VOODOOMATION

THE BOOK OF FORETELLING

GARFIELD LINTON

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Sincere thanks to Lawrence R. Smith, without whose tireless help and everlasting perseverance these writings would not have seen any light of day. Special thanks to Brenda Flanagan, Janet Kauffman, James Wanless, and the Pearl.

These writings are for those that came after me: my son, Diallo; my nephew, Tervon; my niece, Dana; and my nephew, Ori.
Essence and Life cannot be seen . . . 
It is contained in the Light of Heaven,
The light of Heaven cannot be seen . . .
It is contained in the Light of the Heart.

—*The Two and the One*
by Mircea Eliade
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CONTENTS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction ................................................................. vii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hilltop 412 ................................................................. 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grandma’s Garden Seeds ................................................. 8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hum Bah Bah Hum ........................................................... 14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Descendants of the Blue Water Hole .............................. 25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Great Cow ............................................................... 35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Slithera ................................................................. 54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Climbing Sisyphus’ Hill .................................................. 64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>From The Book of Foretelling .......................................... 71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Standing Bum .......................................................... 91</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
What happens when a stunning gift for lyrical prose combines with a narrative skill that in us a suffocating fear of dancing cheek to cheek with all the gods and ancestors? The answer to this riddle is Garfield Linton, a phenomenal young writer who, in his first book, *Voodoomation: the Book of Foretelling*, performs such miracles and many more. Among the yam patches and banana groves of the Jamaican countryside, in mysterious blue holes along the shoreline and beside haunted mango trees, these stories rise like the holy texts of a religion that is not only pan-Caribbean and pan-African, but pan-humanity. All creatures of the world—two-legged, four-legged, winged and finned—can and must participate in this vision. The mysterious revelations and transformations in *Voodoomation* are for everyone.

Linton’s short stories often resemble folk tales. They can also recall a frightening animistic universe, where every object and creature is capable at once of manifesting wonderful malice and providing unexpected redemptions. In their subtle playfulness these stories also bring to mind astute political and social commentaries. To borrow Yeats’ phrase, they create a terrible beauty, offering us dazzling glimpses into the *spiritus mundi*, the effects of which linger long after the reading. And yet, in the midst of all this supernatural power, there is compassion for the foolishness of mortals and a wry, low-key humor that derives from that humanizing perspective. In “Hilltop 412,” the narrator describes the outsider Father Sangenette and his attempts to lift the lives of the poor Jamaicans of his country parish. The boy who tells the tale recalls the day the priest brought cherries from his tree, the only one of its kind in the neighborhood, to the local school. To celebrate the occasion, he asked the schoolchildren to sing “This Little Light of Mine.” The narrator sees nothing but irony in this act of charity.

What about the people who didn’t have any light to shine?
I asked him about those people one morning. What about those people who didn’t have any light to shine? That’s what I asked him when he came and gave the whole school juicy cherries that smelled like something we never had.

The modulations of language and tone in *Voodoomation*, and the virtuoso leaps and shifts that take place within its narratives, provide us with a literary experience of satisfying complexity.
In his recreation of the Jamaican countryside, Linton gives a local habitation and a name to the forces that struggle at the point of intersection between the physical and the spiritual, where the everyday world and the territory of our souls collide. There are creatures, in human form and otherwise, who are bent on apocalyptic destruction, and there are heroes who struggle to knit the earthly fragments back together. In the midst of this titanic battle there is a cast of very human characters, recognizable to all of us, who bumble through life guided by the usual self-delusion and petty ambition. They brag and lie, procrastinate, and threaten each other with curses. However, through Linton’s skill, and in spite of their vanities, they draw us into a rich, sympathetic relationship. In “The Great Cow,” as the boy Kuya comes to fetch the neighborhood butcher, he awakens the old man in the middle of a dream, a mystical ascent to heaven to rejoin his dead wife.

“Boy, don’t you fondangle with me now, ’cause this is serious business, especially since you the one who stop me from flying up to my wife.”

“Wow! Didn’t know you could fly, Mass Alfred. Could you teach me?”

“Young boy like you!” Mass Alfred looked at him in amazement. “Don’t you know how to fly? The younger folks take it for a joke nowadays, but flying is serious business. When I was your age, I would fly every night, couldn’t wait to go to bed.”

In Linton’s world, even this poor farmer, most noteworthy for malapropisms, has the capacity for beauty and transcendent vision. Although the reader might be tempted to see these stories as falling into the genre of Latin American magic realism, they have very different roots. The magical world of Linton’s work is not a literary construct, but a fully realized cosmology. His burning words create new forces to transform the recalcitrant matter in the bramble-choked landscape occupied by poor Jamaican farmers. Other stories search for a way to liberate Caribbean expatriates who have been shut away in the metaphorical icebox of the American Midwest, where they live in a kind of suspended animation. The spells and incantations of Linton’s prose seek not just to amaze the reader, but to move veritable mountains, to make changes in
the way life is lived. Like the religious practices his stories reflect, these pages perform actual rituals of liberation and purification.

A number of these stories are told from the point of view of a young boy, bullied by adults and his peers, an outcast, but one who is full of magical qualities. Indeed, this boy is a shaman in the making, capable of communicating with gods, forces of nature, and spirits of the dead. In his various incarnations, this boy is the chosen one, the innocent who will guide his community, and by implication all of humanity, to salvation. This remarkable presence in so many of the stories is especially important, because it defies the stereotypical view of voodoo as a cult of darkness and vengeance. At the core of Linton’s work is a vision of healing compassion and light.

Also significant in these stories are the recurrent references to reptiles and reptilian people, particularly snake men. Often the heroes of these tales, these snakes are never Judeo-Christian satanic villains. In fact, the dominant snake figures, including the narrator of “Slithera,” recall the powerful voodoo god Damballah, or Danbala Wédo, patron of the rainbow, art, and creativity. If there is a protector spirit presiding over this extraordinary collection of stories, it is Damballah. Not only has he breathed inspiration into the author, he has through the resulting stories breathed the creative spirit into all of us. How else could we look at the miserable circumstances of the world around us and see them as an opportunity for miraculous transformation? Voodoomation: the Book of Foretelling leads us to a new place, at once frightening and reassuring, where we can all coexist in peace and happiness.

Lawrence R. Smith
Laguna Beach, California
I’m at the bottom of Hilltop 412. Every morning I’m at the bottom of this hill. I rise early with blood in the sun after roosters cock-a-doodle-do with goat ropes in my hand, run faster than flooded rivers plunging downstream through green grass heavy with night dew to dip water from blue springs packed with land crabs, then I’m at the bottom of Hilltop 412 with donkeys and mules in pastures of great cows feeding by shores of Blue Indigo. People are here like duck-ants swarming joints of bamboo trunks. I mount the hill they mount with little sacks digging holes in our backs. We walk.

The graveyard is to our left and an oak tree to the right. My cousin is sleeping on the other side of the oak tree over there in the graveyard. He drowned in his mama’s belly because he could not swim. Before he died, though, he could fly. He was the butterfly that fanned the fire in the center of her chest. But after Pastor Sangenette said dust to dust and ashes to ashes, and everybody at the grave emptied handfuls of clay dirt on the box in the ground, the flame in her heart turned on itself.

I wish I didn’t have to go any further. If I could just sit this minute, stop walking before I enter roads of dust, then I could climb the roots of oak trees Arawaks would build canoes from before riding streams with alligators basking in blazing sun while jingle flies play with their faces and heads at mouths of salt water. Count sand grains all day long, that’s what I want to do. But we walk. Count sand grains all day like Indians of the Indies.

Every time I stop eyes fall on me as if I am the sore biting into their backs. I have a sore, too, that’s why I have to stop every minute to brush away flies before they sow little wigglers into my flesh. This is the road of a desert in the dust with rolling stores that prick, tie my mind in knots and slaughter my emotions, forever holding me in clammy hands of warm embrace underfoot. Every time I lay my feet down on the surface of this thick dust I feel like I’m going through, way down yonder where mud is thick and air is thin and the more you walk the deeper you sink.
On the mound beside this road is where Father Sangenette lives, the foreigner who owned the cherry tree on the side of the mound. Every morning when I was in school he’d bring cherries and tell us to sing:

This little light of mine
I’m gonna let it shine.
This little light of mine
I’m gonna let it shine.

What about the people who didn’t have any light to shine? I asked him about those people one morning. What about those people who didn’t have any light to shine? That’s what I asked him one morning when he came and gave the whole school juicy red cherries that smelled like something we never had.

I will have to cross the river up ahead where asphalt roads end and dust begins. But first, put your cat foot in the water and tell me something. Tell me your foot is dry and I can show you a liar every time. My foot has been wet ever since, that’s how I know what it means to have wet foot. The hardest thing to deal with in this world is people with wet foot trying to hide it when they come running up to your house, knocking down your front door, leaving drippings on your welcome mat. Particles of powdery white gypsum are climbing my brown, bare feet at each step like a rising tide riding the moon so women can have their water. River of waters tumbling down deep I have to cross your Milky Way filled with crystals. Talk to me. Tell me something.

While getting your foot wet don’t do like me. I got my toes tangled between mud and rocks when floods came that beautiful morning and drowned three lizards in dirty water and sand. Sand is deep, especially quicksand below the last steps dangling from both sides of any riverbed. And you’ve got to let up on the reins, my friend. Let up or you’ll choke your wet foot. Even though toes have webs, they don’t have gills.

Three green lizards out on dry limbs with yellow tongues twitching like bait for jingle flies encouraged me. One after another they said it, “Wet your foot; just do it.” To tell the truth, I have to enter open fields where black volcanic sand soars high from molten
lava, and sand particles speeding at three millimeters every hour, particles flowing like a parallel current across vast magnetic fields killing sound silently and erecting shaped reflections in heat waves.

Now I, Tadpole Fish, hatching in deserts from eggs lying under dunes centuries ago when sand sang and voices immediately met surfaces, squeak. In places where the sun rests before it rises to sounds standing up and frightening silence I wait for music to ripen and pop like an avalanche flowing down the slip-face of sand dune drifts. Do you know how it feels to have souls under your feet at the bottom of the sand in the blue hole rising with force from water beds in the middle of nothing out here? How can I care what the world says when I have wells and springs, water holes blue and wide coming from wet toes. My foot. The wet foot everybody treats like leprosy on their welcome mat, scaly spots on mangy dogs with nothing but ticks and fleas? Answer that question.

Below, under the sheltering sky, blackbirds scratching for worms to feed their young hopped over here and over there among ashes and dry bones; and the red fireball pinned against green ridges riding on edges of clouds above liquid motifs ever so Godly, slowly budged inch by inch, dispersing mist sitting among dew-leaves in drifting clouds. Figures came crawling, six came out, slowly, almost casually, like phantoms draped across the night; they walked between quiet minutes surrounded by unfelt mist dripping from the moving sky. Six figures stood detached anchored in separate planes up under everything on Hilltop 412 with attention directed at dark stars.

Toto on his tiptoes tried to avoid walking under groves of short trees heavy in white bloom at Tanansee Corner by edging on the far side of paved roads leading into Burnt Hills. But thin waves of smelly, sweet rose stretching across black asphalt, spider webs anchored to booby traps rubbed his nose. Embalming fluid snaked up through his nose, high near supinavinacava, and mushroomed in the center of his head. Immediately lights, he saw them winking, fireflies dancing hand in hand with darkness, embracing, caressing romance in dark saddles upon fingers of ridges that dip deep in
water valleys near the summit of Hilltop 412. But as soon as he tried
to sneak up on them, they lifted up on him, disappeared, hacking the
one good moment out of time in a single breath with a wink.

Under small trees of blooming white petals harboring yellow
drifting pollen where bees buzz during daylight, stood Kauzpa. Everyone knew he was there, waiting. He had a case of whooping
cough before he started waiting. Miss Matty advised him how to
cure it. He should skin a cane-field rat, boil it down with sarsaparilla,
mix up a dosage of chaney roots and bitterwood, then cook the
whole mixture down to a simmer. Arta, the son of Kauzpa, went to
get the rat.

Strong and mighty Kauzpa couldn’t ride bull-bucking cows
anymore till they weave and bap, tumble and tilt then pitch over at
the breaking point while jumping over his moon-shaped waterhole
in moist marshes where their mother, Greatest Cow, lived. He
couldn’t tighten girths across saddled mules with iron bits pressing
against their tongues heavily. Kauzpa, who could work the most
fertile soil till it turned belly up and rolled over into salt and sand,
laid up in bed.

Arta looked for it. He got up on top of everything he knew
and turned them inside out, but couldn’t find the differences Miss
Matty was looking at. Cane-field rats and house rats both have
long tails and live in the dark holes underneath everything. Arta
roasted pieces of coconut, put one on the rap trap under everything
in a hole behind his house and ate the rest. “Roast coconut got a
flavor!” Next day he caught a nice looking fat one for his father. Bev,
who had been pregnant for the last two years, going on three, was
walking to All Sides when food pulled her attention from grassless
ways curving around Kauzpa’s house. Arta couldn’t offer her any,
though. The soup was just enough for one person.

“Arta, where you get this rat, boy?”

“Far, Papa, too far to describe.”

“Mean to tell me you went all the way over yonder down there
below Rock Spring to my property beside the row of ribbon canes
you and me plant last year for your daddy?”

“How’d you know all this, Papa?”
“Look at me, in my eyes. Don’t you ever question what I know. I know what I know and that’s all you need to know. Get that?”

“I know you know things, Papa. I…”

“You damn right, and don’t you forget it. That’s why I’m the father and you the son. I know things, so don’t you think I’m cripple. I can tell my own food when I taste it, and this here rat was born and bred on my land, my property. You can taste it all over the meat.”

Kauzpa called when he was done, and Arta walked up on him and took the spoonless enamel bowl with chips all over it. Rust spots scattered across the fleshy portion of Kauzpa’s colorful bowl like hunger on a dog with two houses. Arta left his father’s house with Jimmy to shoot birds and catch fish on Milk River. A mongoose popped up on them above tall, brown grass crossing their path while eating up all the snakes except the garden variety. Father Sangenette brought the snakes with him when he came to the Anglican Church on the mound near the hill. Snakes are spirits of unrighteousness wandering in wilderness of forever till the devil incarnate lights up the bushel with his mongoose-rod-of-correction where this little light of mine is hiding.

Kill them out, people of righteousness. Stomp on them with the vigor of Greatest Cow stampeding down Hilltop 412 like water cascading across the stairs of Duns River Falls with her messages: “Watch and pray for the coming of IT like a thief in the night that enters without a knock in divers places. You can run high way down low, but don’t try to hide from the word in the sign that will seek you out in the land of Stone Boulders where even caves will spew you up. There is no hiding place.”

“Greatest Cow, Greatest Cow, what is the message for the day?”

The first tenant walked out to the street of tar and asphalt and stopped Greatest Cow in her four-hoofed tracks.

“Turn the leaves, My-Sister-in-the-Name. Just open them up and look. And what you see is what you get by rivers in Babylon where I sit down waiting for trees by fresh water blooming white petal in due season.”

Greatest Cow reached out her hot breath and got back on the move like rolling stones that gather no moss. She passed house
after house, waving to the kids hanging on unstitched hems of their mama’s frock tails.

“Greatest Cow, I had a dream last night with a wedge-tail bird on top of Burnt Hills near the finger of Wild Cliffs.”

Another sister-in-the-name wanted Cow’s help.

“A blackbird swooped upside down in a corkscrew with me in a little bottle, then I became a plaything bouncing on its beak before it finally bury me in high grass under red dirt. What is that, Cow?”

“You have nothing to worry about, Bev.”

“What about me, Your Greatest Cow? What can you do about real life? Come look yourself and see the snake swallowing its own tail and shedding all types of scales in my house.”

“You said snake?”

“Snake!”

Six figures of the air gathered under settling moisture hanging in limbo above a clean, smooth log ripped of its rough, dry bark. The log stretched across the wishbone gap of two pimento trees like a bridge. Then they came as they have always come. One by one the Holders of Four Hooves. V-face from the east arrived first on the spot and gathered firewood for the flame. Joegog came with a cool breeze through the south with two kerosene pans filled with mineral water. No chlorine. Khenate stepped out of the north in naked disorder and flowing whites. Ashton arrived last on the scene; he rose up from the east in red dust and fire started to burn. Then Butcher came out of the coffee and banana groves with the Holder of Tails. All six stood tall around crackling fire under kerosene pans with mineral water that had fallen from yesterday’s sky into iron drums packed with mosquitoes.

All six opened wide holes in their faces for more aroma of IT bubbling like lava. Fat, creamy-looking wiggles enjoyed the smell that touched; they wallowed, they squirmed, and humped their backs in primordial soup. Butcher walked up the smooth log levitating among leaves of pimento trees and tied two pieces of goat rope to it in a hangman noose. Butcher stood ready. Joegog stepped first into the bed under sheets of everything. Butcher gently ran his mouth
over bed sheets to penetrate the blood-filled flesh of IT that ate their cousin who had come to visit.

Mouths cooled toes throughout that rainy night. Thunder roared that God signaled in words He was laying down with monsoon in August. Then there was this: “Whe! Whe!” IT turned on her bare back till her bones rattled “ra ta ta tat” and pinched the feelings along her shaky exposed veins. She looked left then right up into the eyes of six figures with gripping fear. Her voice echoed.

The Holders of Four Hooves grabbed her screaming right foot and tripped IT off balance to swim in her own hollering. She tried like hell to swim, wade in murky water, the puddle of soup she made on the bed from tears and dry-rot flesh; but like killing spurs on the feet of crowing cocks, she too nearly cut her own throat by trying to swim. Four of the six saved her from her own hands. They bent down low and swooped her up along with the glory and the might in the hour of obscurity and darkness from murky waters of buried germination.

All four dropped their prey heavily on waiting banana leaves near boiling kerosene pans. Butcher wiped his steel across the hairy throat of a whole nation embodied in one kicking IT that goggled, spitting up thick clumps of dark, red blood. The Holders of Four Feet and Tail held IT firmly in place. She was dead, just like that.

Streams of running red, the great inundation, spewed from the deep of hearts and wet the dry, crusty earth warmly. Blood flowed in streams from the Lying Dead down into groves of banana and coffee trees unmercifully. Frogs crawled out of the early morning to find out what was going on above bloody waters.
GRANDMA’S GARDEN SEEDS

Arthritis pinched her flesh and pricked her nerves; it jerked her knees with cold hands till the foundation of the house trembled to her heavy breathing. As far back as her mind stretched, there wasn’t a time since she lived here that her knees didn’t swell or hurt deeply. Grandma mixed hot water and Epsom salts to soak her stiffness and wipe away the pain. In gray hours of low clouds she felt like chopping off the knees and throwing them into the ocean, with all the throbbing and burning they gave. It didn’t feel natural to be living in such a cold place, but she had been living here so long she’d be a stranger anywhere else.

God knows the knees could be bad when they decided to, but they had a good side to them. Take our house, for instance; we didn’t have to wait on TV weather predictions like other people. Grandma’s knees, ever since she washed them in seawater, predicted everything for us. Like last summer when we had a heat wave that killed five people down in Texas, everyone in our house was drinking lots of water and staying out of the sun long before TV said the heat wave was on its way.

It was kind of chilly outside yesterday when Grandma made me dig up the garden, said her knees told her to prepare it for things to come. I went toward our neighbor’s garden fork. But Grandma stopped me, said she didn’t want any fork on her stuff; it’s the devil’s instrument, and will only disease the soil where she planned to sow her seeds. “These flower seeds are too precious. The hoe, on the other hand, is a special tool,” she said, “and if it take a liking to you, it’ll put on wings and plow the dirt like woodpeckers digging away on wood. That’s if it take a liking to you like it did your granddaddy. God bless his soul!”

Today Grandma is kind of chilly outside to Onis and puts him to dry for telling her it’s about time she comes here and borrows the hoe hanging in the next-door neighbor’s garage. Grandma stops and points him back into the dirt of her garden. Onis cannot be planted, so he gets up and waddles across the street. He doesn’t
know how to grow. He wants to disease his sister’s plants, flower-seed on her feelings. “The hoe, every last piece of tool you have in your possession,” Grandma tells him, “use it and wing the dirt like a plow on somebody else’s everything,” then cries “Kre! Kre!” and is done with him.

So here I’m hiding under the sofa, waiting, looking back. Shinqua sits beside me to work up the garden while Grandma and Grandpa way up ahead with the beginning in their hands sit on violets and high-yellow sun before they start their digging. But as usual, Onis messes up everything. Grandma stares at dust floating every which way among clumps of clay concentrating for my face, then she comes to my rescue by stopping the effects before they could find a final cause in me. Onis tried once, then tried again when at first he did not succeed in hurting me. He drives Shinqua to take off with my seed planting ability in her hands. Shinqua, who’d lived with me before I got down to taking care of Onis suspending night before each horizon without words for his actions, is my everything. Far away from full blackness beneath itself, Onis in the soul of Grandpa’s morning image departing time with one stare at Grandma’s central eye, hits her concentration off balance. “What’s the problem, Grandma?” Shinqua wants to know why complete creases digging into the brown of Grandma’s face are taking away the only peace in the house for a ride to hell. Onis again, he is causing effect.

Shinqua wants to leave in a hurry with me. But Onis is casting a spell on the moment. “Kill thyself or take him down before he shows himself, ’cause I know him.”

