforks for curtain poles
Horse-bridle and saddle.
Windows boarded, floors bare, except for broken linoleum.
Door dangles, cables hang from ceilings like vines.
Here impulses were muzzled.
We collected manure from the paddock
Hand milked cows, carried tea in a tin can.
Margarine on bread wrapped in cloth, our rations for field labour.
What seed buried in earth doesn't grow?
What bucket lowered doesn't come up brimming?
Ancestors. Poverty a prison then —
Now your soul's release.

PERSONAL PRONOUNS

I Me We

A voyage of discovery
Like an archaeologist mining
A hoard of outrage
Digging a sort of resurrection
In e major, and d flat. Salivating
Controlling a compulsive
Motivation to scream
Of enigmatic silences
Using I, me, we.

The criminal in me seeking
A redemption of the past
Uses a pen as good companion
The "I", to immerse me,
Write to make a shape of life
Digging for my old map.
The "Me", tries to make
Sense of the chaos in "We".

CHARTING THE WATERS. I

For Sally, Surya and Seta

In a humble yellow concrete block
Miss King one spring term told
23 happy students who were hushed:

You are the bright future. Our uncharted fleet of words.
You must pattern and plot your observations. Learn to read
And write.

You'll be fishermen, throwing your nets like fans
To land with a splash of silver.

Language is your indispensable tool. Your navigational chart.
But mariners must pay mooring fees, so without the words
You'll have a harbourless life.

Their eyes with dark centres opened like globes.

CHARTING THE WATERS. II

Tune your ears class
Clean your eyes or else
You'll only see curdled clouds.

Bright, brown children, sprouting, Filtering, refining.
She tuned the music of the mind, lit the sparks, stimulated
Senses to fantasy. Conjured up scenes,
Captured them, hammered home with zest,
Whilst the imagination rose on vast unfurled wings

That time like rainbow after rain, like sun
In the wet season of school days
I miss now.

Once solid lessons have the quality of dreams
Words which were so sweet no one wanted to swallow.
That time long ago Miss King reared English language;
She enabled us to inhale exciting new words, allusions.
Apt associations.

Words clung to pregnant minds
And the urchins like flowers, swelled.

BERBICE HIGH SCHOOL

Sound of the cane, hissing high in air
Before it descends on small brown hand
Stretched out full length.
Stomach churning, eyes burning,
The crack sounds on bare flesh.

Wince as wild cane bites into skin,
Pointless to beg for mercy.
Won't cry.

Goose flesh creeps down arms and legs,
Marks swell on palm of hand.

The fury of the lashes, the rage in his face.
Treated like wild dog, by brutal, practised sadist.

Learning without meaning, without happiness. 10 years old.
Degraded. D graded.

Fled.
Never to return.

END OF YEAR REPORT

Switch off that warbling on the radio. Now.
Singer sound like he tail fall off.
Like he lamenting through the hole in his ass.
Stupid.

Mattie pickny deh a fetch water
Them eat dhaall and rice daily
Them deh a beat clothes
Them plant garden
Them out grazing cow and sheep.
Them deh boney and poor and barefoot
Them get good marks!

Is so yuh stupid?
Yuh come 8th out of 28?

A yuh deh too good
A yuh eat too much, belly too full
A yuh get too much ghost story
Adventure story and comic book
A yuh deh too good in this big house
A yuh wear too much leather shoes and socks.

MY CREOLE IDENTITY CARD

It is from the country of my yesterdays
And it roars
And is embedded in my bones

It is old days and ways
Flowers of memory
The plaiting of streams of language

It is a rare landscape
That no storm can destroy
Accumulated with care
It peaks above the blue

It is my language identity card
It is lawless. It conveys the vigour of the tale
It is a reclamation of stories untold
It is the European-Atlantic clarion call

It is sharing a sameness
Where humour is the bridge
Where diversity is our culture

You've asked me why
So I've told you.

This language puts a shape on my experience.

CHURAIL PICKNIE

*A mother to her child,
on the morning of their house
warming ceremony.*

I'm busy today, I have to fetch
Water from the roadside standpipe
So people can wash their hands and feet at the machaan.
Today is important, his family are coming.
All will be watchful, will inspect,
Will check the interior design. *That's why*
I'm scuttling around.
Snappy.

Keep away from the fire!
And don't touch that iron pipe! The hot phooknee.
Don't blow raakhee ashes from the fire either!

When food is served, saane it with your hand.
If you eat too much, too quick
You'll get naaraa and you'll be sick.

Behave well today,
Or you'll only get maar water to drink!
And maamoo will maarsaaree your behind with a stick
And you'll miss the whole ceremony.
So no shame on your aajaa and aajee and me!
Don't be a spoilt stinky gandaa egg.

