GREEN CANE
AND
JUICY FLOTSAM

SHORT STORIES BY
CARIBBEAN WOMEN

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Editors

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To our mothers
Carmen Elena Montesinos Vda. de Esteves
and
Virgenmina Rivera de Paravisini

and to the memory of our fathers
Antolino Esteves de Jesus
and
Domigo Paravisini
INTRODUCTION

and first upon the hillside where bare feet
in a goat’s wake avoiding the small brown pebbles
know earth as it was made and men in fields
releasing cotton from the mother tree
milking its heavy with white wholesomeness
or riding wave on wave of green cane till
the swell abates and the warm wind
finds only calm brown surfaces
thick with the juicy flotsam of the storm
make poems

and men who speak the drum
bembe dundun conga dudups cutter
or blow the brass or play the rhumba box
or lick croix-croix, marimba or tack tack
and women who record all this
making the tribe for start in blood
and sending it off to school to factory
to sea to office, university— to death
make poems

Pamela Mordecai,
"Poet’s World"

The last two decades have witnessed a veritable explosion in the
literary production of Caribbean women. Gone are the days
when every generation or movement would have one representa-
tive woman writer who would signal by her presence the very
absence she was called upon to negate: that of women’s voices in
the mainstream of literary activity in the region. Beginning in the
1970s, the growing international reputations of Caribbean writers
such as Maryse Condé, Rosario Ferré, Jamaica Kincaid, Jean
Rhys, and Simone Schwarz-Bart, among others, have focused
attention on women’s literary activity in the region and on
women’s particular contribution to our understanding of
Caribbean societies through literature.

The increasing popularity of Caribbean women writers has
been sparked by a growing interest in voices from the Third
World, where issues of gender and feminism are compounded by
labyrinthine questions of race, power, colonialism, poverty, and the correlations between national and personal identities. Since their work often addresses some manifestation of gender, class, racial, or colonial "Otherness," it has served as the catalyst for critical exchange on these issues. The exploration by Caribbean women writers of the remnants of plantation-bred socio-economic structures, and of the concomitant lack of sisterhood between black and white women in Caribbean societies, for example, has made a valuable contribution to the ongoing revision of traditional feminist thought.

Thus far, critical attention has centered almost exclusively on Caribbean women novelists. Short story writers (and poets) have received at best moderate notice, primarily because their work has appeared most frequently in local journals, newspapers, and magazines, severely limiting access by readers and critics. The short story, however, is a genre of unique importance in the Caribbean, with roots dating back to rich Taino/African folk traditions of which women have often been the custodians. It has been as short story writers that a large number of Caribbean women have established literary reputations—Dora Alonso, Rosario Ferré, Olive Senlor, and Jamaica Kincaid are cases in point. But there has been until now no collection of short stories where the student of literature as well as the general reader could experience the richness and variety of the genre as practiced by Caribbean women.

The stories included in this anthology have been selected to show the broadest spectrum of themes, styles, and techniques. This diversity can be seen in Jamaica Kincaid's brilliantly eloquent portrayal of a mother-daughter relationship in "Girl"; in Jeanne Hyvra's poignant depiction of the alienation of a Caribbean woman in Parisian exile in "Opéra Station. Six in the Evening. For Months . . ."; in the eroticism of Dora Alonso's description of an old woman's frustrated sexual desires in post-revolutionary Cuba in "Cotton Candy"; in the symbiotic relationship between the tormented plantation mistress and the parasol who narrates Olga Nolla's "No Dust Is Allowed in This House"; in Ana Lydia Vega's parodic reversal of male erotic discourse in

"ADJ, Inc."; in Myriam Warner-Veyra's affectionately humorous tale of the triumph of folk-belief over Church bureaucracy in "Passport to Paradise"; and in the solidarity between the privileged light-skinned girl and the victimized black servant in Michelle Cliff's "Columba," to offer some examples.

In their search for their individual voices as Caribbean writers, women have had to address the traditional themes and tropes of Caribbean literature—slavery, the plantation economy, colonialism, the complexities of class, race, and language—from their own particular vantage point, that of women from emerging nations where patriarchal/colonial institutions have sought to silence women's voices in general—and colored women's voices in particular. Therefore, in resisting their double oppression, their work both echoes and subverts these themes and tropes, often calling into question accepted notions and well-established "truths," revealing aspects of the Caribbean experience not previously gleaned from literary or historical accounts.

Perhaps the most obviously resonant theme is that of the writer's relationship with the written word, with her very ability to write, with her discovery of the often awesome power of the text—a recurrent theme in these stories. This is a theme of particular importance given both the widespread illiteracy in the region and women's limited access to formal schooling and higher education. Thus writing itself becomes an audacious act, one tantamount to an usurpation of the potential for literary creation, which had been previously the sole province of males. Claude, protagonist of Maryse Condé's "Three Women in Manhattan"—transplanted from Pointe-à-Pitre to the inhospitable landscape of New York City—awaits the moment when the audacity to write "would come back to her, that her hips, her sex, her heart, her head would set off in motion once again and that she would give birth to her world."

Claude's quest for her lost "audacity to write" allows Condé to address women's situation vis-à-vis literary establishments which
have sought to suppress female voices. The quest itself is mediated in the text by Claude's relationships to two women writers: Elinor, whose fashionable apartment Claude cleans; and Vera, an old Haitian activist who has offered her shelter and protection. The two women stand on opposite poles of the literary world: Elinor is a successful young African American novelist torn between black and white literary establishments, eagerly courted by white critics who find in her work the epitome of "the folklore of the Old South and [of the] collective black patrimony," and harshly censured by black critics who want her "to speak once more about slavery and the slave trade, and racism," and to adorn blacks "with the virtues of victims"; Vera is a Haitian novelist whose unpublished manuscripts bear witness to the suppression of the voice of the Haitian historical plight. Vera's tragic inability to find a publisher for her many-times-returned manuscripts, juxtaposed against Elinor's position as a writer in vogue, prompts Claude to ask vital questions about women's relationships to the very literary establishment they seek to penetrate: "Were they condemned to this inglorious end? Who defines Beauty? Who decides upon success? Why was Elinor basking in the full sun? Vera in darkness?" Claude's own eagerness to write is fed by her desire to tear down the barriers that have silenced Vera's Caribbean voice. She dreams of writing a work that would present Vera "not such as she was—an octogenarian in a pitiful wool cardigan, raising her pathetic voice in a tumult of distress—but such as she dreamed her to be: Erzulie Dantor, flaming torch clenched in her fist."

Rababai Espinet's "Barred: Trinidad 1987" strikes a similar chord, suggesting that the "tumult of distress" in which Vera finds herself is rooted in the "newness" of the Caribbean condition, in the historylessness that marks newly-independent island societies emerging from centuries of colonial control. Espinet's tale articulates the uneasy relationship between the East Indian immigrant and his or her new landscape—and the silence to which it leads—a theme that has widespread resonance in cultures founded upon the horrors of slavery and the Middle Passage. In the story, a young East Indian woman agonizes over her people's frustrating relationship to words in "the peasant newness of this settlement": "We are lost here, have not found the words to utter our newness, our strangeness, our unfound being. Our clothes are strange, our food is strange, our names are strange. And it is not possible for anyone to coax or help us. Our utterance can only come roaring out of our mouths when it is ready, set, and can go."

This preoccupation with the utterance, and with the underlying pain it must sooner or later express, is shared by the disembodied voice in Jeanne Hyvrad's "Opéra Station. Six in the Evening. For Months . . . ." tortured by its inability to negotiate "the river of words in the mangrove thicket of writing": a voice adrift in the underground maze of the Parisian Metro searching for a way to "dance the broken voices reemerging from everywhere." Hyvrad expresses the anguish of a writer overwhelmed by a history of slavery, death, and deportation so devastating that it leads to silence, or at best to the fragmented utterances of the dispossessed. Her story bares the word's power to unleash the frustrations of the disenchanted into revolt.

A different aspect of the dangerous potential of the written word is exemplified by Rosario Ferré's "The Poisoned Story," where the printed page becomes an instrument of death and revenge. Through its central character's questioning of the authority of the male interpreter of her story, "The Poisoned Story" exposes the way literature can distort history to deny a voice to the black and the poor, as well as to women. Ferré's fiction to date has focused precisely on the problem of the voicelessness of marginalized groups in Caribbean societies, and it has attempted, through the medium of the short story, to dethrone official history and to open avenues of communication—voices—through which women and the poor can question the otherness that has been imposed on them.

This preoccupation with finding ways to give voice to experiences not explored before in Caribbean literatures emerges poignantly in "Cotton Candy," where Dora Alonso, one of Latin America's most highly regarded short story writers, examines the voicelessness of repressed desire and its piteous consequences.
Lola, the forlorn heroine of the tale, wastes her life away, torn between her pathetic attempts at proclaiming a burning sensuality constantly doused by male fears of her torchlike desire, and by her mother's suffocating control. Lola's inability to express the wealth of feelings bursting within her is representative of women's preoccupation with the silencing of their voices that characterized the Caribbean literary tradition until well into the 1960s. This tradition's concern with the creation of a body of literature that articulated authentic interpretations of history and developing definitions of national identity led to the neglect and devaluation of women's writing, as the themes acceptable within the context of national formation—political development, agricultural reform, breaking the race barriers to education and the professions—often fell outside the boundaries of women's socio-historic experiences.

As Alonso's exploration of a woman's erotic silencing shows, Caribbean women writers have appropriated the erotic as a favored avenue for the articulation of their own socio-historic and political concerns. This is indeed the case in Angela Hernández's entrancing "How to Gather the Shadows of the Flowers," where a woman's yearning to verbalize her erotic fantasy life—and progressively to withdraw into it—is narrated by her bewildered lower middle-class family. Hernández's often-humorous juxtaposition of Faride's erotic poetry with the family's middle-class dictums of propriety is characteristic of the treatment of female sexuality in these texts. Her fantasies provide Faride with the opportunity to transcend the narrow confines of her village society. In them she emerges as a sophisticated, worldly traveler, an ardent lover, a brilliant student, a theatergoer, all the things that her being female in a traditional Caribbean village has precluded. This very incongruity between her surroundings and her dreams provides the bittersweet humor of the text.

This use of humor surfaces again—with a heavy touch of irony—in Hilma Contreras's "Hair," the chronicle of a middle-aged man's growing obsession with his curvaceous young neighbor and her mane. Contreras's own juxtaposition of Luciano's feverish fantasies against his wife's matronly placidity lays the foundation for the somewhat unsettling punchline that marks the end of the story, which Contreras uses to satirize the many layers of male objectification of the female body in the text.

