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Speak of me

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Speak of Me

by

Lauren K. Alleyne

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in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

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Program of Study Committee:
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Iowa State University

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Graduate College
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This is to certify that the master’s thesis of

Lauren K. Alleyne

has met the thesis requirements of Iowa State University

Signatures have been redacted for privacy
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My Mother's Daughter

My middle name is Kizi-Ann. The name Kizi, my mother tells me, means ‘stay-put’ and Ann is a diminutive of her name, Annette, and she fondly says it means ‘daughter of Annette.’ This has become something of a family joke; firstly, because my mother is a notorious ‘hot-foot,’ and has moved fourteen times in her lifetime and because of all her children I am closest to her in temperament, so that Kizi-Ann (Stay put, daughter of Ann) seems something of an oxymoron. We share a history of leaving, of fighting Mom and me, the legacy of the Alexander blood completely the opposite of the Alleynes.’

It begins I guess, with my mother’s grandmother, Lucille Alexander, known as Lou to her cronies and Mama to the family. When Mama’s husband showed signs of being abusive, she packed up and left him — all half dozen of her children in tow. They had lived on the southern coast of Trinidad in the little fishing village of Mayaro, and when she left, she moved to Barataria, a suburb just outside of the capital of Port-of-Spain, doing laundry and other odd jobs to support herself and her children. Her mantra was the statement my mother still uses today: “Situations and circumstances alter cases.”

Mama was a brisk, whipcord thin old woman with thick long hair as white as icicles and a tongue just as sharp. She was dark skinned, and her narrow face housed strong features: dark, piercing eyes; thin lips that seemed elastic — they twisted easily into a broad smile or a pleat of displeasure according to her mood; and a straight, and as she liked to describe it, “aristocratic” nose. There was an unquestionable aura of power about her that was undiminished by her frail-looking frame. She was a woman who believed in taking action, rolling with the punches, severing useless ties — “deadweight,” she called it — and doing whatever was necessary to get by, and then get ahead.

She fostered in her children that same attitude, that willingness to work hard, under the most adverse of conditions, the most daunting of setbacks, in an effort to better themselves. She worked and put them through school, relentlessly seeking and seizing any opportunities that came their way, and one by one they fled the nest, landed in the States, England and Canada. My grandmother became pregnant out of wedlock, and soon after the baby was born, received an opportunity to go to England. Never one to let good prospects
slip by, Mama took my mother in, and sent her daughter off to pursue her new life free of the burden of a baby. She had to return to working in order to support her granddaughter, but once more, she was willing to adjust her life to suit a changing circumstance.

Thus began my mother’s life. She lived with Mama, working herself from the early age of thirteen in her godfather’s store, their combined salaries and occasional bank drafts from one or other of the growing number of relatives abroad supporting them both. They moved constantly, sometimes staying with other relatives, other times moving to cheaper or better quarters as the situation demanded. After high school, my mother refused the opportunity to go to the local university, where she had been accepted, but not offered financial aid. She opted instead to get her teaching degree, which offered the more immediate possibility of financial stability. Upon completion she moved several times more, working assignments in remote areas of the country until she became government contracted.

My mother’s nomadic youth had created a deep urge and to settle, make roots, stop moving. She wanted to buy a house where she could begin a life and her grandmother could live hers out in comfort and stability. For a young, single female, during those times, such a goal was ambitious, even ridiculous. With no collateral, a dependant grandmother and a junior teaching job, getting a mortgage to purchase land, and then build a house was nigh impossible, according to everyone. But my mother is a determined woman, “Lou’s grandchild” she would say, and at the age of twenty-five, she signed the lease for the lot of land in Mc Bean Village, Couva, where she resides to this day.

When my mom had the audacity to become engaged to a man of whom Mama did not approve – he was too poor, too dark – their relationship crumbled. “Either I will live here, or that man will,” was her response to my mother’s announcement of her engagement, and when Mom refused to break the engagement, Mama made a big fuss about the whole affair and prepared to go. She left, with a grand scene, the changing circumstance calling for an alteration of the situation. The wedding, I think, was the last big move my mother made; when she married my father, she severed all ties with the Alexander clan – moved on and forward as she had been taught.

*
I have always had the urge to be moving, have always defied the notion of inactivity and the seductive nature of habit. The lure of the unknown has always called to me, a yen for adventure in my soul. When I was younger I dreamed of being an explorer, discovering new worlds. Tales like Enid Blyton’s *The Faraway Tree* and *The Wishing Chair* fed my desires. During the long August holidays, I would drive my mother wild with my cabin fever, and my inability to be content, like my brother and sister with the free time to play and watch television. I would whine about being bored until she relented and found some class or other for me to take: tennis, typing or cosmetology school – it never mattered to me, I was curious about every thing. Even now, I always find myself chafing at the merest whiff of stagnancy, I always felt that there was so much of the world that I had not seen and the fact that I was sitting around, and not getting to it was terribly irksome at times. My father could never understand me, would only shake his head, but I think somehow, my mother understood to a certain extent, my need to shake off the familiar like an old skin, burst free from its binds, to keep moving.

When my secondary school years were drawing to a close, the topic of tertiary education started to surface. I was very bright, eager, and it seemed the next natural step. The problem, as usual, was money. As in most societies, teachers aren’t very well paid in Trinidad, and my father is a seasonal construction worker, often laid off for months at a time. There are relatively few scholarship opportunities – fifty or so were offered yearly to the University of the West Indies’ St. Augustine campus in the Northeastern part of the Island, while about thirteen thousand students per year were taking the qualifying exams. For most of those graduating and unable to secure loans or funding, the future was bleak and entailed months of frustration while looking for a job in a saturated and selective market. My mother and I both knew that such an existence would drive us both crazy, and she wanted for me, I think, the opportunity that she was forced to pass up – a university education. “Somehow or other, Laur, we will find a way.”

Whispered conferences between my parents about how this was to be paid for abounded, and many a night I am sure that as my mother stayed awake calculating and re-calculating, the fact that my school years were drawing to a close was something that weighed heavily on her mind. At some point, however, I had come to a realization, and
everyone was shocked when I announced to my family that I did not intend to attend the local university – I wanted to study abroad. The reactions were skeptical – study abroad was even more expensive than studying at UWI, where would I live, how would I live – and the general consensus was that my head was always in the clouds anyway.

In spite of the downright disbelief, even from my mother, I worked everyday toward that goal. I sat night after night, for weeks, writing letters to over one hundred and twenty five universities in the United States and England. I never applied to the local university, I did not take their scholarship exams, and asked only that I get the money necessary to send out my applications and take my SATs. My teachers thought I was jeopardizing my future, and did not take me too seriously, but Mom encouraged my efforts, thinking that even if I failed, I would have satisfied my need to at least try.

I made good scores on the SATs and then Mom and I went to a college fair that was coincidentally being held for the first time that year in Trinidad. She took the day off and we went to the ballroom of the Hilton hotel in Port-of Spain, where over one hundred university representatives from the United States had gathered. Their colorful brochures and smiling faces described places and opportunities previously unimaginable to us both, and that day, we both knew that I was going to be leaving home soon.

* 

When I think of my mother, I think of possibility. I think of her taking an electronics course, so that she could install the doorbell she asked my father to put in months before. I think of her book entitled 'The You-Don't-Need-a-Man-to-Fix-It Book,' from which she learned how to whack the battery plugs of the car with her shoe-heel if it didn't want to start, and wrap strips of tinfoil around the TV antenna to get better reception. I think of her juggling a family, a career and all the extra curricular activities she managed to squeeze in: Lions, Parish boards, planning committees, walks for sight, food drives for the poor. I think of her planning how piano lessons, karate training and Math classes could fit into the family budget, because she thought we needed them. I think of the nights that I would wake up to find her pacing, her eyes red rimmed as she wrestled with some problem or other.

Those were the times we bonded most. She would tell me stories of her life with Mama, of working in her godfather's store, of going to high school after a huge outbreak of
eczemas because she was determined not to miss the work, how the girls made her life hell because of the terrible scars. One night, I woke up as I heard her moving around. She was sitting on the floor of the prayer room, her hair tousled and she was crying. I asked her what was wrong, but she didn’t answer, and I just went to her and lay with my head in her lap. “What you doing up, little girl?” she asked after a while, a smile in her voice, “I thought I sent you to bed hours ago.”