Enjoy today. Savour it child.
You, me and this house on exhibition.
Money and manners is all.

BAD LUCKY MOO-MOO

"I gon dig out yuh eye if yuh tell lie," me mooma say.
She cuss me belly, me ass, back and side complete.
She chase me wid belna with her mouth big,
"Good for yuh, yuh like butter-flap wid man
Now yuh catch belly, news gon spread like fire.
Shame deh on we now.
Yuh say yuh dance calypso wid the cock-eye man?
Good for yuh, man na force yuh
It tek 2 hands to clap.
Yuh skin yuh teeth, yuh skin yuh leg
Yuh gon cry soon.
Yuh suck yuh teeth to me so long.
Soon yuh got to push out pickney,
And then yuh gon only skin up yuh mouth and cry.
Suck teeth done now. Pickney got for suck milk."

"Mooma, I never sleep with no rangotang
man. I never show no man me motion.
I tek me rock cake and mauby, sit under the sapodilla tree.
And me fall asleep.
Jumbie must he come and work obeah.
I hear lil soo-soo. I feel like I get nara.
And now ... I expectin."

"Mooma. Don't swell up yuh mouth. Just tell all
This is another virgin birth."

"Mooma. Shut yuh mouth before yuh catch fly."

THE SHOOT

She paid \$100, put on the powder,
And fixed up her dress.
Then she readjusted the bachelor button on it.
“Na waste time fuh nothing
draw up a chair
I gon draw yuh photo gal.”
She took off her red rubber slippers slowly
And put on crepsole shoes.

He said. “Look sharp now, I ready gal.”
“Man don’t rush me
Or I gon give you piece of me mind.
I done grease yuh hand already.”
He said, “Hustle up and
Haul yuh fat ass outa here quick.
Stop titivating like a moo-moo.”

Eh, eh, then cut eye start fuh happen:
She said, “You used to eye me up before the buck skin
Gal catch you. I hear she one force ripe piece
Like a feg of orange. Since when you tek magga gal?”

He replied, “Since you look like a manatee.”

“Draw me passport photo now. I ready to go.”

[She: ASIDE]

“Now I vex bad. I got to wreck yuh up an bruk yuh down.
I gon wok a bad eye on yuh, yuh bharwa, lungeera, nimacaram.
Yuh jumbie-boor, yuh gon ketch goady. Yuh maakaa-choody.
Soon-soon time yuh gon bawl like barracuda bite yuh rass.
Yuh gon glad fuh yuh dead-out even, yuh maakaa-choody.

I gon out yuh light
And yuh rass gon shite.”

A FAMILY ECLIPSE

A Lear of a storm threatened
For years, then broke. They trembled
In places private, beneath grim skies, behind bolted doors
Waiting. Swayed and weaved through slow days and nights
Patient. Quiet. Watching for recovery until eyes ached.

Alcohol and drugs tainted his virtues —
No one can forget those threadbare times,
Stripped of all rejoicings.
The brain had limped home
To surrender to reason. Blasted.
The prolonged disturbance reduced its fury
And violent passion slept.
There were no brutish words, no accusations, that night.
No tempest tore at hearts.
He just wept over long-dead griefs.

One day in 1993, a smiling face appeared in the eye.
Voice and colour recovered.
Emerged from danger state,
And measureless fears. Then, slow delight over-spread.
Confinement was over.
Sunk spirits in May revived.
Warmth and timid hopes—bloomed. A smile flowered.
They listened. Hearts beating fiercely to the bud.

Though memory's banished
To a secret place,
It's never far from their hearts.
They hear his distant drums with dread,
See his smile like sun in winter vanishing.
With outstretched arms
Tangled families grope
The invisible curtain of night.
Pity them,
For they are beggars with crowns.

LILAC VEINS AND STILL WATERS

Yuh head sound?

How yuh deh like cockroach in this chicken coop?

How yuh able live on breadfruit and sweet broom tea?

The man plant yuh pokey good. Every year a belly loom.

How long bruises burst on yuh russet skin?

How come love na drain away and unravel?

Wrang and strang man like salipenta. Nasty santapede.

He blister yuh hopes, left yuh a flightless bird.

How long girl before needle on yuh fuel gauge drop to zero?

Tell me, how yuh so complicit in yuh own debasement?

I sorry I call he patwa and perai, but it better than wolf.

I too voracious with me mouth, but he a predatory animal.

How yuh mek people call yuh Claire “The Loon”?

Yuh marriage should be illegal, Why not unknot yuhself?

Married fast—sped to him, like bullet train.

But he mek tracks everywhere—scatter himself all about.