The story's humorous debunking of the role of women as sexual objects is representative of a growing openness in the themes acceptable in Caribbean literature, a recent development which parallels the emergence of women's movements in the region in the late sixties and early seventies. Ana Lydia Vega is a fitting heir to Contreras's humorous use of the erotic to articulate feminist content, as her story "ADJ, Inc." attests. The characters in "ADJ, Inc." parody male erotic language and postures, unveiling the absurdity of what is accepted as normal behavior in matters of gender relations and vividly revealing the class and race underpinnings that govern male/female relationships in the Caribbean. Vega's award-winning fiction offers countless examples of irreverently funny depictions of women's subversion of patriarchal, middle-class sexual mores. By often choosing as her characters lower middle-class or working-class women—traditionally excluded because of their race and class status from the chivalric protection afforded the virtue of white women of the upper classes—Vega subverts the accepted notions of respectability that have perpetuated patriarchal control: the very notions that had informed the tragic fate of the tormented virgin spinster of Dora Alonso's "Cotton Candy."

Caribbean women's claim of the erotic as a favored means of expression is an integral part of their demand for unrestrained access to the world of writing and books. This claim is the theme of Jean Rhys's "The Day They Burned the Books," the story of a young girl seeking to save books from the pyre to which they have been condemned by the unenlightened mother of her "special friend." The late Mr. Sawyer's library—a quintessentially English gentleman's library transported to a Caribbean setting—is also quintessentially a male space, and Mrs. Sawyer's dismantling and burning of a library that had been a more powerful rival than any mistress could have been is fueled by a hatred akin to that of the protagonist of "No Dust Is Allowed in This House."
toward the wall built to confine her. Mrs. Sawyer's hatred for her husband's books, however, reaches fever pitch when faced with books by women. "[Bly a flicker in Mrs. Sawyer's eyes," the narrator tells us, "I knew that worse than men who wrote books were women who wrote books—ininitely worse. Men could be mercifully shot; women must be tortured."

The protagonist's yearning to be part of a world of books that transcends the racial and class constraints of Dominica's minuscule white society is mocked by her inability to find in the French book she manages to save from the pyre—a book she cannot read or understand but which bears the tantalizing title of _Fort Comme La Mort_—the key to admission into the well-guarded male realm of literary creation. Rhys's ironic, ambivalent playfulness concerning the relationship between women and the creation and understanding of texts—Mrs. Sawyer, for example, is described as "an awful liar" who can't make up a story to save her life, but who "makes up lies about people all right"—points to these writers' demythification of the supposed voicelessness of Caribbean women, a voicelessness that the irrepresible tales presented here resoundingly deny.

A significant number of the tales included in this collection are narrated from the vantage point of the folk or fairy tale, traditions to which women have had ready access in the domestic sphere. Of great importance to the development of a women's literature in the region is their manipulation and often reversal of the tropes of the indigenous folk tale and the European fairy tale.

The oral tale is represented in the collection by the anonymous "Tétyette and the Devil," a funeral tale recorded as narrated by a young Guadeloupan woman in 1971. "Tétyette and the Devil"—a story of a young girl who marries a devil despite her family's warnings and must be rescued by her brother when the devil attempts to eat her up—is reminiscent of the European tale of Little Red Riding Hood, complete with the slashing of the devil's belly from which the girl emerges "all whole." As a cautionary story, the narrative is fraught with ambiguities about women's sexual initiation and female independence, and is characteristic of the frequent depictions of women in the oral tradition as having to be rescued by males from the consequences of their imprudence and foolhardiness.

These assumptions of the folk tale are laid bare by Rosario Ferré in her rewriting of stories from the Puerto Rican folk tradition. Ferré, an avid listener and reader of folk and fairy tales, has published several books for children which reinterpret the many stories she heard from her nanny as a child. Interested on the one hand in rescuing these stories from the threat of extinction, and on the other hand in rescuing her readers from the patriarchal and misogynistic elements of the oral tradition, Ferré's rewriting of folktales inscribes them in a new tradition, that of Caribbean feminism. Through her artful combination of traditional plots and narrative devices with unfamiliar, often anachronistic elements, she subverts the accepted views on women and the oppressed characteristic of the oral tradition. For Ferré, as for many Caribbean short-story writers of earlier generations—Florette Morand-Capasso, Virginie Sampeur, Lydia Cabrera, Ester Feliciano Mendoza, to name a few—the richness of the oral tradition has constituted the mainspring of literary creation. In one of her autobiographical essays, "The Writer's Kitchen," she narrates how, following the failure of her first attempt at writing a story, she used the remembered oral tales of her childhood as the source of her first successful text, "The Youngest Doll."

In "The Poisoned Story," the story included in this collection, Ferré draws upon two related traditions, the European fairy tale and the tales of the Arabian Nights. From the fairy tale Ferré borrows the familiar trope of the wicked stepmother seeking to separate the child from the father and his possessions. The story is complicated by its being transposed to a planter society where the age-old antagonism between stepmother and female child of the fairy tale is compounded by the race and class antagonisms which are the legacy of slavery and the plantation order. From the tales of the Arabian Nights Ferré borrows the trope of the
French planters of the colony of Saint Domingue in the late eighteenth century. Yáñez's placement of the story's key scene during an old Haitian coffee picker's retelling of Mackandal's legends to a group of avid listeners gathered around a camp stove underscores the centrality of the tale to her story. The scene focuses on a well-off white planter's challenge to the veracity of the tales told by the old black man. There is in the story a clear thematic link between the oral retelling of the stories of Mackandal's triumph over the exploitative French planters—stories central to the Haitian, and indeed the Caribbean oral traditions—and the celebration of the triumph of the Cuban Revolution. Cuco Serrano's open challenge to that tradition mirrors his previous attempts to subvert and betray the Revolution, so that his destruction becomes symbolic of the triumph of both the people represented by Mackandal and the Cuban villagers who find such comfort and inspiration in his legend.

Marie-Thérèse Colimon-Hall's "A Pottage of Lentils" epitomizes Caribbean women's eclectic combinations of the oral, folk, fairy, and, in this case, biblical narrative traditions in their tales. "Borrowing" from multiple tropes from these traditions—the three sisters, the rambling dilapidated mansion, the recovery of the family's lost fortunes, the humble suitor turned charming prince coming to the rescue, the masking of the heroine's identity—Colimon draws the reader into a familiar world, which she then defamiliarizes through their placement in the non-fairy-tale-land of impoverished Haiti and through the open-ended conclusion, which leaves the traditional happy ending much in doubt. Colimon's framing of her narrative within the context of the biblical tale of Esau's relinquishment of his birthright for a pottage of lentils serves a similar purpose, as, next to the oral/folk/fairy tale tradition, the Bible is perhaps the only other narrative universally familiar to a Caribbean audience.

The Bible is indeed the only book in June-Plum's house in Opal Palmer-Adisa's "Widow's Walk," a book that she reads to her dying mother as a source of hope and courage, but also a book that underscores society's injunctions to women to conform and accept, as June-Plum's meditation on her many pregnancies
in light of the Bible's exhortation to be fruitful and multiply indicates. In "Widow's Walk," however, folk culture is represented as a more vital force than the Bible in guiding the characters' lives. Through the representation of Yemoja, mistress of the sea, as the powerful rival to which June-Plum may have to surrender Neville, Palmer Adisa vividly renders the power of folk wisdom to reconcile humans to the beauty and violence of tropical nature. Fearing that Neville has drowned, but still hopeful that Yemoja may return him if properly appeased, June-Plum bows, as if in penance, to the sea: "She does this three times, then scoops up a handful of sea water and drinks it. She is beginning to understand Yemoja, more powerful than any person, including herself. She is a force of nature that prevails. Surrendering to her is not defeat; it's wisdom. June-Plum breathes more easily as she heads home."

Underlying these uses of the folk- and fairy-tale tradition is the preoccupation of Caribbean women writers with the problems of race and class that are the legacy of colonialism and slavery. In these stories, these conflicts are apparent in the representation of the solidarity between female characters, regardless of their class status, and the dispossessed peasantry. Such is the import of Michelle Cliff's "Columba," where the young female narrator eschews the privileges of the white and wealthy milieu of her guardian in favor of the company of the young black servant with whom she shares a perspective of disempowerment. "Columba" encapsulates the themes we have come to associate with Cliff's fiction: the denunciation of race and class privileges with their resulting exploitation of the black and poor, the anger at the impotence of being female and young, and the young female protagonist's concomitant alienation from her world. The comforting embrace of the young girl and the servant that ends the story is emblematic of this solidarity, a solidarity echoed movingly in Olga Nolla's "No Dust Is Allowed in This House."

In Nolla's story, the parasol/narrator's identification with her mistress finds a parallel in the mistress's seeking the mute comfort of her servants Eusebio and Margarita when confronted with their shared powerlessness before patriarchal power. A feminist story of overwhelming anger, "No Dust Is Allowed in This House" centers on a privileged plantation mistress who comes violently in conflict with a husband's power to isolate her and her beautiful family from any soiling contact with the underprivileged. As told by the loyal parasol whose responsibility has been that of preserving her mistress's "special paleness"—an uncontrovertible proof of her status as a lady—the story underscores white women's precarious position in Caribbean societies, poised as they are between the power of the white male to whom they are inextricably linked by race and class, and the peasantry and working class with whom they stand linked by their relative powerlessness. The negation of myriad aspects of her personality bursting to be expressed finds an outlet in her imagined bursting of the walls that isolate her, an explosion which prefigures, but does not promise, the possibility of freedom from patriarchal, racial, and class constraints.

More characteristic of the reality of the relations between Caribbean women is Phyllis Shand Allfrey's "Little Cog-burt," which depicts a white woman's unempathetic distress at seeing herself surrounded by black faces whose beauty she can only very unwillingly acknowledge. Allfrey's slow dissection of her character's racism is underscored through Moira's mirroring in her crippled soul of little Cog-burt's crippled hands—hands and soul that "will never grow any larger or stronger"—and through her uneasy relationship to Cog-Burt's uninhibited mother Ma'am Jovey. The story, with its sentimental albeit hard-hitting unveiling of the psychological nuances of racism, is but one example of the depiction of the seeming impossibility of relations of sisterhood between black and white women, separated by class as well as by race. It is a theme present in many of the stories included in the collection, whether as a central theme—as in Aida Cartagena Portafaltín's "They Called Her Aurora" and Olive Senior's "Bright Thursdays"—or as an vital element of the characters' social landscape—as in Bea Vianen's "Of Nuns and Punishments" and Ramabai Espinet's "Barred: Trinidad 1987."

These stories—Olive Senior's "Bright Thursdays" particularly—
address the complexities of race relations in the Caribbean, where great significance is attached to relative skin color, and where the polar categories of black and white that characterize race relations in the United States are replaced by a broad spectrum of racial categorizations that run the gamut between black and white. Laura, the protagonist of Senior’s “Bright Thursdays,” is a child whose destiny is sealed by the “whiteness” of her features: “Laura had come out with dark skin but almost straight hair which Miss Myrtle did her best to improve by rubbing it with coconut oil and brushing it every day, at the same time rubbing it with alcohol to keep it soft and make it ‘clear.’ Miss Myrtle made her child wear a broad straw hat to keep off the sun, assuring her that her skin was “too delicate.” Laura’s “straight nose” and “long dark hair” are her tickets of admission to the relative affluence of her white grandparents’ home, where she contemplates the white faces in the photograph gallery and “silently beg[s] pardon for being there.” Her alienation underscores the survival of patterns of social relationships rooted in slavery and the plantation which still mar the possibilities of sisterhood in Caribbean societies.

