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Passage from unpublished new novel, The Counting House For Sam Selvon, with gratitude

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Abstract

'So what you bring me this time?' Kampta snarled as soon as Miriam approached the hut. It was past midnight, he had stayed awake to greet her, fretting and cursing all the six hours Gladstone delayed her. She was exhausted, she wanted to bathe and sleep, not engage with his anger, but he would not let her. He looked contemptuously upon the parcel of salted ham she handed over as if it were meagre booty. 'You mean you skin your back-end all night for a piece of ham?' he asked in mock disbelief, treating her with the same scorn he heaped upon her brothers when they returned from their nightly expeditions with only a pocketful of nails. He made them feel guilty for having betrayed him and their forebears. He had trained them physically, had tutored them with stories to provoke their sense of hurt and rage, and when the moment was perfect he released them on a raiding mission. But all they brought back were weak excuses. 'I don't care if Gladstone put two or twelve extra night-watchman to guard factory' he screamed at them, 'all-you just useless. When Gladstone land in Africa he raid enough to pack one hundred thousand shiploads, and all he had was one gun. You hear, one gun. And you know what else he had?' He threw the question at Thomas who looked away in shame. 'Brains. The man had brains. Brains is what most people carry in their heads but all-you head stuff with blood-doth.' They fidgeted, the nails bulging in their pockets and digging into their flesh. They had walked the two miles from the factory in pain, but Kampta made them wait a little longer before allowing them to empty their pockets.

DAVID DABYDEEN

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novel, *The Counting House*
For Sam Selvon, with gratitude

'So what you bring me this time?' Kampta snarled as soon as Miriam approached the hut. It was past midnight, he had stayed awake to greet her, fretting and cursing all the six hours Gladstone delayed her. She was exhausted, she wanted to bathe and sleep, not engage with his anger, but he would not let her. He looked contemptuously upon the parcel of salted ham she handed over as if it were meagre booty. 'You mean you skin your back-end all night for a piece of ham?' he asked in mock disbelief, treating her with the same scorn he heaped upon her brothers when they returned from their nightly expeditions with only a pocketful of nails. He made them feel guilty for having betrayed him and their forebears. He had trained them physically, had tutored them with stories to provoke their sense of hurt and rage, and when the moment was perfect he released them on a raiding mission. But all they brought back were weak excuses. 'I don't care if Gladstone put two or twelve extra night-watchman to guard factory' he screamed at them, 'all-you just useless. When Gladstone land in Africa he raid enough to pack one hundred thousand shiploads, and all he had was one gun. You hear, one gun. And you know what else he had?' He threw the question at Thomas who looked away in shame. 'Brains. The man had brains. Brains is what most people carry in their heads but all-you head stuff with blood-cloth.' They fidgeted, the nails bulging in their pockets and digging into their flesh. They had walked the two miles from the factory in pain, but Kampta made them wait a little longer before allowing them to empty their pockets.

'Next time he open his coolie mouth at me I kill his rass' Thomas told his brothers when Kampta was far away. But he knew that it was an empty threat. He knew that Kampta was right to shout, for what was a shilling worth of nails compared to the money Gladstone was making from all of them.

'You have to thief and wreck and laze and fuck and drink and knock drum and make song that mock Gladstone, for soon your life done but *he* still own your legacy' Kampta had preached to them, 'remember your grandpappy them, black and angry though they weak with lash and two-three teeth only left in their mouth how they break the rest against

sheep-bone and what-else bone whiteman feed them. Two-three teeth in their mouth like when goat enter cornfield and eat out corn and two-three ears only hanging from the husk. Is so whiteman eat out your grandpappy but even so, is rebellion they perform, and burn down canefield, and sharpen their teeth against whiteman, and sing Christian song in his ears till he surrender.'

Sleep. She wanted sleep, not fight, but he would not let her go.

'A piece of ham?' he repeated but still she did not answer. 'You mean the man heap up gold in his house but all you take is ham?'

'It come all the way from England' she offered, for want of something better to say.