“Who are you talking to is what I want to know,” I said to the little midget. “You, pleasure of ugly love. Yes, you! One deep whisper of mine can forever cast you down, so watch your step.” I tell him to his face, but Grandma warns me.

“You best to drop and play blessed soul to heaven by trees in front of the house when your ex-brother wants your soul. Just do it. Do it for me, baby, give him what he wants.”

“Who the hell was he talking to though, Shinqua?” Onis said, trying to act powerful. Shinqua has had enough of his mouthing by
now. She switches him off once and for all; his voice was removed from the throat until his belly rumbled like a drum and suffocated the room. “I don’t know what we did to him in the past,” Shinqua stands by me looking puzzled at his makeup, “but he is carrying the grief of an entire nation.”

“It’s not what we did to him, my child. He was bound to happen soon or later; all families have one of him.” Grandma comforts Shinqua’s heart as always after destruction. Now I am left of here all alone while she gets to enter Grandma’s arms extended across the garden. She wants to know what kind of blood is causing his heart to go against his family when part of his job was to guard us against negative influences until a positive one came.

Shinqua shook back to me. I tried to reach out and touch her world. But as if she were in a vacuum, she let go of me and everything around her. Then Onis popped out again like a little weasel in a huge cornfield. Luckily Grandma had a nose for smell when his mess to the side touched her nerve banging on pottery sculptures seen by everyone passing; he was a huge fish tied to a stick like summer night cutting Grandma’s law. The delicate strength of her books stood up and put him in place. Onis was trying to rub his hands over everybody’s mind in the neighborhood.

Living with Shinqua is great. I feel proud to know I’m part of the deal turning seeds to flowers. Whenever she begins breathing harder while riding sounds only trees can make, I know everything will go in order. And these are the times I call out, “Mama!” I can’t help but do it, so somebody else can know how my Shinqua is coming like a blast out of something heading home.

“Who called for me?” Onis talks to Shinqua roughly, as if he didn’t know he was the second-born. “I heard names in the wind out here knocking on my door.” But she nods him away.

Grandma puts up the word for her: “Whatever you say, Onis, whatever you say.”
A huge rat, the biggest Shinqua ever saw, cast a shadow over us and left us without light. Onis was trying to be again. Shinqua’s family eye as a birthright to see things for the rest saw the rat, Onis, trying to be something other than a rodent. I could not walk away, not with him overshadowing us like that. He was going for blood and the flesh of his own would do.

“What’s that peering through the peep-hole, child?” Grandma eyed the picture, me and Onis. He had me cornered and I swore to the very moment: Daddy died for possuming while working on a rocking back and forth for months in one spot, but not me. I wasn’t going to possum for Onis. Shinqua stepped out from Grandma’s arms extended across the garden. She turned her head and looked dead at Onis’ mind. “Why can’t we ever see you resting on time without blading everybody’s way?” Shinqua asked. Onis slapped her figure for glancing at his desires, then Grandma stepped in. “Don’t destroy your image, neither one of you. Don’t you ever!” she told them. “It has been keeping us from going homeless, my babies.” Grandma finally embraced Onis. Shinqua liked the statue keeping all of us together. From a little girl to now she couldn’t help standing and walking to Grandma’s beat. “How can you ask me if Onis is one of us? Cut my blood and see.” Grandma squinted her eyes at her.

“I didn’t mean it. I really didn’t mean anything.” Shinqua stood beside Grandma, and moved Onis’ skin-and-bone out of harm’s way.

I saw the opportunity, so I asked Grandma why were we possuming back in the days when all we had to do was go underground. It made my blood run cold to the middle of the street with Onis pounding on our heels as if he was a nightrider too.

“Look in the past children, and don’t miss a beat, either,” Grandma said before we hugged each other, “because we can’t make it happen again.” Shinqua and Grandma watched the more than large vermin, live as ever, crawl, heartbeat pounding while we possumed so Seekers could nibble on our big toe for blood and flesh. After they had a taste of everybody’s life, Shinqua widened her eyes till her third one blinked. “I’m scared, Grandma, scared,” she admitted, “plain scared of the future.”
Father was responsible for tucking Onis away where the world in the original went down for a long time, but Shinqua brought us back with her family eyes and strong legs through Grandma’s loving arms. “You look like the devil just gone to bed,” Grandma said back to us in the direction of her bedroom. Grandma talked a spell. Our hugging and togetherness as one family under a single name placed her heart in marriage reception pictures combined with Father’s in the midst of the mantelpiece. “Only with my children down can there be darkness without light. Ain’t that right, Shinqua?” And that was that because it was getting dark.

Nights always comfort sleepy eyes and review a drowsy spirit, but not Onis’. His nights had a pounding heart that didn’t know how to produce tears, which is why he was out nosing in the dirt to head off Grandma’s loving arms in the garden, and shut out me and Shinqua from blooming when the time was right.

“Go to work,” Grandma told him. But Onis was crazy anyway, and it was much easier for him to climb uphill and occupy time than go down empty handed, seedless. Grandma felt her time coming; she heard memories playing back to her. She thought about getting out the love she had for the family in a dream and passing it around so we all could become flowers. That still wasn’t enough to stand Onis up like lilies of the valley walking hand to hand with the sun across the sky.

“What the hell you want now, Onis?” Grandma’s eyes in the hole barely made him out. She had to open herself up for flowers to grow in his unstable spots. Speaking through Onis in the garden were Grandma’s golden eyes, finally. We were able to bloom as sunflowers in the summer sun.

Flowers turned their faces toward the sky and Onis came out over joy on Grandma’s face. The happiness and calm she had in store for the family pulled us into her embrace. Onis at first was right proud. Grandma sowed him freshly. She dropped her voice so her sounds could enter him home free. “Since the Lord took your daddy I’ll put you to keep watch over the family, okay baby?”
Shinqua took her sparse hips to the middle of the flower patch to watch the hoe take on wings and checked on Onis’ plowing ability. “I hope he’ll plant deep purple animals God could choose as flowers,” Shinqua said to me when the hoe was about to root up Grandma’s favorite flower. But Onis did his job. “Lord, Grandma,” Shinqua was sipping tea when it came out of her. “Onis is one of us,” she said, “he is one of us in more ways than blood!”

Eye to eye with Shinqua, Onis knew what it meant to be alive in Grandma’s garden like darkness crossing over into dawn to realize what it means to be daylight. Shinqua rubbed up against Grandma’s arm like a little kitten, while grandma rubbed the oils on her head and made it wide open to Onis so there was love for everybody. Shinqua kissed Grandma under the sun for the balm, and I braced heartbeats released by Onis for the family as a whole.
Waves curled toward the sky in strings of steam from black on tar roads toward Burnt Hills. Toto walked behind Almie in steam. Every step or so he jumped across beady tar patches erupting. Frowns of frustration creased his face; perspiration dripping down his forehead burned his eyes. Molten tar was really getting to him. So he stopped, stepped off the burning road and fell flat in the grass. He was tired, too tired of walking on hot asphalt. For a minute all Almie heard was her footsteps pounding. Toto’s steps had faded to the background while her bare feet drummed forward on hot tar surfaces. Soles of her feet like those of wanderers in open fields poked into pockets of silence and left vibrations. She remembered days that didn’t belong to her memory; unfamiliar days belonging to someone else’s past were visiting. Hot tar she now trod on floored her veins with pain. Other people’s pain touched her with heavy hands, pain trying hard as hell to rip apart her thoughts for resisting to look back on burning pages of memory under flames. Consuming heat that took voices out from cries of wandering people surrounded her, numbed her till her soul ached beyond death but wouldn’t burn out. Memories on fire cried;

Heat more heat
Hotter the pain
Sweeter the victory…

Footsteps rumbling under the surface of the road, rumblings of a talking drum beating out a pattern in her head pounded hum bah bah hum. Patterns of people in flight trying to escape howling flames surrounded by blades of grass held her mind hostage. Her mind was carried up and down, tossed to and fro in regions of unknown remembrance through eyes lodged in the roof of her head—that baby-soft spot that pumped in and out, in and out like a heart to the touch. She was confused, dizzy as spinning taps coming out of standstill rotations and ready to drop. But she caught herself with outstretched arms before the fall. She surrendered heart and soul to images swirling in sounds like morning dew sitting on the velvet
backs of cocoa leaves in early fog with the sun at an angle, and had pain turn to pleasure as fresh water ran down the stark of dry cocoa leaves to wet-wanting roots.

Almie figured out how to roll with pain. She didn’t run from or fight against anything, though at first pain burned and shook her till nerves throughout her body lost control and wanted to take care of their separate troubles. She coaxed them into hush, hush. Nerves combined as one source. Almie concentrated. Nerves sank into themselves and cut off feelings from their core to surface; she bent her knees into the unborn child’s position and let surrounding heat come in, penetrate her to a dead calm. The hole to her navel felt as though it were sprouting little strands like those hanging on the belly of jellyfish wading in the deep. Her head felt light, lifted up above the thinnest air birds in the sky float within. Birds like falcons, sky gods. So she raised it up off the earth and sat upright on her behind, crossed her legs over each other, and rested her clasped palms over the pit of her stomach to assume the lotus position. Her navel gaped, wider and wider, growing every second, inch by inch into stronger strands of yellow, her beams merged, emitted rays outward reaching up for the sun like umbilical cords connecting mothers to children. Now she was with the mid-sky flame. So much heat radiated from the temple of her middle section. Toto was getting lost in everything, memory and all.

She got up feeling dazed, spun in the middle of the road, turned and turned till she unfolded herself from other people’s memories. He was nowhere on the road. She hugged her head and bellowed his name. Her voice carried through stillness with more vigor than a hen losing chickens to hawks. Her echoes bounced on rough edges of slanting rocks and rallied back as boomerangs trying to find the hands that threw them into open space.

Toto crawled out on his elbows from tall brown grass to the side of the road like a reptile heading for sunlight. His stomach bruised against dirt along roots of parched grass in flaming heat falling from sunrays. He looked upon Almie and was confused. “Grandma?” he asked. “No, Toto, this is your sister.” He started to shake and
tremble in Almie’s arms. “Almie! Lord, help me! I can’t see. Do something, Almie.” She braced him off her chest, spit in his eyes and watered out a blade of dried grass.

“Let’s go, Almie.” He staggered few steps away from her before he gained any balance, “Do this other time, please?”

“Why?”

“Let’s go back home before we end up missing.”

“Think we come this far to give up like that?” She turned and walked up on him, put her breath on his nose. “What you scared of?”

“You know.”

“If you didn’t try to hide, nothing like that would happen.”

“Can we go back, Almie? Please.”

“Lord have mercy!”

“Toto gave her his back and started walking. “You and your belly is why we here right now and I’m going home.”

“I’m sorry, Toto.”

He sidestepped her outstretched arms and stopped under a palm tree. “Why today when the sun center the sky, Almie? You know we not suppose to go there, anyway. Can’t you feel the heat?” Toto held his head low because lines of disappointment were beginning to show on Almie’s face and he didn’t want to see them. He walked in circles and formed rings with his big toes at the palm tree’s trunk. “Can’t we do it tomorrow when it cooler?”

“How you know that? Talking to Miss Matty?”

“Uh uh.”

“How then?”

“Last week me and Mass Joe go over Dorum planting corn and yam, and he said the river bed rising. That’s how come. The river suppose to flood today and cool down the place, so we better go before they come and we not there.”

“Ah, just clean your eye, though.”

“You the cause in the first place.”

“You promise to come climb.”

“I don’t feel like climbing no more. Just look at my foot, look what the heat doing. Can we go back before they miss we, Almie?”
“Plleesssee!”

“Why you want to go so much?”

“My blood feel for it.”

“Thought you said you belly.”

“Blood, belly…take your pick.”

Birds in pinnacles of pimento trees cried when two figures came up the path leading into the garden; all sorts of insects creeping around in there immediately stopped talking to each other and raised their necks high when four footsteps entered their feeding ground. Almie and Toto stepped from the broad road paved by tar and concrete with trees and grass pushed to its side, and placed their feet on the narrow track of dust and gravel.

Their grandmother, who obeyed words of Forefathers from the day she opened her eyes to the time they closed, expected the rest of the family to follow in her footsteps and obey traditions laid down. Toto’s goat was the only person who entered the garden’s private parts and came out alive. But not for long. The goat went down into the hole opened in the earth when midday sun centered the sky. And although Miss Matty, the healing lady of the district, was called to give her latest mixture of herbs and wild weeds, not even she could save his goat.

Before the goat died, Toto would sneak out to pick tangerines, the real yellow ones, or plums. Since the goat and the hole, he kept his distance. But Almie convinced him to follow her. Not only was she going to tell on him if he didn’t come, but worse yet, what if something very bad was to happen to her after he left her all alone? Suppose she tripped over a big stone, fell on her side and busted one or more of her ribs? What would everybody say when they found she died because nobody was by her side to run for help?

Toto climbed the tall tree with one yellow mango speckled with blood-red spots while she stayed on the ground to catch. But it didn’t matter how hard Toto tried to shake the tree, his little strength was not enough to drop mangoes into her open palms. He didn’t see why he had to be tiring out himself so much, anyway.

“Wait, don’t stop yet! Shake the tree one last time as if you have energy in your bone.”
“The tree stubborn and won’t move.”
“What you mean stubborn! Shake it like you got blood in your body.”
“Come shake it yourself if you don’t believe.” He started to climb down.
“Please Toto, just climb back up. Push real hard this time.”

She tried to catch the mango, but it slipped through her fingers, fell at her feet, then bounced and rolled into the mouth of the gully mid-sky sun had opened to light. Down and down into thick burrs and weeds it tumbled and bounced. She parted thick bush and made for the left side of the precipice, toward a dark hole in rocks that went under, then bottomed off into a valley filled with nothing but animal bones, all white and crispy dry. He jumped up and down on the mango limb, trying to stop her. But she didn’t seem to hear. Toto gave up, crawled down the tree and watched her enter damp coldness where lambs, calves and even a donkey had gone, and with the exception of his goat, never returned.

“Why you try stopping me from going down the hole? You know I was only going for my mango.” She tried to start up a conversation on their way home. But he didn’t have anything to talk about.

Miss Matty, the next door neighbor, started having a black bird land on her verandah railing the following day. Immediately she said the raven was a messenger, there as a sign. Her perching prophet stopped calling a week later and ants housed in the rotting, wooden rail on her verandah disappeared; yet the bird incident prompted her to spread words to everyone about how she got messages from higher powers, and that she was expecting more. During the morning she stood in the middle of her yard beside a colorless quart bottle filled with rainwater and watched the sky. The see-through quart bottle without a cork sat on a dogwood post like an offering on an altar; it was there to ward off wandering spirits from her yard. As though she were in a trance, she stood out there looking. The pandemic of women looking skyward soon took hold on the entire district, causing Almie and Toto to look at each other when their mother joined the crowd. Their father and the rest of the men whose wives were looking to the sky gathered up their donkeys. “Matty on the
move again, eh?” they mused, looked at each other, nodded their heads, mounted their donkeys and headed off to the fields to plant yam, banana, corn and peas as always. These men on donkeys in single file along narrow paths leading into fields were sowers of seed. There wasn’t a single day when these faithful descendents of the Forefathers were not out there in the fields digging up untouched soil, cutting down obstructive trees and leaving nothing but fruitless stumps, burning up anything in their way to plant their seeds.

The evening with winds riding gray clouds drifting together like pack mules pulling heavy loads visited Almie and Toto’s room with woo, woo. Rustling banana leaves whistled and flapped in winds floating against the window of the room they slept in. Then silence came. Dusk took on the color of night under a silence that stood tall as darkness stretching up toward heaven in the dead of night. Almie shook like the fluttering leaves outside her bedroom window. She pulled the sheet up to her head and covered her entire body. But her covering was not enough. She raised her knees to her neck and longed for morning.

Night lifted her longing soul up from her body on the bed and blew it into her grandma’s garden. Shadows walking in the garden with the wind touched her mind and opened up desires she had for blood-red mangoes till her raw feelings were fully exposed to drizzling rain settling upon palm leaves. She was cleansed to the core. Her mind tried to stand on its own after the cleansing. She breathed in slowly then pushed out lightly, in slowly, out lightly. But the weight of her body was pulling down too hard; she felt drawn like comets cutting across midnight that leave nothing but a long glow of sparkling dust for eyes to see.

The language of the dead packaged in a whisper moved across the window to her internal world and took her mind up from down in the garden and put it back in her body on the bed. Two women in trees seeking refuge from Forefather’s lightning and thunder whispered in unison into the hole that transformed dark sky over Almie’s room into veins of light like a Christmas tree, so her wandering mind could find open doors leading back to a familiar place. Trees on the outside of her room bending and tossing in
winds cast shadows on the window; shadows from another world waved to her recovering body on the bed. Spirits out there in trees, female spirits whose souls had been searching for peace ever since the Forefathers stoned them to death, sent vibes through the glass window and communicated with Almie. These loud roarings in the night put fright into Toto under the bed. Fear gripped and bruised his neck and back with stiffness, while Almie lay on top feeling naked, as if she were being born all over again in the moon outside her window where storm parted thick clouds. The moon smiled on her inner being through northern lights. Toto remained under the bed in the dark side of the earth.

Toto waved good morning to Miss Matty, who had been standing on her verandah looking as always to the sky. He was coming from the spring with a bucket of water.

“How you doing this morning, son? Where you sister?”

“She not feeling too good this morning, Miss Matty, and Mama tell her lie down.”

Almie stayed in bed for two days with her mother by her side. She couldn’t recognize anyone, not even her brother. She was in a funny condition, and her mother tied her to the bedpost fearing she might jump through the window. Every time her mother tried to talk with her, she kept pointing to the window, yelling “Let them take me! Please! They here for me! See them?”

“That’s banana leave playing with the window, child.”

“No! Look good. There! See them now?” Her eyes were popping out of their sockets.

“Yes, dear, I see them.” Her mother decided to pull the curtain and lock them out till she could get help. The next day she sent Toto to get Miss Matty.

Whenever anything gout of the ordinary occurred—birth of a cow, the castration of a dog or the burying of a new baby—a messenger would run and get Miss Matty to come and look into the problem. After she came and bent by Almie’s bed with vials filled with herbs and weeds, the same way she was positioned over Toto’s goat before she tended to it, she tipped three droplets from each
container into her hand; the same three bottles she used on Toto’s 
goat before it died. Miss Matty rubbed Almie’s face and chest; she 
cringed and skinned up her face. Her eyes rolled to the back of her 
head till nothing but white showed. Foamy saliva drained from her 
mouth, and her skin went paler than ever. Toto remembered the 
look in his goat’s eyes before it finally jerked. Almie’s eyes were no 
different now.

All the women that had been looking skyward gathered around 
Almie and Miss Matty; they stood upright, heads straight, facing 
east, hands held tightly and bodies forming a circle. Miss Matty 
helped herself up on Almie’s sick bed, edged around on the mattress 
three times and her sky-looking followers who formed the circle 
began humming and shuffling their feet to

Hum bah bah hum
Hum bah bah hum
Hum bah bah hum

Miss Matty kept walking around on the borders of the bed frame, 
then extended her right foot like a rod used to test quiet rivers before 
travelers put a foot in. She touched the child with feet that had 
wandered over high and low hills, in and out of deep woods, feet 
that had journeyed through wilderness and had gone by guardians 
of crossroads with swords across their chests as signs of power and 
domination. Toto stood on the other side of the door as a witness. 
He tried to get Almie’s attention, to tell her not to say a word, but 
Miss Matty held her attention.

“Child, and don’t try lying to Miss Matty; I want you to trust 
me.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Funny,” Miss Matty said, then looked on Almie closely. “Did 
you...?”

“Didn’t do it, Miss Matty,” Almie cried. “Didn’t do nothing.”
But Miss Matty pressed on. “Tell the truth, child, tell the truth.”
Almie cried out louder, “I didn’t do nothing, Miss Matty.”
Miss Matty pressed on: “Tell the truth, child; only that can help.”
The more Miss Matty pressed, the more Almie denied, and the
more Almie denied the louder her mother and ladies forming the ring hummed, and the louder the humming got, the warmer Almie felt. The humming got so strong that vibrations from it caused Almie to tremble. Little strands of heat began growing from her navel all over again. And the more Miss Matty questioned her, the warmer Almie became. Miss Matty asked her the question one last time with determination. “I said, did you disobey the word, child?”

“I was sleeping when voices said thanks for freeing their soul from stone throwers; I made them live again; I’m keeper of burning flame. They said my wish to climb help them, stop them from wandering the rest of their life. That’s all, Miss Matty; I swear.”

“Stone throwers, eh?”

“Yes, Miss Matty. My feelings was lost, dying down there in the hole in the garden with a lot of dry bone. Something like a valley.”

“Ah ha! Stone throwers; now a hole with bones, eh?”

“Nooooo!” Almie tried to stretch out her hands to somebody, hold onto something and the panic came: “Mama, I didn’t do anything. I swear. Mama, please! Miss Matty, I’m one… Lord look! Somebody! Mama…I’m…Almighty, just this one time…Oh Lord!”

“That’s right, my child; you didn’t do a thing, not a thing,” Miss Matty said, “not a thing, my child,” and commenced mixing up herbs and weeds. She poured everything from the three vials into the quart bottle containing untouched rainwater. Sky Watchers humming and shuffling around the child’s bed held hands tightly, and kept the pace going with Hum bah hum bah, while heat built more and more in Almie to the rhythm fueling her rising flame.