I don’t remember what we talked about then, but somehow she wound up telling me about the long bout of illness that landed her in the hospital for a whole year in 1970. “It was just after Teachers’ College, and I couldn’t go to my first appointment.” She had contracted tuberculosis, and it had been repeatedly misdiagnosed. “One day I just felt a sharp pain, I couldn’t breathe, I couldn’t move – I thought that for sure I was going to die,” she said, her voice distant, her hands stroking my hair. When they took x-rays at the hospital, they discovered that part of one of her lungs had collapsed, and she’d had to have two thirds of it removed. After the surgery she was quarantined in Caura, the heart and lung hospital way up in the North of the island.

“They had said I may not have survived the surgery, and when I did, they thought I would not recover. But I had Mama to worry about, and I knew I couldn’t afford not to get well.” After one or two months, visits from friends and family started to wane, they too thought that she wouldn’t make it. “Mama was the only one that kept coming.” By the time she could move again, she had bedsores and was swollen from the injections she received multiple times daily. “I had to learn how to walk again, like a baby. In the beginning, I couldn’t even sit up, far less carry my weight…”

I had since sat up, and was facing her, trying to see in the lines of her face how such a little person could have endured so much. I must have asked her, because I remember her saying, “It is at times like those you realize things,” the faraway look never leaving her eyes, “that when it comes down to it, none of this earthly stuff matters: not fame, not money, none of it. When it comes down to the count, it’s just you and God. People come, people go, but those days, when I was practicing how to stand up without falling over, and walking round and round that bed every day, gripping those bedposts, I learned that there’s some things that you gotta do on your own. No one could have helped me then and if I’d listened to half of
them, I would have rolled over and died. You have to be determined, keep yourself and your faith strong.”

*

It was three a.m., sometime in June and I was in tears. I had received six scholarships — six — and had accepted the full tuition offer from St. Francis College, in New York. We had still to come up with the funds for my living expenses, books and although my aunt in New York had agreed to help and we were wary of depending solely on family reassurances, there were no other options. The bank had refused us a private loan and the educational loans were not available to me since my study was not at UWI. Mom had decided to sell the car and I had already arranged to part with my beloved piano — a cherry wood upright that we had bought second hand only the year before, the first real piano I had owned even though I had been taking lessons for ten years.

The enormity of what I had begun was beginning to sink in and I was unable to sleep. I had gotten out of bed, so as not to wake my sister and gone to the prayer room, where Mom found me curled up on the carpet and sobbing. She put her arms around me and asked me what was the matter and it all came pouring out — there were so many problems, so many unexpected issues arising, we were risking so much and I was afraid that in the final analysis, I would fail somehow. “I want this so badly, mom,” I remember blurting out through my tears, “but I am so afraid.”

She hugged me close for a minute and then laughed. “Girl, you a fighter since you small — don’t let anything stop you from doing what you want to do; I never forget that day I brought you home that elephant…”

*

I am the eldest of three children; however, at the time when this occurred, I was either the only child, my brother was still a taut swelling of my mother’s tummy or else he was very young. Being new parents, both my mother and father often tended to bring home various toys or outfits and had a collection every baby gadget available. On this particular day, my mother had gone to Port of Spain to run some errands. My father, the story goes, placed me in my walker. (I must pause here to say that I do have memories of the translucent turquoise plastic of the walker — a circular structure supported on three or four metal legs with wheels.
A harness-like structure in the middle held me upright but partially seated as I learned to walk around. He was frustrated, because I had just discovered the various knobs and protrusions on our old black and white television (which we still have to this day) and had been turning it on and off, changing the channel, raising and lowering the volume, smacking the screen and generally enjoying, I imagine, the wonder of the images and sounds that emerged and changed with every new discovery. He was busy in the kitchen and I can picture him sticking his fingers into the patch of thick hair just over his forehead, or yanking his beard, as he is prone to do when confronted with a puzzle, hoping that the walker would create some measure of unbreachable distance between my curious fingers and the controls on the set. He assumed success, when no more blaring sounds of static issued from the television, and he heard the wheels of the walker tripping merrily around the house.

At this point, my mother returned. When she entered the living room, the walker was overturned. (She always shudders when she gets to this part; “Girl, I nearly had a heart attack – I thought you had hurt yourself before I realized that you were not in it!”) I was wobbling along, going back to my new toy, the television. She scooped me up, probably held me close for few moments until her heart had stopped its frantic thudding, and then set off to figure out what happened.

“Dennis!” she called to my father, who I suppose hurried out, surprised to realize that she had come home, and alarmed by the tone of her voice. Arriving in the living room, and taking in the scene of the overturned walker, he shoved his hand through his hair again and asked, “But how did she get out of that thing?” He then told her about the television and my fixation with it, which somewhat calmed her, and reminded her of the toy she had picked up for me. She rummaged through her handbag – which has always been rather voluminous and full of surprises – and pulled out a little blue elephant. It was about eight or nine inches long and five inches high, its trunk was curled upward and its thin tail was frozen mid-swoosh in the back.

“Laurie,” she crooned – I had gone to my father – wriggling the elephant, “Mommy bought you a present.”

All accounts have it that I took one look at the blue elephant and burst into tears. My mother tried to explain that it was just a toy, made it dance and run along my father’s leg, but
that only served to make me cling even closer to him and scream even louder. Mom was perplexed, Dad amused, and both tried to get me to play with the elephant, to no avail.

“Look, Laurie, it sings!” She squeezed it and it emitted the dreadful, high-pitched squeak that children’s squeeze-toys tend to make. I remain terrified and unconvinced; mom says she gave up at that point and placed the elephant back in her bag.

My father returned to the kitchen and my mom was sorting through her purchases when suddenly the television blared again; I had resumed my previous activity, having recovered from the elephant trauma. Over the next few hours, I would ignore various deterrents: the stern-voiced warning, the wagging finger, little smacks on the backside – I was drawn to the television and would not let it alone. (They had discovered how I got out of the walker: I would run as fast as I could into the sofa, which would overturn the walker, allowing me to clamber out.) My mother throws her hands up to this day, saying that I had never been so persistently naughty before (and I would like to think since) that day.

Still curious about the elephant, and hoping to distract me, she brought it out again, and like before, I howled and buried my face – “screaming as if someone was trying to kill you,” my father recalls, for my shrieks had brought him running. At that point, my mother had an ingenious idea; she placed the elephant on the stand right in front of the television. They chuckled to themselves when I refused to even look in the direction of the television. For days it worked, and they believed the television obsession conquered. Until one day, the volume blared again. They came to the living room and the elephant was on the floor, and I was grinning, merrily twisting and turning the knobs on the set. Mom says she picked the elephant up and at once I began to cry, so they determined that the elephant must have fallen off by accident, since I was still afraid of it. They replaced it and I shied away as I had done before. They left the living room, but my mother remained in the dining room, and still laughs in amazement, at the sight she saw.

“It was so funny I had to call your father to show him, it was a classic,” she recalls, shaking her head. Apparently, I had determined that even if I didn’t like the looks of the elephant, it would not bite or otherwise harm me. Thus, I faced the television set from the distance of some feet, covered my eyes with one hand and flailed the other one around, running all the while toward the set – the elephant would fall off and leave the coast clear, so
to speak, for experimentation with the television controls. (She noted too, that having gained access to the television, I was careful to move the elephant out of my line of vision.)

“You were still so afraid of that elephant, but you should have seen yourself,” my mother laughs, a hint of pride in her voice “you just screwed up your face, closed your eyes real tight and knocked that elephant right out of your way.”

* 

My mother tells the story, because she knows it always works – what obstacle can seem insurmountable when transformed into a blue plastic elephant? Over the next few weeks, we bought our tickets with the money from the sale of the car and the piano. On July 18th, 1997, we boarded a plane to New York.