Laura’s victory over this alienation at the conclusion of “Bright Thursdays” recalls Hazel D. Campbell’s “See Me in Me Benz An Ting,” with its intimation of a possible break of the deadlock of post-slavery, post-colonial relationships between women. The embrace extended to the Lady in the torchèd Mercedes Benz by the working-class women who had witnessed the mob’s assault on her and her “Status Symbol”—an embrace that shelters her “into the safety of their humanity”—is emblematic of the possibilities of transcending the residues of colonial-bred relationships between black, colored, and white women. Campbell’s story heralds a hoped-for era of sisterhood until now not evident in relations across class and race between Caribbean women.

These problems of class and race have been the result of plantation-bred economic structures that Caribbean societies have yet to transcend and which still hamper Caribbean socio-economic development. The myriad economic and political problems that have plagued these island-nations, the collapse of the sugar industry in many Caribbean islands in the 1940s and 1950s being perhaps the most obvious, resulted in a diaspora that brought millions of Caribbean migrants to settle in large metropolitan centers like New York, Montreal, London, and Paris, which were to become the centers of literary activity for the new migrant communities. Countless Caribbean women writers have experienced this diaspora and as many as half of the writers represented in this collection have lived for extended periods away from the island-homes where they spent their formative years. Some of them—Jamaica Kincaid, Michelle Cliff, Lillian Dévilleux, Opal Palmer Adisa, Ramabi Espinet, Myrim Warner-Vieyra—appear to have permanently settled in their host countries.

The migration experience has consequently become a theme of special resonance for Caribbean writers, male and female, and is represented in several of the stories included in this collection, some of which begin to chart and analyze the delicate and complex process through which an island-oriented literature written from the perspective of exile becomes a literature of migration which responds to the experiences of Caribbean migrants in their new environments. Marie Thérèse Colimon-Hall’s “A Potage of Lentils” explores the push/pull factors leading to Haitian migration to New York City; Aida Cartagena Portalatin’s “They Called Her Aurora: A Passion for Donna Summer” and Maryse Condé’s “Three Women in Manhattan” depict the experiences of Caribbean women as domestic workers, and of their class-and-race-bound relationships with their white female employers, a theme that Jamaica Kincaid explores in her most recent novel, Lucy; Lillian Dévilleux’s “Plano-Bar” explores the ways in which women have found in the experience of migration the means to break away from the patriarchal aspects of Caribbean cultures which hampered their full development while remaining true to the nurturing values of their native cultures. In her refusal to return to Haiti from her exile home in Montreal, Eva, the aptly-named protagonist of Dévilleux’s story,
embodies the spirit that gave birth to the dynamic Caribbean communities in exile. The process of adaptation to their new social environments may eventually cut individuals such as Eva, Aurora, and Claude from their Caribbean roots—that is too often the cost that exile exacts—but their voices articulate essential aspects of what has been a vital element in twentieth-century Caribbean history.

Seen as a whole, perhaps the most salient feature of the stories collected here is their presentation of the multiplicity of voices of Caribbean women: the mother in Jamaica Kincaid's "Girl," the aunt in Velma Pollard's "Parable II," the parasol of Olga Nolla's "No Dust Is Allowed in This House," the adolescent of Bea Vianer's "Of Nuns and Punishment," the ambivalent university student of Magali García Ramí's "Cocuyo Flower," the passionate, distressing voices of Ramabai Espinet's "Barred: Trinidad 1987." They stand in these texts as representatives of women observed, pitied, imagined, hated, and loved, and they linger with us long after our reading is done, reminding us of the accomplishments and the promise of Caribbean women's writing.

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Dora Alonso was born in Matanzas, Cuba, in 1910. She has been an active contributor to many Latin American journals. A prolific writer, Alonso has published novels, short stories, and children's literature and has won numerous literary awards throughout Latin America. Her first novel, Tierra adentro, won the Premio Nacional de la Dirección de Cultura, and she received the 1961 Casa de las Américas Prize for Tierra inerme. Alonso's fiction, particularly that written before 1959, offers poignant and powerful depictions of marginalized characters struggling against an alienating reality or a corrupt society, and have often focused on the exploited Cuban peasantry.

DORA ALONSO

Cotton Candy

The butterfly was dancing above the trees. It would fly down, lighting on a radiant morning glory; gather its wings, making them vibrate with a delicious quiver, and at the same time, move its light legs over the wine-colored petals. In flight again, it would land on the edge of the cotton candy machine.

Lola, fascinated, watched the yellow butterfly. At once she took in the juicy acrid smell of the cubalibre branches, which she parted with her childish hands. The butterflies were falling under the green whip, dying, astonished, and young Lola was gathering her fragile harvest to offer to her first love. Donato was ten years old; he rode a bike and whistled in a strange, compelling way because of his cleft palate. Donato, recipient of dead butterflies given by the girl in an occult rite, which not even Donato knew about.

From butterfly to butterfly. Donato, Domingo, Dionisio, Daniel, Danilo, David. And more and more. Lola had her fifteenth birthday, sighing under a steady rain of winged corpses, on her hair, her hands, her budding breasts. At night the sheet that covered her was a shroud seeded with wings and a luminous powder which threatened to soar in flight, taking her up in the air to where cats meowed among angels and owls.

A growing young woman under the domination of a tyrannical mother, Lola grew wild in the quiet settlement of Minas, gathering dreams which went back to Donato when she was seven. At twenty, the accumulated names shouted among bands of butterflies drove her crazy.

Every day, under the weight of a repeated and unconsummated guilt, she wanted to go with the cats and the angels; but her hot flesh got tired just with the sewing machine pedal and the rags which necessity made her sew. At midnight she would leave her bed to go out, like a sleepwalker, onto the patio. Hearing the buzzing of the feverish beehives, Lola burned among the honey and the gryations, wanting to sink her teeth into the sweetness full of stings. Almost insane, she would invoke the names of the telegraph operators, train conductors, rural guards, circus men, traveling salesmen, cousins, and friends whom she tirelessly loved in great secrecy.

Every week the only prostitute in town would come secretly to see the tormented seamstress; she always came very early, tired and smelling of bed and tobacco. Between them they chose attractive patterns from fashion magazines. Their relationship was established on the basis of the respectability of the loose woman, who employed manners and words of an exaggerated refinement, and on feigned ignorance on Lola's part. When they finished choosing a pattern for a dress, they would exchange recipes, or talk about the existence of spirits and their apparitions, while also gossiping about weddings and baptisms. The seamstress's mother was present during the visit, taking part in the innocent gossip which smelled of cumin and bright light. And when the time came for the dress to be tried on, the eyes and nose of the virgin would seek traces of guilt in the naked flesh of her best client.

The constant tightening and loosening of dreams and realities
were gradually deforming the young woman. Laden with adornment triplicated by her anxiety—necklaces, old ribbons, rouge, long rhinestone earrings—showing off her small feet, she would go to dances where few men asked her to dance. An instinctive defense drove them from the ardent virgin, as a devouring and persistent pyre is avoided.

The monotonous years, for her repetitions of frustrations and renewed desires, killed her grandparents and uncles, and forced her relatives to emigrate. Her lonely forty years fought then, like a dog biting its chain, and her mother agreed to move to Havana. The two women would soon understand that Luyano was no better than Minas. For ten more years Lola struggled to have a man in either of two ways: "Marry me," or "I'll set you up in a room." But her mother, going against nature, hung onto her with equal obstinacy and drowned Lola's last murmurs of necessity.

On her mother's death, the spinster felt an alleviating remorse which made her dissolve into tears. She was alone now, but it was late. Lola would have struggled a little longer with the sewing, but her eyes refused to go on. In order to earn a living she sold fabrics and cosmetics door to door, but she offered such good terms that she ended up selling lottery tickets. Her hair was gray by then, and the wrinkles began to devour her face.

Giving reasons to herself, she became used to the circumstances, accepting the hard buffetings of life without suffering too much. Her bread arrived wrapped in an Official List, and each Saturday the voice of a child from the orphanage, or of a young blind man, who would choose the lucky number while turning the lottery box filled with numbered balls, would announce the winner. She ended up picking a site near the zoo, as a handy place for buyers of single or whole sheets of lottery tickets. Kind, smiling, with a big pocket in her skirt where she kept her change, she would cry out the numbers with her nasal voice. At the end of the day she would ride the bus to Luyano, to the same shack where she had always lived.

As removed from politics as Simon the Dwarf, she did not have to fight in any way to get the benefits of the new era. She entered through the same door that solved the economic anguish and the unfortunate life of the humble vendors in the zoo. Lola was assigned a stall to run the cotton candy machine. For the first time she felt secure and could look around her peacefully. The old lady ate her bread without having to worry about the next day.

Every morning she very politely greeted the other employees; the hundreds of them who went hurriedly on their way to the different businesses in the park. She was by now nothing but wrinkles and bags, crowned with an ugly mane tarnished by a permanent. A big woman with a thick waist and straight, fat, pianolike legs, arms with hanging flesh, and feet that walked twisted like a wild parrot. But in spite of herself, there was a certain virginal aspect about her disheveled figure: a seal of something well-kept, aging without rendering any service.

The routine work allowed her to free her secret parades, which followed her throughout her long spinsterhood like a consuming plague. While filling the metal spoon with sugar, pouring it in the electric centrifuge, and forming a great cone by curling the white threads around a stick, she would indulge in unending daydreams.

Old already, she built a refuge with all she had not been allowed to live. As others recall their actual memories, Lola unearthed phantoms and butterflies.

The large human family of the zoo took a liking to her and enjoyed embarrassing her by telling her dirty jokes. Being a good woman, she would render small services and gossip about work and events of the park.

Lola needed several years to discover the background and the different relationships of the life surrounding her. It was in the spring that she glimpsed it in its limited fullness. She didn't tell anybody, but she tuned her ears, her eyes, on trees, beasts, birds. Always in wait, with each pore like a hungry mouth.

She would go to sleep wishing it was time to go back to work. When she finished work, she would use any pretexts to stay longer and go slowly through the zoo in order to look with newborn pupils at the cages.

A new existence seemed to animate the animals, and she
discovered and felt love in every corner and over her head. The inexpressible, contagious atmosphere fascinated her. With the beginning of the spring cycle the beasts became beautiful like the trees and the light. And the favored season inflamed the caresses of the turtledoves and the light blue of the tiny birds from the village of San Diego; it brought together the claws of the eagles and the crowns of the herons.