Black crows parading across the sky parted clouds and swooped down alongside the precipice lulling life in a heated summer; their words seemed to go down forever, toward the garden that widened out into the valley of dry bones. Toto tried to speak to heirs of his forefathers while towering banana stalks leaned on the women of the circle as if they were perches.

Sweat dripping from tree limbs beseeching molten tar stood on Miss Matty’s signaled words of water, fetched form discolored tall grass sorrowing on her sky. She stopped the children’s unruly spirits
in midair. Echoes of her lamenting call came forth as a bird of prey, more furious than predatory hounds of hell.

After she filled her vials, ants from spring water came out from their domicile, happy and energetic, ready to decompose organic matter for mother earth. Strength in Toto and Almie’s veins ran up and down with life on the eve before Sabbath to show they were not yet dead. The Sabbath didn’t care, though. Saliva, blood, skin falling off bones to feed mother earth was all that mattered.

Miss Matty’s calling to the four hills encircling the district had reached the heart of stone boulders where the heirloom of the garden rested. Never receiving the authentic birth of volcanic rocks as on other islands, this condemned hole lay low in the middle of mango trees to take in goats at times, other times calves, but never sheep. Ravens housed in pockets of this rock of rocks awakened lonely spirits hiding from the light of day. As travelers without a home, lonely travelers seeking company to walk to and from time immemorial, these spirits would climb across the eleventh vestigium of the dividing universe at night with iron chains in their hands, clinging, descending upon dawn’s morning fog so the Forefather’s words would be obeyed.

Toto’s goat as a sacrificial lamb begged, went down trickling in the stomach of four rocks, and prompted the keeper of the gateway there to anoint him, let him be the anointed one to lay in Miss Matty’s massaging hands for a renewed life. But he was too weak for the test; he cringed by the wayside as goats always do at the touch of her doctoring hands like a human eye blinded by the sun for walking too long in the deserts of the world. Miss Matty saw what was taking place. As a result, she shook her head, spun running tears fetched by a colorless bottle in the front of her yard and sunburned the goat’s worthless gifts that had become porously cracked with disloyalty for desiring to be a sheep.

Close neighbors, ancestors from centuries upon centuries ago, observed countless Almie’s hands in theirs as goats’ hooves. Looks of naked thought, void of emotion, with rock-like bloodshot eyes called from the sunken recesses of silence in the Abyssinian hole. A solitary hold on quietude as night owl’s cry of gloom were everywhere.
Almie’s surrounding strength protected her from Miss Matty and the rest, while Toto fainted in despair before her swollen eyes. Wiping all indication off his and her body, Almie took one last look at the sky before it died in folding colors, wrapping the entire district in shades of gray.

Without the walking in every direction of his thoughts, Toto froze his mind on a stare and wiped his open palm on the tree of bitter fruits in his sister’s way. The ricocheting echo of Hum bah bah hum showed respect to the countryside overlooking obeyed laws of things yelling in perfect pitch, then rose up from its granite nap to see the face of Almie and Toto no longer among shadows.

Almie and Toto, children of the latter days searching for a promise, children of the night endeavoring to find the light of day along narrow roads leading form concrete wilderness, burning fields suffocating dreams of children descending from the dark stars within the invisible zone of Sirius B walked side by side with the sun on their face and Burnt Hills to their back.
DESCENDANTS OF THE BLUE WATER HOLE

She gazes upon her shape on its curvature, and how it resembles that of a brooding ant, the queen of cocoons surrounded by a thousand hosts under a cool earth. Her body needs rest, especially now that she will soon be hollow in the center because of all the excavation going on within her bowels, the moving of all her minerals, her core. A little relaxation can bring together her inner mantle, now open wide by unnatural pulses in the form of man-made vibrations seeping through her pores. A little sleep in the dark can make her raw ripped bowels whole once again, even though solar winds seeking her true north with subtle pulses only queen ants under the cool earth can feel are gray against the yellow sun in the form of ripples on shrinking lakes, and rivers with broken legs gather into her oceans.

She knows that her bodily composition is delicate, but more so is the peak of her feelings that yearn to touch, warn her children drinking, gulping down her givings and wasting her sustenance by taking the share of many unto one when they are already full. Her wish is to pass on the words of the Great Mitochon, telling her children this is not a war. Do not treat her givings as spoils. And to those who will not hear her voice, their wish for war as their desire for an enemy will offer up their bodies as prey. And so they know that the enemy they seek will not die a death of rebirth, as is the way of earth. No! Their death shall be gradual, a barren moon, slowly abandoned by trees, rivers, lakes and oceans. A mule left to be rock-filled, thirsty as dust along the Kalahari seeking moisture from the howls of midnight wind moving across the land.

The clouds above in shaded rolls of magnificent green march in parallel bands of dense and heavy cherry-red streaks to mask her moon. She looks out at other galaxies, clusters separated by seeming voids, black holes forming two shapes in the southern skies like bodies spiraling through moments, babes in her womb.
Sistron had told her to lie down, take some of the burden off her feet to cut down the gathering of water in her joints since they were out of kilter. She shouldn’t be uncomfortable in this pregnancy, especially since the family of daughters didn’t want it to be like another disappearing birth, shadows that show in the womb, but never arrive in the flesh at birth. Sistron sensed her pregnant sister’s waters rushing with a gentle roar, ebbing as tides brimming with froth, that bubbling soup sitting on the edge of the sea where fresh and salt water join as one. Sistron involved her spirit in the vibes coming from her sister’s womb, for they were bloods connected by one vein attached to the immortal coil. The vibes felt good as always, but different this time, as if other shapes were present, foreign bodies their ancestor, the Great Mitochon, had told them about. Mothers, sisters and all could rejoice now; of this Sistron was certain, for those vibes would follow strands of matter from two sources branching from one womb to make many and strengthen the Motherfold from attacks of the wild.

Three shadows swam through the door facing east, spirits swimming through green algae, a slime with a smell reaching high heaven. The shadows were looking around in their mother’s womb at each other’s forms. They all united in these peculiar waters, for all around remained dark, uncertain, and they needed the comfort of the touch each gave, the warmth it brought, the longing it satisfied. They were one here, a rainbow in all its brilliance and spirit: undefined, free, pure as water by the brook of life in a deep lagoon.

Thin streaks of white flakes gathering, floating as clouds through space, pungent with the essence of eucalyptus aroma, embraced three spirits swimming, spirits coming forth like water lilies in swamplands breathing oxygen-thick air.

The three had been going to the dark side of Blue Hole for a while now, but were never lucky enough to see their journey through, while seated on the outer edges of the concrete rectangular structure covering the waterbed beside their sisters who came and went. As speculators they watched and wished, wondering where the other half of them had gone.
Of late, the water level had been dropping steadily. Almost all in habitants of the Motherfold didn’t believe the water was really drying up. How could it when Blue Hole sat on the meeting spot of the great rivers that not only ran in and through them, but under the center of the earth? Sistron told the gathering it was a new era in their cycle, that these three coming were different from the ones before.

All three forms eased down into the disk that opened to the shallow region of these dark frothy waters. The rectangular frame welcomed them into its clear body. They waded tadpole style through the wetness that caressed the souls of their physicality. They moved on surfaces that felt like sinking sand surrounding their being. They folded in spirals, at times kicking at each other’s nature, then embracing to keep one another in sight for they were lonely while traveling this narrow path leading outward.

To give up these three forms as goats on logs in the Hall of Altars, or to the night, was Marigi’s wish, because she could already see their ways. They were no different from those who had already come and had to be driven out. But Sistron, with the resounding words of the Great Mitochon, said their aggression toward each other’s form was to be overlooked, for it was the very reason she evoked them, and with a little direction from her, something to occupy their evolution, these three had the spirit to calm midnight howls of wolves in the wind. Marigi tried to force them back to the ground while no one was looking, nonetheless. But Sistron’s dead weight formed a key, the ankh to the upper land of dust and pollen, and cradled the nest in Marigi’s arms, even though, as one of the bearers of life, Marigi foresaw the tree one of her forms would become. His seeds were that transparent, a soul overflowing with the wish to dry up hers and all the waters of the Motherfold.

Manchild stepped from the waters with the sun, a saint emerging from baptismal waters, and was a shadow from the east no more. Gentle palms wrapping his dripping body comforted his fright. The
same must be said of his brother Spiritwalker...with the exception of Kilnature, the boys started screaming at the strangeness of a waterless region confronting them.

“Don’t stand there looking down on me across the land like a rootless animal with no inside, Kilnature said to Manchild, because I will forever be the real earth in flesh on a tight rope climbing towards God’s name for forgiveness, because of you.”

“What are you talking about, Kilnature?” Marigi cut in.

Spiritwalker watched the two, and wondered why each morning ever since they began gathering at the spring to drink, neither one wanted to give way to the other. Not even a little.

“How much time I tell you never bring the dirt on your feet to drip in the water while I fill my cup?” Kilnature pointed at his brother in the womb of the universe. Then Marigi stepped in.

“I'm really tired of calling you children at the top of my voice,” Marigi told the two. “Morning has raised her head along this grassy atmosphere because of you two and the fighting even before you all gathered flesh. So listen to me for once, listen and bend your hearts. Surprise me with love, not howling or flame in your voice for each other’s soul. This is a pure place. Why can’t you two be like your brother? Look at Spiritwalker. Follow his footsteps and stay in the path we as a people have been following till you three got there. Either that or leave.”

Kilnature climbed the wilderness on the outside of Marigi’s house to look back at what he was leaving. For now he had to give up all privileges of the water hole. He coaxed his steps to lead him into a place of welcome where he could spread his bed on a surface without bumps, and his head on a soft pillow. Marigi gave him Grandma’s Garden so he could have a seed of his own because there wasn’t enough space here, especially since Manchild was her first to bless the waters of Blue Hole.

Kilnature rolled his eyes and hissed through his teeth. Now he had to share the judgments poured on him with everybody. To his sisters and brothers at home he was still a child, roaming somewhere
out there for himself. Unfruitful trees like cedar that were made to
digest the transgression heaved upon the topsoil, paths leading to
their home by the feet of a searching heart prepared their greenness
for him to wash his sorrow. Kilnature loaded each of his stomachs
till it was filled, eating as many limbs as he could to satisfy a roving
appetite. He even leveled the palms along the once rich groves of the
Sahara, Gobi, and Burnt Hills, then proclaimed the land infertile.

Kilnature salted the topsoil as he traveled among and through
the belly of rocks, in and out of cold corners that froze his mind to
existence. The family had murdered his love for them. He knew
by now that the image he had of Marigi had turned into a small
mound, one occupying the hungry termites roaming his heart. He
put out the last drop of motherly affection he had left in his heart
in case it tried to start some fire of endearment when he returned
to claim his place, gathered up all he needed for now and headed
across the threshold of emptiness, desolation.

Clouds of shining souls heavenly in bloom on meadows of the
sky comfort the family while they shed their wings. Every seven
years Descendants of the Blue Water Hole commune at the edge of
the sun in love and unity, a family gathering where each brings gifts
for the other, a place where they all expressed fellowship to the web
connecting each image that binds them to the dust, the sky, and Blue
Water Hole.

Kilnature stood on the other side of the earth, and watched the
procession of his family cradled by the wind as monarch butterflies
in midair proceeded on a long journey towards Angangueo, Mexico,
and wept.

“Why am I not an image nearer to God’s? I too was born at
the waters; I helped to give it shape, so why, somebody? Why me?
I have a life. I feel. I hurt, and my pain is the longest, the sharpest
—with fangs that cut. If it were just the pain, I could bear it for a
thousand years. But the family, the Motherfold, those who put it
in me to love have driven me away from the Motherfolds where it
should be released. It’s this feeling, and it hurts really badly! Why,
my god? Up from the earth, from hills of rainbow stretching across
your home, I stand beside you now, a formless cloud with no seed to
create light within. I’m with scales, Marigi. Look at me, Sistron—
disappearing…”

At the first birthmark of space, children of the Motherfold stood
over the middle of destruction running from Kilnature’s hands when
a donkey brought Caudata, the lizard, on its back into the middle of
everything. This lizard in the saddle held words for the descendants
of the Motherfold:

“Instead of cutting your brother’s locks and blinding his desires,
show him some love!”

“If he were a true vine, if he were on our side of the world,
maybe. Now go home where you belong! No one here can be the
field for your seed or his pollen dust,” Manchild told the messenger.

Too little sun beaming in the valley over the years caused
Kilnature to peep at the sun he left behind. This caused deep doubt
to dig at the root of his resolution to stay away from the motherland
he was born to.

“Come and follow me into battle against the Motherfold,”
Kilnature told his followers. “We’re water animals from one vine
circling around total darkness lying under the soil, unfloatable dust
in the dark, dust thick like breath we breathe and observe. We’re
the first to appear. We’re the fire that warms the blood before all
is said and done. Why should our light go without a sun, freeze in
this wilderness where we have a home?” All those who stood below,
while Kilnature spoke from the mount of Sarha directly opposite the
hills of Motherfold, shook their fists at their family in the clouds and
cried: “Down with the Motherfold!”

Kilnature and his followers climbed from the peak of the
opposite hill like green vegetation begging the eclipsed moon to
satisfy their chlorophyll thirst because the sun had turned to blood.

Spiritwalker didn’t like acting against his flesh planted in this
wonderful sun that glowed, that ran across eyelids of starts out there
descending. You never really feel coming into this world; this he
knew. All you hear is the ancestral dawn, a drum talking through
dark matter that drifts together physical images of breaking selves, which is why he could not understand why Kilnature wanted him and Manchild to remove each other’s heads.

“Because you are burning minerals laden in the land, vines rooted to the Motherfold,” Kilnature said while confronting his brother the second time.

“What else you thinking, boy?” Marigi opened her door wide to let in Kilnature.

“Who, Mama!” Kilnature couldn’t believe, just couldn’t believe that she still had the strength.

“I saw you coming for three hundred long years down the path of the future with all your followers, my boy. Ever since you made the first step that led out of the wilderness I knew you would be the one to bring roads into Motherfold. I guess praying to the wrong savior told you to come up here and cut cane with us. So go ahead. Show the world what your spirit smells like. But this is the part where I want you to go dead under for butchering the spirit of the trees, the animals and now the Motherfold.

“I didn’t ask for those bitter and unfruitful cedar trees you gave me in that garden. They were infertile. I didn’t ask to be put there. What did I do so bad that you had to send me there? “Tell me, Mama. What? Me and all the others over the centuries. Why?”

“Rules, my son, rules.”

“Where are the rules now, Mama?” Kilnature stomped, “Where are the rules?”

“And what do you want me to do, my son?”

“I want to know. That’s what, Mama. Know…”

Kilnature rolled over and went into dropping the wild dreams from his head. It tasted bitter to him to know he had to remain flightless all his life.

He took a thorn from his bosom and opened Marigi’s chest. Mothers and Daughters tripped over each other’s slaughtered bodies that went down without song after Kilnature and his followers stampeded them like a mad heard of Great Cows entering their haven. Inhabitants of the Motherfold sang requiems across the top
of the earth till beams of clouds covered their younger sisters before they too became prey, giving Kilnature and his forsaken brethren wings to climb up and visit doorsteps to the forsaken Hall of Altars. Manchild raised his head up off the pillars of Kyzyl Kum when Kilnature arrived at the altar, and gladly escaped by seeping under the wooden panel on the other side of the cosmos.

For millennia Kilnature had been waiting. Once he was back up in the clouds where he belonged nothing mattered anymore, not even the family blessings. Who cared about his bad visions, his unkept spirit, or unsoulful vibes coming from the border of time where he slept for years and years? He knew it; the sound he now made was that of lost affection, of someone crossing signs at the crossroads, someone carrying the essence of the dead. He gazed on his capsized feelings walking by the sight of stones clinging unto his flesh, memory of himself in the holes of igneous rocks.

Sistron evoked powers that prevented Kilnature’s stomach from digesting the last trees by the Blue Water Hole near the Hall of Altars. She removed his stolen wings, but that was all she could do till he purposely stood on her heart with frozen feet. He wanted to see his soul on top of the circular disk in the Hall of Altars. But no blood came form the blue flame in Sistron’s soul. His night passed across a wide desolation that left him colder than he had ever felt after he took her spirit—too powerful for his followers, who keeled over dead. And nothing, not even the bearskin he used as shelter while living among rocks, could take away the chill of frost her powers left on his blood. So he walked lightly on the ashes of her soul after setting it out into wideness. Now that she was open, he had the power of the sun on his skin throughout. Not a dark blue flame like Sistron’s, but a silver one of unquenchable heat.

Manchild and Spiritwalker learned what it felt like to crawl as frogs upon the dawn, reptiles wondering what’s going on while they tread in a secure spot and watch the serpent extend his tongue and lick the warmth away from their sun. Spiritwalker looks at his brother’s hate. But these dead rose higher and higher, feet stepping
on charcoal, and said the death of angry spirits is not easily cast away. Fearing he might touch a tingle that hurt where the light of his life lived, Spiritwalker pushed his prayer into a black hole to give it density, the strength to resist the magnetic pull of Kilnature’s powers.

Spiritwalker gathered up his flock of ravens that escaped Kilnature and mounted his horse. Kilnature had opened the door under the stars naturally. The entire hillside, all the way down to the place of their birth, was desecrated by Kilnature. Manchild stepped across Kilnature’s vision for him and the dwellers of Motherfold, and the sound he heard was that of a cow’s huff. He then quickly eased off the bench of receptions in the Hall of Altars and stared at the crown on his brother’s head, because the blue earth was ebbing his name.

Locusts purified Manchild’s spirit, swarming his head with songs. Looking at himself, he couldn’t believe that water had his blood forming a renewed fountain. The crystal of these beliefs extended in the air beyond his strength and gathered his family, or what was left.

“Better not make a sound of the sacred stance keep us under a united sun,” Spiritwalker said.

“Who am I?” Kilnature asked, after coming down in his brother’s midst and grasping the mantle of power. “The year of the locust shall hurry before the sun. But can it bend my rule?”

Manchild resisted the panic going on deep inside, while movements, eyelids harboring his attention with venomous fangs circulated his vision. Talking to this spirit whose soul sought his family jerked the orbit of the Blue Hole; he was certain now that this was it. Spiritwalker gave his soul to the ravens for safe keeping, told them to find a worthy place other than the Hall of Altars, for this was the end of the Motherfold. Animals with water dripping from their eyes washed their grief with soft sobs.

Flames of love for life from the mouth of Caudata in the name of preserving the Motherfold tried to open an answer, and bounced
the edge of perilous days from their midst. Caudata attempted to form a web of togetherness for the family as a whole:

“We stand here ready to go into battle O great warriors of Motherfold. But why should we when so much blood has already been shed? Our blood!”

“All he wants is a garden to plant the one seed called Onis,” Caudata yelled. He then looked up into the eyes of Kilnature: “I’m right or wrong?”

“Kilnature said nothing, for the years of termites on his chest had turned his heart completely into a mound of thorns.

Blue Hole muffled her cry of mixed feelings. Brooks streaming from her sobbed for the life it had given to them over the millennia, knowing very well that soon all would be a barren moon, each eating the flesh of the other.

“Let him have it, Manchild, even though you are the firstborn. Why should we perish when all he needs is to see himself reflected? We know by now it’s his nature to suck in excess from Blue Hole. But for God’s sake, he’s part of us. We kill him now and his death will take over our children’s children with each hand at the other’s throat. We’re all vines of the immortal coil whether we like it or not, black matter when all is said and done. Carbon settling at the bottom of the ocean if we do not drain it before we go. And yes, dividing lines between Marigi and her son have caused us great harm. But the soul with hidden intentions must always swallow its tail like Kilnature will when he goes into Blue Hole with our blessing and sees his reflection, Onis. This is how we save each other.”

Dismembered minds could not get out of waking barefoot on charcoal for days, curing their spirits of the plague, hate gushing across pages of the stars to be washed clean in Blue Hole. For a while unfruitful vines stemming back to life through a few scuffles tried to close the purification period.

Words of peace heading off the burdens of flesh on every living limb heated up the fields of song with a low mellow tune in the key of A minor. It was for all hearts to reach out and form a web across the waters of Blue Hole as the first covenant for Kilnature’s first born, Onis.
THE GREAT COW

Too weak to fly from this existence of being human, I, Foggy Mist, remain normal as worms digesting the earth under a beating cowhide drum over a dead chicken to give it a different life. Tossing, then motionless within sheep’s wool, I’m the physical correlation of ashes and dry bones thrown to the four winds, yet towering across the green sky scratching for existence as a life form.

To this physical dimension home is no longer planted around this wonderful sun that glows, shining beautifully then sleeping in a liquid haze. First dispersing, then descending onto earth from the dark stars within the invisible shadows of Digitaria like a procession coming into a new world, I pace to the gravitational words of the Lady of Lights holding morning and evening. She is the ancestral woman residing in time, opening and closing her lid of dark matter that drifted our soul together.

Swimming from the green sky to scoop up any physical image of my breaking selves levitating in puffy mist under all this blue water, my spirit proceeds to the ribbed night to see the headless cow fluttering in a woman’s quickening stomach, then gathering its limbs in unison as a preparation for the new process coming into the lives of water animals like tadpoles on the edge of the universal pond dropping their tails.