* 

These days, obstacles come in an array of shapes and sizes: bills, bosses, boys – you name it. But a call to Mom always reminds me that most stumbling blocks are less difficult than they look and even if they are as difficult as they appear, within me lies the strength to overcome them; it’s in my blood, I am my mother’s daughter, I am Mama’s great grandchild. Generations of proof has shown me that all I have to do to achieve my goals in life is close my eyes, pray, then summoning all the strength I have, run full speed in the right direction.
Gingerlilies

for my mother

They were your children too, grew from the magic of your fingers coaxing, mulching, digging air into their soil. You would rush home exhausted from teaching, see your babies wilting in the heat and forget that you were ever tired, grab the hose and spray the shine back into their red drooping heads, their dusty leaves. You would kneel, knees sunk deep in dark manure and whisper to them whatever words you thought would make them grow, kept the weeds at bay with a vengeance; you pruned them, trimming away dead blossoms and limbs – things they would have held on to, but you knew would only weigh them down. They too have seen your face creased with concern, hovering over theirs, have tasted the salt of your tears spilling from eyes rimmed with worry, have felt the firmness of your touch on their fevered brows willing them to wellness. But you always demur when someone compliments you on your garden, as if your calloused hands and tired spine and days of sweat and heartache counted for nothing. Hands on your hips, brown eyes shining with pride, you reply: I only gave them what they needed; they did the blooming on their own.
II
Either you will
go through this door
or you will not go through.

If you go through
there is always the risk
of remembering your name.

_Prospective Immigrants Take Note_
Adrienne Rich
It is the Sunday before I leave for New York. I am only supposed to be going for four years, but it is understood that it may be much longer. It is a solemn day. My mother is busy preparing the house and the prayer-room, while my father is in the kitchen putting the final garnishes on the food that he has been cooking for hours. My brother is in a white shirt and shorts, bike ready, in case he has to do any last minute fetching or carrying, his white pants pressed and neatly hanging over his bedroom door. My sister is sullenly arranging flowers for the altar; it is her least favorite job because she hates the ants and insects that crawl out from the freshly picked ginger lilies and bougainvillea, but she has a flair for it and cannot stand the mess I make of the job, so she always does it herself. I too am quiet; my usual joy tempered with the knowledge that this is the last time life will be like this, that I will be getting ready for a prayer meeting in this room my father built for us; the last time I would fan the incense pot until the coals glow red and melt the grains of Three Kings into a perfumed smoke that tickles my nose.

Members of our little prayer-group trickle in: my godmother, with her razor wit and unusual sayings; my godfather, her nephew, who sweeps me off my feet whenever he sees me no matter how much heavier I’ve gotten; Aunty Queen, who I convinced with two-year-old sincerity that contrary to what Mom says, I should have juice for breakfast instead of tea, our secret for the years she took care of me; Reynold, her son, whose shy smile and intriguing facial mole garnered a huge crush that lasted through my adolescence; Uncle John, who always said ‘don’t look at me in that tone of voice’ in his heavy baritone every time he made a silly joke and we rolled our eyes; and other friends and well-wishers. As they change into their gleaming white dresses and shirts, their chatter, their pleasantries wash over me, a familiar tide of words and laughter softening the silence.

We begin at nine sharp. The routine is the same as other times, but today it is charged. We sing. Mom has chosen all my favorite hymns, and I sing them with gusto; I know all the words by heart so I can close my eyes to better feel the music that will carry me over the ocean, that will sing to me of home when I am no longer here. My godmother prays her
quaint prayers, littered with language from another time, blessing the house, 'the four corners and the binding center,' and the children, 'the lads and the damsels,' but today her voice cracks as she prays 'especially for that young damsel about to cross the brining ocean.' Tears ooze through her sealed eyelids, meander down her weathered cheeks. When she is finished, my father helps her to stand, she sits next to me, squeezes my hand tightly.

My brother reads a psalm: “Bless the Lord 0 my soul all that is within me bless his holy name.” It is, after all, a day of thanksgiving. Reynold, the intellectual, reads from the gospels. It is the story of the ten lepers healed by Christ, of whom only one turns back to give thanks; when he is finished, he gives his little homily. “To whom much is given,” he says, looking straight at me, “much is expected.” He goes on to speak of the importance of saying thank you, of gratitude.

And I am grateful. I am fortunate to embark on a journey that will take me to new and exciting places, one that will provide opportunities that I would not have had otherwise. I will go to college – be the first in my family to do so, and I will make a life for myself and for those behind: my sister, my brother, my parents. Much has been given, much is expected, and suddenly I am afraid. For I know too that the bank has refused our loan, that the plane tickets have to be paid for, that all our savings have been converted and amount to less than $500 US dollars. I know that my father is still not working; there are schoolbooks and uniforms to get for my brother and sister, and I am building my future at their expense. They trust me to make their sacrifice worthwhile. And I know that I do not know this place I am going to, that I love what I am leaving behind. I am struck with terror.

My mother nudges me, passes me the candle – it is my turn to pray. I kneel in front of the chapel, and close my eyes, try to find that place where I can say the words – the usual “forgive our sins, give us grace, bless the world, bless the poor, bless the family, bless the studies” – but I cannot find it, I cannot pray. I feel my mother’s glance, and she softly hums a hymn, giving me the time I need, the room follows her lead. I feel the weight of expectation, a crown of thorns, bearing down, and for endless moments I know the agony of Gethsemane. I feel my mother move, and hear the swish of breath as she blows the coals alive. The perfume of Three Kings tickles my nose, my memory; the rising odor lifts the veil of darkness, and with it, the burden from my shoulders. I pray.
The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures. He leadeth me beside still waters, he restoreth my soul. He leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name’s sake. Yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil, for thou art with me, thy rod and thy staff shall comfort me. Thou preparrest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies. Thou anointest my head with oil and my cup shall be filled. Surely thy lovingkindness and tendermercies shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord, forever.

The psalm is complete, but I find I cannot stop. The words keep tumbling, cascading from my lips. I shall not want...I shall fear no evil...thou art with me...my cup shall be filled. I say the words and pray them again and again needing to cling to that promise, needing to know that I would be all right. I stop suddenly; I am exhausted. I feel hands grasp mine, wrap around my waist, rest on my shoulders; they give me strength. I pray. Forgive our sins, give us grace, bless the world, bless the poor, bless the family, bless the studies, bless us all. Sign of the cross. I open my eyes, the flowers and candles are blurry, and my cheeks are wet with tears I didn’t know I cried. My mother is at my back, hands on my shoulders; my sister kneels behind her, arms wrapped around my waist, tears wetting my skirt waist. On either side is my godmother, and Aunty Queen, arthritis forgotten as they kneel holding the hands I had outstretched blindly, in supplication.

We are still for a moment. In the background, Uncle John begins to sing, something happy, something joyful, and slowly I rise. I help the others to their feet, swipe the back of my hand across my cheeks abashedly, and I too begin to sing. I feel light, unburdened and suddenly filled with a rush of joy. This was my dream; this was what I had always wanted, but I realized that I could always come home, come back to this place, to these people who loved me enough to celebrate my success, even if it meant I had to leave them. My brother begins to clap in time and soon we are all singing at the top of our voices, clapping, making joyful noises. We end on a high note, with buoyant spirits and voracious appetites. My father fetches the fresh loaves of bread; the curry, the roti, the platters of fried chicken and pots of pelau are unveiled and we bless the meal. We sit scattered around the house and I hoard the snippets of conversation, the laughter, the tidbits of well-meaning advice: ‘now mind dem boys and dem eh!’ ‘doh travel late in de night, New York have all dem crazy people,’ ‘Make
sure yuh go to church on Sunday,’ ‘enjoy yuhself, but doh forget what it is you gone to do!’ I smile and nod, give the final farewell hugs and kisses. Smoke from the dying coals curls around the house, wraps itself in our hair and clothes, tickles my nose, buries itself in my memory. I will not forget this day, this covenant, this promise. I am filled with gratitude.

II

July 11th, 1997

You get two suitcases, 70 pounds each — that’s all. So you get the biggest ones you can find for the cheapest price you can get them, and even if they’re the ugliest things you’ve ever seen you listen to your mother when she says it doesn’t matter. So you pick the lesser eyesore, the plain black pseudo-leather, having decided that you absolutely could not live with the embroidered floral one, no matter how much easier it would be to spot on the carousel. There is only one black one left in the store, the attendant shrugs, so you wind up with one of each — not too bad. For days they are stowed in the back of the house, out of sight, hidden as though the lineup of documents — tickets, passports, I-20, scholarship letters — the piles of books and shoes, the lists of things to do, things to get, things to remember tacked onto your bedroom wall, the mirror on your dresser and the refrigerator are not reminder enough that the day is approaching — you are leaving soon.