I watched him with mistrust and silent disgust for years.

His face could launch a turd.

How yuh let him pound yuh skin, pelt licks, lash yuh?

Love? Is more like rupture than rapture.

Yuh won't survive this fuh long.

It's time for you to leave.

This marriage is one marathon

That you can't run.

THE TEXTURE OF EXISTENCE

The emotion was sadness.
Mind strained at the edge of hysterical breakdown.
You just needed to take a rest from life.
To reassess.

I understand now your sense of paranoia,
Your sense of personal suffocation.
That calm was out of reach.
I understand that now ... in retrospect.

CENT ICE

(Yoghurt got more culture than you)

I know weh yuh deh an
I know weh yuh going.
Yuh full a sweet mouth an jigger foot.
Got more mange than me dog, more purr than me cat.

Yuh dutty tribe full a yaws;
All a yuh hang on like a rash an tic.
Friday night yuh ready to drop—licks.
An we did beg yuh fuh stop.

Me blood never tek yuh.
Yuh can't better yuhself wid big eye
Ajoupa people can't live in town
All a yuh family chop people—rob cattle.
Cocksure now. Yuh knock bottle, spoon an pot
Yuh brains like calabash
Guts. All white, no grey matter.
An we did beg yuh fuh stop.

Yuh cut ass, cut tail, yuh pepper she skin;
Yuh buss an lash she.

Well chamar, this is me last word,
So never say yuh never heard,
Cos somebody gon come an show yuh your place,
Somebody gon come an mash up yuh face.

Me family deh quiet now, is so we deh, saying nuttin.
But one day, one day, congotay. We gon ketch yuh
An sit down yuh rass.

We gon learn yuh lil manners. An melt yuh.

BLOODCLOTS

Them two inhabit yuh life like chalk and charcoal
Yuh can't meld together as *real* family.

She voice like a bassoon, crisp and bracing.
She mouth like an estuary flap.
The two of them whole day eat big, shit big, puff and pant,
Then she crappaud throat pulsing when she vex.

Her son, your stepson, is not my blood-grandson.
The child dress like a bull in a balaclava
All them shirts get a number in front and back,
Like he branded. Got the depth of a puddle.
He spoilt bad, and follow she like a goose.
Boy a flare up like lava when fizzy drinks na cold.
He say I is a stout beech with blocks for feet.
I vex bad but swallow me spit yuh hear? That was yesterday.

Today I see he mek a V with two fingers
And me blood blare. Me give him one good stare.
But me hand spare him. Child curse like gun fire burst.
If I open me mouth.
I would shear him with a verbal cuffing.

Speckled-skin pickney from abroad, me could swallow
He whole. Vile reptile, mek me retch up bile.
Is lil pruning he need and pickling
Then a good lash to roast he batty.

In the mansion of me mind, I bury the memory.
I adept at finding bearable aspects
To unbearable experience.
But bad manners and disrespect for old people?
Slack rein—cause pain.

Son, I going to look a nice girl for yuh.
This time yuh must think
With yuh head not yuh heart.

Bide yuh time son
Yuh from a family of some note.

WAY OF LIFE

Sea.
Place of grace.
Intoxicates.

Wool and swishing silk.
Tasted the sweetness
Of true liberty.

Younger then, I felt the pull of the tide.
Consoling. Changed my life
Under sun's fire blades.
Left the world
Of reason behind.

Sweet damp.
Folds, falls of water
Whiffs of mortality.

*Ganga got no radio
flare or lifeboat out deh. It dangerous.*

WAY OF LIFE 2

Hopes lead fears in equal doses.
Heaving sea, alone, in an open
Boat with a quarter-rum.
Buoyed up.
Thinking
That nature does not defeat man
Man defeats man

Though age has trimmed my sails now,
I've learned the pleasure of doing nothing.
Just being. Watching all the channels in the sky
And water frothing, battering the shore.
A drama of ribbons and ruffles,
Tulle and lace seething.
There are times I stand up and applaud.

CRABWOOD CREEK

Leh rue tell yuh that me wake up
On the beach high and dry. Yuh can call it
Half drunk. Sea start sway in me head sky,
She motion hypnotise me so, till swirls
Of madness plough the waves inside an mek them
Twinkle like dew shine.

Me see some frisky prancing
Until Varuna the sea god surface. Sea hush up, wind
Stop play. He wear a shirt ultra marine blue just
As old folk say. He got short hair an stubble beard,
Close set eyes an a nice jawbone line.