She raised her body up as another me from total darkness with absolute ease, walked to the room on the other side of hers, outstretched her hands unto floating dust in the dark, dust that makes the air rest upon the edge of our pallet whenever we breathe very deeply.

“Wake up now.” She shook the spirit from side to side. “You have to go and get Butcher,” she said. The body remained stiff; it had neither life nor motion. She shook again, rolled it off its stomach and onto its back so the face pointed toward the moon coming through, only to have it return face down into dust steadily rising up off the ground below the place of rest. She shook again.
“You love waking me, don’t you?” Kuya asked the shadow without a shape; and though he could hardly see her, he knew; she didn’t have to say it out loud. He just knew . . . felt her glow of warmth for him as always. It was always like that when she waked him again and again. He had to walk through all the wet grass and bruising weeds to get the butcher, while she stayed back and lit the fire. Why couldn’t he be the lighter of fire, while she got the butcher? After all, lighting fire wasn’t that hard. All you do is get some dry wood, make sure to form four triangles, and that the heart of the fire has space to breathe. Never clutter the wood or have the ashes build up too much and stifle the heart of the flame. Then keep adding firewood, and watch the fire blaze. Keep adding wood to steady the blaze till dry wood piles to the level of the stones the silver pans sit on. What was so hard about that? So he told her.

“Come get Butcher with me, or let me stay and light the fire till you go get him.”

“You know we can’t do that, Kuya.”

“How come?”

“Why go through this again? Always the same question.”

“Because me always get him. Me alone walking in the dark. All you do is light fire. Why can’t we switch?”

“Okay. Switch. You light and I get the butcher. Satisfy?” Paula folded her arms unto herself and watched him sit on the edge of his bed in the dark, whispered his name heavily, and started to close the door. So he got up.

“Shooooo.”

He rolled his eyes, hissed through his teeth, and shook his head. Couldn’t believe she was still trying to fool him. It wasn’t like that anymore. He was older now, so she could go right ahead and call down judgment on him. Yeah. Let judgment come on down, so locusts can eat him up. He knew she was thinking he was still a boy of ten and imagining the chewy feelings of locusts in his ears, eating up the grass, the leaves, trees—digesting the roots of all living things, and leaving a blank spot in his mind that would still affect him. Matter of fact, she didn’t have to call down locusts on him all those other times either. Especially the time when he saw her in the
kitchen. He was only doing the job Mass Joe gave him: “Boy, any
time you see Paula talking to a man, I want you to find me, morning,
noon or night, just find me.” But because Aunty and he had gone to
Low Land to sell food in his Datsun pickup, Kuya tried to call Miss
Vera to come and see what Paula was doing. But she threatened to
call down locusts, fill his ears to the brim with those slow crawling
creatures the preacher in church said would eat up every last human
in the latter days. If he told that the tall, thick boy Father Sangenette
worked as a slave to show the community he was no son of his—for
he was a pure man, an Anglican there to spread the word only—she
would choke him to death if the locusts couldn’t.

According to Mass Joe, Tony was the worse thing on two feet in
the district; he was no different from his daddy, Father Sangenette.
The only thing that separated the two was one had the church to
hide behind. Mass Joe prayed for God to send him the day he could
catch Tony in his chicken coup trying to couple his hen, for he swore
he would have chicken soup for dinner. He’d say that every evening,
but mostly on Sundays when Tony got all dressed up in his starch-
to-cut or Sunday best and strutted by, while our family sat out on
the veranda listening to Miss Lou and Miss Ran on the new stereo
Aunty just bought. Mass Joe didn’t want to see Paula walking on
the other side of the same street Tony walked on, much less talking
to him,

The sound coming from the kitchen made it seem like somebody
had broken into the house and was having a ball of a time eating
up the food that Friday when Kuya accidentally sneaked up and
cought the two. All he tried to do was find out what the commotion
was all about. He opened the door, and there on top of Paula was
Tony, acting like a hookworm somebody had just poured salt on,
while she had her feet lapped around his waist as if she were in a
wrestling match. He called out to the closest neighbor since no other
big person was there to tell what he saw. Paula got up quickly and
slapped her bleach-smelling hands over his mouth before he could
yell twice, while Tony walked out boldly, and a broad smile spread
across his red face.

“Get you stinking hands off my mouth, Paula!” He muffled
words through the spaces of her fingers.

“Not till you shut you trap.”

“Owoooo... I’m going to tell on you. Just let me lose and see.”

He slipped through her grasp as waxed thread going through a needle.

“Tell what, you idiot?”

“Tell what I see you and Tony on the kitchen floor doing.”

“And what was that?”

“Don’t ask me, ask Mass Joe after I tell him.”

“All right Mr. Strong and Mighty, go ahead with your big bad self and see if I don’t call locust on you. Just you tell and see if you don’t turn in a skeleton, dry as chip, after locust finish chewing you from tongue to tail.”

“I don’t care; call them.”

She called out for a swarm and Kuya could hear them buzzing, coming to eat him up.

“Please, Paula, please! I won’t tell on you... swear to God, I didn’t see nothing. Please Paula! Stop them, Paula. Get them out me ears! Promise! I won’t say a word!”

“Swear to God?”

“Yes, yes! Now stop them.”

“All right. But just remember, locust hate nothing more than a lying boy.”

Looking back at himself, he couldn’t believe he said all that. This time he showed her his fourteen-year-old muscles he would use to crush any locust if she tried anything. She chopped him on the fleshy part of the flexed muscle, and instead of her hand bouncing off, a lizard raised its back in his muscle. Kuya spun. Buckling, slowly he twirled like screw going into wood, while the pain soaked in till he was fully stopped. He sucked in. Paula watched.

“You better not make a sound, Mr. Muscle, and wake up the house. And don’t you mind locust; they’ll come in time. Better go get the butcher before Mass Joe come and crush you with a good assing. Hurry before the sun come up, too; you know how it get when daylight come down and we not finish cleaning up the killing.”
He was about to close his room door; she stopped him, and started laughing under her breath: “Kuya, who breed Paula? You and me the only man in the house. If I didn’t do it and you didn’t do it, then who?”

He walked out to the kitchen, and couldn’t help but laugh. Paula was all right. Yeah! Paula was his favorite cousin. “KUYA! WHO BREED PAULA?” That was how loud it sounded in his ears when Mass Joe came home that night and woke up the house and told Aunty how everybody except him in the district knew Paula was pregnant.

“Gwen, how come you never tell me Paula pregnant?” He was pounding against Paula’s door. Aunty came flying out of her one o’clock sleep without her glasses, and the front of her nightie was wide open.

“Don’t you think you’ve too much tonight, Joe?”

“What you trying to say, Gwen?”

“Come, Joe. Remember you have yam to plant, you have plaintain to pick up from way down at Depot Town tomorrow at five. Come. Bed waiting. Come get some rest.”

She had her arm underneath his, trying to coax him away from Paula’s door. But he roughed out of it, even though she was pound for pound to his six-and-a-half feet, two hundred-and-fifty pound weight.

“What you doing, woman? First you say I can’t hold my drink, now you accuse me of old age!”

“Let’s go to bed, Joe. The children sleepy, and you waking up the whole district.”

“They know everything already; too late to wake them now.”

“Who said they child is pregnant anyway?”

“Call her, then. Call her!”

Aunty tightened up the gown around herself.

“Paula?”

“Yes, Aunty.”

“Come here, baby.”

Mass Joe opened his eyes wide to Paula when she walked by him
to show her he knew the truth, and don’t try to pull any wool over them.

“Get the boy, too.”

“Kuya, come get your aunty glasses for me, baby.”

Mass Joe waited till he got back with Aunty’s glasses. Kuya?”

“Yes, Mass Joe.”

“Who breed Paula?”

“Don’t know, Mass Joe.”

“Boy, I said who breed Paula?”

“Don’t know, Mass Joe.”

“Me and you the only man in the house. If me didn’t do it, and you didn’t do it, then a who?”

Aunty tried to rescue us from his yelling and all the spitting and alcohol he had blowing down our faces.

“Joe.”

“Stay out a this, Gwen.”

“How you expect a little boy like this to get somebody pregnant?”

“Answer me, boy!”

“I don’t know, Mass Joe. Maybe the breeze, sir.”

A smile immediately squeezed through the side of cousin Paula’s mouth, and Mass Joe was just in time to catch it.

“See that, Gwen!” he yelled till the zinc on top of the roof rattled.

“See what?”

Aunt Gwen began to get frustrated. Her face dropped with the weight of everything on her mind, and you could see her feelings hanging all the way down to the floor.

“She laughing at you and me. After she eat up all my food I work so hard to put on the table so nobody bad-mouth this house. Say you all go to bed with hungry belly, and how Joe family borrow food from other people . . . But right in my face, Gwen! Under you nose, as if we didn’t learn her manners. What she done do wasn’t bad enough, so she stand there laughing. How you expect me to hold my head up and look people in the eye after this? Tomorrow when Sidney or Longhas pass and say “Howdy, Joe,” you think me can look them in the face like a hard working man and answer? No,
sir. Not in my book! Any many who look up after all this is a damn liar. No book read like that. Under my roof you don’t tell a lie and smile it off.”

“Where you see the child laughing, Joe? Poor girl so frighten.”

“Now see here, Lord. Look at my bother-ration! Who you married, Gwen? Me or them? You always on their side. Anything I say, wrong. Just who married who for better or worse? This my house. I plant the food, put it on the table, and suppose to open my mouth without everybody trying to put a grip on it.”

“You’re right, Joe. You’re damn right. Just who did I marry? But I can’t blame anbody but myself. Muma tell me and my sisters to walk far from your breed. She use to sit us under the tamarind tree when you and your papa’s long line of boys passed the house, she warned us girls to stay clear. ‘Look and touch yourself, rub your hands down on your clothes children, but don’t let me see you stretching them fingers out, pointing.’ She said you Cleasons were too boastful and money grubbing. And all I can say she wasn’t right. All you ever do is boast about your property and money, yet Hopi who have a whole lot of money and property than you’ll ever have never boast a day.”

“That’s enough, Gwen. Enough!”

“I should’ve listen to Muma. But you came up to me with your sweet self. How handsome you look then. Strong jawbones, tall and strapping. Where did all of that go, Joe? Now, you come in here drunk and accusing my kids of laughing and pregnancy. I should’ve listened to Grandmuma. Look at you now. Just who did I marry? You’re right. Who did I marry? I know I’ve done spread my bed, but that don’t mean the children should lay in it. And the only time you’re going to come in here and accuse them without me saying a thing is over my dead body. My sisters leave them with me in one piece to go to England and scrub floor, and that’s how I’m going to give them back. So let’s go to bed and make the children sleep.”

Aunty tried to lead him along by the hand, but he swing in reaction to her touch, and both fell to the ground. He lost balance after swinging with every ounce of strength, and she by trying to hold him getting pulled down by his dead weight. Paula and Kuya
didn’t know what do after the fall. They had never seen them like this before, so they stood and watched. But the minute Mass Joe got the upper hand, Kuya jumped on his back. Mass Joe had flipped Aunty over and was straddling her. Kuya clasped his arms around Mass Joe’s neck and hung his entire weight on it. Paula didn’t want to miss the action; she jumped in too. Pretty soon all three had him pinned, but Aunty stopped them from going any further.

Mass Joe didn’t go to bed that whole night. He went out into the front yard with his crowbar, beating the stones. He even cried. The first and only time. Talking to the night. Telling it how Aunty and the rest were running him out of his own house, the house he built with his own two hands. How Paula ate up all his food and ended up pregnant but it wasn’t his baby.

Kuya looked at Mass Joe’s old pair of knee-high water boots sitting in a corner of the kitchen, and his mind could not get beyond the madness that happened that January night. He thought about walking barefoot but changed his mind. These boots were twice his size but would have to do. He dusted them off. The morning dew on the grass was too wet, and he couldn’t afford to have this wet grass riding up on his pants till it drenched his knees, then ended up giving him arthritis in his older days. He stuffed Mass Joe’s old goulashes with newspaper in case they tried to flip off, then stepped from the house out into the front yard onto the rock-filled earth under morning stars.

Kuya doesn’t like the dankness of his room; it closes in the space there, but the surrounding walls act as protection against anything you wouldn’t expect, like a rat or two that may cool your tows and nibble at the flesh whenever the cat is feeling lazy, or a couple roaches running across your bedsheets. Out here in the open world under the stars is a different story. You never really feel or can touch things that touch you; they do the touching while you do the feeling. And the noise! All you hear is crowing roosters. He doesn’t like all this carrying on: barking dogs are the next to follow in the procession. Night birds are okay; their noise—whoooo—is sweet to the ear. But
the howling and the crowing seems to talk to the dark, telling it to walk up behind you and touch you on the shoulders, smother you, pull you straight down to the blackness where it all began. So he keeps looking behind, turning around in a full circle every now and then just to make sure.

He has one dark corner left to cross before he reaches the butcher’s house; but everybody knows Miss Manda is standing at Cottontree Gate, waiting like Kauzpa and other souls for her spirit to find a way home. As a speculator from the tail end of Burnt Hills, she started her journey at Cottontree Gate after the truck carrying her and twelve other speculators heading for Coronation market in downtown Kingston capsized over at Murry Gut corner, near Freeman’s Hall. Nobody walking by likes the sight or smell of her spirit at the corner, and they blamed her condition on her. She knew you couldn’t drive by a four-legged animal on the side of the road after midnight and not pay your dues. She saw the calf’s eyes, the blood-red colors looking dead at her in the front seat from a corner in the hole of slanting rocks, and knew she should’ve called to one of the others in the back to throw out a foot of yam, a finger of banana, a head of cocoa. Any speculator on their way passing these rocks knew to leave something. And the times when they do forget, the donkey or mule carrying the load makes it a point of duty to signal by planting both front hooves in the road so the rope tightens up in whoever’s hand is leading, shows that something isn’t going right.

Miss Manda and the rest were on their first truck drive. They were liberated from carrying food to market on the back of donkeys and mules. Mr. Linerd from Spring Garden had just brought over a truck from England. The first one to hit the district, so why should they have one hand holding up a basket of food on their head, while pulling a donkey carrying two hampers of food, and a bunch of bananas riding high in the saddle when they could have an engine with horsepower? Much easier to load up everything in the back of the truck and get to Coronation in three hours, versus donkeys, which took five to seven days. So Miss Manda, all because of the truck from England, has been standing under the tree ever since.
The closer he gets to her, the bigger his head swells. His head rises till his entire body becomes one nerve spot. The smell of fresh death standing under the lilac tree is sending out embalming fluid and perfume into the dwelling place of the living. He takes off his shirt, turns it inside out as a sign to the dead that a living being is coming through. But the dead don’t care. The road still smells like essence from the grave. He walks as he always does whenever he wants to avoid a confrontation along the path of death. And her spirit overwhelms him. He gazes on her advances with less than sad gestures for a minute. He sits down his negative feelings for the dead, fearing he might touch her worst dislikes, and backs up against a rock to hold himself up. Her pinning soul enters his flesh and his chest backs down from the stimulation. Things are happening on his inside, a tingle that hurts too much is breaking down his resistance, entering his place of fire where the light of his life lives.

“I will not be so heavy on your bright spot, my son; I only want to know why you’re afraid of yourself, why you’ve afraid of walking in the dark.”

“Get thee behind me Satan; I know you not!” That’s what everybody says you should say when you meet a duppy. So he edges his way along the rock, yelling: “Get thee behind me Satan; I know you not!” He repeats the chant till he passes the entire rock formation slanting down over the road at Cottontree Gate.

Mass Alfred was bout to turn over on the other side and finish up his dream when a tum, tum, tum on his front door woke him up.

“Who’s knocking down my door?”

“Me, Mass Alfred,” Kuya was huffing and puffing as if the world was coming to an end and he was late for roll call.

“Who?”

“Mass Joe boy, Kuya, sir.”

“Go on home. Tell your daddy next week.”

“He say you tell him at Mass Hopi when you all was playing dominoes last night to get you this morning, sir.”

“That’s right, my boy. But you listen to what Old Man Alfred
saying. Go home! Tell him next week.”

“But he said I must get you no matter what, ’cause Paula need
the blood, Mass Alfred.”

“Damn it, boy! You don’t hold a grown man to his world.
Go tell your daddy next week, bright and early. He’s a man, he’ll
understand.”

Mass Alfred rolled over and went back to dozing. A low moon
seeping under his front door came drifting into his dreams. Just as
he was about to borrow the wings from an angel of his youth to
taste how it felt to be flying in his old age. Maybe not so much over
the hills and flat land, even though who knows what he would have
done once he was up in the clouds. But the moaning came, turned
into the biggest bull you’ll ever behold and chased the angel away.
After it chased the angel, it turned on him, but he sat and let it do
its best, because nothing mattered anymore, because he couldn’t get
the wings to climb up and visit his wife in heaven.

The bull bucked and bucked, till it bucked him out of his dream
with its moan and groan. Mass Alfred raised his head up off the
pillow to get a clean picture of the sound coming from outside,
because now it seemed like the bull had crossed the threshold. First
time this ever happened to him. Something about that bull was
peculiar. The sound it made just didn’t belong. He tried to place it
before bending over and reaching under the bed for his broad-mouth
machete. The thing looked like a cow in his dream, but the sound
wasn’t a cow’s. Neither did it belong to a goat, donkey or night owl.
This one was more like something from a sea animal, a creature
gone astray on dry land. As long as he has been around, and he
has been around for sixty-five long years, never—not even when he
was over in white man’s country on farm work cutting sugar cane,
or picking apples, and they have some strange animals over there in
America—had he ever heard such a sound. He eased off the bed,
tiptoed to the door, and peeped through the keyhole. The only thing
he saw was darkness starting right back at him, and that damn sound
seeping in under the crease of the front door.

Machete aimed, holding it up over his head and ready to bring
it down on whatsoever neck was on the other side of the door, he
opened it with two fingers and the other three grasping the tin lantern giving off a steady stream of black smoke. Sitting on the steps was Kuya with his head in his lap.

Luckily he jerked his head towards the light when the breeze of the door brushed over, or else Mass Alfred would’ve let the machete fall.

“Boy! Somebody need to gather you up in their hand and teach you some good sense!” he said to Kuya, then began mumbling under his breath. “Damn boy come over here and stop me from visiting my wife.”

“I wasn’t doing nothing out here, Mass Alfred.”

“All that carrying on?”

“No, sir.”

“Don’t you lie to me, boy, ’cause I’ll wax your rump, then tell Joe and Gwen how you lie to me so they both can play fiddle with the rest of what’s left.”

“I didn’t do nothing, Mass Alfred. I was only humming:
Good-bye world
I’m gone
Good-bye world
I’m gone . . . because Miss Mandy try to take me with her on my way here.”

“Say that again!”

“Say what, Mass Alfred?” Kuya couldn’t understand why Mr. Alfred was so excited all of a sudden, because everybody knew Miss Manda had been dead for over forty years.

“Manda, boy, Manda! What she say?” Mass Alfred opened the door wide, and the years of musk gathered in his room gladly escaped into the morning.

He couldn’t believe, just plain couldn’t believe it. All these years he had been waiting to hear from her. For forty long years there wasn’t a day that passed and he didn’t walk by that place. And after Miriam told him his wife, Manda, had walked up to her and told her to tell him she was waiting for him to come soon, he spread his bed under Cottontree Gate for a whole year. But she didn’t show, didn’t even send out a little of her spirit smell to signal she was there.
Everybody else who passed by said they smelled the dead under
there, everybody except him. She was vexed with him. Had to be.

Before she left, she would tell him to stop butchering animals.
“If Joe and the rest of people needed meat so much, let them do the
killing,” she would say. “Why spill all that blood? Somebody would
have to pay someday. One of us will have to pay for all the blood
you keep shedding, Alfred.” But Alfred never stopped. Whether it
was sheep, cow, goat, or hog, just call him. That calve had blood in
its eyes for her. She saw it coming the night the truck ran over the
animal. Blood dripped from its eyes instead of water. Now her spirit
was paying the price.

“Hear nothing?” Mass Alfred asked.
“No, sir.”

“Boy, don’t’ you fondangle with me now, ’cause this is serious
business, especially since you the one who stop me from flying up to
my wife.”

“Wow! Didn’t know you could fly, Mass Alfred. Could you teach
me?”

“Young boy like you!” Mass Alfred looked at him in amazement.
“Don’t you know how to fly? You younger folks take it for a joke
nowadays, but flying is serious business. When I was your age, I
would fly every night, couldn’t wait to go to bed. But now, flying
done left me and gone. Except tonight, and you show up and
spoil everything, so I suggest you tell the truth. Now, did you hear
anything?”

“Yes, sir.”

“See! That’s what I’m talking about with these younger folks.
Why tell me no, then?”

“Because I just say that, Mass Alfred.”

“Hush it right now; just you hush it, ’cause I know you. Joe told
me, Hopi, and everybody else all about you; how you and your sister
try to make him into a fool three years ago. Not because I didn’t say
a word, I know about you and your sister,” Mass Alfred said after he
put on his boot. “Difference between Joe and me is I got a lot of
foreign up in me. Only place Joe ever go is from house to Dorum.
Why you think I talk the Queen’s English with such a twang, boy?
They didn’t tell you old man Alfred was up in foreign?