You’ve been preparing for days, running around doing laundry and quick shopping, gathering last-minute gifts from friends and family. You’ve already held divorce court with your sister over which stuffed animals belong to whom (you decide to split them evenly based on a compromise between actual ownership and misplaced sentimental value.) The warmest things owned by anybody remotely your size have crawled out from exile in storage boxes and mothballed dresser drawers to land on your sister’s bed in a pile of long sleeves and collars, flannel, corduroy, and other thick, unnamable materials. Each item — the checkered blazer, the maroon shirt, the fuzzy blue bathrobe and the tan turtleneck — has a tale: “I had this when I went to Canada, (or England or New York or nowhere at all) and since I came back, it just sitting there.... I have no use for it now, so... It’s too big for me anyway, and I thought....”

Because you share a room, your sister’s bed becomes the hub of all this activity. She
hasn’t slept in it for over a week, and you have been fighting over who has more than her fair share of covers as you huddle together in one bed, but neither of you sleep in the living room. In the mornings you wake up wrapped around each other, curled into a picture of innocence. Some days you lie there and listen to the hiss of her breath as she sleeps, feel the dead weight of her arm thrown across your stomach, her hands clutching your nightgown like a baby. You try to remember these moments during the spontaneous, all-out wars that seem to break out for the most trivial reasons between you during the day, that usually result in her stalking off in tears. When you express concern your mother says not to worry, that it will pass.

On the floor beside the bed are your books; you have many and have spent hours deliberating over which ones stay behind, which must be sent on later, which can be given away. You take none of your two hundred or so ‘trashy’ romance novels – not even one to read on the plane – since you have read them all already. You give away Calabash Alley, Smile Orange and A House for Mr. Biswas (you especially hated the last one), and reluctantly agree to give your Enid Blyton, Nancy Drew and Hardy Boy collections to your younger cousins. You feel a pang as you decide that your ‘good’ books: Shane, Wuthering Heights, The Chrysalids, T.S. Eliot’s Collected Poems, Jane Eyre can be sent on later, your old Chemistry and Physics texts and notebooks are more important – you do not know that you will later regret that decision, that you will wind up scribbling poems in margins and changing your Radiology major to English.

Another bundle has your going away presents and it keeps growing in size and oddity: food, pens, books, cards, stationery, locally made jewelry, funny little basket crafts. You are touched that people are thinking of you, but sometimes wonder what it was about you that could possibly indicate to someone that you really needed tie-dyed polyester blouses; earrings the color of the national flag or a calabash purse – things you wouldn’t be caught dead wearing under any circumstances. The inspirational plaques were nice, but did they have to get 8x10 pieces of wood to say “Good Luck” and “God Bless”? You feel mean-spirited and ungrateful, as you wonder why they didn’t just give you the money – it would have been more than welcome and certainly easier to pack...

Pack. It is the night before you leave. The last of your visitors are gone and only the family remains: Mom, ready to get down to business, and Ray, willing to fetch and carry as
instructed; Dad, in the kitchen preparing your favorite dinner – dahl with pig’s tail and rice –
avoiding business at all costs, and Debra, listless, trying to look cheerful and failing
miserably. And you, certain that there is something you should be doing, but not quite sure
what it is, and silently glad that the curtain will soon fall on this drama.

There is, of course, Aunty Marge. She is the travel expert who knows how to stuff
underwear and socks into shoes, wrap packets of your favorite candy in your new sweaters,
and how to roll t-shirts so they occupy less space. She doesn’t know how to deal with the
books though – no one has ever needed to take such big ones or quite so many, if any with
them before. She is talking non-stop – about duty free shops, departure taxes, which lines to
get into, how early to get to the airport, which shoes to wear, what not to tell the customs
officers; about New York, how cheap everything is, how cold the winters are, how good the
shopping is on Flatbush and Church Avenues. You are trying to tuck the facts away into
exhausted brain cells.

The ugly suitcases are summoned, the smell of their newness unzipped into the
purposeful air. They are laid open on your bedroom floor, two yawning, hungry holes in the
center of your fuzzy brown carpet – the one that you picked out, since your sister got to
choose the paint and insisted on yellow walls (you dislike yellow). You try to help appease
their emptiness and walk back and forth with items as they are called for: “The other side of
that shoe, that shirt – no not that one, the other one!” You can’t seem to get anything right, so
you are brushed aside and you hover uselessly. Every now and again your aunt slips in a
package of something or other that you are to deliver to a cousin, a friend, a person you never
heard of. You try desperately not to resent the loss of precious space, console yourself with
the fact that you can put some things into your mother’s suitcase too, how much stuff could
she need for six weeks? Eventually you are shooed away as Aunty Marge and Mom get down
to the technicalities of stuffing and tucking. “Go help yuh father or get some rest, or
something.”

You are tired. It has been a hectic week of visits to family that you have not seen in
years, old teachers and parish priests, the doctor, the dentist, the pharmacy. There were last
minute get-togethers and lunches with friends from church, from school, from piano lessons,
the last fêtes with your crew at Club Celebs and Upper Level. There is, of course, your own
goodbye party, the first party you’ve ever had, where your three best friends popped Stevie Wonder’s “That’s what Friends are For” into your stereo and surrounded you in a nostalgic circle where you hugged each other and cried.

But you cannot go to sleep. You are looking at the knot of the mosquito net hanging above your bed, remembering how getting it just right across the bed baffled you as a child. You are breathing the smell of freshly turned soil and overripe fruit: Julie mangoes and cherries, passion fruit and guava, tomatoes and melangeone. You are looking outside into the darkness at the scenery that you have known all your life: the mango tree that you just knew housed a monster at five or six, that you could have kissed when you came home from surgery and a week in the hospital at thirteen, that always fascinated you because it looked like it was on fire in the sunset; the coconut tree that you watched your father climb, whose nuts were filled with sweet water, whose leaves you learned to make brooms and mats from, whose fruit you grated to make sweet bread, coconut bake and sugar cake.

You walk around, look at the marks on your wall where you tried to grow by measuring your height at least three times a day; see the black smudge behind the bed head where you scribbled ‘Lauren and Troy forever’ and later tried to erase it. You run your fingers along the sticker collection you and your brother labored over for years, remembering how diligent you were at buying candy everyday just for the stickers inside, smile at the pride you felt in knowing exactly how many were pasted across the wooden beam. You dare not close your eyes because you are packing too.

You wander back into your room, past the matching bright yellow of the closet and grimace – you won’t be sorry to leave those behind – but you think too of your red dress, your favorite dingy white t-shirts and your comfortable, if bummy ‘home clothes’ still folded on your shelf, that you’ve been told have no place in a new life. You turn around just as your mother is about to toss out your favorite nightie (the pink flowered one with the white bow on the neck and the hole on the shoulder) and you scream “NO!” maybe a little louder than you intended. Her hand freezes mid-air and there is a heartbeat of silence. Aunty Marge begins to protest, “But the weight – you only get 70 pounds!” But your mother looks at you and says, “Okay...We’ll make room.”
The morning is fresh with the wet of early morning dew. Thin rays of sunlight stretch their arms through the mist sleepily – slowly coming to consciousness, the faint light brightening as it emanates from the blinding ball in the east. It is about six thirty am and a small pickup truck is barreling its way down the almost deserted Southern Main Road; the rustling green stalks of the cane fields and the clear blueness of the sky whiz by in an indistinguishable blur of color and quiet. At traffic-light stops, it is possible to detect the signs of stirring: taxi drivers pulling into the stands; one or two lone travelers waiting roadside, flagging cars that pass by; the sounds of “mornin’ neighbor” across fences, brooms sweeping yards, and the creak of rusty gates as early-bird stores open for business.

The driver, Brian, sits with one arm slung out of the window, the other gripping the steering wheel, his jaw tense and his brow furrowed in concentration. In the passenger seats are two women; Annette, the younger, is the mother. She leans back against the headrest, paying half attention to Marge, the older one, whose hands move constantly to keep pace with her story – most of which is lost to the wind as it whips through the open window. Every now and again, one or the other looks through the pane of glass behind her, to monitor the activity in the back.

In the truck’s covered tray, one first notices the two, rather large suitcases: one black and the other a hodge-podge of colors set with large white flowers, both adorned with red dancing strips of fabric tied to the handles. Beside them lie a much less imposing heap of backpacks and pocketbooks, another smaller suitcase, and a duffle bag, most of which also wear the red fabric. An odd assortment of four people sit precariously on the none-too-sturdy boards that serve as benches, lined along the side of the truck. On the left, Ray, a wiry boy of about seventeen, chatters incessantly, addressing his animated stream of commentary to a man with a placid expression who responds with an occasional nod or rumble. They do not look alike, but something in the set of their faces – perhaps the wide nose set above full lips – betray their common blood.

