

Poems

Jacqueline Bishop

TITUBA SPEAKS

The magic I brought wrapped up tight in the bosom
of my chest to Salem, Massachusetts,
Came not from slaves, nor from my Guyanese Indian people,
but from a white woman

Who taught it to me back in Barbadoes
where I forcefully taken. She the one, those days we alone

On the plantation, showed me how to curse someone
and how to turn-back-the-curse to cure someone.

Some nights that woman and I would look up
at the flat white face of the moon –

And it is true, we both called the moon mother.
She had a black cat about her

She called familiar. There was a broom she never touched
leaning against the far wall in the corner.

FIRE BUILDER

I am by nature a conflagration ---
I am by nature the gale force wind
that blows these mountains brown and bare ---

Some say that I have become a symbol to my people.

I am the salt ponds of Sualouiga;
The if-you-could-only-name-those-shades-of-blue-waters;
The woman who can simultaneously see
what is before and beyond me.

We must unpack
The book of symbols.

Call me ill-tempered;
Call me bad-tempered;

Call me all-for-myself;
Call me all-for-my-people;

Call me the one who is always building a fire ---

The names really aren't that important.

I am the woman in the bright red dress
Looking like a flamboyant tree walking down Front street;

The woman who is always ahead of you ---
The woman whose face you cannot see.

Call me Circe; call me Sycorax;
I am the puzzle; the mystery; the riddle;
I can become anything you want me to be.

Call me the mother of the July people;
Call me the July people -
All those hands raised into fists,
Holding that blood-red flower.

Call me mythmaker;
Call me Firebuilder;
Call me One-Tete-Lokay.

The Housekeeper's Lament

She don't see nobody else's mistake---
only my own. I always the one

Getting the shitty end of the stick.
Like is me one working in this god-forsaken run down

Place that these people keep calling a hotel.
That woman they calling a shift supervisor,

The one that don't even know how to talk to people,
She see me in the kitchen, having my morning tea,

And instead of letting me in peace to drink my tea
She start in on me, like she always doing.

She come up to me asking if I know that
Is two days now Room 37 check out

Of the room, the room still don't touch,
The people could be dead in there for all I know

And here I am walking around,
Eating bread and butter, drinking tea,

my head up in the clouds,
like I don't have a care in the world.

I look at this woman, take a deep breath, think of my pickney dem
Back at my yard and I don't say nothing to her.

But you tell me: How I must keep up
with the goings and comings of foreign people?

Sing of the Songs of Childhood

Three slender dark boys are playing
Under an almond tree abundant with rust
and emerald and sun-stained leaves.

Almonds fall effortlessly to the ground bruising
Their thick-yellow-skin, while the wire-waisted

Bark-brown naseberry tree, its head a floppy green
going and growing in every which direction,
refuses to let go of its oh-so-sweet
But rough-skinned fruits.

These are the songs and sounds and smells of childhood:
Three boys running round and around in circles
Trying to catch each other. Trying to make each other "it."

These are the songs and sounds of childhood
of my grandmother, not yet gone from me
for a year, but who I still reach, searching for
night after night in my dreams.

The boys voices meets me in a distant song of sorrow
As they chant, running after each other,
Running now among mango and cheery trees,
off now in the distance, among bright pink bougainvilleas

overwhelming the pots and fences
Where they are planted, and where, like the boys,
They too are staking their claim in the early morning sun.

The boys continue playing, chanting, singing,
laughing to and at each other their voices loud and sharp
and crisp and tangled up in the cool morning breeze:

Ah-you-a-it Ah-you-a-it
Ah-your-turn-to-be-it You-not-playing-fair
Ah-you-a-it.

Just Speak of the Dead and They Appear:

Unless, of course, the dead is your great grandfather
Who stayed away for years, stayed in the long grey shadows
Of your mind, minding his own business -

He had always said the dead should stay dead
And he would not be a wandering dead,
Showing up, unwanted, in the lives of the living.

From time to time his wife, my great grandmother,
Would appear, when there was something she really needed to tell me.
Her mouth would be firm, never laughing. She had come a long way.
She had a warning to give me:

*Never put your trust one-hundred percent in other people, don't care
Who they be. There are many wolves in sheeps clothing!*

In life, she was a woman who believed
That every generation had to find their own way,
fight their own battles.
One is never to over-rely even on the members of one own fambily!

They must have known, these two,
who made a habit of keeping out of people's business,
that there are times when the dead is needed, called for,
called forth into the rooms of the living ---

just days before my grandmother went to sleep
for the last time in a narrow iron bed in the Buff Bay hospital,
Humming a hymn to herself, surrounded by all the things I had bought her ---
The floral housedresses, the puffy pink bed slippers;
they showed up, (my great grandfather for the first time
since his death more than twenty years before), they showed up, these two,
and strange enough, this time, they had nothing to tell me.

*Not everything good to eat good to talk.
Sometime one needs to kibber their mouth.*

And days later they showed up again, these two,
who had already claimed what they had created,

to remind me, my tears as clogged and sluggish as the Nonsuch river,
they had come to deliver a message:

*I-want-you-to-pull-you-all-self-together.
Stop-all-this-cow-bawling,*

*Remember what your granny told you,
That last day in the hospital, blowing hard,
Using the last of her strength:*

*You did not love me, you love me a lot, my granddaughter
and I know it, I know it.*

For years, after her death, I would dream my great grandmother,
in rooms and houses laid bare, bereft,
but made whole by their firm wooden foundations ---

Finally I understood what all along they had been trying to tell me,
my living dead, those ones who did not like *faasting* into other people's business,
the ones who kept insisting that the dead were to stay dead, and not
butt up into the life of the living ---

If I just spoke their names, call on them,
my dearly beloved, my dearly departed---
my great grandparents, my much beloved grandmother ---
If we would just speak their names, our dearly departed,
If we just speak of the dead then they would appear.