'England? England?' he repeated quietly, turning his face to the darkness as if to better visualize the country. 'So you let him in return for a slice of England?' The quietness of his voice made her fear him. She could cope with him when he ranted or preached knowing that as long as she listened sympathetically his anger would subside. But she had also seen him talking to himself in a low voice as he paced the ruined garden - he had forbidden her brothers to plant, for planting was slavery - and she knew that he was pitchforking in his mind the nastiest of manure. He was frustrated. He had only an army of three boys at his disposal, insufficient for all the deeds of revenge his mind dreamt up. In such a mood she avoided him, making excuses to visit relatives in the neighbouring village which took her away for a whole day. But there was no escape now. Her thighs hurt from Gladstone's doing so even if she wanted to run away into the bush she could not. Best to look abject. Best to cry, to disarm him. Best to limp away, crying. In the morning, after a full night's rest, she could fight him. She could chase him from her yard for the hundredth time. She could taunt him for being a good-for-nothing abandoned coolie drowning in self-pity. She could order her brothers back to the garden. But now now. Not when he spoke quietly. She could feel tears gathering, not feigned, as she planned, but from real fear. With Gladstone she acted, squealing or weeping according to the role he chose for her. Sometimes she would confuse the masks of brazenness or terror so as to spoil his fantasies and leave him unfinished. But mostly she complied, for fear of her domestic wages which fed and clothed her brothers, with a portion put aside each week for her mother, when she returned finally to them.

'So everytime you lie with Gladstone, is England you lying with? When he heave on top of you is a whole country, great and heavy, pressing down on you so you can't escape?' He let the ham drop from his hands as if to free them for some deed. 'But Miriam girl, tell truth' he said playfully, almost with a small boy's innocence, 'you like England, no? When he put it in, you does close your eye and imagine you is whitelady riding through mist and meadow and all them other pictures paint on all the tin-cans he give you? You does open and close like how

whitewoman does do her umbrella when the fine rain fall then sun come out?'

Is spit I get, not gentle rain and breeze, she wanted to answer, a middle-age man rising and falling and fanning me with his flab, and he so excited he fart and dribble, and by the time he finish my whole face wet with spit and the bed smelling of horse-manure. This is what I do for all-you ungrateful dogs, she wanted to say, and is my mother make me do it. When she come back she will want finery or else she will run away again...and if she run away again I burn the hut with Thomas and Joe and Peter sleeping in it, and I sprinkle white spirit over my head and light it, and I run through the canefield torching till I reach Gladstone's house, but if by that time the flame on my skin is low, then I go stoop and blow on my foot, blow steadfast till no breath left, till the flame start up and find fresh fuel underneath my skin and lick the whole of my body, then I stroll from room to room setting them a fire. Stoop and blow, and not make one noise, not one scream, like I stoop now quietly at your foot to pick up my ham, pick it up and dust it off, like I pick up myself from Gladstone bed and brush off the flakes of his skin. Like the preacherman break bread over my head and the white crumbs sprinkle in my hair and kindle and it become burning bush and I hear God denouncing me, *me*, from above, for sinning and how I must seek forgiveness. Like you standing over me now, raging with fire inside you which you want to put in me, purify me, and me kneeling as at church-altar but is not blessing I want but my fucking ham which I fuck for, roll in the dust for, so move your man-foot and fucking cock, you and God and Gladstone, and let me pass, she ordered but no word came from her mouth, only a sob which she dampened immediately for she would not cry real tears for him, not for any of them, not even for her mother.

Editor's Note

Most Australian children learn a poem by Mary Gilmore called 'Botany Bay'. It is a poem about our convict ancestors and the debt we owe them. I quote one stanza:

In old Botany Bay

Stiff in the joints with little to say

I am he who paved the way

That you may walk at your ease today

I discussed this poem on one occasion with David Dabydeen and he was quick to draw an analogy between old Botany Bay and Sam Selvon. For just as we Australians owe a debt to our convict ancestors so too do the younger generation of writers from the Caribbean e.g. John Agard (Listen Mr Oxford Don), Linton Kwesi Johnson (Sonny's Lettah from Prison) owe a debt to Sam Selvon for his injection of new blood into the English Language. It is a debt that David Dabydeen has always been quick and anxious to acknowledge. Dangaroo Press published David's first book, *Slave Song*. It was a book of poetry about the peasant canecutters of Guyana and written in Guyanese Creole. It was entered for the Commonwealth Poetry Prize and won it, the first book of poetry not written in so-called 'standard' English to win the prize. This was a tribute not only to David's ability as a poet but also to Sam Selvon, who took that first step.

Anna Rutherford