On the right, sit two girls. Debra is the taller; she is almost folded in two, her knees high up to her chest, and wears a baseball cap pulled low over her eyes. She does not face the
rest of the group, her back turned slightly and her head resting against the window facing the cab. She is silent, observing the others from beneath the dark shadow of the New York Yankees, but every now and then she rolls her eyes at some question or statement issued by her brother or father across the suitcases.

But it is the other girl that is most interesting for the simple fact that somehow the voices and the silences seem to center around her. She sits facing the open back of the truck, her feet just hanging over the edge, her hands gripping the side to steady herself against the jouncing motion. She is well-dressed, her dark slacks, long sleeved shirt and jacket contrasting sharply with the little brown truck and the casual tee shirts and jeans of the others. A contrary air of weariness and alertness surrounds her – her eyes alternating between a wild darting around as if they were trying to suck up the whirl of the passing landscape, and vacancy as her gaze clouds over with weariness and her eyelids begin to droop. At one point, her father calls her name sharply and reaches over to grab her jacket with one swift motion, as he notices her hands loosening their hold, her eyes falling shut and her body leaning over the edge of the truck a little too far. She jerks awake then, but shrugs off his arm, refusing to relinquish her seat.

Thirty minutes later, the truck passes a sign: “Piarco International Airport next left.” The houses, thick bushes and lush trees begin to thin into the flat plains of the airport, where the truck finally turns, pulls in front of the unimposing, almost drab building, and stops. Annette and Marge turn to tap on the glass, nodding and making ‘we’re here!’ gestures. After a brief moment of stillness, everyone jumps into action. Marge comes out to commandeer a cart, as Brian, the van driver, comes around to the back where Ray and his father pass the luggage to him. The well-dressed girl hops out, and absently straightens her clothes and hair. Debra is the last to emerge, jumping awkwardly to the ground, then stretching her long arms gracefully into the air. Brian gets back into the van and pulls off in search of parking, as the rest make their way into the building.

The younger woman is somewhat agitated at the long lines at the check-in counter. “Marge, I knew we should have come here earlier,” she fusses to the older woman, who is unperturbed, and working her way to the shortest line. “Annette, stop fretting,” she replies absently, and directs the others to take places in the other two lines, “Whoever gets through
first call us." She turns to the girl in the jacket, "Yuh have the tickets? The passports?" As the requested documents are produced, she nods her head approvingly. The lines move slowly, but eventually Ray waves as he reaches the check-in counter farthest to the left. The others abandon their posts and move toward him, ignoring the displeased look of the other passengers.

The agent checks the two passports and asks that the suitcases be loaded onto the scale. The two women look at each other and cross their fingers as the man and the boy hoist them on one by one: 69.5, 65, 80 and 76. "These two are overweight," the agent says, stating the obvious. "Is those books," Marge hisses, maneuvering her way to the counter. "Miss, hear dis, she get a scholarship an' she goin' away to school in New York. She had to take all her books and we tried to keep in the limit, but they was so heavy, and she had to take clothes an' ting too, yuh know..." The agent is unimpressed, but looks at the winding line behind them, nods and attaches the labels to the luggage. The group breathes a collective sigh of relief.

The group shuffles into the lobby, stands around silently. "Well, I guess this is it," the father intones, puffing his chest out, a sure indication that a long speech is about to follow. He is cut off by a muffled cry as the tall girl strides off, pulling her cap lower onto her face. Marge makes a move toward her, but the girl in the jacket restrains her: "I'll get it," she says, making her way over to Debra, who turns her back at the sound of her sister's approaching footsteps. "Hey," says the girl in the jacket, touching her gently on the shoulder, pretending not to hear the stifled sobs. No response comes from under the cap. A moment of silence. "Don't go." The two words float between the girls for an eternity. "I have to." Another moment of silence. "Fine then, go." Swiping her eyes, Debra turns and walks back toward the group. Her mother tugs her closer by the bill of her cap and kisses her atop her head. She resists, but then succumbs to the embrace, lowering her head, hugging tightly. Soon she is standing straight and silent again, but with less tension in her movements.

It is time to go through the gate and a flurry of hugs and kisses ensue. Marge is still giving advice: 'Make sure yuh go in the right line when yuh reach!' Annette is giving last minute instructions to the other three, "Dennis, you have the number in New York if there are any problems – and don't forget the light bill... You two, don't give your father any trouble,
especially you eh Debra... and Ray take care of your sister until I get back... Be good!" The girl in the jacket gives everyone a final embrace, then stands apart stiffly, hiking her backpack higher on her back. "Are you ready?" her mother asks. She nods. They show their tickets to the security guard and go through, then turn and wave as they wait for their bags to be scanned. "We'll be in the waving gallery," the boy shouts; they smile, and continue walking.

Mother and daughter do not speak as they pay their departure tax and walk around trying to find the right gate and arrive just as the plane is beginning to be boarded. The gate attendant issues their passes and directs them down the narrow stairs and out of the building toward the aircraft. As they walk the girl feels the heels of her shoes sinking in, sticking to the asphalt, already growing soft in the early heat. She yanks each footstep out and continues to move forward, eyeing the parked plane like a finish line. She imagines the trail of prints she must be leaving in her wake, but does not look, afraid she might be tempted to follow them back, afraid she would turn, like Lot's wife, into a pillar of salt. Shielding her eyes with one hand, Annette pokes the girl with the other, and points to the waving gallery, asking if she could spot the group. The girl remarks that it is too far away and besides there is a glare on the glass. Her mother does not hear because she is busy flapping her arms at the nebulous mass of gesticulating people in the distance, all focused on the line of travelers making their way to the plane. They make their way up the narrow stairs, answer the friendly greeting of the stewardess, find their seats and stow their belongings below them. The girl has the window seat. She sighs deeply — a long, relieved rush of breath — as she nestles into the comfortable padding. The woman too, pauses momentarily, leans her head back into the headrest and closes her eyes and whispers 'Thank you Father, we made it.' The plane engine hums, sending a steady vibration through the seat and accompanying the murmur of passengers settling in: the scratch of fabric rubbing against the seats, newspapers rustling and the tick-tocks of the flight attendants' heels as they make their last rounds, shutting the overhead compartments with determined snaps. A voice comes over the intercom — "Thank you for flying BWIA, this is your captain speaking and we will soon be departing for John K. Kennedy International Airport in New York. Our estimated time of arrival is ..." — and fades as the plane readies for takeoff.
The mother jumps up excitedly and peers over the girl’s lap as the plane begins to turn, squinting through the window, still waving. Over her shoulder she asks, "Lauren, aren’t you going to say goodbye? This is the last ..." she trails off and shakes her head in disbelief. The girl is asleep.

IV

September 2nd, 1997

It is my first day alone in New York. My mother returned home this morning, waving farewell, whispering her customary “Take care, love, and be good!” She hugged me tight, then disappeared through the gate, and placed her bags on the conveyer belt to be scanned. We had an agreement: no crying, no mushy stuff. And so we both continued to wave, huge smiles plastered across our faces, each pretending not to see the shadowy shimmer of restrained tears in the other’s eyes. Her bags came through on the other side of the scanner and for a moment she was distracted, gathering them, tucking the large bear we had purchased for my sister under her arm.

This is the day that I have been longing for, looking forward to with all the anticipation that comes with fresh starts, new beginnings. It is a day that I pictured in a thousand ways those long nights of penning letters to schools, asking for a chance; the day that I planned and re-planned since the moment I found out about my scholarship. And here it was. In a few minutes, I would officially be living in New York... on my own... no Mom, no Dad... just me and my new life. I would make my pilgrimage to the City, walk in places I had only seen on television, created in my dreams: subways, The World Trade Center, Broadway, The Empire State Building, Brooklyn, Central Park, Times Square; I would delve headfirst into the magic of the world’s most exciting city. I was ready, and had been guiltily counting the days until my mother’s worrying watchfulness would board the plane back to Trinidad.