TREASURES OF THE DEEP

Me lie on a beach when, air, thick with heat,
He roll in, me call he yuh see, no chat
But he wave back an hold up the oar. Leh me tell
He is the lap and suck of sea he is the fury
That lashes hulls, mek them spill out metallic flashes
Start the wind concerto risin'.
He go, an straight away wind an waves
Start playin' spittin' an sprayin' salt breath
Misbehavin'. That is from beginnin' of time,
From alpha days me old parents say.

Treasures of the deep? A kiss me ass story
When yuh tek high wine.
You need bread an lil shut eye.

Yuh na lost all yuh sense an reason—
Only yuh heart. It deh in season.
Wisdom gon come with time.

ME HEAR TIME GOT A BICYCLE NOW

after Andrew Marvell

Take off yuh panty
Let me chart yuh middle passage

So many fragile beauties grow up repressed and flawed
Let me implant yuh with certainty

It you turn away now, one day yuh mouth corners
Will droop in bitter remembrance

So let we slake our appetites
Virginity is only one debit with a thousand credits

His eyes penetrating and alert
"Yuh never miss the water til the well run dry"

Yuh should be castrated chemically Pinocchio
Me can't bear to replicate yuh,
So unhinge yuh mind and waspish remarks from me

I want a good Cocker Spaniel not a Pekinese
Go bury yuh bone elsewhere

I rather go back unopened and remain a virgin
Ad Infinitum.

BLAIRMONT SUGAR ESTATE: ASSAM I

Me can learn a new language
Even me can change behaviour

Me can change me skin
Born honey turn nut brown
Now me black like bitter chocolate.

Me don't have dynasty, no wife nor picknie
Or flock fuh ripen. They rise up. burst then split:
Me had the best times when love's river rose.

Me can't change me belief
Although me faith drought dry
No more swearin' by black books
Now-a-days, me bow only to new moon.

Rev. Fowler marry me and she. Love didn't
Flower she cancel the vows, reasons rotten,
Forgotten now. Spent, me din' waste time
Repentin': spilt not one tear, Enjoyed many
Post-marital events. Then, me learn fuh swim.

BLAIRMONT SUGAR ESTATE: ASSAM 2

Life full with stories when horizons start fading
Ripe fruit, withered human trees, rain falling.
All got the same ending, all a we expire.

Sugar estate people born to wuk like mules
For a mouthful of security: a pocketful
Of emptiness. Me can feel the poverty in me
Blood stream. Then you bend or bruk—
Up before you heart stop or mind run off.

TRIBES AND TRIBUTARIES IN QUEBEC

For Reya & Christina

We kissed when we first met,
aged 8 here in The Walled City of Quebec.

And 60 odd years later
partially sighted,
holding hands,
my old husband and I
tapping, humming,
break through the ice to get to our
sugar house
using reeds and bark cups
to collect amber maple syrup.

We native Indians, decelerating with a swagger,
we the 1st nation
the indigenous population.

'Maple moon', early spring
time for sapping, tree tapping,
breath steaming,
thin moon waning.
In ethereal translucence we
heat sap. Red
hot rock dropped in clay pot
creates
smokeless flame.

Atterwards we sip sap oozing from each other's trunks
and he spreads me out on our bed like moonlight.
We speak in tongues, and engage
like careless happy children.

PITCH LAKE PRAYER, TRINIDAD

Gimme a sign Lord
Show me weh fuh look
Gimme a word Lord
Show me weh he deh.

Shine yuh light down here Lord
Shine it on this ground
Show me weh fuh look Lord
Show me weh fuh go.

Gimme a sign Lord
Teach me how fuh fly
Put yuh hand in mine Lord
Send me some light.

Teach me how fuh fly Lord
I got fuh reach him quick
We aint got much time Lord
Help me nuh?

Me deh bereft of sleep Lord
Me emotions deh rampaging
And all me sentence mangled Lord
With substantial raging.

And today the anniversary
The day me heart bruk up
He vanish from Point Fortin Lord
O Lord, gimme strength.

Me can't tek no more blows
Peace in short supply
Gimme lil respite Lord
Counsel me nuh?

Put yuh hand in mine nuh?
Gimme a sign.
Gimme a word Lord
Gimme light.

He name resound Lord
Me pray fuh he return
Help me fuh understand Lord
Show yuhself. Lord

Lord?

THE LOSS OF LOVE IS IRREVOCABLE

*We are born astride a grave.
The light gleams an instant,
then it's night once more.*

Waiting for Godot
Samuel Beckett

Alfred. Nonagenarian man.
Head in clouds of sadness
Blue-black raven's eyes
Lunar silver hair
Sees spiders' webs as cathedrals.

On the backs of his gnarled hands
Streams and rivers of red and blue criss-crossed
In blotches of countries and narrow peninsulas.

Was married once for seventeen months
Swayed, and was
Singed in fire and drama.

