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Your Island, Your World (In memory Sam Selvon)

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Abstract

With that loping stoop you bore down on me like an eagle (as I imagined one) and asked me to write something for the Sunday Guardian magazine you put out. Me, who thought writers lived on Parnassus (a mountain I'd heard of).

CECIL GRAY

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With that loping stoop
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an eagle (as I imagined one)
and asked me to write
something for the Sunday
Guardian magazine you
put out. Me, who thought
writers lived on Parnassus
(a mountain I'd heard of).

But youth is impetuous.
I went home and scribbled
an implausible story that
you printed. (I still have
the page I clipped out.)
And some nights I walked
the two blocks between
our homes and tried
to tap inside your words
the vein feeding your pulse.

You seemed to a blind
fumbler a mystic of sorts,
one mad enough to think
about leaving the island
to write. Openmouthed
I watched you depart.

Then you took the small
language used by the island
for picong and calypsoes
and stretched its vowels
across the mouth of the world.
Placed us, as raw as uncured
rum, with every sweet nuance

we used for survival, in pubs
and underground stations
of London. Took Brackley
and Moses out of Rose Hill
and gave them a stature
Micawber once had
in the classrooms that
censored the tongue
our thoughts found ease in.

Yet at home some giggled,
still ashamed. Wondered
how Englishmen took it,
your bold spurning of what
the schools still frowned at.
You were half-disowned.
Then, as usual, when foreign
approval tendered your fame,
when laughter they heard
came from white far-away
continents it was OK
to lay claim to your name.

That time in Croydon
we spoke long about ways
sunlight shone in your pages.
The bitter cane had already given
its liquor to all lonely
Londoners, squeezed from
the Caroni plains, and
girls in that city wanted
to clip like Delilah
your fast-greying mane.
But you had eaten the
bone-filled cascadura,
so again and again you
returned to the thunder
you heard in your heart,
needing the heckles of
Gallows, of Bat.

Rest now. Your pen has
done all of its work. Tiger
lives, Urmilla stoops at a
standpipe washing away

the last traces of race
you sent to her to get rid of.
Sir Galahad has touched
your shoulder with time's
irrevocable knighthood.
I never delivered the tales
of the place you expected,
save a few. See my wreath
like an O in my sorrow.

But then I knew every
square mile gave you its
story, each dustpile its gold.
All of it was your island,
all of it your world.