Yet, the moment I could no longer see my mother’s face, I wanted to run – past the security guards and their metal detectors, past the cue of impatient passengers – as fast as my legs would carry me. I wanted to run, throw myself into her arms and beg her not to leave me in this alien place – to take me home. My muscles tightened in response to the surge of
adrenaline, reacting with an instinct as old as time: fight or flight. My mother turned around just then and our eyes met. Her wise, brown gaze reassured me, calmed the furious throbbing in my chest, the utterance rising in my throat – I would be just fine. She twisted the bear and made it do a goofy wave with its furry paw; I rolled my eyes and smiled. “I love you,” she mouthed, as she blew a kiss at me, turned and walked briskly down to the passenger’s lounge. I looked at her receding back, ramrod straight as always, and I knew that she was not going to look back – I was scarily, finally, on my own.
Manhattan: First Night

Amazed she walks the enormity of this city, walks tourist-like, head cocked awkwardly to see taller, to the top of buildings that reached higher than she had ever imagined buildings could be. Their flashing, their come-hither glitter winks brighter than stars. She has been taught to reach for them. They are sirens, silent music.

She relishes the rush and hum of trains racing deep in the belly of brightness, roars drowning beggars at work, all their tinny clink and clatter. The sweeping warm wind left in their wake. Speed and departure. Arrival. And she feels a strange freedom amid this grandeur, this place that is its own music, its own constellation; this place of people dark-suited, somber; of tasks demanding the urgency of movement. And she is here; she stops,

drinks in the bustle, eyes shut. She takes a breath, long and deep, takes it all in to the bones and breath of her, settles into this strangeness, its new edges. Standing. Eyes closed, the middle of the sidewalk. The middle of Times Square. Such an idiot. Ready to apologize for her naiveté. Her gaucheness. To explain she was not country. That really she belonged. She opens her mouth, opens and realizes people just kept moving: fast walking people yellow cab hailing people stepping into subways. She is not there. She is invisible.
Little Longings

Broad shouldered,
thick-waisted and stocky –
my bones thick, heavy
as the smell of sweaty socks –
I decided since I’d never be skinny,
I would at least be strong.

But for a girl fed
on fairytale princesses,
bred on the slight and wilting
heroines’ plight,
that tremendous need
to feel tiny persisted –

led me to places
like my father’s 20-foot
scaffold in the backyard,
or airplanes swaddled in cirrus,
the world stretched to nothing
beyond their steely wings.

Once I found myself seated
atop a Brooklyn building,
legs dangling over the edge
of the rooftop – six stories closer
to the stars – looking skyward
and earthward

and inward;
imagined myself a speck,
small and insignificant
as any other
in the blue-black bounty
of that summer night.
The Contract

These are the terms and conditions under which you will exist in this place:
You will always remember your homeland – those foreign shores from which you fled to arrive bewildered in the safe-haven of Lady Liberty’s harbor¹; You will always remember your mother tongue – the rich sounds of the language that filled your ears with comforting rhythms even before your birth²; you will remember the stories of your childhood, the tales of *douens, obeah la diableresses and soucoyants*, of Brer Rabbit and Anansi.³ You will remember your place, in the great hierarchy of equal opportunity.⁴ And you will never forget, will always remember the ideals that first drew you to this hallowed ground – your right to dream, to follow your own pursuits of happiness in this, the land of the free.⁵

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¹ You will remember to despise it, to believe it third world, underdeveloped and uncivilized.
² You will remember to think its sounds uneducated and unbecoming, try daily to lose all traces of it.
³ You will remember to disregard these as creations of an ignorant, antiquated populace – one that you have outgrown.
⁴ You will remember to be thankful for that place – alien, immigrant – and learn not to aspire beyond it.
⁵ You will remember to forget.
Those Black Folks Have Kids So Early,
said my friend’s roommate’s sister in a whisper
as I turned my back and headed for the door,
tugging two-year-old Levi behind.

It’s just as she’s always heard in her small,
all white Ohio town about those people,
about their sad and easy girls destined to breed
fatherless children, trail them along like ducklings.
(She scanned my third left finger for a ring.)

Or perhaps it is a series of fathers – it’s no secret
how virile, how well endowed those black men are,
or how they never stick around to take care of their bastard babies.

And she imagines and pities the tragedy of my ghetto,
bullet-ridden childhood, my youth likely spent in the shadows
of an alcoholic father and a crackhead mother
(perhaps it was the other way around – how could she know?)
Wonders if I was one of those drug babies,
an infant born with dark urges surging through my blood.

And I feel her stare past my thick (and thuggish) down coat,
see scars and bruises in colorful patterns (blue? black? purple?)
dealt by my abusive gold-toothed, weed-dealing boyfriend
(such a vicious cycle).

But her blue eyes tenderly squint their myopic approval
(the chic, thin wire-frames of her glasses nestled in her hair)
as I gather up my baby, bundle him warmly, tuck him into me safely.
She admires that I am trying to make my life and his better
by going to college (that is after all, how I have come to move in her circles),
wonders what calling of fate made me clean up my act,
get off of welfare, try to make something of myself
in spite of the odds...

But she’s BABYSITTING!
my friend Julia yells, cuts her speculation short
(Julia’s Bulgarian and hates American Capitalist Culture of Consumption and Commercialism,
can’t stand the prudish ‘village’ mentality of Americans, longs for Europe.)

And babe in arms, I turn just in time to see
the pale white face of Miss Ohio turn bright red,
nervous hands dragging her glasses past the puzzled wrinkle of her brow,
to the bridge of her nose as though Ralph Lauren lenses could explain
how she could so misread the obvious.
The Binge

I remember those days of dying to fit into this city of straight lines and sharp edges
this place of leanness, of excess trimmed
to precise efficiency
slimsexysweet girls straight as the straws
I sipped my meals through and longed to model
all two hundred odd pounds of me
curved and superfluous wide hips full breasts
and broad accents that would not hide grow flat
simply disappear

Instead I bolted the city down
the black hole of my need always unsatisfied
always wanting more I gorged myself on its leftovers
its storehouse of cheap riches ripe for my taking:
coffee light sweet sugar glazed donuts toasted bagels
cream cheese hot sausage ketchup mustard sauerkraut
relish french fries five-piece white meat whopper chili
ice cream mocha chip frappuchinos whipped
to suit the weather and I packed it all into every hungry inch of me

Until I burst where the edges cut inside
where the seams of my stomach threatened to split
and heaved at the hardness poking through like bricks
until my whole being strained in rebellion and protested
this mad invasion and even then I could only push
two dark fingers far as they would go down my throat

gag
gag
gag

I could only rise and rinse the sour taste from my mouth
Losing Home

My mother tells me
of people who have died;
of the new houses on our street,
with new neighbors, new children
on bikes, new noises to get used to;
of the new curtains she put up
in the living room, where I loved
how the light used to flood in
from the naked eyes of seven windows.

She keeps me informed
of the news, the new governments
and old corruption, the new principals
at my old schools, of retired teachers
and new classrooms completed after years
of fundraising, tells me that they finally
fixed the roads that the potholes
we used as landmarks are filled,
paved over at last.

She sends me pictures
of smiling cousins I rocked to sleep
and fed from bright bottles, all grown
up now and gangly; of newly weds,
then of godchildren, the new babies
of old friends who will know me
only by the pictures I send back to her,
the ones she shows off with pride,
and boasts how grown up I look.

She even says that I would not mind
going to market now, though I’ve always
hated the stink of vegetables burning in the sun,
the hover of flies above overripe fruit,
she says things are different these days,
that they’ve demolished the old block,
replaced it with neat rows of covered stalls
designed to keep the food fresh
and the shoppers cool –

I’ve no reason now
to complain, she laughs.
Then she asks me when I am coming back.
The wistfulness in her voice tugs hard
at my chest and I tell her I will visit
in time for the mangos, by summer, after
the old tree in our yard has flowered
and the fruit hangs thick and full
from its high branches.

I ask her if the old tire
we hung is still there, if she remembers
how my brother, sister and I fought
for turns, wonder jokingly if I am too big now,
my legs too long to swing from it.
And she does not reply, her silence
heavy, the long distance static striking
my ear like a bell. *I thought I told you*
she says softly.