“No, Mass Alfred.”

“Well, boy, I was up in America, England, French, London, Paris, even Europe. That’s right. Something you know nothing about. Yessirreee! I was up there showing them folks how to pick apples and cut sugar cane. Don’t you go and give me bad name when I’m gone, ’cause some of them are good folks. But if ever there is a greater liar, a more crooked thief, that’s them foreign folks. They’re what you call genuine kingsnakes. They’ll lie down on their belly out there and see you Jack Rabbit coming down the road, and because they don’t have nothing better in this world to do than crawl, they offer to help you hop; they’ll even rub you down with their forked tongues.” Kuya sat on the steps and watched Mass Alfred’s shadows dance against the newspaper-walled room, while the flickering lamplight weaved and bapped to the wind coming through the open door.

“How you mean fork, Mass Alfred? You talking bout the one we use to plant food over Dorum?”

“What else you think, boy?”

“Wow, Mass Alfred.” Kayu got up and began walking around, he could not control it any longer.

“Yessirreee! Up there they’ll see you coming and say you need a clean wash of civilized culture if you hope to get country off you, if you hope for a more civilized living along paved roads, sidewalks and concrete buildings. That’s what they said to me when I was sweating up there cutting cane and picking apples. But pretty soon they call the rest of the world to show them the bad condition you’re in after pumping you up with words that taste sweeter than honey to the mouth, but hurt worse than a serious case of constipation later. That’s right, my boy, I was up there and learn everything from them. How you think I know how to butcher so good?”

“They learn you that, too?”

“That’s right, so don’t you try no funny business with Old Man Alfred. The back may bend but the face is far from ground,” Mass Alfred said after blowing out the light and closing the door.

“Can you learn me some foreign, Mass Alfred?” Kayu asked, while they proceeded in the direction of his home.
Mass Alfred suddenly stopped, as if he heard something in the dark. “Tell you what, boy, I would say we stop by Manda on the way, but knowing her, best I get this business with your father out the way. Maybe the angel will give me another chance tomorrow.”

Paula wrapped the flannel around the baby nicely, so the early morning air didn’t force itself into small yellow patches of sores scattered over the child’s skin, then she tiptoed out of the room. She went into the outside fireplace, which was really a smokehouse for tripe and maws. Sometimes they used this kitchen for cooking if kerosene stove broke down.

Three lines of leafless branches stretching end to end about four feet above coal and ashes was where the guts of the killings were placed to dry after salted. Paula poked a dry stick into the thick bed of white ashes that had turned into a small mound like an ant’s nest, cleared the heart of the fire. She placed the little pieces of charcoal left from all the burning wood that had been put there since yesterday closer together, and slowly blew on their dark spots till small sparks of red drifted little by little spread its glow across the charcoal’s blackness. The small white-blue fire from the three small lumps of charcoal became the flame for her lantern.

She turned up the gauge of the wick, gathered up all she needed and headed out on the path running alongside the house, past the chicken coop, up beside a few roots of fever grass on the far side of Kauzpa’s grave where it V-ed off, one side becoming a shortcut that ended at the foot of Church Hill, and the other snaking into the banana and coffee walk till you reached the clearing beside the mango tree. The cows began shuffling around when they saw her lighting the two fires next to their pen.

Aunty came up later with the pans of water and placed them on the fires.

“Fire looks good, Paula. Best fire I’ve seen you build yet.”

“Thanks, Aunty. Learn it all from you.”

“Didn’t hear a pinch from my baby all night. Try to peek at her before leaving, but you wrapped her up so tight, I didn’t for fear she might wake.”
“She not that bad. Since you give her chicken foot leaf with cerasse and imba, the bumps been acting better. Don’t scratch her that much no more, either. After this killing, though, with the blood and everything, I think they will go once and for all. I just hope Kuya get Mass Alfred. We all know how he love his sleep.”

“What was that with you and him this morning?”

“You know Kuya, Aunty. I just hope he get back here before Mass Joe start wandering.”

Aunty and Paula turned their backs to the cows and faced the direction of the person making noise in the trees, while the flame of the fire reflected on their clothes, on the leaves, on the grass, on the faces of the cows, and on Aunty and Paula’s eyes. The feet out there among the banana and coffee trees were coming down heavily on the leaves in the dark. Mass Joe came out of the tree line with a bundle of dry banana leaves under his left arm and his hooky machete in the other.

“Somebody call me?”

“No Joe; that was me and Paula talking.”

He heaved down the dry leaves, then began flattening them out between the pen of cows and the foot of the fire.

“Got a hell of a fire going on here, Paula.”

“Thanks, Mass Joe.”

Mass Joe looked at his watch, wondered what could be holding up Kuya; he was about to open his mouth, but swallowed his spit instead. Aunty and Paula sat by the fire, watching the bright orange flame rise higher and higher. Mass Joe picked up two stones and dropped one in each pan so the water could boil a little quicker. Feet mashing on dry leaves along the path beside the house headed toward the fire in the center of the clearing.

Miss Vera was the first in line. She braced the pan against her hip, rocking side to side on each step with the help of her stick till she came into view of the fire. The pan she had was to put the maw and tripe in. Mass Sidney and his boy, Lesta, came next followed by Mass Alfred and Kuya. Everything was ready. Mass Joe, Mass Sidney and the two boys would hold the cow while Mass Alfred pushed the knife.
Mass Joe sent Kuya in the pen to back the cow next to the gate, since he was the one who fed them, while the others kept a close watch in case the other cows tried anything. Kuya coaxed the big black cow over to the gate. When the cow got arms length away from the waiting men, they swooped down on it. One grabbed onto its ears, one the head, and another a front leg while he forced it from behind. It kicked, it kicked, it kicked . . . almost got out of their hands. But Mass Joe, by kicking out its two back legs, brought it down on the bed of banana leaves in front of the mouth of the pen, where the cow was trying to get back through. Mass Joe laid across the two legs, holding them to the pig of his stomach, so his body weight rested on them. Kuya held onto the tail, Lesta grabbed the belly portion and a front foot; his father looped the slipknot he had round the cow’s mouth and forced down the head. Mass Alfred waited for Paula to set the basin in place before he shoved the knife. The big cow tried to kick itself loose, but Mass Sidney had its mouth roped and feet roped. And the more it tried to escape, the faster the blood oozed in a stream from its neck into Paula’s pan.

The pan filled to the brim before the cow went limp. Paula removed it and went back down the path toward the house to bathe the yellow spots on her baby before the blood got cold. Inch by inch, black became white. First the stomach then the feet, the ear, face and tail. They all used their razor-sharp knives and removed the black skin and hair till it was white, then turned the white side over, and scraped away long strands of black hair. Soon the black cow was a dead white animal.

They placed the white cow on freshly cut green leaves after the scraping, and watered the body down till it was spotless. Except for one or two drips coming from the hole where the knife entered the neck, most of the blood had become water by now. Crystal clear, and slowly dripping, while the unfolding morning pulled night toward day across wide open eyes in the head of the cow, revealing tracks sticky with mud where a hundred heartbeats pounded.

The butcher removed the head, split it open, removed the marrow and gritty tongue. Miss Vera put a frying pan on one side of the fire, cut up the tongue, and set it out to fry; on the other fire
she cleared away some of the ashes hiding lit coal and placed the right and left side of the brain on top. She and Aunty, plus two other women, went off to the side into a clump of trees and sat down to work. They gathered buckets of hot water; each took the slender coffee stick stripped of leaves and beans, and ran it through the cow’s small and large intestines till all the food of yesterday came out. They turned the intestines inside out, washed them clean. The men to their left took over frying the tongue and roasting the brain.

Hair so black as the darkest midnight over the quietest body of water above an overcast night turned white as snow. Holding onto the spirits of those that surround me, I, the gut-removed, tailless, headless figure dripping bloody clots, hot and streaming in a vessel like sunrise coming down on dawns, swear this once to pour myself through the child’s outstretched arms and not into a mixture of seven devils again in the middle of pimento trees. To convince others you’re not an outcast, that you’re just as legitimate as every other human, can be a drain along your neck, your veins, especially your main arteries.

Gathered up as one picture for all eyes in a clear field of decomposed marrow are my bones, my intestines, my inner sides trembling when every weary word loose from my unborn flesh sows seeds in humans’ mind that bring a joyful day of harvest through the great doors leading to the Hall of Altars.

Talking to these spirits who seek flesh to purify themselves pressed a lonely child into my daylight hours, a feeling that is holy as water from renewed fountains. The crystal of these waters circulates through my indigestible, jerks my vibes like curdled blood in a sepulcher forming beliefs for its own heart. Energy forming fingers in the open air extends without borders into my contracting selves. And I’m relieved.

Not because she who is called Paula tried to stretch out into me and talk in the flesh without first washing her bare feet with fire, not because she opened the family spirit’s mixture for yellow spots, a clearing of fleshly beauty, till the ways of the sacred stance that kept the united flame burning in the hearts of true believers dismantled
the power of fire. She should not have bounced the edges of days that didn’t belong in the Year of Locust with unclean hands, then coaxed my concentration into a smooth surface of bent truth. I didn’t penetrate her forming earth of yellow spots.

Though morning has raised her child’s neck for a while through the vines of trees and grass along the atmosphere, this is not the way of remedy, my child! Listen and bend your heart to the words that close all traditions privately. Howling Flames, who knows the order of the curved path unto the sacred, blotted me out of this world with strict rules of standstill vision. Swirling words heading out for Satan’s sulfur field, then to my home, Digitaria, will unfold on those who walk the other way. The balancing of the sacred ways is a castrated position rolling from saliva in regions where smoke climbs to the child of the universe. Every weaving step that has a life played in these heavenly rains, beating on the outside of their spirits, for she who lived in the eye of dark matter weaved stream of evaporation. Thunder roars words of lightning striking upon her July madness. So looked her right in the circle, where morning is the echo of her wild call, bending always with her swords away from the merciful.
THE SLITHERA

I straighten my body slowly. Careful not to crack bones in my back, I brace my chest forward, day-to-day, trying to get the right hold on life. I like the relief, the good feeling it brings to be under reconstruction while surrounded by cylindrical structures here and there, in the land of Neorepublicae. I’m being worked over from all angles like old brick houses stray dogs piss on and the homeless set afire on Devil’s night in Detroit. Things have been stretching me out of proportion of late till I bevel like elliptical arches on banks of felt but never seen eroding soil. To live a life of supporting traffic is a bitch, but that’s what being a bridge is all about. You have to be a body of sturdy structure. Good backbone made from elephant tusk. And that’s the advantage. But backbones are never on sale. Anyway, it’s not in my makeup to have any, not even if I were out in the market looking. They wouldn’t fit my style. I did try on some clay feet, though. Maybe I attached them to the wrong limbs, but clay didn’t work.

As material for building, clay doesn’t stand upright under high water pressure when the tide under the belly of your bridge rises up, when the mouth of rivers running through your life puffs, swells and expands along smoother surfaces of your inner body and waterlogs these parts. Clay feet at these times in your life only add to the trouble. That’s why Grandaunt had hers amputated. Clay feet can’t help but slowly soak up water. It’s in their makeup to turn to mud, to be the landslide going downstream with water under your bridge. So I say burn your bridge!

Burn all the bridges in your life that wayfarers use to reach the dying you that was once a spirit but is now a saturating flesh. Never pay attention to those saying don’t, never burn your bridges, you may need them to cross later. When the vision of yourself, something said to be concrete, is flux, fluidity trapped in open fields, how or where do you cross as one continuous person? And who’d want to go back to that old tiresome life of pilgrimage when he can have the youthfulness of reconstruction? Away from the slippery slopes of hard clay under your sole, and to a life of reconstruction, is not
pilgrimage. When I was on my pilgrimage, searching and searching till I came up on the ashes of myself, everyone said reconstruction was the way to go. Do for yourself, they said, for it's a concrete jungle out there. But now that I'm reconstructing my image, they say don't burn bridges behind you. Not burning your bridge is a pilgrimage. Hello! Somebody tell me what's going on! Is everybody blind or is there too much light in my sun? I have a whole lot of constructing to do. Hear me? A whole lot. And I'll be damned if I don’t burn some bridges. Fire has always been good to me, especially in this heart of darkness where I dwell. On these cavern walls, fire will illuminate the source of the invisible hand passing down words from the house of Law and Order in the city of Neorepublicae; it will show the images of people’s thoughts burning. The excitement it brings, then the ashes of things past to new beginning, will be me. Away from broken buildings with shattered glass, tightly jammed building on a no-man's-land encircled by rusty fences, the partition of time or space wouldn’t cross to loosen my bonds.

I will burn these bridges sinking the shores of ghettos, third worlds set adrift as sinkers to uphold the pillars of civility pumping its puss through digital signals, debris floating from the house of the Industrial era. And if anyone says “Who goes there?”, then you must set your mind on fire. Tell the fire Marshal you’re just warming up for what is to come.

As a member of the snake family going on my third skin change, my advice is don’t hesitate; strike the matches while your wick is wet and burn your wooden bridge down flat so your smoke can climb the skies as a sign of initiation. I've set my past on fire till the firmament of my spineless foundation sparked a new birth. And God’s it’s lonely. But feels great. So, whatever you do, never let them see the skeletons in your closet, because then they’ll know you didn’t have a spine.

To be spineless is a curse. You’re a snake, a slithering scum sucker of the earth that shall crawl on its belly till kingdom come. So, know thyself. Spinal preservation is of the essence in a world where those with upstanding backbones are the cream in your coffee. Without a spine you have no blood. Or if you do have some
blood left, it’s ice cold. Cold blood is a true sign of spinelessness; it’s the worst substance people can have running in their God-given veins. Snakes, toads and lizards have cold blood; that’s why we crawl on our bellies most of our lives, with our faces so low. The rule is, our nose should be as close as possible to the ground, so with every breath we take the dirt that shall be our bread. Like hogs wallowing in their waste to keep their temperature down on hot days, most reptiles can’t help but crawl in gutters; it’s the habitat created by Vertical Vertebrae in the land of Neorepublicae. Which is why I’m under reconstruction.

Most people think my back has always been a bridge horizontally stretched across banks of rivers for the world to walk across. They think I’m made to uphold these trucks transporting chemicals invisible to everyone except one of my friends who saw the evil spirits spreading in her Eastside community while she swing-swing back and forth in the park across from the liquor store, and eyed the bald-headed buzzard sitting on the edge of her neighborhood waiting. But if they really want to know about my back as a bridge, it came down as an inheritance.

Meejum as a child was left out in the front yard among the flowers and birds, in a crib made of thatch in the land of Good Old Days. Her mama was in the backyard preparing food, and her papa in the fields planting peas and yams when Monkey climbed over the hibiscus fence and entered the garden where Meejum was taking her beauty sleep. Monkey was out looking for somebody to ride. The mule he’d been riding had developed clubfeet.

“Giddyup, jackass,” Monkey said to Mule. “Make me late for my appointment with Lion and you dead. Hear that? Dead.”

“Maybe that’s why I can’t giddyup. I’m a mule,” he said, and limped a little more.

“Who doing the riding, Mule?”

“You, Monkey.”

“All right then, I said giddyup, jackass!”

Monkey tightened the iron across Mule’s tongue and pepped up
his steps with the aid of a whip, till Mule got tired and all the hair rubbed off his back, the hair that was to cushion him while sleeping out in the grass. After Mule kicked Monkey from his back for calling him an ass, Monkey ran from the deep of the jungle till the treeline stopped him in his trembling tracks. It was then that Monkey saw this strange-looking thing in a big thatch basket out in the clearing. This animal looked so much like Money: it had four feet, a mouth, eyes, ears. If only it had more hair on its body, Monkey thought, he would have gone someplace else to search for fear me might be attempting to ride one of his distant cousins. But the lack of hair on Meejum’s body helped Monkey to decide. She was his new mule. He took her over the hibiscus fence, out into the world, and has ridden her ever since.

After a hundred plus years of Monkey on her back, Meejum amoebaed on herself. Not so much of her own free will, but more by a natural prodding of the body. Monkey could not control himself when he saw her belly swelling. He would have two mules to ride now, one to the bush, the other to town. A life of other people riding their backs didn’t seem like a promising occupation for her children. Meejum wanted something better for her kids, something she could hold her head up about and be proud of. Since she didn’t have any say in the decision process of whether she could have or not have children, she used her stomach muscles to say and shape all she could not prevent, and squeeze my mother into a Slithera: the wet zygote that shall crawl on its belly in blue holes. Monkey was so happy about Mother’s coming that he built Meejum a house to keep out the sun and rain for sixty whole days. He even walked to his field and to town for the next two months.

Monkey was really confused when this long, slimy looking thing came from Meejum’s hut one midafternoon. He got mad that he had done all that work for such a narrow ass no one could put a hamper to, and threw my mama from the face of dry land to drown in the wet sea where she found a new home. Which is why my frame doesn’t make it good for riding; I inherited it from Mama, who was shaped by Meejum. I was not made to giddyup.
The distance between me and my dream, the girl forty lengths ahead and still walking with long strides as if she had thighs like Grandmamma Meejum, nearly caused me to break my right foot in a rut on the sidewalk. My eyes were too fixed on the prize of my life, and I bucked my big toe on the edge of a depression. It’s not as if I haven’t been trying to be careful of depressions, drop-offs or sharp curves that can cause folks’ vehicles to go skidding, rolling off roads they frequently travel. To get this far, I had to walk sideways like a crab. Walking full front like prairie buffaloes is a sign of power, that you have lots of oil on your back under that thick wooly hair of yours. I can’t afford to look anything that pumped-up, at least not with my one-of-a-kind luck. My whole family and community, for that matter, has been having holes poked into them by the saddles that made others’ asses comfortable. With my one-of-a-kind luck, the next thing you know, folks are prospecting on my back, drilling all sorts of holes in search of oil. God knows, I don’t have the body type like Grandmama Meejum: thick hambone shoulders and thighs like bison’s. A big-bone frame that can go and go would do me a lot of good when I set my bridge on fire. But words surround my desire as always, so I lie by the feeling of them, pretending I’m eating a sandwich in other people’s shoes. It gives me such a rush that I don’t feel like being a bridge or some old house for other people, animals, trucks and cars to run over or use up just for kicks. Maybe it’s better I drop these skins, free my body for the fourth time of natural and civilized laws for my paradise.

Better Dream viewed from the beyond, which is unlike a life of laying on your belly so others can walk across your back, hides under a liquid surface with my image tucked to her chest so the pulse that beats there, reaching out to all breathing the breath of life, can keep my spirit alive. She was the one who anticipated the first ripple that shook the water surface above my head. I can never forget that sound: clunk! The clunk that started heavy waves, pouring rain, and finally, flood. Showering rain dancing with broken breeze under white sky marked by a streak of full red, delicate yellow, harsh green,
deep purple and a host of other colors draped my charcoal black till nothing was left but infertility.

When they were young, True Blue, Shinqua, and I walked holy ground and tasted the face of joy upon entering the maze of our Grandma’s garden. Blue was fresh then as May flowers. We were water creatures in those happier times when we bathed each other’s souls then walked away without leaving a smell. We could feel delicate sparks of music, the soul’s food; we rubbed on the vibes till our mouths tingled, our bodies puffed into fire while swallowing each other’s flame for communal strength. Sitting here waiting for God’s prayer can’t do it. Our mission is to try and remove the enemy within our language, on our tongues so Archangels can hurry up and start playing their trumpets and consume riders of our dreams in their tracks so peace can be possible in our lives again.

Mend me, O Lord of the Slithera, with autumn leaves of upper Michigan, so I can hold onto something, anything beautiful. You gave me hope to walk in Grandma’s garden, to be a flower, young all over again, and plant my nightmares in water fields and marshlands where they’ll find roots so I can harvest a fruitful dream in times of hunger. Requiems from True Blue come to me from beyond and dish out the soul’s food; shine on my autumn leaves and wither my winter to the heart of summer before it fills my life with icicles. Song of the living dead, I pray, come to me now in my time of need from the denser depths of my sister, True Blue. Take the saddles of Upright Vertebrae off our backs that we may all know how it feels to be one again.

Some say I’m a capital fool, ill-prepared to receive the language of the soul while standing at the crossroads. But I, the bridge, though unwilling to stretch myself across the gap in the earth where rivers cross, shall wait by the crossroads till I’m properly relieved.

To unlock the earth we dig at the soil centering the soul, to soothe beauty we drum mixed gods out of art. Through the needed help of vultures sucking tulips off my trying mind, I’m a fruitful
garden. What a beauty it is to witness the maze of dead undulating ego pulsating! People are something else, trying to trap me in open fields because I walk blindly. All living better satisfy the dead; they better satisfy parasitic shadows we in hell physically phantom. They are depending on us to accomplish harmonies. Time is innocent; this they know. But they miss playing in water reaching above the neck so the fish they are can be free once more.

Standing as a bridge at the crossroads is a piss on our days, an attempt to grab a piece of our life. I prayed for survival in this state. Then I ran up, down, in and out of myself for a return to Better Dreams smeared across the house of God’s church floor in a looking glass, but too many tongues were in there jumping and skipping hallelujah to the lower part of True Blue’s feet, testifying to troubled souls on necks of Vertical Vertebrae. After True Blue baptized these necks in Jesus’ blood with her words, souls belonging to the necks became human mud. These souls were born with clay feet.

