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EACLALS

Benjamin Zephaniah’s poetry is reprinted from Too Black, Too Strong (Bloodaxe Books, Tarset, Northumberland, 2001) with Benjamin Zephaniah’s permission.

Front Cover: Agnes Hewitt (1857–1957), a Jamaican brown-skin gal. (Photograph courtesy of Beverley Noakes.)

Kunapipi refers to the Australian Aboriginal myth of the Rainbow Serpent which is the symbol of both creativity and regeneration. The journal’s emblem is to be found on an Aboriginal shield from the Roper River area of the Northern Territory of Australia.
EDITORIAL

But today I recapture the islands' bright beaches: blue mist from the ocean rolling into the fishermen's houses.

By these shores I was born: sound of the sea came in at my window, life heaved and breathed in me then with the strength of that turbulent soil.

We who are born of the ocean can never seek solace in rivers: their flowing runs on like our longing.

Although born inland in Australia’s national capital, I spent a large part of my childhood sleeping and waking to the sound of the sea. The road to the coast from Canberra to Bateman’s Bay, Merry Beach, Bawley Point and Ulladulla, was traversed every weekend and at the beginning and end of summer holidays in a state of dreaming — in anticipation and longing for that turbulent soil.

Perhaps it was this sense of affinity with ocean that drew me to the language and rhythms of Edward Kamau Brathwaite’s poetry. Here was the familiar made exotic — the Caribbean never seen, but vividly imagined through the knowledge of the other shore. I encountered Caribbean literature in the second year of my undergraduate degree at the University of Queensland — George Lamming’s *Castle of My Skin*, Jean Rhys’ *Wide Sargasso Sea*, V.S. Naipaul’s *House for Mr. Biswas*, the poetry of Derek Walcott, Mervyn Morris and of course, once ‘Eddie’ now ‘Kamau’ Brathwaite.

I grew up with a love of English literature that described scenes never encountered in Australia; the emerald green in my box of Derwent pencils that might colour willow tree and verdant English pasture had no correspondence to the yellow, olive and silver greens of drought and gum tree. I also grew up with the poetry of Judith Wright. This was a poetry that spoke to my geography — the ‘lean, clean, hungry country’ of tree-cleared undulating hills silvered in the blaze of summer heat. I understood as an Australian what Brathwaite meant when he said, ‘The hurricane does not roar in pentameters’ — this was not an understanding gained through knowledge of hurricane, but knowledge of engishes, and a recognition of the imperative that a language speak its geography.

Hurricanes however were experienced only vicariously. They feature in Olive Senior’s poetic remembrance of ‘Hurricane Story’ in *Gardening in the Tropics*:

> Thatch blew about and whipped our faces, water seeped in, but on grandfather’s bed we rode above it, everything holding together. For my grandfather had learnt from his father and his father before him all the ways of orchestrating disaster.

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It is with some sense of the surreal that this special issue on the Caribbean goes to press: while the images of hurricane Ivan’s devastating path filled our television screens in Wollongong, the sub-editor formatted Elizabeth Walcott Hackshaw’s essay on ‘Cyclone Culture and the Paysage Pineaulien’ and my request for the black and white sketches of Frank Collymore’s ‘Collybeasts’ went unanswered as the Caribbean rode out the storm only to be confronted by another.

For the purposes of this special issue, ‘the Caribbean’ is understood to encompass English, French and Spanish Caribbean as well as the diasporic Caribbean — essays draw on the literature and culture of Jamaica, Barbados, Antigua, Dominica, Guadeloupe, St. Lucia, Cuba, Colombia, Britain, Canada. Significantly, many speak to that sometimes silenced or denied history of the body and sexuality identified by Barry Higman in his review essay of Olive Senior’s Encyclopedia of Jamaican Heritage as playing a central role in Caribbean culture, the inheritance of the body being ‘the most basic of all concepts of heritage’. (244) But to speak of the body – its signs and enactments of desire — can place a writer in the destructive and malevolent path of a hurricane. The story is written in a vernacular that is handled with an admirable competence — it is confronting but integrity lies in its authenticity; the theme of the story is neither unusual nor particularly confronting — at least that was my naïve assessment — until I was appraised of the context out of and into which the story was placed. A few days after accepting ‘Lapdance’ for publication I came across an article in the Guardian Weekly [Aug 13–19, 2004], captioned ‘If you’re gay in Jamaica, you’re dead’. The piece begins with a reference to the murder of gay activist Brian Williamson in June of this year, and claims that, according to international human rights organisations, Jamaica is ‘one of the most homophobic places in the world’ in which gay relationships are necessarily largely conducted in secret for fear of abuse, torture and vigilante action. If, as Wole Soyinka claims, the man who remains silent in the face of tyranny dies, and to speak is also to die, then a safe place must be found in which man or woman can speak of the body and its desires without fear of reprisal. Ways of orchestrating disaster, ways of surviving and even celebrating are available to us — they lie with our willingness to tell our stories and to listen to the stories of others with sympathy.

Anne Collett

NOTES