Whistles, like darts, rent the air. The exalted tenderness preceding desire began and the old woman, with her parrot feet, was a wandering elf in its pursuit.

The music of the ringdove was heard at all hours, and of the white, red-breasted dove. Hummingbirds nested in Lola's ecstatic eyes.

The zoo buzzed like the distant beehives in Minas, with the bellows of the deer, reborn in his bristling hide, lapping his timid female. In the cave, forgetting her captivity and the noisy avenue, the gray bear, sitting on her haunches, attracted and kissed, sucked her mate, from the forehead to the mouth, the mouth . . .

The ancient virgin of the cotton candy looked blindly for any encounter with whatever sang or roared limitless love. She would be still for long periods, scrutinizing her newly discovered feelings. In the well-kept prison was born the unmatched joy of heat and mating.

Lola waded though the lukewarm preludes, searching with unsure steps for the deep water of unmannered sex. The forgotten dizziness of her youth returned with the strength of a llama, who mounts his female for a very long time, hurting her. With the lasciviousness of the chimpanzees before the monstrous flower of the female; with the modesty of the spider monkey who tantalizes the imagination. With the incredible variations of the orangutans, masters of the science of the brothel; contortionists, enjoyers, human in the art of extracting from sex its rich variations. They would roll on the ground intertwined, a ball of pleasure, distilling it, silent, surrendered. Lola, followed by the furious ghost of a mother, wanted to flee, but she would stare and stare, tense, full of anguish, her mouth metallic, her knees buckling, and her face red with shame.

Her quiet blood would grow to a high tide with the repetitions of the acts. They were weeks of communal delirium in which she went from bough to cage, from one animal to the next; to the ferocious surrenderers of the coupled lions who, roaring, would tear at each other, to the crosses between tiger and lion, which gave birth to tigers and tiglons.

It was the time when the guards were afraid—of the new rhythm, the delirious fights, of the seeding.

The season of love transformed the intimate hours of the spinster. Lola returned to her two-strand necklaces; to her long, glittering earrings; to her rouge; to her small, high-heeled shoes stuffed with her overflowing feet. She would pin flowers on her blouse and use French perfumes.

During the last spring she craved a hand mirror and went to look for one in the knickknack shops, among an extravagant scramble of dust-covered objects. The mirror was a beautiful piece of embossed silver, with cupid and fawn motifs, and a beautiful glass surface. She kept it in her purse, and looked at herself covered with makeup and trinkets like a barbarian queen.

Last May, after eight years of mixing the sugar threads, of sighing with the birds and the beasts, of mixing her history, her ghosts, her butterflies with the colors of the birds' plumage and the breath of the beasts in love; one Dionysian morning in which the four thousand inhabitants of the zoo seemed to copulate in unison, in which the feverish pupils seemed to sparkle, sexes palpitate, and the painted Egyptian touracos, which the rains discolor, were floating in nuptial flight, Lola had an encounter with the Jockey.

The Jockey found her by the food stalls, and Lola saw a young man: smooth face, his teeth intact, sparkling eyes, muscular neck without jowls or wrinkles . . . She blinked in surprise. So afraid . . . ! He said something like, "You're drunk," and she shrugged her shoulders without answering. She was looking straight at the old black man in charge of the kangaroos and the llamas, who was approaching on the other side of the path. Julián seemed to be made of light and ebony. New from head to toe, the beautiful black man.
Hazel Dorothy Campbell was born in Jamaica and has worked as a teacher and public relations officer. Her first published story appeared in the Sunday Gleaner in 1970. Since then she has published two collections of stories—The Rag Doll and Other Stories (1978) and Woman’s Tongue (1985)—and has won numerous literary prizes. Campbell’s deceptively simple fiction explores the function of religion in the shattered cultures of the Caribbean. It is a fiction characterized by an ambiguous sense of doom and resurrection under a veil of social commentary.

HAZEL D. CAMPBELL

See Me in Me Benz An T’ing

Like the Lady Who Lived on That Isle Remote

The Lady of the house sucked her teeth angrily as she put down the telephone.

"Carl knows I can’t stand driving down to his factory," she complained loudly.

"Why doesn’t he just send the driver for the car!" She gestured in annoyance. "In a hurry, my foot!"

The maid dusting the furniture nearby didn’t comment as she knew her place better than that. In any case she wasn’t being directly addressed.

"Don’t forget the upstairs sitting room," the Lady ordered, suddenly turning her annoyance on the maid. "Yesterday I ran my finger over the TV up there. Absolutely filthy! Don’t know why it’s so difficult to get you people to do an honest day’s work."

Carl had absolutely ruined her day, the Lady pouted. She would be late for the session with the girls and miss all the nice
my—Do you know what I mean? I'm sick and tired of watching you drink shots of tequila behind the old Mexican's counter, and this happens here where there are so many policemen, so many ITTs, here, from where they spread CIs all over the world—daily violence, daily tortures—an unemployed, homeless guy, dazed as if he was high, beaten up just because he's acting funny, and he lets them beat him up, that's not the way Dominican machos behave. The policeman is acting tough, as if this was a cowboy movie. If this is the Free World, overabundant, overexploited, I'd rather be alienated. And no, no, and no! I leave and I go back to Mistress Sarah and her constant music, Donna Summer's music, to face the same shit, the same put-downs: you're talking nonsense. And she screams and howls when I read in the paper about the injustices they commit against blacks in South Africa. Not happy with the lynchings in Soweto and Johannesburg, they mutilated Steven Biko in a prison cell in Pretoria. Mistress Sarah grabs me by the hair, and she screams as hard as she can: you're talking nonsense, you're talking nonsense. And she drags me to the record player, and raises the volume as high as it will go. Now I can't even hear myself cry. And Donna Summer's voice, her black woman's voice, fills Mistress Sarah's house, jolting it with its rhythm.

*Translated by Daisy Cocco De Filippis*

Michelle Cliff was born in 1946 in Jamaica. She is the author of two collections of prose and poetry, Claiming an Identity They Taught Me to Despise and The Land of Look Behind, and of two highly regarded novels, Abeng and No Telephone to Heaven. She has been the recipient of several fellowships in creative writing, and is internationally known for her essays, articles, and lectures on racism and feminism. Her latest book is a collection of short stories, Bodies of Water (1990). Among the central concerns of Cliff's prose and poetry are the issues of race, class, and color that have played such a negative role in women's lives in the Caribbean and the United States.

**MICHELLE CLIFF**

*Columba*

When I was twelve my parents left me in the hands of a hypochondriacal aunt and her Cuban lover, a ham radio operator. Her lover, that is, until she claimed their bed as her own. She was properly a family friend, who met my grandmother when they danced the Black Bottom at the Glass Bucket. Jamaica in the twenties was wild.

This woman, whose name was Charlotte, was large and pink and given to wearing pink satin nighties—flimsy relics, pale from age. Almost all was pink in that room, so it seemed; so it seems now, at this distance. The lace trim around the necks of the nighties was not pink; it was yellowed and frizzled, practically absent. Thin wisps of thread which had once formed flowers, birds, a spider's web. Years of washing in hard water with brown soap had made the nighties loose, droop, so that Charlotte's huge breasts slid outside, suddenly, sideways, pink falling on pink like
ladylike camouflage, but for her vivid nipples. No one could love those breasts, I think.

Her hair stuck flat against her head, bobbed and straightened, girlish bangs as if painted on her forehead. Once she had resembled Louise Brooks. No longer. New moons arced each black eye.

Charlotte was also given to drinking vast amounts of water from the crystal carafes standing on her low bedside table, next to her *Information Please* Almanac—she had a fetish for detail but no taste for reading—linen hankies scented with bay rum, and a bowl of sour-sweet tamarind balls. As she drank, so did she piss, ringing changes on the walls of chamber pots lined under the bed, all through the day and night. Her room, her pink expanse, smelled of urine and bay rum and the wet sugar which bound the tamarind balls. Ancestral scents.

I was to call her Aunt Charlotte and to mind her, for she was officially *in loco parentis*.

The Cuban, Juan Antonio Corona y Mestee, slept on a safari cot next to his ham radio, rum bottle, stacks of *Punch, Country Life*, and something called *Gent*. His room was a screened-in porch at the side of the veranda. Sitting there with him in the evening, listening to the calls of the radio, I could almost imagine myself away from that place, in the bush awaiting capture, or rescue, until the sharp *PING!* of Charlotte’s water cut across even my imaginings and the scratch of faraway voices.

One night a young man vaulted the rail of a cruise ship off Tobago and we picked up the distress call. A sustained *SPLASH!* followed Charlotte’s *PING!* and the young man slipped under the waves.

I have never been able to forget him, and capture him in a snap of that room, as though he floated through it, me. I wonder still why that particular instant? That warm evening, the Southern Cross in clear view? The choice of a seachange?

His mother told the captain they had been playing bridge with another couple when her son excused himself. We heard all this on the radio, as the captain reported in full. Henry Fonda sprang to my movie-saturated mind, in *The Lady Eve*, with Barbara Stanwyck. But that was blackjack, not bridge, and a screwball comedy besides.

Perhaps the young man had tired of the coupling. Perhaps he needed a secret sharer.

The Cuban was a tall handsome man with blue-black hair and a costume of unvarying khaki. He seemed content to stay with Charlotte, use the whores in Raetown from time to time, listen to his radio, sip his rum, leaf through his magazines. Sitting on the side of the safari cot in his khaki, engaged in his pastimes, he seemed like a displaced white hunter (except he wasn’t white, a fact no amount of relaxers or wide-brimmed hats could mask) or a mercenary recuperating from battle fatigue, awaiting further orders.

Perhaps he did not stir for practical reasons. This was 1960; he could not return to Cuba in all his hyphenated splendor, and had no marketable skills for the British Crown Colony in which he found himself. I got along with him, knowing we were both there on sufferance, unrelated dependents. Me, because Charlotte owed my grandmother something, he, for whatever reason he or she might have.

One of Juan Antonio’s duties was to drop me at school. Each morning he pressed a half-crown into my hand, always telling me to treat my friends. I appreciated his largesse, knowing the money came from his allowance. It was a generous act and he asked no repayment but one small thing: I was to tell anyone who asked that he was my father. As I remember, no one ever did. Later, he suggested that I say “Goodbye, Papá”—with the accent on the last syllable—when I left the car each morning. I hesitated, curious. He said, "Never mind," and the subject was not brought up again.

I broke the chain of generosity and kept his money for myself, not willing to share it with girls who took every chance to ridicule my American accent and call me "salt."
I used the money to escape them, escape school. Sitting in the movies, watching them over and over until it was time to catch the bus back.