Blood froth before peace can run along our street as a rule. But why? I say to Father in the flesh. He shrugs his shoulders along the rail by the dock, then stops, braces over the rustiest rail along his path leading down into the water. His circular traveling is closing on itself now, and he is scared to meet who he is.

He wants to hear about my struggle with huge crumbs like ants walking along concrete crevices seeking a warm spot to hide their bread of life. He walks up to the water by the wharf to look for his paradise. But not a single fish is here to transport him out into the blue. Not even a crab or crawfish, scavenger of the blue, is here to greet, welcome him back into the wet world. He holds onto the day, hoping . . . puts his best foot into the run of the river then pulls it back. His prints doesn’t have any value in running water anymore; they will only disperse, flow downstream in a rush.

Father is hurting. I can see it now. He is aching for home, to be the pebble falling on the surface of my childhood experiences, to cause the interference of colliding waves to ripple his ways. Ripples of life on a placid blue river in the morning under the sun way out there looking is a wonder to a thirsty mind by the sea. Me in those
hours alone on the rock, with my head to it and toes digging in the sand softly. He wants to have the effect of a stone thrown into a lake by a lone traveler, my grandmother looking at her reflections in the waters of life. To be the pebble that vertically sinks slowly into my innermost heart and displaces hands that held the cradle that comforted me from then to now in his desire. Through circular ripples on my horizontal memory, he wishes to converge vertically with my fatherless days, edge his way home free into my forgiveness. Father wants to be a part of my boyhood because he didn’t have a fighting chance when I came on the scene crying for food and shelter. His enemies had him pinned under crossfire, he said. “I was out of supply, my boy,” was how he put it. Communication was cut off between him and the outside world; he had to run from his opponents and prepare to fight them another day before they overwhelmed the little strength he had left. “So when you’re in the defense, and the enemy overrun your secondary position, blow that booby-trapped bridge as a last line of defense, because there is no turning back after that,” were his words. “And whatsoever you do, follow the rules of the masters:

‘hush…voices
obliterate your tracks,
hidden as ghosts…spirits
beneath the earth, invisible to anyone.’

His image smiles, looks back into days of the two of us playing baseball, basketball and sees nothing but little oily patches, the residue of cargo ships floating in our blue water world.

I smile at these thoughts while walking in Father’s eyes. He walks off again and leaves me feeling inadequate about myself as a fish. I am a bum because of him. But to him bums are real flesh and blood, and I should thank him for the lesson in tough love. Bums are without shame whether their water be dirty or clean. They are true swimmers, fish people, original water creatures. Unlike so-called normal people, bums glisten when they walk with an aura of wetness that goes out and touches like unselfish rain falling on the roofs of an entire neighborhood, instead of on the home of one. Whether
bums swim, crawl or walk through life, shame is not their fear; Father said before he left me standing at the docks holding onto a rusty rail.

I’m in tomorrow to find the young lady who is always forty paces ahead of me and still walking. The last time she called back to me, she said, thanks for putting your trust in me. Better Dreams is showing me how to use tonsils; she is teaching me how to be properly amphibious for the journey up ahead.

“Isn’t water-living enough for you?” she asks.

“All I want to do is find out something, Dreams. I’m feeling so good right now.”

“I don’t know what you seem so happy about, but I think you should know you’re not as warmblooded as you might think. You’re a fish. Wet and cold blooded. And dry scales on a fish is a pitiful sight. So if you want to go and have asphalt under your feet, go right ahead. But don’t you ever—and I mean it—don’t you ever come swimming back like your father did after dry land removed his gills.”

I’m falling back into quagmire on each step forward while blood drips from words painting images of my fish family in newspapers where vulturial effigies hold bones of deadbeats like Father in their beaks as exhibits. Lightning fires the sky, then thunders over a group of people on the upper deck of activities within me.

“I’m hearing you,” I say to the air, but no response is given.

The feeling of her aura, her voice riding on the breeze of her breath against my skin ruffles my brow, and I know the lady walking forty steps ahead of me is here to stay.

“Do you know me from somewhere?” she says.

“Huh?”

She turns her back on me, smiles at the damage done, then comes back with: “I want to know if you’re taking your medication.”

“What?”

“Just take your Prozac and be glad you finally know what you want, because self determination for a snake should be an afterthought!”
I couldn’t let anyone stop me from reconstructing myself. Rebuilding my image from scratch was a fresh look, to be a kid three times in one lifetime. The comfort the child sitting on the other side of me had at the dock could be mine also. The balance, the motherly foundation cradling his smiling framework, was the best material to build my dreams on.

“I want you to stop holding the rail,” Dream Girl said to the kid.

She yanked and bruised the poor child’s framework till tears came running to me from the baby boy. This was my time to do something, but she caught my attempt and threw it back at me with humiliation: “Thoughts like those can only cause you harm, snake boy!”

Tears from the little boy’s cheek looked at me. Dream Girl rubbed her eyes in his hands to get into my world through his lifeline, then Grandma came to the wharf with the aid of her staff.

“You speak as if this child is yours, Dream.”

“I thought my piss of blood and water spoke for itself,” Dream said with vengeance in her eyes.

“’He is the son of life.’ Let him have his dream,” Grandma told her. The child in me said yes when I heard that. I waited to hear more for Grandma was speaking: “’You might have housed his body, but not his soul,’ Your kind shall never visit such a soul as his, not even if your name is Dream.”
CLIMBING SISYPHUS’ HILL

Walking through ruins of projected dreams is a destruction of sleep where nightmares haunt both my dream and actual world. Some people think, and others say, dying is the worst thing that can ever happen. I have died so many times . . . Living seems closer to that continuous roundabout where everything has the same look and foundation as all the faces of death.

Anyway, the first of my two most memorable deaths occurred at age ten. I woke feeling a deep pain my stomach. These were the days I jumped rope and hopscotched with friends. Roy and I even went to catch parakeets then. He was the new neighbor from England, half-black, half-white, now living with his grandparents, who were fed up with England. The grandfather came back to Jamaica with his wife, brought Roy and his sister to show them the homeland, and keep them company. England was cutting down on giving out citizenship of late, they said. Not even Roy, who was born over there, could become English. Grandfather Edwards didn’t like that one bit. So he saved up a lot of money, worked till his eyes were permanently bruised with a dark overcast. That’s what snow does if you stay too long in it and you’re from a tropical country; it beats you up, gives you frostbite, digs under your skin and removes the black, making it look uneven, dark here, light there in old age. Grandfather Edwards said he had enough of the cold, and even if he didn’t, England and the rest of Europe would soon make sure he did by sending him and a lot of others home, back to where they naturally belonged because the legacy of the New World was slowly drying up and they didn’t have the technology yet to fix the problem.

So, until England gets the technology to send out space ships to discover new worlds . . . Or better yet, until one of her daughters, maybe America or Australia, finds the people living on Mars, they should go home. Roy couldn’t wait till England got back on her feet, which was the only song and dance he harped. He would walk around the district and tell everyone how aliens were really up there in Mars. What Roy didn’t know was these aliens learned not to trust strangers. Millions of Indians from the Indies, while on their trek
back across the sky to the Hall of Altars where souls are recycled, warned the Martians, told them they were defeated because of the help they tried to give to strangers in ships mistaken for angel vessels. As if that warning wasn’t enough to scare the Martians deep underground, millions of African souls from the Congo warned the Martians, too, told them all they did was chop the trunks of rubber trees and carry the white stain to barter for beads and trinkets. Next thing, their entire villages were on fire, hands chopped off, feet amputated if they didn’t go and find white stains for Leopold’s men.

All this talking about Mars and aliens became Roy’s means of passing time while heading down the road every morning with Grandfather Edwards way up ahead in front, and he tailing behind the goats. Sometimes the goats had him pulling in all directions; he wasn’t a Jamaican, he was born in Birmingham, England. Even the mosquitoes knew that. They sucked on his foreign blood, left red spots all over his white legs that later became great sores.

Roy didn’t like it out here at all. We had too many hills to climb, too much bush swarming with mosquitoes; roads were too narrow. Out here made him feel sticky, warm-wet like his skin was falling from the bone. The other boys and I liked him on our side when playing soccer. He sure wasn’t a good cricket player, but he could kick a ball. So we tried to convince him to stay, tried to show him how to walk through the trees without getting sticky, but all he did was pray. He could not pray hard enough for England to find the friendly aliens on Mars so he could go back to his homeland.

To take his mind off Jamaica, he’d sneak out, go bird hunting with me, even though riding bikes between brick walls and paved, clean streets was on his mind. He told me about America, how he went to visit his cousins one summer and they went out into an all white neighborhood on their bikes. Then the boys in this neighborhood would come chasing after them. That sounded like fun I told him. To have other guys chasing after you was like playing cops and robbers, Indians and cowboys. He didn’t agree, but wouldn’t say why.

Since bird shooting was the closest we had to riding bikes between brick walls, or have people chasing after you, we’d get
breadfruit gum: cut huge breadfruit trees crossways at the trunk in a deep line, and let the white milk stain like fresh breast milk flood down into our cans. We boiled the stain a little, plastered it across a smooth long stick, climbed a sour-orange tree and placed our stick at its pinnacle. Parakeets liked that special branch reaching up, that dry branch without leaves sticking out in open air, like a lantern in a watchtower signaling to strays and lost souls at sea. But they didn’t show this day. Maybe they had taken the day off, or went visiting relatives.

A few blue-gills, grass-quits and blackbirds caught our attention, but the highflying ground dove was the bird that had us reaching for our slingshots. Like boy David we searched for those special stones. We weren’t at a river; we were up in the Cockpits of Trelawny where Maroons hiding from British soldiers would sit and eat, which made it hard to find smooth, round ones. Ray fired and missed. I spit on my rock and fired. Roy couldn’t believe it. He held himself.

“Can’t be.”
“I got him!”
“No! God, can’t be!”
“See that, Roy?”

The dove capsized, spun in the air around and around from above the clouds and fell onto the ground in a lump. The joy lifted me up on wings as if I was a bird swooping across land, trees and rivers. First dove I ever shot. I have talked to them before, at a distance. Just never shot one. They never allowed you to come close. Most times while walking below tall trees all you heard was the wind from their wings’ flap-flap, “whooo.” Then high above the trees, there they were. Never you first; they were always the ones to see. My heart fell when we went over and the dove wasn’t there.

“I don’t see it, Roy,” I said, very surprised the bird was missing.
“Must’ve been coming from the hospital.”
“Couldn’t be, too much strength in the wings. See how powerful them wings was flapping.”

“I saw the toes, and either that bird was coming from the doctor or was a ghost. How else could you shoot that wide but it still drop? Did you see how wide you shot?”
“Jealous, Roy. Jealous because you didn’t do it.”
“Jealous? Just pray it wasn’t Kauzpa you shot.”
“What you talking ’bout now? Everybody know Kauzpa standing under Tannansee, waiting.”
“Well, eagle eyes run in my family and that bird had six toe, I saw them! Duppy toes.”
“Aunty say I have pato eyes; don’t matter how dark, I can see.”
“If you didn’t know, Pato is night bird, not day.”

I went home, told Aunty about the dove and she balmed me down with herbs, frankincense and myrrh mixed with strong spirits. This was my first death, and I did it to myself. Shot my own spirit. The pain my chest grew worse. Before I could play in the sun, walk and not feel giddy. Now the pain sank to the center bone where my breasts meet in a sink, and pushed out to the middle of my back, eating up all the flesh along the way. The sun would not be sufficient to warm me. Didn’t matter how long I folded up in a stoop on the big rock out in the middle of the yard with the sun beating down, I still felt cold. No one could do anything but me; I had shot my spirit, so they watched. There was no cure other than living, waiting, walking around day to day with a light head, feeling as if you’ll fall any minute, as if you’re vomiting up something finally, but winds come up, air pocket going outward. And the pain your chest moves to your joints and feels like someone poured cold liquid between your bones. So you wait some more, living, knowing any day now you will fall apart, but not soon enough.

These days were the rolling of a stone, like that Greek guy they call Sisyphus. No one told me why I had to do all that rolling. At least Sisyphus knew. He stole something and had to pay. Me, on the other hand, had to pay without just cause. Roy said his friend Dimea, an American he met one holiday, said there’s no such thing as “without just cause.”

Dimea came over to visit him one night, and said he felt like going out on the street and just slitting throats, Roy told me. He’d walk up behind anybody he saw on the street, sidewalk, or alley, grab him by the head, jerk it back and slit the throat. When Roy asked
what the people did to deserve this, Dimea said they were guilty.
“Of what?”
“Everybody is guilty.”
“What did they do?”
“Everybody was born, weren’t they?”
“So?”
“You Americans are sick, sickest in the world. Did you know that?”
“See. I know you’d come around sooner or later. You damn right the world is sick. Everybody is guilty. My grandmother, cousins, everybody who refuse to accept me on my father side because they’re full Indians and I’m not—including my father—are all sick; my black mother, who turned her back on me when I went to see what her face looked like, is sick. My foster parents, who took me in off the streets but curse me because I didn’t graduate high school are sick; their kids, and others in these homes, neighborhoods, who nagged me for ten long years, saying I’m a negative photograph, caught between black and red light. The whole world is guilty.”
“I’m like you, if you didn’t notice, part black, part white. See me going around with killing on my mind?”
“Don’t know how you all do things over there, but over here, I’m constantly kept alive by their eyes; watching me, waiting for me to do something strange.”
Roy said Dimea was paranoid. I didn’t think so, though; Dimea was right. All are guilty the minute they are born. Why else would I have to be rolling this stone?
Everybody is given a surface in life. Some are lucky and are given rolling hills and green meadows. Then there are those with flatlands like swamps and deserts. My good friend Khenty, for example, was given deserts, and a small stone, a pebble which he carried under his tongue that flooded his palate. He admits it’s small, and that the sun burns his flesh during the day and cold soaks his bones at night. But nothing hurts like that stone under his tongue. It brings down his entire being, heavily, like a toppling tree, falling not by ax, but by its own weight.
Before I began rolling, like Khenty, I was one of the bodies stretching across the deep in the bosom of a void that felt the first light entering. On a street black with asphalt but red in mood like bulls facing matadors with a final jerk that hurts in the neck, rays so bright shimmered my flesh, penetrated my inner regions and brought forth the first vine. With fire and my blood, the vine doubled on herself, covering me with leaves, me the consumable flux ebbing and flowing on both sides of the earth’s poles till the moon smiles upon a starless night.

Sometimes red, blue, green, yellow, brown or colorless, I swim the four corners of the world, spreading my wings, descending from the upper reaches of Mauna Kea to drip slow rain in the bowels of caves and caverns where Aztecs carried their dead. Under the canopy throughout the earth you could hear me roar while walking alongside rose-apple and plum trees, as I meandered through and over plotted land, bridges, invisible boundaries along the hearts of man, hindrance blocking their ability to touch, reach out to thirsty tongues and soften palates before they cracked wide open.

To die is a living moment, a corn stalk uprooted and placed on concrete, starved from the minerals of soil, a turtle placed on its back in a desert with sun on its belly, waiting for vultures instead of light rays that brought life to corn stalks on their first popping from mother earth. I can remember the days I had life, those days before my second death when I awoke alone in my room and looked around wondering where’s everybody? Where did they all go with my life? How did I end up in this Anglican Church? No one seemed to hear the thunder in my ear. We all stood still, voiceless in this huge building with great acoustics, where the oak door reached up to let in giants, and the windows were so great in size any dinosaur could fly through. Lightning flashed in my head, yet the congregation stood still, as if there were no panic. But someone was coming, trying to enter. I heard him, felt him stick to me like snails climbing banana stalks and leaving a long see-through gloss, while the priest stood his ground in that tall pulpit reaching up over his flock of sheep, waiting for the church to let me pump the pipe organ sitting in a corner among cobwebs.
I can remember the days I had life, those beautiful days before my second death when I awoke alone in my room and looked around wondering where’s everybody. I was on the other side of my dream watching the sun in a blue valley from high above on the side of a hill. One bird in particular who would hang around me, said he was there in the cornfield to eat up the worms, protect our corn leaves from caterpillars and other insects trying to devour us. My second death happened while I lived in a compound surrounded by birds. I can remember the days I had a life, those beautiful days before my second death when I awoke alone in my room and looked around wondering where’s everybody? I trusted my newfound friend to not eat me; he was a flesh eater, be you dead or alive. He had the same shifts as any falcon, with moderately long but soaring wings; had globular eyes that hardly moved in their sockets and could look behind by rotating the head through a thirty-five to fifty degree arc; it had eight times the vision of a human, had taloned feet, notches on the cutting edges of its beak; said it was a New World vulture. My protector had broad, soaring wings, hooked beak to tear flesh from prey that it caught.

To die is a living moment, my corn stalk uprooted and placed on concrete, starved from the minerals of soil, a turtle placed on its back in a smooth desert, waiting for vultures instead of the sun that brought life to corn stalks on their first popping out of the earth. From a soaring flight, which it started by calling from a perch, it lowered its feet into me, twisted around in horizontal cartwheels, then ascended with my body, the corn stalk, in a whirling flight.
“Arta! Now where’s the damn boy? Artaaaaaaa!” Mass Kauzpa can’t understand what’s wrong with Arta. He carried the boy over here to keep his company, stand by his side and learn about the farming business, how to dig yam hills, how to plant yams slanted and not straight so the eyes don’t break off and kill the plant, how to tie the vines to yam sticks after they start growing to prevent them from spreading all over the dirt and knotting into each other, how to know the crop is ripe and ready for eating when yellow leaves on the vine fall to dirt. He brought the boy over here to water the cows and donkeys when they get thirsty, but he neither sees nor hears the boy.

Arta stands by the waterhole under clouds that keep blocking his sunlight, preventing him from seeing his shadow. A lizard on the plum tree beside the water hole can see its reflection, too, but can’t find his in water or on land. It’s the clouds; they are too wide and overcast. In no time they cover a whole area of sun. And run as you can, clouds always catch up. Every hop he makes they are there. He purposely stands in the lizard’s way to block its reflection from taking form. He wants to see his on top of the circular water hole, not the lizard’s.

He started out at Mass Kauzpa’s side, trying to learn how to dig yam hills. It was sunny there at first, but clouds came into his life as always, and he left to run after sunny spots. The first warm spot was four footsteps away when grayness came over his body at Mass Kauzpa’s side. But his blood needed warmth, so he walked lightly on fallen leaves, dry brown ones, and brushed through grass reaching as high up as his neck to enter back into heat. To stand in warmth, feel the power of the sun on his skin, in his life, touching him in places only sun can, was more than embracing to Arta. This heat becoming the warmth of charcoal pushed up through the souls of his feet walking atop fire to purify the soul. The sensation it brought was no less than the heat from his mother’s body he felt as a boy every time she would put him on her breast. Total peace.

But when boys and girls at the primary school he attended
glimpsed the yellow spots on his body that forever wanted to show
their faces however much he tried to conceal them under the long
pants he wore to hide his shame, their faces cringed with scorn
through eyes of whips that burned deep inside, while they chased
him with pointed rocks till water overflowed and covered his eyelids,
drowning his vision. Even teachers behaved as everyone else,
especially Miss Henrietta. Whenever she went to get his attention
from the desk where he kept it all day thinking of his mother’s breast,
and onto her blackboard with English all over it, she would pull his
head up by grasping the collar of his shirt with the tip of her finger
as if she were fingering material daubed in ooze.

WAYSOFTHESERPENT

“Young man,” the lizard on the plum limb calls out to Arta.
“I’m sorry, but my shadow needs to communicate with the sky, and
you’re blocking my sun. Do you mind stepping to the side so I the
great warrior Ptash of Caterpillar Crawl, can see his grandeur?”
“What?” Arta looks puzzled.
“Right here. I’m right here.”

Arta looks in the blue water that sprang up out of the earth
instead of down from hills for the voice, but all he sees is the tail
end of a reflected rainbow stretched across the sky. Circling the
tail of the rainbow are three snakes. One dark blue and headless,
one bright red with scales and the other gold-yellow with no tail.
In no time they twine as one and become a circular film over the
blue waterhole like a caul enshrouding a heavenly body suspended
in space.

“Up here. Not in the water.”

It’s not the first time Arta has seen this uglyfaced lizard. It’s
always hanging on the same limb every time he comes down here,
always pushing out its tongue in the sun, trying to be warm like him;
but it’s the first time it has ever spoke. Before he could say another
word . . .

Five toes attached to a body with pointed head and long tail
without scales squirm from side to side in stiff movements towards
Arta; the lizard’s movements are too quick for him. With throat far spread, it raises the skin along its neck. The skin splits from the head and runs down along the middle of its back in frays. The lizard grabs these frays, resembling tattered rags worn by nomads heading toward the desert because of encroaching paved roads, with open mouth and reveals a forked tongue like a path with two tracks heading out into a wilderness. Disk-shaped eyelids with holes in each center operate independently of one another. One looks left, the other right, one up, and one down. Arta has never seen anything like this before, and is frozen for a minute or two. Before he could take off running to get Mass Kauzpa to come and see, sticky tips of thick forked tongue extend twice the creature’s length and flick away flies swarming around his legs. The more it licks, the faster flies disappear. His yellow spots are going; its extended tongue licks them dry, which sets Arta running for fear of what might happen next.