She knows that my eyes
are growing damp and sinking shut
under the weight of immeasurable distance,
*we had to cut it down, baby,* gives me
a list of good reasons that echo empty
in my private mourning. And I am silent,
because I have no words to tell her
that I do not know how to own that place,
or how to call it home.
Zero

the air stinks
of undiscovered dead, of pretzels, of morning
coffee, hot sausages, McDonalds, of sickly sweet honey coated cashews.

a stillness hovers
over busy streets, the groaning cranes, honking cabs,
children’s cries and cell phone voices blending to hush.

standing walls bleed
the wax of watchful candles, wear images
of lost faces, hold the prayers of the hopeful
like priests, like confessors wrapped in red, white and blue shrouds.

the search continues
amid the swirling whiteness of unsettled ash
and new echoes of emptiness for lost skylines
and husbands, justice and wives, corpses and consolation. for reasons.
A Brooklyn Girl Dreams of Iowa

They are the salt of the earth
these people
with their cows and corn
wide open skies and spaces;
their knowledge earned
from the whispers of wind
bending green stalks,
undiluted by the flat chatter
of dead leaves.

They know their roots,
are solid, not sought
broadly on the surface of skin;
theirs grow deep, through
fingers burrowing rich earth,
rough sleeves swiping salty beads
from weary brows,
hearts leaning over land, stirred
by the smell of soil.

At day’s end,
when tired spines stretch
relief toward the clouds
they are not lost;
instead, callused fingers
weave shade
for squinting eyes
to follow the sunset
home.
Landing

Iowa State University, August 18th, 2002

Filled to bursting with city life
and habits, Manhattan
fuel in my tank, Brooklyn
dust on my skin, West Village
music ringing in my ear,
I arrived.

My world,
stashed in two suitcases
– the rest left behind –
spins past yet another carousel
and cloaked in the chill
of two a.m. darkness,
I wandered into the arms
of Ames.
Speak of Me

I.

From the comfort
of white shells,
from their illusions
of equality,
they presume to know me.
Skin, darkly different
hair, wild as the Amazon
eyes, that know no blue
speak of me.

I must be sensitive
to living here in Mid-Western
America, so many faces
unlike my own,
and so they tread wary,
armed with chocolate chip facts
to scatter in the dough of conversation
to diffuse possible discomfort –
give us both something to nibble on.

They speak to me of Harlem,
the Renaissance that showed
the world that my people too bled
with poetry and music.
They play jazz at teatime,
We’ve always loved the blues
watch Oprah on TV, wasn’t she great
in ‘Beloved,’ such a powerful movie –
we have some things in common

They nod ‘isn’t he cute’
in the direction of every man
the slightest shade of brown
with winks and knowing smiles,
relieved to admit,
proud that to own
that they see beauty
in blackness –
We too are tolerant.
II.

From the shadow
of nighttime complexions,
from their assumptions
of similarity,
they presume to know me.
Skin, only shades apart
hair, mirrored tangles
eyes, cloaked in equal hues
speak of me.

I must be lonely
here in white-man America,
alienated and desperately
looking for soul-food, conscious vibes
and good "black man loving,"
and so they step boldly,
armed with lyrics – I must be a ‘sistah’,
a Nubian queen, a princess from the motherland –
speak the language I am sure to understand.

They speak to me of history
and ethnic conspiracy, of roots
lost on Côte d’Ivoire coasts,
of domination and of oppression.
They know my story is theirs:
I am revolutionary, a fighter
for our cause, for our struggle;
they speak to me of obligation –
to our ancestors, to our children, to ourselves.

III.

From the distance
of culture and experience,
from their visions
of solidarity,
they presume to know me.
Skin, sun smoothed
hair, brightly wrapped
eyes, short-lashed and slanted
speak of me.
I must be bored
here in bland and un-exotic
Iowa, all that Caribbean
fire in my blood,
and so they come apologetically,
armed with hot sauce activities
to amuse and entice me,
to spice up the silence –
*We too are colorful.*

They speak to me of *Naipaul*
*quite brilliant* who has forsaken
my land, of *Walcott genius*
who is not much to my taste.
They eagerly display CD’s
by obscure artists, look
at me with expectation
that dissolves into dejection —
*Don’t you know who this is?*

I do not speak
of my passion for Blake,
for Eliot and Hardy,
or of the Backstreet Boys
and Madonna music that I sing
and I dance to with glee,
because I know that for them
such things do not
speak of me.

I do not say
that Iowa is Trinidad
with winter, with corn
grown in place of sugar cane,
or that my grandmother
was married to Mr. Foo Chung.
I do not say
that my first love was carved
from white chocolate, not dark.

And, I do not speak
when smugly they point
to the lone and miserable
palm tree struggling
to breathe this foreign air;
I want no revolution.
I simply agree,
it reminds me of home:
it speaks of me.
Finding the Moon

You should have known to stay at home
when the water ran cold mid-shower
and your scale kept going after the needle
had crossed your last acceptable mark.

At work you are tortured by bosses
who forget that even machines break down,
and that you never claimed to be one.

You call to cry to a friend who tells you
to call her back and another who says
that she will call you back and you know
that you are in this alone, and for the long haul.

Then you step outside under the cover of darkness
and The Daily, run from the pitter-patter of crows
dumping from the trees, make it to your car heaving
only to realize that you still managed to get hit,
a fresh blob of white crow shit on your coat, and sigh.

You lower yourself into the seat of your car, turn
the engine and rest your head on the steering wheel,
wonder if it is wise to drive given the day’s track record
— there is probably a tree waiting to hurl itself into your path.

Resigned to your gloomy fate, you release the brakes
with a click and pull the gears into drive, prepare to move.

You glance into the rear view mirror
and there, swathed in the black December night,
the moon hangs her full, fat, yellow-cheese grin
like a dare to find your way back home.
IV
Contract with Myself: After Yeats

When you are young, speak
the words you wish to hear
in the night of your old age.

Write the stories you would tell
over and over and again
to the little ones who will sit
at your knees with open­
mouthed marvel that you
will smile and remember well.

Fight many battles
for many causes, create
revolutions; wear the scars
of your passions like badges
of some honor or shame.

Love fearlessly, foolishly,
wonderfully; reserve caution
and care for the confinement of years
when your wildness will have fled
and your legs will be too tired
to carry the weight of dreaming,
your fingers too gnarled to grasp at stars.

When you are young,
and green and full of living, live
as though you were old and gray
and the slumber of each night
were perhaps death’s final sleep.
**How To Speak Of Home**

Do I speak in dialect?
String the colorful shards
of broken words on a thread
of island music – say *yuh* and *mih*
*and allyuh* for you and me
and us; what about *bacchanal,*
*liming,* 'oman,* and fete,* and free*
up true true Trinidad style?
Talk 'bout de sunshine,* and how
lunchtime de heat does rise up
from de asphalt in a shimmering
wave. Talk bout de breeze,* stir up
fresh from de sea,* how it ruffles
de cane fields,* bend
de tops of de coconut trees...

But there is no Trinidadian
for winter,* or snow,* for cold
so cold that breath breaks it,
hangs it from lips in clouds;
no idiom for ice-storms,* for
blizzards,* or hail,* or sleet.
And there is no word for winds
that slip through zippers and
buttonholes like needles,* turn
even dark fingers blue.

How, then, shall I speak?
Do I translate?
Tighten those wild,* open­
mouthed vowel sounds; clip
the consonants,* say – *wadder*
instead of *waat-ta,* and *mengo*
instead of *maang-goh;* flatten
the sing song undulations,* tame
the arms yearning to break free,
to shape each word in air?

But *meng-o* does not mean
what *maang-goh* does,* cannot
hold the sweetness of a *doux-doux*
or a *calabash,* or the lingering flavor
of a *long mango,* the pungent smell
of a Julie. Mengoes are not lusted after, felled from trees and washed, do not know the edge of teeth biting stringed flesh from warm seed, or the dribble of juices tickling chins and flowing like calypso from mouths filled with a thousand stories.

So how then shall I speak?
The Douen

Douens, according to Trinidadian myth, are the souls of children who died before they were baptized. They live in the forests, coming out occasionally in search of playmates, and appear as any other child except that their feet are turned backward.

I know you well,
lost child, doomed to wander

in search of grace
life and nature’s uncertain

territories alone.
You must already miss

the warmth
of your mother’s smile

the sound
of her singing you to sleep

as you lay contented,
head nestled in the crook of her arms.

You think constantly
of the maybes you left behind,

daydream
of simple things: your room,

its yellow walls
tiny crib and fluffy carpet,

so different
than this new bed of moss and grass.