Charlotte was a woman of property. Her small house was a cliché of colonialism, graced with calendars advertising the coronation of ER II, the marriage of Princess Margaret Rose, the visit of Alice, Princess Royal. Bamboo and wicker furniture was sparsely scattered across dark mahogany floors—settee there, end table here—giving the place the air of a hotel lobby, the sort of hotel carved from the shell of a great house, before Hilton and Sheraton made landfall. Tortoise-shell lampshades. Ashtrays made from coconut husks. Starched linen runners sporting the embroideries of craftswomen.

The house sat on top of a hill in Kingston, surrounded by an unkempt estate—so unkempt as to be arrogant, for this was the wealthiest part of the city, and the largest single tract of land. So large that a dead quiet enveloped the place in the evening, and we were cut off, sound and light absorbed by the space and the dark and the trees, abandoned and wild, entangled by vines and choked by underbrush, escaped, each reaching to survive.

At the foot of the hill was a cement gully which bordered the property—an empty moat but for the detritus of trespassers. Stray dogs roamed amid Red Stripe beer bottles, crushed cigarette packets, bully-beef tins.

Trespassers, real and imagined, were Charlotte's passion. In the evening, after dinner, bed jacket draped across her shoulders against the soft trade winds, which she said were laden with typhoid, she roused herself to the veranda and took aim. She fired and fired and fired. Then she excused herself. "That will hold them for another night." She was at once terrified of invasion and confident she could stay it. Her gunplay was ritual against it.

There was, of course, someone responsible for cleaning the house, feeding the animals, filling the carafes and emptying the chamber pots, cooking the meals and doing the laundry. These tasks fell to Columba, a fourteen-year-old from St. Ann, where Charlotte had bartered him from her mother; a case of condensed milk, two dozen tins of sardines, five pounds of flour, several bottles of cooking oil, permission to squat on Charlotte's cane-piece—fair exchange. His mother set up housekeeping with his brothers and sisters, and Columba was transported in the back of Charlotte's black Austin to Kingston. A more magnanimous, at least practical, landowner would have had a staff of two, even three, but Charlotte swore against being taken advantage of, as she termed it, so all was done by Columba, learning to expand his skills under her teaching, instructions shouted from the bed.

He had been named not for our discoverer, but for the saint buried on Iona, discoverer of the monster in the loch. A Father Pierre, come to St. Ann from French Guiana, had taught Columba's mother, Winsome, to write her name, read a ballot, and know God. He said he had been assistant to the confessor on Devil's Island, and when the place was finally shut down in 1951 he was cast adrift, floating around the islands seeking a berth.

His word was good enough for the people gathered in his seaside chapel of open sides and thatched roof, used during the week to shelter a woman smashing limestone for the road, sorting trilobite-form rock. On Sunday morning people sang, faces misted by spray, air heavy with the scent of sea grapes, the fat purple bunches bowing, swinging, brushing the glass sand, bruised. Bruises releasing more scent, entering the throats of a congregation fighting the smash of the sea. On Sunday morning Father Pierre talked to them of God, dredging his memory for every tale he had been told.

This was good enough for these people. They probably couldn't tell a confessor from a convict—which is what Father Pierre was—working off his crime against nature by boiling the life out of yam and taro and salted beef for the wardens, his keepers.

Even after the Gleaner had broadcast the real story, the congrega-
I sought him out in secret. When Juan Antonio went downtown and while Charlotte dozed, the coast was clear. We sat behind the house under an ancient guava, concealed by a screen of bougainvillea. There we talked. Compared lives. Exchanged histories. We kept each other company, and our need for company made our conversations almost natural. The alternative was a dreadful loneliness; silence, but for the noises of the two adults. Strangers.

His questions about America were endless. What was New York like? Had I been to Hollywood? He wanted to know every detail about Duke Ellington, Marilyn Monroe, Stagger Lee, Jackie Wilson, Ava Gardner, Billy the Kid, Dinah Washington, Tony Curtis, Spartacus, John Wayne. Everyone, every name he knew from the cinema, where he slipped on his evening off; every voice, ballad, beat, he heard over Rediffusion, tuned low in the kitchen.

Did I know any of these people? Could you see them on the street? Then, startling me: What was life like for a black man in America? An ordinary black man, not a star?

I had no idea—not really. I had been raised in a community in New Jersey until this interruption, surrounded by people who had made their own world and "did not do business" with that sort of thing. Bourgeois separatists. I told Columba I did not know and we went back to the stars and legends.

A Tuesday during rainy season: Charlotte, swathed in a plaid lap-robe lifted from the Queen Mary, is being driven by Juan Antonio to an ice factory she owns in Old Harbour. There is a problem with the overseer; Charlotte is summoned. You would think she was being transported a thousand miles up the Amazon into headhunter territory, so elaborate are the preparations.

She and Juan Antonio drop me at school. There is no half-crown this morning; I get sixpence and wave them off. I wait for the Austin to turn the corner at St. Cecilia’s Way, then I cut to Lady Musgrave Road to catch the bus back.

When I return, I change and meet Columba out back. He has
promised to show me something. The rain drips from the deep
green of the escaped bush which surrounds us. We set out on a
path invisible but to him, our bare feet sliding on slick fallen
leaves. A stand of mahoe is in front of us. We pass through
the trees and come into a clearing.

In the clearing is a surprise: a wreck of a car, a thirties Rover.
Gut-sprung, tired and forlorn, it slumps in the high grass.
Lizards scramble through the vines which wrap around rusted
chrome and across black hood and boot. We walk closer. I look
into the wreck.

The leather seats are split and a white fluff erupts here and
there. A blue gyroscope set into the dash slowly rotates. A
pennant of the Kingston Yacht Club dangles miserably from the
rearview.

This is not all. The car is alive. Throughout, roaming the seats,
perched on the running board, spackling the crystal face of the
clock, are doves. White-Speckled. Rock. Mourning. Wreck turned
dovecote is filled with their sweet coos.

"Where did you find them?"

Columba is pleased, proud too, I think. "Nuh find dem nestin'
all over de place? I mek dem a home, give dem name. Dat one
dere nuh Stagger Lee?"

He points to a mottled pigeon hanging from a visor. "Him is
rascal fe true."

Ava Gardner’s feet click across the roof where Spartacus is hot
in her pursuit.

Columba and I sit among the birds for hours.

I thank him for showing them to me, promising on my honor
not to tell.

That evening I am seated across from Charlotte and next to Juan
Antonio in the dining room. The ceiling fan stirs the air, which
is heavy with the day’s moisture.

Columba has prepared terrapin and is serving us one by one.
His head is bowed so our eyes cannot meet, as they never do in
such domestic moments. We—he and I—split our lives in this
house as best we can. No one watching this scene would imagine
our meeting that afternoon, the wild birds, talk of flight.

The turtle is sweet. A turling man traded it for ice that
morning in Old Harbour. The curved shell sits on a counter in
the kitchen. Golden. Delicate. Representing our island. Represent-
ing the world.

I did not tell them about the doves.

They found out easily, stupidly.

Charlotte’s car had developed a knock in the engine. She
noticed it on the journey to the ice factory, and questioned me
about it each evening after that. Had I heard it on the way to
school that morning? How could she visit her other properties
without proper transport? Something must be done.

Juan Antonio suggested he take the Austin to the Texaco
station at Matilda’s Corner. Charlotte would have none of it. She
asked little from Juan Antonio, the least he could do was
maintain her automobile. What did she suggest? He asked. How
could he get parts to repair the Austin; should he fashion them
from bamboo?

She announced her solution: Juan Antonio was to take a
machete and chop his way through to the Rover. The car had
served her well, she said, surely it could be of use now. He
resisted, reminding her that the Rover was thirty years old,
probably rusted beyond recognition, and not of any conceivable
use. It did not matter.

The next morning Juan Antonio set off to chop his way
through the bush, dripping along the path, monkey wrench in his
left hand, machete in his right. Columba was in the kitchen, head
down, wrapped in the heat of burning coals as he fired irons to
draw across khaki and satin.

The car, of course, was useless as a donor, but Juan Antonio’s
mission was not a total loss. He was relieved to tell Charlotte
about the doves. Why, there must be a hundred. All kinds.

Charlotte was beside herself. Her property was the soul of
bounty. Her trees bore heavily. Her chickens laid through
hurricanes. Edible creatures abounded!

Neither recognized that these birds were not for killing. They
did not recognize the pennant of the Kingston Yacht Club as the colors of this precious colony within a colony.

Columba was given his orders. Wring the necks of the birds. Pluck them and dress them and wrap them tightly for freezing. Leave out three for that evening’s supper.

He did as he was told.

Recklessly I walked into the bush. No notice was taken.

I found him sitting in the front seat of the dovecote. A wooden box was beside him, half-filled with dead birds. The live ones did not scatter, did not flee. They sat and paced and cooed, as Columba performed his dreadful task.

“Sorry, man, you hear?” he said softly as he wrung the neck of the next one. He was weeping heavily. Heaving his shoulders with the effort of execution and grief.

I sat beside him in silence, my arm around his waist. This was not done.

Marie-Thérèse Colimon-Hall was born in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, in 1918. She began her writing career as a playwright and published five plays between 1949 and 1960. In 1974 she published her first novel, Fils de misère. She has also written essays, short stories, and children’s literature. Colimon’s keen observations of the Haitian people’s struggle against poverty give a particularly poignancy to her work, as Fils de misère demonstrates. In Les Chants des sirènes, her collection of short stories, she explores the painful impact of the Haitian diaspora on both the individuals in exile and the Haitian community.

MARIE-THÉRÈSE COLIMON-HALL

A Pottage of Lentils

And Jacob was making pottage: and Esau came from the field, and he was faint:

And Esau said to Jacob, “Feed me, I pray thee, with pottage, for I am faint . . . .”

And Jacob said, “Sell me this day thy birthright.”

And Esau said, “Behold, I am at the point to die: and what profit shall this birthright do to me?”

And Jacob said, “Swear to me this day,” and he swore unto him, and he sold his birthright unto Jacob.

Then Jacob gave Esau bread and a pottage of lentils.

Genesis, 25:29-34

"Pan American World Airways announces the arrival of Flight 427 from Miami."

The airport quivered like a forest in the minutes preceding a downpour. Quick steps glided over the wooden floor. Voices
Maryse Condé was born in Guadeloupe, but has spent long periods in West Africa, France, and the United States. She studied in Paris, earning a doctorate in comparative literature from the Sorbonne in 1975. A prolific writer, Condé has enjoyed enormous literary success in France and the United States, and several of her novels, Segou I, Segou II, and Moi, Tituba, sorcière noire de Salem, have reached best-seller lists in both countries. Condé’s work, which includes fiction, drama, and criticism, has been published extensively in French and in translation. Her fiction displays a keen sense of irony, meticulous historical documentation, and a gift for evoking place and character.

MARYSE CONDÉ

Three Women in Manhattan

To Wanda

"Did you hear me? Are you listening to me?"