“Boy, mean to tell me you hear me calling but didn’t answer?” Mass Kauzpa sticks his machete in black dirt mounting up around him, looks up on Arta’s figure while on his knees through sweat running down his brow. He had been digging at the same yams all morning. Ever since he started buying fertilizer instead of using mulch like his father, and the rest of the people before his time, these yams has been growing stout and thick. They grew many times their size ever since he started buying the expensive salt that came from America and England, the same salt that gave him a yam one year that took six people to carry. Mulch doesn’t mean to him what it meant to his daddy. With the fertilizer he doesn’t have to change to another area every seven years as with mulch. He wipes the back of his hands across sweat running down from under the cocoa leaf he had placed under his cap to keep his blood pressure low. He needs a clear look at Arta.

He rises up off his knees and shakes his head, wonders at the yam in the hole, how it was boring through all that dirt and still going, yet all this boy beside him will ever do is go chasing after butterflies. When he was a boy his daddy had to brush him away. His daddy couldn’t do anything he didn’t have his hands in. That’s
why at fifteen, after he broke the iron fork in two while digging yam hills, his daddy gave him his own patch of land to plant his own food. He had become a man. Mass Kauzpa looks at the way the boy stands, how the boy has his hands folded as if joined in church and wonders how in Jesus’ name he grew in his house yet turned out so lazy. Arta tries to hide the hand hard breathing with his hands over his chest and throat as if he is having a case of asthma. Mass Joe pays it little to no attention.

“Where you go, boy?”

“Right here so, Mass Kauzpa.”

“Now look at this boy form the ass of himself.”

“I didn’t go nowhere, Mass Kauzpa, I swear to God. I was right here down at the water hole.”

“Make me see now. You right here beside me where I tell you to be, but you breathing like a mule carrying two much weight.”

“I didn’t do it by myself, Mass Kauzpa.”

“Didn’t do what, boy?”

“Clouds push me; they did it to me, I swear. I stand beside you like now, but clouds come and put out my sun. I hop over to get back in it; but, just like that, it keep disappearing. I run after it to get warm, but it take off again. That’s how I end up at Blue Hole. Maybe because I was in the sun so long and it drunk me, but when I hear you call I was coming—then a lizard I was talking to lick away flies from me, even my yellow spots. See! They gone.”

“See! See what? That you wasn’t here like you should to see how big this here yam is, then come looking all confuse. About time you get rid a that damn plague. You mumma bathe you down with cow blood long, long time.”

“I swear, Mass Kauzpa. As I stand here. See?”

“Sweet Jesus, look at this boy swear! I tell you, boy, if you wasn’t all skin-and-bone, I’d beat your ass till your lying heart jump out your chest and tell on you to save itself. But since you not my child, I sending you home to your aunty ’cause you take me for fool. A damn fool, at that. I see all right. You damn right am going to see to it you never set your hopping ass on my farmland any more. Clouds, talking lizard and God sun. Boy, how you do it? How come them
lies never choke you? Best you go home. Let her deal with you. Go home!

“Want me to bring home some food so she can cook and have something for you to eat when you come home, Mass Kauzpa?”

“Now, look at this liar fast becoming a thief. You know the three walk together, don’t you? Where you see Lazy, look close for Liar, ’cause both walk hand in hand; and where you find those two you bound to find Thief. And the day you bring that thief in my house is the day you become a shadow. Mark my word!”

“I was only trying to make sure you have something to eat.”

“Don’t you try to sweet-mouth me, boy. I’ve been everywhere you going. Just look at you! No taller than a tree cut off at the stump. Trying to make sure uh? How?”

“Help, Mass Kauzpa.”

“Help! What kind of help is you when you not around?”

“Clouds cause me to do it, Mass Kauzpa. I was right here beside you and . . .”

“Go home! Take your lying, crooked, lazy ass home before I. . .” Arta hangs his head low and walks off.

“No, no no! Hold it right there, Mista. Where you think you going? Can’t you see me talking to you boy? I said where you going?”

“Doing what you say, Mass Kauzpa.”

“You’d want that, wouldn’t you?”

“No, sir.”

“Where you going then?”

“Don’t know, sir.”

“I can see you trying to run up my blood pressure already. So I tell you what, get the donkey and mule water. And don’t stay all day long talking to bugs and rats; get back here as soon as you finish, ’cause I got more work for you.”

Arta walks off in a hurry to get the bucket, and Mass Kauzpa calls after him.

“Hear that, boy? Leave them birds alone.”

“Yes, Mass Kauzpa.”

■
Arta steps across one of the many trenches leading water off the land down towards the water hole. When the rain drops more water than the land can suck up, these trenches flood like rivers, protecting yams, bananas, corns, peas, and the rest of the crops. The mule and donkey are standing out in the open with *kasha-macka* circling them; they are feeding on short stubs of grass and looking at him head their way. Nothing, except flies, hurt more than walking out there in the wild and stepping on *kasha-macka*, especially when the boy approaches barefooted. Even when he puts on Miss Kauzpa’s worn-and-left goulashes, they still prick like needles. Difference is, they don’t get to go that deep in the flesh. These mackas are just as sharp, and will prick just as deep as those on the crown of Jesus’ head. Arta jumps another trench and the water gathering at the bottom of it shimmers with little white and brown mosquito babies.

In places where the land is flat, baby mosquitoes gather in bundles, jigging like worms in the water along these trenches. And when you walk up, they sink to the bottom. One of Mass Jaule’s sons stands under the mango trees against the treeline to his left and waves, the one Grandpapa called Slim; he and his shadow brother are up there throwing stones at the East Indian mango tree on Mass Kauzpa’s side of the property. Their father is weeding grass from around his corn, peas and cocoa. He doesn’t plant much yam like his brother, Kauzpa; yam takes too long to grow. Too much work for him, and he doesn’t have the time, either. You have to chop down all the macka, which are really thorns, wild thorns that may rip your flesh if you’re not careful walking in their midst. Next thing is, setting the place afire to get rid of the bugs and wild weeds hiding out in there, this way you break in the land, which is really a wilderness, by turning the topsoil so the untouchables on the bottom feel some sun. Then, finally, start digging yam hills. Arta walks by Mass Jaule, says morning. Mass Jaule looks up at the voice, is right on the verge of getting his head back to his business.

“Wooo, boy! Look at you! Pretty as a singing bird! Them yellow spots! Where they go? Your mother carry you and wash them off in Milk River?”

“Can’t say nothing, Mass Jaule.”
“Can’t say nothing? What you talking ’bout? Should be jolly well glad you finally look like a natural born man, glad you get all that yellow fascie off you body, and not walking around here full of leprosy.”

“Leper? No, Mass Jaule.”

“What then? I hear you and Kauzpa mumbling over there, but he didn’t beat you this morning like he use to. What he promise?”

“Nothing.”

“Son, hold up you head! Now, look who you talking to. I said, what Kauzpa say to you? And don’t you tell me nothing, ’cause I hear him hollering after you from way down yonder like he always do.”

“Well.”

“Don’t dig too far in this one, either; just get it out.”

“When I tell him a lizard lick away the yellow, he call it a lie, say about time they gone ’cause Momma bathe me in cow blood long, long time.”

“Which lizard you mean?”

“Over there.” He points in th direction of Blue Hole. “It say it was waiting for me all this time ’cause my yellow spot is a sign of his people. Sun people.”

“Come to think of it, you could be right about something. I just think you might have something there, son, ’cause if I remember right, all Mass Laab ever tell us boys was lizard story. He could tell a lizard story that have you back raise like a saw. Just like him to do something like that, have everybody thinking all this time how he cross the river and never come back to say a word about how they been treating him over yonder. I’ll be damn! Boy, you know what that mean?”

“No, Mass Jaule.”

“Don’t you fret, then. When you see him again, tell him visit his grandson sometime. I know I shouldn’t give a grown-man message to a baby boy, but you just tell him what I say; he’ll know. Got a good mind go with you. No. Go ahead, go right on ahead, ’cause if he was here for me, he’d find me by now. Just you tell him what I say.”

“Mass Kauzpa say I shouldn’t talk nothing to nothing down
there, just water the mule and donkey then come right back.”

“Kauzpa have no spirit. He don’t have a drop of God in his blood. I go to church every Sunday. Only spirit Kauzpa know is the religion of planting food, every day a the week, rain or shine! So you hear me now—don’t you pass back here and didn’t do what I tell you.”

“But . . .”

“Don’t but me, son.”

“Mass Kauzpa going to question me, though, Uncle Jaule. How come I stay so long?”

“Tell him you talking to me ’bout them yellow fascie you got rid of.”

“He don’t care, though.”

“He don’t care when you say so. You go back and tell him Jaule talk ’bout them. Hear me?”

“Yes, Uncle Jaule.”

“Kauzpa have no God in him, everybody know that; but he still family.”

Arta nods his head, then a familiar feeling crisscrossing his legs gets his attention; those sticky, crawly pests are back. Now his body wants the sun, to move away from here, find some heat, quick. Flies crawling through and through lifeless brown leaves fallen from mango trees, yam vines, and all the other trees scattered on the earth, rise up in a buzz. They rise up from the spot where Mass Jaule has already weeded green grass, from the places he is about to, and even on the path leading to the animals. They rise up like scorpions’ tails on the verge of striking, pitch on his skin, but his flesh doesn’t welcome them anymore. His body has become the forbidden zone; they need to knock on other doors because pus holes leading into his flesh are closed. Mass Jaule watches the incident and can hardly believe things would come to this. He can remember times when the boy was a fly factory. He was a pitiful sight to behold then, and if you didn’t know better you’d scorn him, run him from the dinner table out into the world to fend for himself. Mass Jaule looks up the hill where his boys are, gestures that Arta should go up there and say howdy to his cousins who are waving at him.
“Arta?”
“Yes, Mass Jaule.”
“One last thing before you go. Tell Kauzpa send me piece of meat if he have enough pork to spare, ’cause the food too hard to swallow without something to rub it against when you chew.”

Mass Kauzpa digs, and digs, then digs some more. The farther he digs the bigger the yam gets. He scratches dirt from around the yam’s head. Cuts the vine from the head after it had done all the work vines are supposed to, waited for Mass Kauzpa to plant them as after-harvest-corpse, dead bodies under the earth that rot away to start afresh as a newborn stretching for two suns. The yam sends its body down toward the sun in the belly of mother earth, while its vine goes up towards the sun in the heavens.

Sometimes three vines come from one head, other times two. Mass Kauzpa prefers one vine to each head. This way the vine can climb, get all the nourishment to circle and twine, circle and twine around and up the tall yam stick after the head has gone through a couple weeks of lying under the soil to die.

Vines, like thick white fog along a river channel showing water runs there to distant observers, are the first things to appear after the heads are placed under the soil. They are the life signs to indicate before all is said and done that worms didn’t kill the yam crop. These vines then climb from the peak of the yam hills like green snakes from under a rock. At the head of the yam hills are yam sticks. Some vines find the sticks and slither up, winding around till the sticks are nothing but leaves standing in space. Usually you can tell when a yam is big by looking at the amount of bush on the yam stick. If you have a whole lot of bush to it, if the vine itself is thick—with a lot of macka prongs to it (not macka like kasha-macka, but soft macka) then that yam is a special breed.

Mass Kauzpa can see already that this yam is a giant on land. The fertilizer had her middle section swelling. If this yam bears like this and he hasn’t put that much fertilizer to it like he did to her brother, the yam he fed to Hafu as a lesson, what would happen next year to her body when he put a good amount of fertilizer to
her head? Next year will be a good time to dig some yam; he could see it now.

He rises up off his knees from down in the hole and climbs out to the piled earth on the opposite side, looks over the hill to see if the boy is sitting around someplace on his ass. All the boy ever does is eat up the sugar cane and mango, then sit on his ass as if he’s suffering from body-come-down. Young boy like that! Mass Kauzpa looks across through row of green leaves turning yellow upon yam sticks. He can’t figure out why the boy is taking so long to water a donkey and a mule. He looks at the dirt piling up around him, looks down into the hole at the yam and knows he has a long way to go.

The hole is already deeper than he is tall. Lucky this side of the land is not that tough, or else he would have had to chop off the head and plant it in a more sandy soil. He gets back down into the hole and starts heaving the dirt over his head again. He is getting into the earth. Clay sticks to the fork’s teeth like flesh does to bone. He doesn’t have much longer to go now. The yam is midway, and the way things look, this one seems like it has about six toes. Mass Kauzpa continues to dig deeper into the clay; soon he will reach gray spots in the soil where the water smells and everything is soggy.

Arta walks up to his cousins. “Uncle say you want me?”
“Gosh!” His cousins can’t believe their eyes.
“Mass Kauzpa waiting, so talk quick.” He told them.
Arta interrupts their gaze, and Hafu Mouth’s lips drop, eyes not believing it’s Arta’s flesh; his brother, Slim, can’t either.
“Where all you sore, Arta?”
“Yeah, what you do, go a obeah man house?”
“You call me for that?”
“Eh, eh! Look here!”
They cleared their throats to show Arta it was them, that they knew him when he was dirty looking. They knew of his past; they were his cousins. A couple hours ago he’d have done anything to be in their company.
“What? You better than we now?”
“Nobody no better than nobody.”
“Why you so stubborn when we call you, then?”
“Yeah, as if you better than we.”
“Was talking to uncle.”
“We talking before that, when you jump over the first gutter over there.”
“Me never see nobody.”
“Oh yeah
“Yeah!”
“We’ll try and forget it this time. But don’t try it again.”
Arta climbs the tree on Mass Kauzpa’s side of the property and gives them what they want. Hafu Mouth gets the most as usual. He ate till his belly filled to a bang, but that’s how he is, a natural eater, the reason for his name, Hafu Mouth.

Arta unties the mule and leads it to the water hole. “My little friend, how nice to have you back, “Lizard says to him. Arta grabs a handful of grass blades beside the hole, uses them to wipe clean the white eight-gallon bucket, dips it in the water, and lifts. He had the mule tied to a kasha-macka tree a little way from the hole, not close enough for it to dip its mouth in the blue water. Mules have a tendency to stand over water like they’re drinking, but they’re really looking at themselves. Trying to pull them away after they have their mind fixed is like forcing an ass to drink from a running river, so Arta brings the bucket, and sets it at the tree the mule is tied to. The mule dips its head in the bucket then yanks it back out, shakes his head with his ears flat on his neck in the rhythm of a timbrel. This prompts Arta to go into his pocket for the salt wrapped in plastic and drop some in the water. The lizard calls out to him gain, while the mule drinks water with salt from a white bucket.
“How are you, my friend?”
“Mass Kauzpa say I shouldn’t talk to you. But I still think you a nice person.” Arta says with his head turned to the side.
“He said that, ah?”
“Yeah. And Uncle Jaule say you should visit him sometime, ’cause ever since you died and left, you never come back and say a word.”
“Tell your uncle I’m not who he thinks, but not to worry for his great, great grandfather is in good hands.”

“You know him?” Arta looks at the lizard with wonder and warmth.

“Yes, my son. Me and him go way, way back. We are the first of the Serpentine lineage; we were called the Croakers of Sidewinding Woods from the village of Caterpillar Crawl. See, I was not always a lizard; me, your uncle and the rest of our people were part snake with yellow spots like you had. That’s how I know to stop here; your birth mark is the reminder of the destruction that overcame us.”

Arta eases down into a squat in the yellow patch of dandelions where the donkey is munching, then glances over to see if the mule is all right, and is back to listening with both hands folded across his knees.

“All of us in Caterpillar Crawl had snake eyes; eyes that never close, eyes set apart on both side of our head, which became our greatest problem. They had no forward vision. A groove in the front of our head caused us bad sight. And when they came like cows and surrounded our village with hidden intentions, their standstill way of attack caught us off guard. We were used to moving targets; that’s what we had the snake eyes for. So they came back in the middle of the night, and I could not see, Laab could not see. Our women, old men, and children, everything destroyed. Even our snake eyes were destroyed by bucking bulls with bad intentions, my son. Bad intentions.”

“That’s why you a lizard now?”

“Yes, my son. Those bulls slit my tongue and destroyed my language; they wrecked our village, set our entire life on fire. And that’s why I’m here, my boy, that’s why I’m here. Because they’re not done; those bulls are a terror, so you can’t hide from them like Laab tried to do when they turned him, his wife, the two girls, and the hut they slept in into a ball of blue flame. With them you can’t run; you have to get front and side vision like me, become a lizard so you can see right, then escape from those bulls.”

“You mean bull cow like those over there chewing cud?” Arta points at a group of cows inside a wire fence standing still, fanning
flies from their bodies with long bushy tails.

“Yes, cows like them. You see, the story goes like this: Croaking lizards sitting out on limbs over rocks of ages in bodies of troubled water wait. They need sunrise on their cold blood to give warmth to pale bodies trembling to death. They want back life of worth they had as chameleons, become one with colors of dried tree barks on which they sit looking at reflections of themselves. But Seekers destroyed their changing powers. With blindfolds, yarns of silk from an unknown spider’s web, Seekers took their changing powers. Croakers were blindfolded like daylight by solar eclipse. Sun and moon were removed from their life with pikes, torches and sabers. It didn’t matter how hard they ran, Seekers were on their heels, weeding them from the earth, just chopping them down like undeserving bad bush sucking minerals from fertile soil. Croaking lizards is now a name to represent us laden in land of dust under the first horizon covered with salt, silt, and sand.

“We as a people, Croakers, as we were famously called before we became homeless wanderers without a name, could startle any midnight with voices. We lost everything, though, on the darkest night of the world when human necks were in bondage, ankles shackled; arms, legs and desires yoked; waists tethered to iron chains anchored to edges of triangular frames sinking out there along passages of harrow because of uneven weight in the world. Four-sided frames with internal structures of triangular forms like diamond back crabs—strongest structure known to natural man, triangle, that is—held all steadfast against trade winds. But we sang till night dropped his covering of veiled abstraction and revealed her radiating soul turning from diamond in the rough to crystals with silver linings so the world could see itself. Then they came.

“From nothing they came upon us suddenly as bearers of gifts, said they could hear us on the other side of the world. We had opened up, stretched our voices so far and wide that they felt the love and saw the light in our hearts on waves of our voices’ frequency. They called us Bearers of Light at first glance, True Daughters of Dawn that slaughtered Night and made their passage to our doorsteps possible. Now they were here to reward us for songs that
touched the heart of dark ages and released yokes, shackles and iron chains on their people’s heart. But their eyes got diverted when they arrived and their minds followed close behind. They wanted our beams of light. Like javelins in midair seeking prey, they wanted our only shining object. It was not fair that we, ill-begotten creatures, had such powers, ones we didn’t know what to do with when the rest of humanity was voiceless. It was our job to give them our light because they were leaders by birth, those with the natural right to seek out civilizations and distribute vision of openness like it should have been in the first place.

“Seekers set our nights and days on fire. Flame in children’s hair burnt deep into scalps, while dismembered parents like chunks of log separated from branches, floated downriver like lumber toward sawmills to be either ground to dust or fashioned into skinless, bone-dry slabs. Bodies piled; they piled in rivers of blood gushing, tumbling over rocks and across vines uprooted in oceans of redness spreading across the bed of the Atlantic Ocean. We were caught up in the rapture of hell on earth like squashed mice stomped to a pulp under hooves of raging bulls, half flesh, half fire, bolting. Papal bulls, as The Book of Foretelling called them, roaming the corridors of Cnossus found a secret passage out of their labyrinth leading directly to us.

“THE BOOK OF FORETELLING, according to the Keeper of Words, said look at the horns for the sign, not on the token of purity they would use to veil their iniquity. We did not know they would come like the unknown mother of Greatest Cow, the holy of holy deity that was pregnant by Moon Beam. How were we to know that that Seekers snorting fire and brimstone under the guise of Apis, the immaculate, the only unconceived one, were evil doers that would roll our world? They tossed our dwelling place between horns from side to side, turned it upside down and brought quakes every which way we ran till our footsteps became uncertain. Seekers sought us out with thrusting pikes on their heads and strokes of sabers from powerful rear hooves while we ran, but not fast enough. Then they wrapped us up like offerings in grass once our home, after they tripped us off balance, set us afire to see how long we
took to burn. We needed flame to purify our wild souls, calm us down a little, they said. My hands were removed for drowning our family secret in Blue Hole. The rest of what was left of my one-time arms had me looking like a dog trying to find balance on three legs, while my truncated forearms and fingers hung from my neck by a choke-string. Messages on my heart from Seekers to all they would later meet jingled on my chest; they were towing bells to warn at a distance of what was to befall us as I ascended into Burnt Hills.”

“That’s a sad story, Lizard. And if you take me with you when I turn twelve, I can get them for you. Take me and I will kill them one by one for you. I can see them cows straight over there; I have straight eyesight; I see left over as the mule and I see right, too.”

“Such a sweet boy.”

“I know where you push the knife. I know where the hole at the back of the cow head is. I can show you on them over there. Come.”

Arta gets up with a burst of energy, and faces cows feeding on the other side of the brook formed by run-off water from the blue hole. But the lizard calms him down.

“It’s all right my son, I believe you can, I believe you, my son. But I have a better job for you.”

“Yeah?”

“That’s right.”

“Artaaaaaaaa!” Mass Kauzpa’s voice rings across the land like a gong, as if his voice is in the belly of a drum, the belly of an animal with no inside but a dark deep hole and husks.