Should've married again but every lady
Had a gaggle of kids. Genetic time-bombs.

Said that depression's but an expression
Of emptiness and worthlessness. A sterility
To remind you that life is flat. Futile,
Comes but to destroy you.

Being old, living in the half-
Light, is an abasement.
And, while he's thinking,
He wishes to be buried not cremated.
Is pensive about resurrection without a body.

He dismissed me as a spiritual dunce.
And as we parted he teased, "today will die tomorrow."

RAMA'S RUM SHOP

In Eversham, on the Corentyne coast of Berbice
In a place where longing flashes, Mr. Bharran shouted:

Wuk hard all me days. Save.
Send she to England.
Send me child away for a "better life,"
And what come back?

Poor Mr Bharran.
Betty, his daughter, "hit the bargain basement" aged 23.
Her inter-wars with alcohol started at university.
Then, fire chased smoke to the edge of a precipice,
Or, one thing led to another (as they say).
And she graduated by degrees
From drink to drugs (from soft to hard).
In her final year she took a class in type A's
And eloped, with Death, the receiver.
Died in a state of disgrace

And after that,
The strain of it,
His wife just left.

Tragedy divides you.

In memoriam SUZETTE SABRINA

I Life Seeping Away

Blinded with hope we journeyed in profound silence;
A procession of us at night
In menacing fog
To the intensive care unit where you lay.

Crawling past Salisbury Cathedral, panic threaded through.
Hope scattered, moon swelled
In gauze clouds against black cotton wool night.

Voices calling out to a sibling dying out.
Her fingerprints on the bedroom walls at home
Forming a sooty tapestry.
The last image of shred and bloom.

Minds reaching out. Sub-verbally. Unaware
Of the enormity of the tragedy which lay ahead.

II Breathless

Our sister, curled up into a ball of submission,
Resembled a foetus, wrapped in its umbilical cord.
She withdrew into the core of her body
And crouched there.

She never did wake.

At 1:25am, you died.
Halted on the carousel of life,
Your last breath drifted like a veil.

III *A Vacuum Of Time*

Your head on a pink satin-lined bed,
A picture on the wall of a ship under sail.

A muddle of family
Stared into coffee as if there were messages in it.

Time between death and funeral
So like a badly edited film. Flickering.
A constant loop, running in the head.

Scenes repeat themselves,
But the sequence is all wrong.
Too many flashback frames.

Lurching, groping through time. Silence drips.
Nightmare and reality are inseparable.
Unable to regulate the mental clock.
Unable to find a brief moment
To nurse the pain. Or an
Even briefer moment
To forget it.

Body bags block up the paths to the brain.

IV Hand In Hand With Lakshmi: Our Young Sister, Heading On Before

Watching wordlessly, shallow breathed,
Box closed like book.
Hearts thundered in chests as you
Descended slowly.
Ash and cinders. A smoky furnace.
You vanished in the grey-white-dust-storm
And brought to light
New words.

Death reached out with carnivorous intent.
And you ceased to be.

NON-DIVINE HIGH

He's a rash of measles
Cocked up like weasel with skunk.

Head down, the old
Shudder, heave and gasp.
He's battled in no man's land for his lump of black.

Here he comes around the bend, lead free
Reared up like bear,
Wide-eyed and pale.

He's careering off the fast track, rudderless.
Onto weed and rubbish covered carpet.
Surreal camaraderie one minute, then 'cool' disinterest.

No *vita nova* for this dejected dope.
Press the eject button on Schubert's songs of loss,
Jettison some controversial scenes.
A decade of deaths, and hopes dashed.

This "Island fortress/garden of England"
Is just a romantic myth.
Homes are awash with spliff,
Billowing.

WHITE DAYS AND RED ROSES

Mr. Turner, a retired undertaker
Refuses to secrete any personal details
But admits to *wanderlust* in the blood.
Since retirement he's had the freedom
Of an itinerant life, but it's sadly now a sedentary one.

Graveyards, he said, are peopled with a range of cultures.
I love the carvings, the small domes and temples
Peppered with deities.
Places of veneration.

I've never understood people's
Uneasy awe of the figure with the scythe.
Such a shame that survivors live in a labyrinth
Of loss. I've known people fall into black holes
Of depression but warmed towards some wartime
Families who kept necklaces of skulls
In ostentatious slumber.

Time passes away young man.
Death is incurable. and it's lifelong!
But it's not such a devouring monster.
At least, it's fair: respects neither wealth nor stature.
And restores a sense of perspective to life.

Consider me a gardener:
I dig the earth, sow the seeds,
And watch the flowers come.

