

FIRST RAIN

DONNA WEIR-SOLEY

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P E E P A L T R E E

2006

GRANDPA KNOLLIS

I can only harvest the pieces of you
from other people's memories
but I gather them anyway,
spread them out like a jigsaw puzzle
excitement mounting when pieces fit,
frustration multiplying when they don't.

I feel I must save your picture, cracked though it may be,
for the ones who will come after
and never hear your name, visit the old yard
or sweep the mango blossoms from your tomb.

Drop by drop memory collects like fresh rain water
leading from the corrugated zinc gutters on the roof
into the ancient oil drums at the back
of the house you built with my grandmother.
Watered by my incessant questions, the stories come to life:
the jacket and waistcoat you always wore
to Calpan Anglican church before it was blown down in '51 storm;
and the legend of you matching might with those formidable winds
bracing your 6ft 3, 250 pound bulk against the front door
through the long sleepless night, while the storm
demanded the sacrifice you refused to surrender
(taking parts of the zinc roof instead).

Your children remember the remnants of your Cuban past:
the smooth black stone that kept your water cool
in the bottom of the earthenware jar;
the wooden cane with the carved handle
you wore just so, across your right shoulder;
the trunk full of lace tablecloths,
thick bedspreads and heavy silver utensils
you brought from Havana for your bride –

and the frequent lapses into the rapid Spanish
my mother remembers as your language of anger.

Returning home after twenty years in exile
to marry the widow of a man with your surname.
a cousin perhaps, but with skin as near white
as yours was jet black
eyes flecked green where yours were a steady brown,
a man from a family so proud of their white ancestry
they never acknowledged my grandmother
until the children came red, light brown, puss-eyed?
You, with your own stubborn pride,
how could you stand being in a family that denied
the very source of your dashing good looks,
the powder-smooth black skin – always the first thing mentioned
after “he was a good looking man!”?

Another mystery to unravel –
digging under other people's refuse to unearth historic jewels –
was the Hispanic link in the naming of your children –
Miguel, Antonio, Isola –
mnemonic threads connecting to a boyhood,
and young manhood spent in Cuba?
When you joined your sister in the Panama Canal
it was not from Port Antonio or Kingston Harbour
as I had assumed, but from somewhere in Cuba,
whose name I may never learn
where you may have had a sweetheart, friends, children?

But the land you came home to, you left as my legacy,
my necessary, fractured past,
the land that nurtures my dreams
my need to struggle towards wholeness,
(in the face of the seductions of erasure
masquerading as cynicism and sophistication)
recognizing all the while that the struggle is the real prize ...

This land that you bought for your children,
and their children and their children's children
as a symbol of roots and permanence
could not, did not, nurture you to wholeness.
Whether in glorified hyperbole or watered down and tainted
all the stories paint you permanently displaced,
spiritually homeless, an outsider, unbelonging.

But you had the vision to foresee
that your children would need the grounding you never found.
Wide spaces of sky, fertile earth,
skin and kin they could lay claim to
and enough land to build houses and dreams...

So, I gather the fragments that left you outside history,
ordinary deeds and misdeeds – legendary temper, marital conflicts,
the whippings you gained village-wide fame for
(yes, the beatings still remembered
that makes it hard for some to speak of you)
and place them by my mother's stories of your tenderness to me,
gestures only my spirit remembers.

I must save them all,
pound them together into a bittersweet ball,
brown and oily like the chocolate
my grandmother used to make from scratch,
keep in a cupboard for when company calls,
generations of great and greater grandchildren
the newly exiled, homeless, permanently displaced.
From the pieces of this puzzle
imperfect, like the legacy you left us,
perhaps they will invent their own past
weave themselves a story with a middle,
a beginning, perhaps an end or two.

STORY FOR MAMA DAISY

It was a star-apple season in Woman Pond;
the crickets were rehearsing a symphony in the coffee walk.
Night had just fallen, sudden like the closing of the wooden shutter
and my uncles were gathered on the verandah
smoking Craven A's and telling ghost stories.
Uncle Wammy was telling the one about the rolling calf
that turned into a ball of fire and chased him all the way home,
when my father interrupted with a new story
about the duppy light that knocked down
the two church sisters coming home late from revival service.
You laughed so hard your waters broke,
and I slid down quick and slippery like a fish,
into my grandmother's waiting arms.
Hers was the first face I saw,
the woman we both called Mummah.

2

Seems you were always taking time away from telling me stories
to go off working somewhere, day's work at the Goldings
night shifts at the textile factory,
with periodic intervals of looking hard for work,
when you, too tired from worry, shuttered your face like night,
turned your stories off, and I went running
for refuge in Mummah's camphor-soaked bosom.

3

But I could have lived on your stories:
'Dame Round Face and the Magic Polisher';
or my favorite about Mummah saving the life
of that hateful woman who had a dead baby
stuck inside her. She hated my grandmother
for saving her life, but not the baby's. Stupid woman.

I could have lived on your stories,
but you insisted that I eat meat like other children,
wear pretty dresses, drink milk, and attend church
and school recitals, where I secretly pilfered
and performed your stories.

4

When I took to sitting in corners with books
you frowned, but said nothing.
What were you going to do with a child who ate books,
you who struggled to keep meat on the table?
And when Mummah died leaving you motherless,
and fully responsible for the children
she left you bereft and burdened.

5

So at 12 I left you for someone else's home,
someone who could afford to feed a child on books.
Our goodbye was two lonely backs turned
walking in opposite directions,
neither knowing if the other cried.
Restavec it is called in Haiti.
In Jamaica it is less common,
goes by no special name except survival,
but the terms of servitude are much the same,
the silences part of the game.

6

So I learned to love what could touch me without hurting,
what could disappear from my hands without leaving,
what could make me hunger, but never left me gasping for air:
I learned to love the books I ate,
because they taught me how to reproduce

the stories you had fed me with breast milk.
Now I do not know where you and I end
and the stories begin, and it doesn't matter any more.
Each time I find a new story, or a new way to tell an old one
I become a little more your daughter.