Claude didn’t raise her head. No, she wasn’t listening to Elinor because she didn’t need to. Every morning, Elinor would repeat the same instructions, pulling on her fine leather gloves or planting a bright-colored cap on her curly hair before disappearing, leaving behind a delicate scent.

"Wash, scrub, iron, water the plants. When you leave, don’t forget to bolt the lock; it’s very, very important ... ."

Since Elinor stared at her, hesitating as usual between tenderness and exasperation, Claude gave her a smile of apology and went into the kitchen.

The apartment into which Elinor had moved six months earlier was elegant. It was perfectly suitable for a young woman writer, whose first novel, The Mouth That Eats Salt, had made the covers of all the literary magazines. Not black magazines. Those, well, you know what they’re worth: as soon as a black man or a black woman writes a few lines, they’re treated as geniuses! Elinor had been the subject of study in articles and had appeared on covers of serious and objective white publications which culled her references to folklore of the Old South and to collective black patrimony while still emphasizing her beauty, burning like an August night in Georgia. She had in fact given a copy of her novel to Claude but her limited knowledge of English had prevented her from reading it. She did nothing more than open it up, looking fondly at the intertwining signs—which for her meant nothing—before placing it on the only shelf in her bedroom between her photo album and a copy of Teach Yourself English.

Through the kitchen window, Claude had a picture postcard view: under a bright blue sky, the sparkling skyscrapers holding in the perpendicular streets filled with yellow taxis. How surprising New York is! Claude had not yet become used to this beauty, which was as disconcerting as that of a face of which one has never dreamed. Sometimes, leaving the dump where she lived on 144th Street—where blacks and Puerto Ricans, united by the same misery, clashed in the same hate—she wondered what had led her from her nonchalant island to this city where everything spoke of success, fortune. To her at nineteen, her past seemed endless, confused, strewn with painful points of reference, already marked by failure. She had never known her father, a native of Marie Galante who disappeared after his sad and fruitful union with Alicia, her mother. Already overburdened with children, her mother placed her in the hands of her godmother, Mrs. Berthose Dupré, of an excellent Point-à-Pitre family, who gave her the best education in exchange for domestic work. Actually, she never got ahead of the domestic chores: wash, scrub, iron, water the plants ... on one side of the ocean as on the other.

She looked back at the dirty dishes. The day before, Elinor had given a reception. These days she had a lot of people over. This is what she had to do in order to tend to her public relations.
After all, writing a book is not enough in and of itself: only the naive think so. One must also promote it; and Elinor gave of herself. When she arrived for the first time at Elinor's house, Elinor overwhelmed her with questions in French which was both faltering and precise. First, Elinor thought Claude was Haitian, grown up in the humus that fertilizes all large North American cities. Then, she was surprised:

"Guadeloupe? Where's that? How old are you? What brings you at such a young age so far from home?"

Claude heard herself mumbling a true story as improbable as a web of lies. Who could believe that when she was of age, she left the Hotel of the Great Seas where she'd been hired after her Certificate in Tourism, had withdrawn the paltry nest egg that Godmother Bertille had built up for her in the Bank of Savings, and had packed her trunk? Why New York? Why not Paris through the migration scheme, the Bumidon, like all the others? Precisely because she was horrified by Paris. Several times a year, in the big house between the courtyard and the garden on Commandant Mortenlow Street, Godmother Bertille's friends, returning from the French metropolis, would ecstatically go through their stories:

"My dear, we went all the way to the top of the Eiffel Tower with the children. Paris at our feet! What a sight!"

And Claude, careful not to knock over the glasses of coconut sorbet served to the guests, was smitten with hate for that city—overpraised harlot—and swore she'd set sail for another America.

At the end of the interview, Elinor had declared:

"So, everything is all right. You'll come for three hours every morning."

From that time on, a bond had tied them together, formed of compassion, scorn, at times hate, and love as well, for they shared a secret. Both of them knew it: Claude was an Elinor that the absent-minded sorcerer, destiny, had forgotten to gratify after having wrenched her from nothingness. Under the pretext of perfecting her French, Elinor had told Claude about her childhood in the Victorian house inherited from her mother's side.

The youngest of seven children, this number had always symbolized for her her predestination. When she described her mother, her aunts—especially her Aunt Millicent—Claude could picture them effortlessly. Add on a few curls, extra touches of eyeliner, jewelry both more austere and more rich, and you had Godmother Bertille, her sisters, her friends. As for the father, absent but forever present, quick to get angry over a wrong crease on a shirt front, he was Marcel Dupré, her godmother's husband, head of the Office of Direct and Indirect Taxation, who every Sunday had his nails polished by his eldest daughter. It was the same world, blown up to the proportions of a continent, that's all. Nonetheless, the resemblance ended there. In her buckled shoes, Elinor would skip from one person to another, presenting her cheek to be kissed. She was the prodigal child, the wild seventh who upset her teachers and who, at Martin Luther King's death, composed an ode in his honor, read in church and reverently listened to by everyone. She was not the godchild of humble origins, taken in by charity, raised without love, and turned ugly through indifference. Claude left the kitchen, crossed the living room—70 square yards of white carpeting, paintings by Romare Bearden, naïve painters, Salnave, Wilson Bigaud, Wesner la Forest, unusual and graceful objects brought back from Mexico that she dusted only with trepidation—then entered the office. This room was the place for a secret and remarkable alchemy. On a long drawing table placed against the window, the typewriter reigned. In differently colored folders, Elinor meticulously catalogued the manuscript of her novel in progress, the short stories, and the articles she was working on. Claude opened a file. What magic! These series of arabesques symbolized a thought, communicated an element of the imaginary which, through them, was more penetrating than reality. To write! To put her hips, her sex, her heart into motion in order to give birth to a world inscribed in her obscurity. To think that she'd had such audacity! In her garret in Pointe-à-Pitre, on evenings when the household slept, she used to scribble in spiral notebooks. An uncontrollable force within her. To whom could she show the fruit of those sleepless nights?
Miss Angélique-Marie Lourdes was her French teacher, a pretty coprême, a woman of mixed blood, all dimples, who still lived with her parents. Every morning, at the ten o'clock recess, her mother's servant would bring her a cup of hot milk and a croissant on a silver platter and she would eat in little bits like a bird. She was the only one who paid any attention to Claude, making her recite her tales, encouraging her with a smile. But to approach her? To put those clumsy scrawlings under her eyes? Claude had never dared; and when she left Guadeloupe she'd burned all of her notebooks, one by one. She sat down at the worktable, putting her hands heavily, clumsily, on the keyboard.

When she left Elinor's, Claude took the bus to Vera's, ninety streets uptown in the heart of Harlem. Here, there was no doorman in a sky-blue uniform with chevrons, no more security guard in a dark blue uniform and walkie-talkie, no more Oriental rugs, green plants, elevator taking you up to the 25th floor in one breath. In former times, however, with its heavy columns of mock marble, the building was probably not without a certain elegance. Alas, Harlem was no longer the capital of arts and pleasure where Zora Neale Hurston would show off her ankles dancing a Charleston. It was a dirty, desperate ghetto where most of the families survived thanks to food stamps. When Vera had moved in, fifteen years earlier, on several floors there had been doctors and Wall Street employees in their dark gray, three-piece suits. Since that time, everyone had fled to the suburbs where children weren't butchered and Vera, the last relic of the past, stayed where she was. Claude rang the doorbell—three long rings and one shorter one—heard the endless clinking of locks and bolts, then the door opened. How old was Vera? Sixty, seventy, eighty...? She'd stayed slender, even slight. Not a single thread of silver in her crop of hair, but it was thinning, becoming more sparse, like a forest ravaged by too many fires. Her facial architecture was indescribable but her mouth and her eyes were wounded, defeated, destroyed from having feigned hope and courage for too long. She asked:

"Have you eaten?"

Claude shook her head. She insisted:

"Didn't she give you anything to eat?"

"She," of course, was Elinor. Claude was the bond between these two women who had never seen one another. One day she couldn't resist the pride of pointing to the cover of the literary magazine Vera was reading, and murmured:

"I work at her house, too!"

Vera was aghast; since that time, Elinor had become a subject of their daily conversations. Vera cut out every little review or article about her and made comments about them angrily:

"Beauty which burns like an August night in Georgia! Images, metaphors, symbols borrowed from Old South folklore, black voice, black rhythm. How can she put up with all of that? Doesn't she have anything better to do? No great cause, no great cause...!

The other subject of their daily conversations was, of course, Haiti, bleeding from all its wounds. Related on her mother's side to former president Omar Tancrède and on her father's side to former president Zamor Valcinc, Vera's family had been led to the slaughterhouse by the new dictator's orders, their land and possessions confiscated and their homes razed. If Vera had escaped the slaughter, it was because she had been in Europe where she had been beginning a double career as a concert pianist and a writer, and had let herself be wooed by a young Italian man. Abruptly, from one day to the next, she'd locked up her instrument and put her pen to the service of a great cause. Since that time, she contributed a column to an opposition newspaper which, like a phoenix, had disappeared dozens of times, and dozens of times reappeared. For someone who hadn't seen Haiti for twenty years, she knew everything that happened and analyzed everything people said there. The island was within her like a poto-nilan, the central pillar supporting her life. Tirelessly she would fly from one event to another—demonstration or march or supporters' party—administering comfort to everyone, then coming back to her glacial apartment where everything would go down the drain, like her hopes.

When Claude had met Vera, the latter hadn't eaten for two days and was looking at the world through a milky fog which made it more beautiful. She had been walking down Amsterdam
Avenue when she stumbled on a meeting room that was wide open, so rare in New York, that she had gone in. There—oh, surprise—people were speaking in French. Little girls with cinnamon-colored cheeks were passing around large platters of orangeade and pâtés. Had the face of God finally appeared? You could say so because, at that moment, Claude's gaze had met that of Vera.

Vera had no need of a cleaning woman; Claude didn't realize this right away. For the first months, she rubbed, polished, and made shine the worn and colorless objects, desperately trying to give them back their brilliance. Little by little, she discovered that this disorder—this state of ruin—suited Vera. Among the familiar companions of her furnishings, there was no longer any need to pretend. She came face to face with herself, already inhabited by death. Wrinkled up in a corner of the couch, she would page through her albums:

"Look at Mama, how pretty she was. I have her coloring. This here is my sister, Iris. There, that's Daddy! All of them are dead and I've never seen their graves . . ."