THE MURMURING

Streams of reminiscence, remembered, recalled,
Pictures roll over like leaves in Fall.
Thoughts and tears fall to the floor, like dead things.

You boxed up like rigid missiles.
Masks turned mournfully, helpless in your direction.
Upset and anger, a vague physical pain years later.

Birthdays bring portraits in and out of relief,
Fusion of this brings profound disbelief.
Life is one long act of disloyalty.

SPACIOUS

Mason.

Grave marks. Symbols of human fragility.

Evocative ties with past generations;

Mounds of spoil guarded and caretakered;

Neatly mown lawns of ruin.

Conservation.

Heritage centre, car parks and chapel. Paths cut and walked,

Everyone laid out tidily in lush colourful decay.

Preservation

Treasures, trees, surveyors, sites.

Historic monuments. Immovable.

Quarry-stone, marbles, cement stabilised.

Cracks filled in.

God made his statement; laid down his terms.

But is this sometimes a place of celebration?

Do people embrace and fly free?

DEFERRED

Paulo De Gama (Alentejo, Portugal)

A child with mid-life crisis at thirteen,
Thirty eight inches tall, searching
For an alternative
Skipped school
Found fiction.

Studied life drawing in dancehalls
Practised fine art using ash. Learned
Mimic and mime.
Grew three children.
Majored in petty crime.

Assembled in the presence of tall
People, (mostly doctors or teachers
Though their difference is slight).
Then, awarded a lifelong fellowship at
The library, drawn to book lined
Thick white brick walls
Rose to forty eight inches
Fears and feet stilled.

THE GOING

I ordered a kilo of “unprecedented syntactical subtlety”.
And now I’m just waiting for clarity of expression.

Oh, but what fun the ambiguities!
Fruitfully, happily they drop from the nib,
Fall at times and fly away.
Persistently though, some words hold on, clinging, staying,
Only to abandon you as you write.

When they stay, they crawl, float, like insects,
Some winged, flying
Digging, stinging.
For those that escape, you rummage like a beggar in a bin.

Half remembered words.
In transit.

TOOTING MARKET

(For Sandra—Sheherazade 1958-1997)

Should you dare for a smell and taste of home
Go to SW17 to the Sunday morning market:
See the ladies wearing bands of gold, smelling of nutmeg and thyme;
They sell nenwa, bora, bara and milky cassava.
You can try gulgula, awara, and guava.

In one tiny shop, you can buy salt-fish,
Pig-tail, plait-bread, star-fruit,
Tennis-rolls and coolade, golden-apple and foo-foo too.
Water-lilies and young frangipanis, maiden-hair ferns
And oleander—so vivid. Leaves you riveted. Wondering.

Senses intense; music, a poetry of colourful voices.
The variety is infinite. You can cry and laugh at once.

Men drinking Banks beer study the ladies. Glances skidding,
They stare absorbed, preoccupied, "speculating".
One to another said, "Boy, I might have a chance". His wife
selling banga-mary, hassa, huri and gilbaker overheard:

She was explicitly irreverent—to hoots of laughter;
She shouted to the crowd that her husband was a
"misbegotten dilemma".
One hundred earnest smiles ensued and then they all applauded.
She then described his small "pointer broom," "a pencil with
out lead," she said
"...his crown jewels all lost."

Orchro and eddo, pigeon peas and sweet potato sold hot.
With such warmth.
Black pudding or pepper pot? Or souse? "Tek yuh time, na
rush. Pick and choose,"
Deliberate reasoned decisions to make. You see.
Such liberation. Such collaboration. Such loud laughter.
People walking side by side
Together.
On Sundays.

Thanks for the memory.

POETHOOD (2ND GEAR)

"About Your Right To Relate..."

Writing words only turns speech into silence;
Blurs life into death,
And so reality dwindles.
The edges of unrelenting thoughts dissolve.

This writing of stuff is joyless and hopeless;
All that flight into fantasy ... casting and recasting yourself,
Maybe you just need a wilful extinction of personality.

All the letters are barbed.
The alphabet bursts in deep detonations.
Such a deluge of anger and chaos,
You feel as if you're suffering from the bends
In the immersion of life.

But I have a grim determination to continue.
It's about motive and value.
So let the clichés fall on fallow ground.
And I'll write slowly, celibate and sober.

POETHOOD (3RD GEAR)

Words tumble,
Waves break,
Memory bangs outside your head.

Dreaming, sleeping experimentally,
Pulse behind eye throbs rhythmic beat.

At last spell breaks, and
Muse descends to lots of laughter.

Choirs of words hum.
As first futile couplets invade the silence.

One year later. Stunned. No sweat, no wine, aloof and inaccessible.
Detached, weary, dichotomies displayed. Dying days and
Words and schizophrenic profiles ache as
Overtones of madness fuse. An antidote is overdue.