And at night
you weep a little, and wish

that life for you
could have been different,

imagine
how those other children –
so like you yet so alien
with their schoolbooks and toys –

were so lucky
they must never be sad.

Sometimes, you play
with them, inhabit their worlds

for an hour or two
in the evenings until one by one

they disappear –
mamas and papas calling them in

from the streets
to dinners and bedtimes with stories,

prayers, tuck-ins,
and kisses. You can only look on,

turn tail
and trudge back into the darkness,

your body
steadily moving into the forest

your feet
trying to find the way home.
An Open Letter to the American Dream:

I'll admit it: I think I'm better than you, America. That's right, you heard me. You are taken aback. Shocked at the nerve of me, the absolute boldness of me – who the hell do I think I am? Don't I know my place? Have I forgotten that I am an immigrant, that you extended opportunity to me; that I wanted to come here in the first place? You recall that I wanted to come here so badly that I sat outside of the U.S. Embassy building in Port-of Spain, Trinidad, at three a.m. (they open at ten); so badly that I was furious that I was not the first in line – the man who was first had been standing there since midnight; so badly that I sat for hours every day penning letters by hand to over one hundred and twenty five of your colleges and universities asking for information, for a chance; so badly that I hurried home from school to watch for the mail, praying that the post woman would deliver yet another fat manila envelope with her cheery “Here's another one!”

And I admit to this too: I wanted you, America. I wanted you with the desperation of the destitute for money, the passion of the prisoner for freedom. You smile. Yes, I haunted the halls of the United States Information Service in Maraval on weekends. Some days I ditched school: searching and researching; not stopping for food, for drink; ‘not for hell or high water,’ grinned the guard with USIS blazed in white letters on his blue shirt, who smiled like a benevolent uncle and no longer inspected my ID. Yes, you were my true love; the promise of your abundance, of your dowry, appealed and I rejected all others for your sake – for dreams of you, America.

But admit America: you wanted me too. You were skeptical when you administered your ultimatum, your Scholastic Assessment Test – pass-this-or-else – but your mantra boasts of equality, of a chance for all who were willing to work, who made the grade. And so I paid to prove myself a good match, worthy of you. And you were thrilled to find that intelligence grows in the least-likely places, even in the cane fields of backwater ‘developing’ countries. I aced your examination and voila – floods of your schools wanted me, scrambling to offer scholarships, incentives to lure me; you became the besotted lover instead of the hard-to-win bride.

Admit it. You shined your boots, presented your clean-slicked self and began to woo me, woo us all. You began looking for other signs of intelligence among the Trini masses.
Our ‘third world’ education surprisingly equipped us to produce impressive scores on the tests designed to prove your superiority, and so we became a way to improve your image: diversity and functionality in one fell swoop. For your schools with abysmal averages, we made them respectable; average ones became commendable, while at the same time we were testimony of your tolerance, brought that extra name to your lists of ‘countries represented’ by your student population. In exchange, we received a pat on the head, the admiration of our parents and peers, free education and a glimpse of the legendary American Way. Fair trade.

Fair trade indeed America. You did not prepare us for immersion into a cultural history that defined us only by how we looked, how we spoke and not by the intellect you accepted us for. You did not warn us of the long nights of nannying; of the weekends of hard labor in hot kitchens, doing dishes until our hands grew chapped and weary; of graveyard shifts in smoky bars fighting exhaustion and drunken leers; did not tell us that this was all we would be considered good for. You did not tell us that we would always be aliens, that we had lined up and signed up to join the ranks of the undesired. You did not tell us that tolerance was contingent on good behavior and silence, drudgery and loss.

But I can admit it now, America: I still got the better deal. You may continue to boast of your open admissions and welcoming policies, with their narrow lines and exclusive practices, but the determined person moving through your elite ranks of education is still me. You may continue to boast of your privilege, your economy and your super-nation status, but with no other jobs open to me, it is I who create home for the children of your executives, your wall street tycoons, play with them in their rooms stacked with expensive toys and unused books, show them games I played with my parents; try to teach them to love learning, to appreciate difference – that was me, America. And you may continue to boast of your diversity, your affirmative action, your melting pot fading into whiteness, but through you and in spite of you, this black sun-child has come to understand that she had never been a minority; never struggled with wavering identity – had always seen herself mirrored in her schools, her government, her media; had no need to swagger in order to be seen, shout to be heard, or shot to be silenced. And all this I brought with me, unknown even to myself, packed in the two suitcases you searched so thoroughly, stamped in the passport that you scrutinized on my entry; I carry it daily and still you do not see.
Just so you know, America: when you see the educated black woman walking with dignity, smiling with confidence, walking up that white flecked ladder, calmly slicing her portion of your famous freedom pie, and you are about to preen because you think that it is you who created her, look again... she is not your child – she is me, America.
The X-Ray

I feared and revered it,
this black and white portrait
standing calmly against the harsh
fluorescent glow, the cryptic stare
of my doctor in her white lab coat,
her ballpoint pen briskly outlining

the skeleton of my wrist: the fragmented
carpals, the rivers of dark separating
the tiny pieces of the metacarpals,

the four long fingers, their columns
of white bone, the nebulous lumps
of each knuckle, speed bumps on a smooth

and curving road, the comparative stub
of the thumb, the thick layers of adipose
transformed into barely conspicuous

grayness. It did not apologize, demur,
or cover itself in shame at our scrutiny
dared us, even, to look deeper, to pick

each tiny layer apart, dig through the thick
cartilage, the grain of ligaments, the ivory
colored coating, to lay bare the marrow,

the blue veins, the dark arteries, and thin
capillaries rich with plasma and blood
cells on their journeys to and from the heart.

I have longed to live
like this: to be held up to the light, naked
beneath any official stare – found whole.
No Body's a Mystery

Today I found a lump
in the crook of my elbow,

checked the other to see
if one hid there too,

but could find nothing
in the lined, brown folds

of skin. I seem to love
to grow things, my body

fertile earth to the seeds
of excess: the raised, pink-
colored mole on my left
hand that would eventually
disappear; the white trail
that spawned a lingering shadow

of pale on the dark
moon of my face; the polyp

that popped up, making
its home, unnoticed,

in the thick, mucus-filled
lining of my intestinal wall.

Always I have wondered:
what other, unseen beings thrive

in the unknowable
landscapes we call our own?

I have come to realize
that we are carriers,

living every day with
our own foreign bodies.
The Hardest Love Poem

I will speak of you my islands
seal your fiery sun in my words bolt your wildness down in Times
New Roman, size 12 font, one-and-a-half inch margins, single-spaced.

I want to crack your heart open ma patrie catch the rhythm of your limbo,
the beat of your calypso your steel your soca.

I will make this poem your poem madre mia bum:

hot like kutchela like anchar like chow, like asphalt steamed in sun, like Carnival
chaos, like the twitch of broad hips;

red as cherries as hibiscus blooms as the balisier, as the wing of the Ibis
in flight;

white as the break of Las Cuevas waves, as Maracas sands &
black as the land’s blood deep drilled and plenty, as the fields of earth
at the root of your sweetness.

I want your spirit to haunt this house with your magic your melody La Trinité
with your music that drives my singing.
Where the Heart Is

I have given it away, this organ, left it behind on the shores of islands soaked in sun, baptized in the brine of the Caribbean Sea. I have trailed it across the changing face of the continent, broken it on the edge of skyscrapers, scattered it in Carolina sands, lost it on noisy Manhattan streets, on the green-lined highways of Iowa.

I have buried it in words plastered like wallpaper between the covers of notebooks, smeared across the lines of journals and letters. I have pressed it into the white spaces of greeting cards at Christmas, sent it crackling through long distance wires bundled in accents thick as winter coats, heavy as December snows.

I have stamped it on dream-soaked pillows of lovers sleeping as I slipped away, in the twist of tousled sheets already losing the imprint of my body. I have sealed it into the wallet-bound smiles of creased and faded photographs, swept it into echoing laughter that rings too loud, that splinters and spreads like dust, like leaves on passing winds.

I have poured it out into sweat-tears shed in heat-racked Memphis nights, in torrid Miami mornings, blistered it in the frigid mists of Maine; I have spent it in Minnesota malls, cloud-capped California mountains and still, still it has found me, faithfully followed the trail of leaving that maps this pilgrim's search for home.
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