Tears rolled down her cheeks and Claude took the old hand in her own, gently kissing it. What could she say? She'd never known how to speak since no one had ever listened to her. Vera continued:

"This one here is Fabio! Ah, men! As soon as he knew I was no longer a rich heiress, he disappeared. After that point, I never again had confidence in anyone, anyone . . ." Next would begin the litany of those who had loved her and to whom, according to her, she'd refused to give herself. Letters stored in cardboard boxes she sometimes would recite with both mockery and great excitement. What had become of all these suitors? Married, fathers of families, prosperous bourgeois citizens, successful artists . . . or dead—they, too, like Vera's relatives, returned to the warm belly of the earth. Nothing of them remained but for these arabesques which had symbolized their passion. Fascinated, Claude poured over these pages which had so often been perused. The most precious moment, however, would arise when Vera would open the little briefcase that contained various manuscripts of her novels—all unpublished, all returned by editors from France, Belgium, Switzerland, and Canada. For hours on end, she would read chapters from them while Claude, hanging from her very lips, would try to find hidden, underlying faults in the words and sentences. For, after all, why were they condemned to this inglorious end? Who defines Beauty? Who decides upon success? Why was Elinor basking in the full sun? Vera in her darkness? Writing is but a trap, the cruelest of all, a snare, a sham of communication.

Every afternoon, after these long reading sessions in the only room the radiator would deign heat, Vera would fall asleep, her mouth open, and her snoring would sound like a death rattle. Claude would take her manuscripts from her hands: *The Battle of Vertières: A Historical Novel; A Haitian Woman's Heart; Angélica Reyes . . .* then she fell back into her daydreaming. Why had these two women, each in her own manner, become attached to her? Because of her youth? Her naïveté? Her kindness? She understood that she was their creation, that she was the papyrus roll upon which they freely drew the signs through which they had chosen to represent themselves.

But, by the same token, weren't they in her power? One act of refusal and the mirror in which Elinor saw herself so beautiful would break. One gesture of weariness and Vera could no longer breathe, exhausted, completely worn out.

At about three o'clock, Vera was still sleeping. Pulling on the goatskin jacket that she'd given her, Claude left. The bundled-up little boys who were playing in the street smiled at her. They knew her now. She was beginning to carry her own weight as a living person of the neighborhood. This was a good omen.

From Vera's apartment to City College, it wasn't very far to go. Claude had enrolled there, following Vera's repeated advice and her saying that education was the key to success.

"We used to be slaves. With patience, we've climbed every rung. And now, look . . ."

Claude would look, and what did she see? Men and women crammed into ghettos, humiliated in their minds, wounded in their flesh. Men and women subjects of dictatorship, wrenched
to the cardinal points of the Earth. There still was Africa, about which Vera would often speak. It was so far away! Who knew what went on there? Nonetheless, the evening classes at City College were almost free. She was learning English. Bit by bit, the sounds of New York—which had frightened and deafened her—were becoming intelligible. She was able to decipher the puzzles of neon signs and posters...

At the corner of 140th Street, an old man huddled up under a porch looked up at her with his bluish, blind eyes. She offered him one of her last quarters.

Claude stopped, dumbfounded, in the hallway.

Draped in her sulfur-yellow bathrobe, Elinor was curled up, prostrate. She lifted up her haggard, virtually swollen face between the sad seaweed of her hair and moaned:

"Do you see what they're writing?"

In front of her were the magazines Black Culture, Black Essence, Black World... But Claude didn't even glance at them. She was confused by this grief. It was as though, scarring the bloody hearts of the victims and the preachers' songs, the sun had refused to rise, leaving the world in its darkness.

"Just what is it they want? What do they want?"

She swivelled herself around:

"They want me to speak once more about slavery and the slave trade and racism, for me to adorn us with the virtues of victims, and to inspire hope..."

She sniffed, wiped her eyes with her two fists and, in such childish gestures, Claude once again saw in her the little girl that she had been.

"At forty, for the first time, my mother was allowed into a white restaurant in Colony Square. It was the big event of her life. Every morning, after giving praise to our great men who'd shed their blood for such a moment, we heard this story... I can't stand it any longer, do you understand?"

Claude wasn't sure she understood. Nevertheless, she assured her with a smile. Elinor got up. Her admirers wouldn't have recognized their idol on this particular morning. Yet already she was unfurling, getting back her grace, her bearing, as though ashamed of her disarray. Claude understood that nothing could stop her.

Left alone, Claude paged through the magazines, following a few lines with a finger, looking for familiar inscriptions. Why do words cause so much harm? What power is hidden in their design? How can it be captured and tamed to one's desires? In a certain way, Elinor, no more than Vera, had not succeeded in doing so. With a sigh, Claude turned toward the cluttered sink. A moment later, Elinor came and stopped next to her. You would have to have been quite shrewd to have made out the streak of tears under the flush of her cheeks. They smiled at each other and Elinor repeated:

"Wash, scrub, iron, water the plants. When you leave, don't forget to bolt the lock: it's very, very important..."

Nonetheless, these orders meant something entirely different. They symbolized the bond which tied them together, the secret they shared, the equilibrium reestablished...

The iron bit into the collar of the white blouse. Since childhood, Claude would hear people say that she had nimble fingers. It was the only charm she was recognized as having. When he'd finished inspecting the pile of still-warm shirts, Marcel Dupré would condescend to smile and would slip his fingers into his money-pouch:

"Here, buy yourself a piece of candy..."

Thursday afternoons, when she would visit her mother on the Canal, she would find her in the kitchen, her stomach perpetually distended by a pregnancy, wedged between the kitchen range and the table, and she would take the burning cast-iron from her hands. Relieved, Alicia would sit down heavily and then would begin a long tale of children's illnesses, fights with neighbors, blows and insults liberally dispensed by her husband of the moment, interrupting herself from time to time to exclaim, with a fleeting tenderness:

"How handy you are!"

Would she never be good at anything else? She looked at her
hands; small, slightly squared, still shaped by childhood. Since her arrival in New York, too busy in assuring her survival, she hadn't bought any spiral notebooks. She knew, however, that the audacity would come back to her, that her hips, her sex, her heart, her head would set in motion once again and that she would give birth to her world. It was already moving within her. To whom would she show the fruit of her parturition? This time, she wouldn't hesitate: to Vera, who'd inspired her . . .

Vera would adjust her metal-framed glasses which added to the pathetic as well as comic form of her old face and would nod her head:

"This is good, it's good! Yes, it's very good . . . !"

The iron sputtered, the daydream ceased . . .

Toward noon, she went downstairs. In this haughty neighborhood, people focused on a point in space without ever meeting the eyes of others, nor ever touching upon cheeks, lips or hair; everyone seemed to be following his or her own ghost.

"She cried this morning!"

Vera could taste this news like a rare dish, then would overwhelm her with questions which she wouldn't know how to answer. It was best this way because Vera's imagination would then fill in all the gaps and compose a story to her own liking. Acting in this way, Claude wouldn't feel as though she'd betrayed a secret she should have kept. On the contrary, she would tighten the bond which had broken. In fact, since the time when the ship—blessed by God and H.R.H. the King—had withdrawn from the bay for the horrifying crossing, nothing more had brought them together. Places of residence had been assigned to them. Languages had compelled them to silence. Now, unity was being made anew.

On 140th Street, the cold had chased the old man from his wide doorway. In the shop windows—a jumble of Puerto Rican stores—mangos, avocados, and plantains spoke of the climate where misery at least can be clothed in rags of the sun. The sight of them gave rise in Claude only to a nauseous bitterness. She moved along more quickly because the cold felt sharper and more biting.

As she was reaching the corner of Amsterdam Avenue, her heart jumped. In front of Vera's building, an ambulance was parked; it was the materialization of a dread she'd carried with her daily. She knew that this moment would come. When Vera would fall asleep, she would lean over her, listening carefully for her breath. Not yet, not yet. Because, after all, even if she couldn't bring back to life all of the departed and Iris, the so dearly cherished sister, if she couldn't rebuild the villa in Bois Verna, high amongst its solitary cacti, or shoot down the dictator, glorified with blood, and scatter the various parts of his body over the intersection of the Croix des Bossales, at least she could offer her a story, a work which would present her not such as she was—an octogenarian in a pitiful wool cardigan, raising her pathetic voice in the tumult of distress—but such as she dreamed her to be: Erzulie Dantor, flaming torch clenched in her fist. She began to run but tree roots shot up through the pavement got in her way and made her stumble, preventing her from reaching her goal before the ambulance, in a powerful movement, drew away from the curb and took off up the endless, rectilinear street, uttering its long wailing of a mourning woman. A circle of bystanders had been formed and slowly disbanded. The Puerto Rican neighbor woman, the one whose children Claude had sometimes babysat while she ran to the supermarket to exchange her food stamps, stared at her sadly, whispering:

"Es la vieja mujer del quinto piso . . ."

Translated by Thomas Spear
One afternoon his gentle wife had a fit of laughter which dissolved into a feigned cough, because to make matters worse, the girl showed up with bangs down to her eyes.

Luciano began to live a terrible obsession. If he lifted his eyes from his work, there was the hair, on the street, on the balcony, at the window, on the terrace. There came a moment when, his understanding perturbed by the suffocating impact of all that hair, the prescriptions he handled lost all sense.

It wasn't summer yet. But summer's breath, like that of a puffing beast, filled the air.

"It's so hot!" Luciano said, sticking his head out the pharmacy door. "The air feels like fire."

"It's not that bad," commented Doña Irene, serenely seated in the undulating space in front of the electric fan. "But you're making yourself needlessly hot with all these comings and goings."

The pharmacist felt his wife's placid gaze on his back and could not repress an unpleasant prickly sensation.

"Well," he declared impatiently, "I'm leaving. Have the delivery boy help you close up when he gets back."

Doña Irene opened her mouth and placed her plump hands on the glass showcase, rendered speechless by surprise.

Men, she told herself thoughtfully, are as complicated as entangled spoons of thread. So it's hot... what else is new? Just like yesterday, like tomorrow, like always. The secret lies in not getting excited.

Luciano turned the corner around the pharmacy in a great hurry, entered the first driveway, and practically ran up the stairs to the second floor, where they had lived since they had decided to open the business on the ground floor.

Fleshy, neither tall nor short, small-waisted, with Greek-vasc curves, Natividad would come out on the terrace when the eaves sheltered it like a large visor of luminous shadow. She would pause for a moment on the only step on the threshold, glance Olympically over her shoulder, arching her body, bending a knee.
to enhance the enticing line of her profile, and after shaking the dense beauty of her mane with a self-satisfied gesture, she would sit chastely in a native-wood rocking chair in the midst of her pots of geraniums. Between rocking her chair and glimpses at the book she was reading, her eyes would assess the effect that her self-display produced on passers-by.

That day one of her glances captured the admiration on the face of the pharmacist watching her from his apartment balcony.

"Marfa! It smells like something’s burning on the stove . . . Marfa!"

Lying next to the body of his profoundly-asleep wife, Luciano experienced the torments of yearning for a dream that eluded him. He tossed and turned in bed, sweating, irritated by Doña Irene’s wheezing breaths. Around midnight, having reached the point of exasperation, he got up and went out on the balcony, anxious for a breath of air.