“Yes, Mass Kauzpa?” Arta hollers back.

“How in God’s name you take so much time watering a mule and a donkey, boy!”

“The mule still drinking, Mass Kauzpa.”

“How much time I tell you never bring my one mule near that hole, boy?”

Mass Kauzpa is really tired of calling at the top of his voice for the boy; his clothes are caked with mud from the head down, digging all morning at this yam, and never once will the boy show some interest in the hard work he is doing. Right now it doesn’t matter;
he only wants that boy to come and throw him a rope, because he has been digging without taking notice and is too far down to climb back up without help. If his wife could just give him a boy of his own he would drop this one flat. He knows she can give him a boy if she wants to. All she has to do is put her mind to it. Think boy, so he can get rid of this good-for-nothing, lizard-talking, cloud-hiding boy. He calls again:

“Drop whatever you doing and come throw me a rope right this minute. Hear me, boy?”

Arta unhitches the slipknot around the tree’s trunk to lead the mule back along the dirt path out into the open land near kashamacka trees. Ptash tells him if he wants to do some good, he should spread the works hidden in THE BOOK OF FORETELLING Mass Laab had written on his heart when the fire came to the village of Caterpillar Crawl. Mass Laab was the holder of words, but could not cross over into different lives any longer to instruct his descendants on what to do with the sacred words he had written. He had used up all his chances. That’s why Ptash is here. His job is to tell Arta to set the record straight, be a living testimony to the words telling the descendants of Mass Laab about the bull from Papal’s Pen. What they have done and what they will do to preserve themselves.

“Don’t stand there looking down on me, boy; throw the rope.”

Arta has the rope tied to the guava tree next to the head trench. Mass Kauzpa climbs up the rope like an old spider mounting the main strand of its web. Midway up, all you see are eyes in the belly of the earth on a rope climbing toward the light of day. He comes from beneath the earth sweating, water running down on the black, brown, ashes white mud stuck to his khaki clothes. He points down into the four corner hole, indicating that Arta should go own and dig away the dirt from the last of the yam toes so they could pull it up in one piece. But Arta dresses back from the mouth; the smell from Mass Kauzpa’s clothes forces him back. A smell like unhatched eggs that didn’t turn into chickens, eggs that hens brood on for weeks and when you open them a black liquid with traces of yellow flows from
them like slime on snails crawling up a banana tree.

“Boy, you better get that narrow ass down there and finish up
the yam before I put my hand on you.”

“What if the hole…?”

Arta climbs over the other side of the dirt taken from the hole
in fear. Now the earth is the dividing line between father and son.
Fear occupies the space between the ground where Arta stands and
the earth dividing the two. After all the training he gave the boy, he
can’t see how . . . First it was the cloud, now the hole.

“What about the hole?”

“Suppose it swallow me up, Mass Kauzpa?”

Mass Kauzpa folds his lips, even bites them. “What swallow
you, boy?”

“Don’t know, Mass Kauzpa.”

“Think I could stand here and watch the hole swallow you?”

“No, Mass Kauzpa.”

“Well then. If you want to eat you better get down there and
work for your food.”

Arta descends the rope into the earth, looking up at the green in
everything around as if it’s his last. The farther he climbs, the cooler
he gets. He’s walking under those gray clouds again. The smell of
the earth, of worms, of the roots of vines surrounds him, welcomes
him back, then he hits bottom. Mass Kauzpa watches as the tension
in the tight rope finally slackens.

“Arta?”

“Yes, Mass Kauzpa.”

“Use that digging stick and pry it on the rock under the last
finger that curve left. Take you time and loose up the dirt from the
yam. Watch it now, ’cause I don’t want that yam bruise.”

Maneuvering the stick in such a tight spot feels awkward, like
setting a basket out in the front yard to catch water from falling
rain while the sun is red-hot. Arta puts the stick to one side and
uses his fingers to loosen moist earth from the yam, earth that feels
gummy like white sap from a rubber tree. He digs with his fingers,
removes the earth till the rock shows itself. And he’s at the beach
again where he and those gathered on the sand have fear, so they
stay close to shore, afraid to swim where their feet touch no bottom. But as always one swimmer steps forward out into the blue with breast strokes like a frog, as he and the rest dogpaddle just above the rocks, while hiding under the pier, afraid to swim where their feet touch no bottom.

Arta touches the stable rock under the palm of his hand as he would a rock at the beach just under his treading feet. This rock has molding, patterns of people running, while cows follow behind with pointed horns. His finger reads the shapes in the bottom of the hole. There is a latch to it. It’s not a rock. Arta scratches away the rest of dirt from the surface of the rock-like object. It’s too dark to see down there. Arta taps the digging stick on it to see if anything might break, but the surface is tough, and the middle is hollow. Mass Kauzpa hears the sound and wonders.

"Don’t tell me you bruise the yam, boy?"
"No, sir, I think we find gold."
"Gold?"
"Yes, sir. Gold!"

"What you waiting for then! Tie my gold to the rope so I can inspect if it all there.” Arta digs the rest of the little box out of the earth, ties it to the rope, and Mass Kauzpa pulls. The latch on the box is all rusted and full of holes, but the wood is in perfect shape. Mass Kauzpa knows the grain of the wood, he doesn’t even have to look closely. This wood is mahogany to the bone. Seems to him it been down there even since God made the devil. He opens the lid, and inside is a book. Arta is down in the hole, asking “How much, Mass Kauzpa? How much gold?” Mass Kauzpa opens the first page of the book and all he sees are words:

**THE BOOK OF FORETELLING:**

This the great book of symbols for my people during the time of upheaval and scattering in the village of Caterpillar Crawl. As the keeper of words, I fled to the holy hills among sacred bones and was lifted up in another time to spread my soul for the young and the old to harvest
its crops. Beware of roaming bulls from papal pens that shall enter your land in the days of harmony. They will bring gifts to make your eyes red and hearts wanting. BUT know this, my children, they cannot hide if you know the truth about their ways. Look at the horns of all who visit you, for seekers have no other way unto you but through you. This is your sign, my children; look for it and protect yourselves from the hands of those who wish to harm you.

Mass Kauzpa turns the page to see if the book has something worthwhile instead of words, maybe pictures like these on the cover of people running toward red water, and bulls running behind, houses on fire, women on fire, babies burning, all heading from the bulls for the river where the rest of the village wades in blood reaching up to their necks, blood in the mouths of some, all yearning to reach the far side among the hills. Words plastered the other page, too.

. . . short nose, the pit viper, has neither ear nor ear drum, only the inner ear remained after seekers came. Short nose has always tried to use his secret weapon to detect predators at our doorsteps by following the heat in their body. But these enemies in the cloak of friends had no heart nor heat; they were angels, protector of the weak among us, so that our ways may be right for all. Never hearken to strangers with a limp, for they are hungry dogs in search of bones in your water. Now you are trapped, for the hungry dog with a bone in his mouth sees his shadow on your refracting body.

Arta wonders why everything is so quiet all of a sudden, and Mass Kauzpa turns another page. Maybe he’ll find more pictures. But all he finds are more words:

Ridge nose rather tried, with his harmless tongue of two forks, to pick up invisible particles of the colorless intruders out of the air and put them in the cavities of the roof of his mouth. To check what the enemy was made of he pours light on them to moisten their temperature and soil structure, but like short nose, ridge nose died with
a pike in his forked tongue. Rat snake wiggled forward in s-curves, using the serpentine twist on the ground to prevent his body from sliding backwards. He was upon the enemy like leaves on tree.

Again and again the enemy defeated us. Our people saw them as gods, angels of fire because they turned our night into day with flames from our houses of straw. But know this, my children, if sister black-neck cobra was there, they could not have defeated us. And this is a warning to you to hold tight to your cobra for she has the aim. To destroy them when they come for you saying they are there to increase your crop production from nutrient additions, that you should do away with manure and other bedding materials from the stables, turn your heads unto yourselves for your cobra will give them permanent blindness through pinholes on her fangs. Never do away with her, protect her from king cobras for they are swallowers. That’s who killed us. King cobras are snakes that eat each other, so beware of them as those without.

And unite, I say. Form a zygote that shall not divide its eggs surrounded by coating under the third horizon. I know that your layer contains material that shall influence your parental humus, but without capacitation for their sperm no improved growth will take place, and the water, nitrogen, carbon dioxide, methane and ammonia in your midst will never elongate to stimulate acrosome reactions.

Mass Kauzpa throws down the book on the dirt he has dug from around the yam, and drops the rope for Arta to come up. He cannot help but wonder who in his right mind, as if he didn’t have work to do like planting food, or taking care of animals, would waste time scrabbling all these damn words. Painting pictures would have been much better. Words need sound before they can talk, pictures don’t.
THE STANDING BUM

He walks down to the wharf and stares at the blue. Water holds his stare. He bends over the rail for a better look, thinks about dipping a foot, but pulls back. Looks closer. Maybe one fish. A tiny one. But nothing steps forward! His reflection is missing, too. Neither in water, or on land. If the sun were up, shining, as it rightfully should, his shadow would exist. Yet what are shadows but images, hoping to see daylight, he thought.

Beautiful ripples shimmering . . . crystals caressing water. An urge nudges his side; he wants to be a ripple, feel the wetness of water coming, surrounding. But an old man’s presence casts a shadow on his urge. Their eyes meet for a second. Looking for signs of recognition, he keeps looking even after.

Old man stops and turns attention likewise to something else. Both faces stretch across the Detroit River to rest on Windsor. Casino lights, now lifeless and dull, radiate at night as if it were the glowing of souls united in the promised lands.

“The water is so blue. If it wasn’t for that oily rainbow glow, Detroit river would be a sight to remember,” the younger of the two said, trying to start something.

First hesitation, then sputter: “Back in my days you could see the bottom of the river; everything had a bottom then.” Both old and young black men looking their separate ways, talking to open space.

“The fish . . . especially with the water so blue. How could it be?”

“Back in my days you could see them. Beautiful little things! They don’t come around no more. That’s when blue was part of the water, not just shadow from the sky.”

“But the water is so blue, I think it’s the water. Just look how the sun comes up on the edge of the river. All we need is fish and life would be . . . ”

The old man’s eyes light up and turn toward the youth. “In my days, that’s when the blue was. Something your kind wouldn’t understand.” And then he stops.

“Tell me, then,” the younger begged with pleading eyes.
“Grandma sat me on her lap and told me about blues: Mississippi, Georgia, South Carolina down South. Try me!”

Must have been eagerness in his eyes, but the older man starts walking.


He stands up straight, looks around to see, and thank God no one saw. He really wants to sit but thinks twice. If he sits, he’ll start feeling. Inadequate. Short. Unsure of self after that old man left him standing. Who’d he tell the old man’s story to anyway? After all, they were broad strangers. Didn’t even know his name.

Ever since his knees were ankle high, grown-ups seemed to be hiding something from him. Had secrets he saw but couldn’t touch, something he would’ve done anything to put hands on. Now he’s a grown-up like them, but not grown enough.

A bum walks over, sits on the opposite end of the bench where he is resting his foot, and laughs. Bums are okay, real people. This one has a shopping cart filled with pieces of clothes, dirty plastic bags, some faded beads, and food that smells like throwaways from back alley waste bins. He looks across at the bum, wonders why his own mother thinks he’s one. All because he doesn’t sit around the dinner table like a gentleman and eat his food with the rest of family.

“Got some spare change, brother?” the bum asks.

“What gave you that impression?”


“Oh, yeah,” he thinks aloud, and scans the bum over. “Well, I ain’t got no money.” And moves his foot from off the park bench. Scoots back a little to get a better view of the begging man and points: “Him, just walked off, looks the type,” aiming at the old man standing on the slope above their position. “Why didn’t you ask him?”
Shook his head: “Ain’t the type.”
“Ooooooooh! Sucker written all over me, huh?”
“No, no, no, my brother. I’d never disrespect like that,” bum says. Pulls the blue tattered shirt, one that had a lot of wear and tear, out his trolley. Puts it on, over the three weather-beaten ones already on his back.
“What’re you doing then?”
“Okay, get this. To me they three type a folks in the world. Giver, receiver and taker. You a giver; me a receiver, and old man over there, a taker. Get ma drift?”
Young man shrugs his shoulders: “So?”
“What I’m saying . . . Ain’t nothing to be scare of either, but as a giver you and me can change place any day.”
“What the hell is this you’re . . .” the younger man started out strong, but faded off instead.
“Calm down, brother.” The bum sits, crosses his legs and exposes the socks wadded on his feet so the broken-backed sneakers could fit. Straightens his upper body. “You’re getting way too excited for such a new relationship, my brother. As I was saying, I was a giver when I work for Ford. Get hurt on the job, can’t produce no more, and the man say: ‘See ya!” Simple. But takers will always be takers. Take it from me, takers can’t give. They’ll try; but ain’t in them. That’s how I’m proud to be a bum. We all gonna end up someplace anyway. Once a man, twice a bum! That’s the problem with takes; they don’t think like that. Ain’t got no soul. Empty. Holes is all they got. So, they take to feel. To fill. Full is what they seek. But emptiness is a healthy eater. Black holes drinking light. Now they come to you and me.”
“How did I get in your story?”
“Ain’t you ever heard of Jack the Ripper, Jeffrey Dahlmer, Ted Bundy?”
“So what? Bunch of white folks greedy for flesh! Who aint guilty?”
“You can so-what all you want, my man. So-what all you want.”
“Please, please. Get the hell outta here, BUM!!”
“Oh! Now I’m bum. Well, thank you; thank you for honoring my
name. ’Cause all these flesh eaters belong to a secret society sending out secret signals: TV, computer, especially cell phones. Want you and me to believe what they taking is real. Most times, not real. Lots swallow the bait. Except me! That’s why I’m a bum.

“Really? You think?”

“Oh! Now you comedian? You can keep on thinking this is a joke, brother. They want you like that. What you think this is? I know what they know. Why else you think I’m like this? Trying to take back a little of what they robbed to get through rough days, yet we the thief on evening news. Ain’t that some shit! All that damn piling up just so one man can stand tall in the end.”

“Don’t you have nothing better to do, brother? Trying to watch the water.”

“That’s better!”

“Anything for peace, man!”

“Why the evil eye, though? Thought the younger generation would be more willing. Begging for dime is honorable work, brother. Just remember that. They give evil eye like you after hoarding everything. Make me feel like I’m the only thief around here. Yet they the ones with holes in their chest for destroying babies, neighborhoods, countries for God sake, the whole fucking civilization, to fit in one man’s hole. Ain’t that some shit!”

He unbuttons one of his four shirts and spreads wide. “See any holes?”

Young man gets up. “Let me get the fuck outta here before you turn me crazy. And for the record, I ain’t no bum. Just so you and everybody know that. I ain’t nobody’s fucking bum!” And drops a quarter on the bench.

“Deny yourself, my brother.” The bum smiles and pockets the coin. Speaking louder the farther away the young man gets. “Tell me who you ain’t, like I don’t know who we be: Bums walking the land. Ain’t gonna stop me from loving you. Just you come back and visit sometime. Love you all the same. Okay, my brother? Love you too!”

The bum runs up, frightens him when he thought he had escaped Scot free. Ran all the way past him to stand in front of his path after
he had crossed the street, standing under the Brown Bomber’s fist. Then things begin to get blurry, mixed up.

“Get the hell out my way,” he pushes his way through the mix up. “Don’t ever say that to me! I ain’t nobody’s brother, uncle, son. Nobody!” This outburst causes the bum’s eyes to widen. He reaches to touch the young man’s shoulder, calm him down, but the young man lashes out: “Nobody! Nobody! Nobody!”

Suddenly the bum realizes what’s going on and smiles, “Speak it like you should, my brother, like you belong. We ain’t nobody! Nobody!” And heads back. Young man walks forward in the direction of the bus stop and needs to go home, sneak back through the window, head straight for the attic, and hold onto familiar things, for all around him is getting blurry.

He checks his change, and its short by twenty-five cents if he includes the red penny warming his pocket.

A lady standing in the crowd at the stop sees his troubles. Comes over. He says he is fine. She asks him again, then gives him the quarter. When the bus arrives, he returns the favor, tells her to please go ahead of him. She smiles, and he likes that. Now they are even.

He walks down the aisle to the only empty seat, the one beside the lady who gave him the quarter, stands over it with both hands clinging to the rail for support.

“Would you like to sit?”

“Thanks, but I’m not tired yet.”

“The seat won’t bite, you know. Have a seat beside me.”

He should take the seat. Better than explaining. At least eyes that have him as the center of attention might go. “No,” he thought. “Can’t sit down this time.” He’s obligated for the quarter, but it’s more tiring, will shrink him and do greater harm to please. He remembers the bum: “takers can’t help but to take,” even if it seems like giving. People will put up with you after first acquaintance. Give a little. Set the trap and take. Eat up all your life. Which reminds him that harms entry into church is usually through the doorway of fear or hate. Yet, he sees no difference in the stifling unsolicited love yearning that will manifest years after initial embrace. Everywhere
he looks, he sees people doing him, doing each other good all because of hovering blue sky, or dark underworld abyss.

Like the other day he walks into a co-op down on Cass. He and another customer are at the counter. Lady tallying up the price for this customer, who turns to him and says: “Excuse…one of those bags to put my things in.” He moves out of the way. Naturally for the guy to get the bag himself. Guy takes bag and doesn’t say another word. Not even body language. At this moment, he realizes. But too late.

Attendant rings up his needs. Then turns her full attention to him. Body wrapped from head to toe in Muslim garb and tells him he is short by a quarter. He searches his pocket and could only come up with a pocket warming penny. Guy that earlier stretched for the bag says to the storekeeper: “How much?” Then pays.

He turns with a smile, very grateful that a stranger would do something like that. He even went as far as feeling like bending lower. Show how much he is touched. Then, says thanks, “and to think I didn’t try to pass you the bag quick enough when you were…” He doesn’t get to finish. Show how short he measures up to others’ humanity. Stranger cuts him off, says “No problem. Paying room and board in heaven.” And he feels cheated. Really cheated.

This incident pushes him to go. Stand at the back of the bus and get off at the next stop. But the lady is still looking back at him. Urge to wave as her window passes by is very strong. He puts his right hand up. Tinted windows that keep the sun out separate them. One by one, he extends his fingers, and lets his right hand swing from side to side, standing in the sulfur puffs coming from the rear of the moving bus heading to other stops.

Seven blocks before he reaches the attic, he stops by a pole to take a leak. Doesn’t want to use the bathroom at home. His mother complains: he pisses on the toilet rim too much. She wants him to squat. Sit like a gentleman on a throne. “That’s how to use toilets,” she keeps saying.

He splashes on the sidewalk, then walks into the yellow middle dividing the street. A man driving by tells him to put away his stuff before police takes him away. He feels like dropping his pants. Free
body and mind of all burden on his back. But that’s against the law. He really needs to get back home to his attic where he can open the window to the backyard and fly.

Every step leading to the attic shrinks him. One inch then another, but. Feels great! Comfortable holding the familiar instead of giving like a bum? Because what if he falls? Is there some place lower to fall after you have fully fallen, he wonders and pulls the cover across his stomach, thinking how secure it feels sitting for nine whole months in all that water.

He’s feeling sad again. Should have sat, let go, accepted as a nice young man would. He will be old pretty soon. Man at last. Maybe then he can sneak out, go downtown early before the sun comes up and see that beautiful lady with an empty seat beside her before someone else grabs it.

Words are coming in. Surrounding his space of rest. Coming in from another world, outside to form a new experience.

“It’s time you wake and take your medicine,” the familiar female voice said. You can’t keep yourself locked away from the world like this. Why do you keep locking yourself away? Haven’t seen you for three whole days.”

“Went downtown, Mama! I went.”

“You did, my baby? Oh wow. Must have been beautiful.”

“Can I go back tomorrow and find this nice lady who gave me a quarter to get back home?”

“What about the one who gave you the red penny that time? The one that put the shrinking on you.”

He thinks. About how he has been shrinking ever since, and tells: “She’s different, Mama, reminds me of you. Nearly found somebody for you, too; but he was a taker, and I didn’t ask.”

“Good, baby. Very good. Now, take your medicine.”

“But I’m feeling too good.”

“That’s why you should, so you don’t have to go back downtown.”

He takes the medicine, and the changing begins: drums beating in the back of his head. Echoes falling to touch the root of his feelings, his strength at rest in his mother’s lap where he places his ears over her navel, and swims through her tunnel, back to the
point where everything got disconnected. The place where he leaves everything to the temple of her chest built upon the fire of remembrance murmuring: wooo-tum, whooo-tum. Drum guiding his heart with subtle vibrations and waters surrounding his entire sky.
GARFIELD LINTON
VOODOOMATION
THE BOOK OF FORETELLING

"Garfield Linton’s work is, like Limacol, the freshness of a Caribbean breeze. His characters are not, as in so much Caribbean literature, in search of identity. They know who they are; they were ‘not made to giddy-up.’ We come to know them through their shake-waist language that links their stories with the Monkey’s, that signifier of things past and so much more to come. Linton takes language behind the bush, up the road, and down by the sea to create a text that is both purely Jamaican and Caribbean. Writers like Patrick Chamoiseau may suggest we go there, but Linton is at the vanguard of young Caribbean writers who use the pen like a cutlass to create a different space in which characters can dance the language.”

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