Books, flowers, music, ambrosia.
Mine.

POETHOOD (4TH GEAR)

Significant Emissions

Distraught with passion,
I've retired now, pen dried after 21 months.
But I didn't feel a new sense of maturity.
Yesterday is just like today or tomorrow.
I rage. Still. I'm susceptible. I have the same faith and lack of it.

Strokes and curves are not witty, well informed or poignant.
I lack judgement, make hideous errors, write only
Banal repetitive words. Still,
I would have loved to have inherited the bold syntax gene,
And won on the lottery of literary landmarks, and
Moved towards a fuller understanding.

Still. Despite peaks and ruptures, aspiration swells.
It's an unvarying procedure you see:
Laying, playing, rising and toppling. Thoughts will march,
Splashing visions on the beach

This new voyage is a solitary one
No conversation, only dispensation.
Hours of vacuity, and selfish solitude,
Sketching a variety of diaphanous personalities,
In tones and notes cyclical.

VEGETATIVE INTERIOR VERBALISATIONS OF THE LABOURING WORDSMITH

Millipede, centipede, segmented insects
Like errors
With fiendish ability to reproduce themselves.

A litter of paper
Ash trays full
Wine bottles empty

End of century
Fervent disbelief.
Hollow
Strength needed only to work and conform
Pray only for sunshine

Circle fell apart, take apart, are apart.
When mothers lose children only a fraction of the iceberg is
Visible.
Senses numbed.

Suicide, terrible, incredible.

CARTOGRAPHY

Longing for the place of your birth
Marooned in snow, mind slate grey
With mouth open, in days of whiteness
You were given a gift of Allsop's *Caribbean
English Usage*. A compass on a diamond point.

At first a flicker of fireflies, a chapter
Of your life—then a flare. A touchstone.
Energised, finding out
About the place that shaped your life.

Those pages conveyed music
Drenched you in colours and sounds
That purged standard words of false
Resonance. Its heat allowed you
To leap away from navy blue.

To have denied you this, is
To have denied your history,
That amalgam of influence.
Indian. British. Guyanese.

Then people long to go on pilgrimages
And palmers long to seek strange shores...

Chaucer — *Prologue*

JOURNEYS

Journeys are midwives of thought
Train wheels roll in rhythm
Against the castors outside.

On any bus, train and plane
Thoughts hang like hawks
Still in the mind. Steady,
In spite of wind, banging
The image won't fall
From my mind.

Night dying, surging above so much
Brain wanders cabin without impediment
Try to lose stretches of life experiences.
Then on a tin craft, you think of your family
Front cargo crates in the bellies of ships
Just as sixteen rear wheels land
And smoke.

LANDING IN GUYANA

(To Walter Raleigh)

You, spread out below, in a green silk dress,
No longer needy. Regathered a new shape.
Water. Volumes of it come.
Flowing curls of stained glass. Silver eels enrolled,
Ribbon-like, run naked across your neck.

Breathing hard pressed to pane, I feel the heat
Of your green sprouting flames. Far, far below, I
Smell flat fertile skin, see paired elbows of hills
Laced with islands. Firm mounds, nipples.
Twisting and turning. Mouth moaning.

Metal tube snakes up and onwards. Strains, drops
Soars again, racing towards a goal.
Pale clouds peel beneath us, parting like rags.
They will gather too, and form a shape.

Little known jewel who lives your fullest
I come heavily laden to hear song in the beat
Of your heart, to study old signposts, touch gently
Your new milestones. Landing. Plane blows
A wide ring all over you.

WATER LILIES

In the heady heat of May's midday sun
You display a thousand glossy roundabouts,
Soft green pools, in botanical garden ponds
Your shower heads, erect brown pods
Above, swelling silent, full of fattening
Nuts. Below you unfold a pink curved
Geometry of bloom flowering open to reveal
A carved, embroidered waterwheel.
You let this picture minister to you
When cows slowly wandered in to cool.
A scene from The Holy Lakes of The Acts of Rama
Lay in front of you, a scene so real, unreal.
Every detail reminiscent of the holy
Book. Your first serendipitous moment that day.

SEEING RED

Red flags remind me of Jhandis.
I can see the Doolahin in her expensive
Bright yellow orhanee, and bangles of gold
The Doolahaa in white koortaa, looking scared.

Jhandi flags remind me of taasaa and taablaa music
And the Pandit, paann leaf in hand.

Red flags on towers, poles, outside embassies
Illuminate the picture of my Bhowgee dancing
Like a swizzle-stick with the dhaall ghotnee
In one hand, and the water daaboo in the other.

Flags blowing to-and-fro like hungry children
Poised to feast on aaloo in geera and masaala.
For the old ones, phoulowree
And spicy saddhaa roti.
And afterwards, fried kalownjee.

Then on Sunday, sweet kheer with sultanas,
Prasaad and kurmaa, and gurumaa.
Under a fragrant coconut branch maaro,
A canopy of customs. Sacred. Rare.

HIBISCUS TREE

A cargo of hibiscus
Across continents
Trumpet-like flowers
Dressed in plastic wraps
Embossed with yellow borders

Go on a ten day break
Open up like poems
On twig-like stems.
Long yellow tongues
A pollen promise.

Bedtime. A neat twirl of
Petals fall. Arrive to me
Shrouded in tissue paper
Far from home,

And fade.
For me, dried hibiscus
Is used for tea.
A mild laxative.
Contains vitamin C.

HYMN FOR FOUR SEASONS

(Lutheran church. Region 7)

*Jesus loves me this I know
As He loved me long ago*

This was sung to raise your mood
Help you hold hope when you only
Had to ward off depression
Heading towards the crossroads.

This was medicine, a way to cope
Sung when babies were baptised
When you celebrated a birthday
You sang it when you worked.
And when people died
Or were close to the edge.

Sung, when you found love.

Hummed one hymn, your bible cabinet of remedies
Hummed when you forgave yourself
Hummed when you found peace,
With those met in memory.
When you turned over raw materials of distress

*Jesus loves me still today,
Walking with me on my way.*

THE SAGE AND THE ONION

Change is better than what was.

When you waste no effort to please
Freedom becomes tumultuous and uneven.

When you have faith in an impalpable future
You'll go bare headed among the stars.

When life is all you have left to give
When depression is the solution,
Appeasement in disguise
I will give you rest.

When all you see is leaves and night falling
Come and I will give you rest.

When you are inflated with delusion
And there is no sound, only the perpetual shimmer
I will not leave you comfortless
I will come to you.

LOSE NOT YOUR COLOUR

When my time comes to leave this world
When my tide goes out to sea
I'll have one last cough—before departure, and a final pee.
That time in flux, in transience, in mutability,
Will be a new harbour.

When, in renewal time, I slip into a state of quiescence,
During the last ripple of speculation, drifting,
Sing for me, eat and be hearty. Use peppery words.
Have a naked party, wear a smile and wobble
With no crown of sorrow in your eyes.

When my time comes, the wine will be divine
There will be no despair, no fear.
I'll have champagne in mid-air
And lubricate and brush everyone with verbal ubiquity.
Have Hope and Faith, but no sorrow please.
Love is enough—you'll have to work tomorrow.

I've broken a few windows, spider webs (and hearts).
The scars and wounds will heal.
I'm off to a painless peace, independent of fashion.
Submitting to fate,
Committing to God.

Family spirits will meet me on the shore
And if the gate is locked, I'll queue.

Bitter pain holds nothing for you.
Pack your courage in a rucksack. Plant aspirations.
Old love and laughter will sustain. You'll bloom again.

This pious resignation is only a flee from boredom.
Seldom do the dying utter memorable words
Awaiting release.

Or see visions or depart with beatified expressions.
Most souls yield to the inevitable with a sigh
As their dentures slip out.

So fuck the pantomime of grief, the legendary fact.
Fuck exaggerated fiction too.

MY MORNING STAR

by Veronica Prasad

A thousand prayers I whispered for you
Like tiny wings sent into empty space.
A million memories of your face
Haunt me as I pretend that you are there,
As though the golden link that binds
You to me is not broken.
A fountain of love like a little Kaieteur
Flows forever.
Secrets that we shared, words of love
And care
That were spoken
Still remain locked within me.
Glittering diamonds precious and rare,
Just like the ones that are asleep
Beside the Kaieteur,
To take wing, like my prayers
And to live by the shore of the
Fountain of my love forever more.

E-MAIL TO GOD

To: God@hotmail.com
From: Orinoco_Online@lycos.co.uk
Subject: Bless me Father for I have sinned ...
Date: 01/01/01

I'm a little scared of sending this, because you might
Reply one of these days.
I'm sorry I flooded your message board
But I'm scared and losing my faith.

There's no comfort in prayer. No hope.
I see you as frightening and remote.
A figure of judgement and retribution,
I feel no sense of absolution.

Doubt resides in my foundation
You've abandoned me, without salvation.

Where is the caring arm?
The shepherd's crook
For this lost lamb?

Please don't forsake me
I do still try

Please help
Yours truly,

Orinoco_Online

The e-mail has been scanned for honesty and has been certified cliché free.