The moon was shining brightly on Natividad’s terrace. Its fixed and translucent light stained with black shadows the old oak tree in the garden. The girl rocked in her chair, apparently also unable to sleep. She noticed the pharmacist and smiled at him. The greenish nocturnal silence started buzzing in Luciano’s ears. She was looking at him and smiling. She would rock for a few seconds and turn to stare fixedly at him. Luciano decided to go down.

When she saw him open the garden gate, she stood up, startled. The movement unveiled her naked body.

"What beautiful breasts you have!" he said admiringly, his eyes moist with emotion.

Instead of covering herself, Natividad tossed her head back with an arrogant gesture.

Luciano extended his arm. His hand filled with life.

She moaned in protest.

"No . . . let me go."

Ignoring her, he grabbed her brusquely by the shoulders to kiss her. His fingers got tangled in her hair. He tried to gather it in a bundle on her nape but the locks escaped his fingers, winding themselves around his arms, brushing against his face. He felt suffocated with heat.

"I only want to kiss you," he panted. "Don’t be upset . . . Be good, I’m not going to hurt you . . ."

Frantic, he exclaimed:

"Damn hair!"

It was like a hot noose around his throat. He was choking as he kissed her, with no time to free himself from the never-ending hair, quivering with desire and fear.

The ardor of the struggle awakened Doña Irene.

"That nightmare again," she grumbled as her arm reached clumsily for her husband in the semi-darkness. "Don’t drown, Luciano . . . Wake up!"

Luciano sat up abruptly, half-crazed by anguish.

"The hair," he mumbled. "The hair . . ."

"What are you saying? . . . Come, lie on your side and it will be all right . . . Where are you going?"

"To . . . I don’t know. I’m soaked in sweat."

Once completely awakened, he said:

"Don’t get up. I’ll go get another pair of pajamas myself."

"Suit yourself . . . But don’t you start reading at this late hour . . ."

It was cool in the balcony. He breathed anxiously. All was still on the terrace, which was bathed in a moonlit brightness that made the chirping of the crickets reverberate. Leaning against the rail, Luciano stared for a long time at the exuberance of the geraniums. He was overcome by a furious desire to bite them so they would burst once and for all, driving away that unbearable feeling of lust.

Doña Irene changed position in her eagerness to resume her interrupted sleep. This husband of mine, she sighed, is suffering from nerves. I hope to God it’s nothing serious . . . I hope he’s not going to go on like some men who go through crises at a certain
age... She made another effort to fall asleep, sprawling on her back on the bed while she chased away her worries and concentrated on the soporific task of mentally writing numbers on the dark night of her eyelids. A frenetic weight suddenly fell on top of her. She barely had time to utter: "Ooh... Luciano... ."

Translated by Elizabeth Parvisini-Gebert

Liliane Dévieux was born in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, in 1942, and was educated in Port-au-Prince, Paris, and Montreal, where she now lives with her family. She has published one novel, L’Amour, oui: La Mort, non, and various short stories scattered in literary journals and magazines. Her work explores Haitian economic and political migration to Canada and questions traditional patterns of gender relations. L’Amour, oui: La Mort, non is one of the few works of fiction by Caribbean women to explore the devastating impact of the Vietnam war.

LILIANE DÉVIEUX

Piano-Bar

Far behind us, the city of concrete, of glass and noise. A road plowed through the snow, far from the tiresome expressways, our headlights clearing the darkness bit by bit, and ahead of us a luminous point: piano-bar.

I dream that piano-bar like an Eden, this evening like an exorcism, against irreversible time, against love coated in verdigris. Against Daniel’s silences, his bad moods, his big-shot airs, transforming me in turn into Eva-the-doll, Eva-the-little-girl, Eva-the-mad.

Piano-bar. Here, under the orange glints of the faint lights hanging on the wall, night becomes subdued light. A summer twilight eternally preserved. In a corner of the room, the Haitian pianist bends over his piano, over his music. A semi-sweet, semi-mad music which grabs you as soon as you come in, and which, as it grows late, goes to your head, like a cocktail. Piano-bar. The bar around the piano. The dance floor around the bar. Plenty of dancers. Mostly Haitians. Many of them with Quebecois women dancing Haitian-style, rhythmically swaying their hips.
Ramabai Espinet, a scholar and poet, was born in Trinidad in 1948. She published her first collection of poetry, Nuclear Seasons, in 1991, and had previously compiled an anthology of Caribbean women’s poetry, Creation Fire. A scholar whose work has focused on Caribbean women’s literature, Espinet has published articles on Phyllis Allfrey, Jean Rhys, and on the Indian woman writer in Trinidad and Tobago. Her concern with the emergence of the Indo-Caribbean voice is beautifully rendered in “Barred: Trinidad 1987,” one of two fiction pieces Espinet has published to date.

RAMABAI ESPINET

Barred

Trinidad 1987

I put a chair against the door of the room last night. Jammed it securely to the edge where the crib met the wall so that if the key turned in the lock and the door was pushed forward, a horrible grating noise would begin and I would wake up.

All of this because I lost my keys a few days ago. That and my wallet. All of my life I have flirted with the fantasy of losing these two things—a fantasy of being locked out and thrown absolutely upon my own primary resources. I remember standing above the Hastings Bridge in Vancouver, many years ago, high over the cold water and suddenly finding myself possessed by the mad urge to fling all valuables down. The valuables were pretty meager: a bit of makeup, a few dollars, the key to a shabby room in a little hotel. But what would I have done without them?

And that impulse has resurfaced over and over. All at once it happens without my consciously trying. All night long I hear a key turning in the lock downstairs, heavy footfalls on the stairs—an intruder confident and careless—what does this mean? And if someone has been dogging my footsteps and now possesses my keys, not to mention my wallet, what will I do when he appears?

I have no idea, but under my bed I keep a tin of insect repellent which I am told is good for spraying in their eyes. I also possess an old walking stick, a rape alarm with a light on it, and some candles and matches. Otherwise, there’s only paper. Nothing much for a thief.

And, in between the waiting and his forced entry, I might die before the night is out of nerve-racking loneliness and anguish. All of my loves, fights, anxieties, and fears have crystallized into this mournful night where I am reduced to a purple jellyfish-like consistency. I can’t sleep. And then I rise and throw open the doors to my balcony high above the ground. I look up at the peaks of the Northern Range—Morne Wash and El Tucuche. Unto the hills around do I lift up my longing eyes. Only I have no idea what I’m longing for, or if I do, it’s still only an apprehension of something. I’m trying to approach closure, which for me is a completion of the whatever which is necessary for living and which remains like a door perpetually, uneasily, left ajar.

The mango tree is heavily fruiting at this time of the year. I think: this is the land that spawned me, far from the continent of my origin. Can an island be someone’s real home, I wonder? My ancestral roots are far from here and I don’t even know, really, what they are.

I am Indian, plain and simple, not East nor West, just an Indian. I live in the West. My travel across the water to this land has not been easy and many a time I have squatted in the dirt of this or that lepayed hut, a few coins knotted in the corner of my ohini, waiting, waiting—waiting to make the next move. There is fear, poverty, and sometimes a heavy hand striking at night. The
enemy waits outside. Who is the enemy? Is it rum? The boy I married turns into a strange man who hits and curses at night. I bear much and one night I squat in the dirt waiting, the night black and quiet with only frogs singing in the bush where we live. I hear him coming home, drunk again, falling and cursing. The baby sleeping, the night quiet quiet. It is dark. I should move to go and light the lamp. But I don't move, I stay crouching on the dirt. After he is inside the house and stumbling around, then I follow and light the lamp. He is hungry.

"Way de food?"

He is enraged. I move to warm up the food and suddenly a cuff connects. And then he is deadly accurate—all over my head and breasts. The baby wakes and starts to cry.

I fall near the chulhah and he kicks me as I fall. I see him move towards the bedroom door mashing up everything on the way—a green-and-orange-flowered wedding lemonade set, a vision pot, and a blue and red plaque. His voice is deep and menacing, his boot heavy.

"Ah go kill dat chile tonight. Ah go dash out she focking brains. All yuh think is joke! All ah all yuh think I sorf. Well, tonight we go see. All ah all yuh go see."

The night dark and is only me and he and the baby in all this bush. He reach the bed and then he fall down near it. Where he going? Where the arse he think he going? He getting up, then he fall again straight on the new Slumberking. The springs start creaking again, he getting up. The baby bawling now and he getting up...

The cutlass by the fire. I chop some wood up this evening to cook the food. He on the bed and quick quick I chop him two, three times, me ain't know how hard. He give a lil sound and then he stop quiet. Me ain't really know how much time I chop he. He ain't get chance to touch the baby yet. I snatch she up and go outside and sit down in the middle of the road. No car don't come up here this hour. Is only high bush around. It getting cold but I can't move at all. All I could do is to rock the baby. And she, she sleeping. Light coming. I walk up the road—three mile-post up—and call my brother-in-law. He come back to the house with me. They say the man dead.

All around us the cane fires are burning—rising and falling, smoke and soot. Nothing on earth has the live sugar smell of burning cane. And when the cane-sugar boils in the vats the smell is like all the holidays rolled into one fragrant ball—amber and crystalline on the outside and full of honeyed liquid in the center. We bought those balls at Ramdilah, later corrected to Ramleela. Which one is right, what the books now say or what we uttered in the peasant newness of this settlement? We are lost here, have not found the words to utter our newness, our strangeness, our unfound being. Our clothes are strange, our food is strange, our names are strange. And it is not possible for anyone to coax or help us. Our utterance can only come roaring out of our mouths when it is ready, set, and can go.

It has not been a happy arrival and we are still so morbid. There is a weed-killer sold to gardeners on this island. It is labelled gramoxone but everyone knows it as Indian tonic. The suicide tonic.

Indians ain't have no backbone, no stamina. You ain't see how at the slightest sign of stress they does run and drink Indian tonic? (Boy meets and loves girl but the arranged marriage gets in the way. Boy and girl drink GRAMAZONE and perish together—desire literally burning a hole through their bowels.) Indians ain't afraid to die. They does kill easy too. Is because they believe in reincarnation, don't doubt it. If you look in the hospitals is mostly Indians you go see. They there for accident, chopping, and poor guts. Is all the dhal and bhaji they does eat. And all the time the bitches and them have all kinda money hide up and save up. Yuh see all them sadhu and babu all yuh see walking the streets. Them is millionaires, man, millionaires. How yuh think Indians have so much business in this country? Them controlling the business community, you know, is only me and you stupid enough to think is white people. We born yesterday,
we can’t see what in front we eye. Them controlling ninety-five percent of the business in this country. They smart too bad. And all they children does do in school is study, study. I went to school with plenty Cramal Bookasing and them yuh hear. And when they can’t get in the good schools they does bribe man, bribe. Even in university they does buy the test paper. Is true they don’t have no big job and money but them people low, they ain’t bong for that. They ain’t know how to live, they don’t even spend money on food. Is only dhal and bhaji day and night.

After the birth of the second child there was no money in the house. Dass was working at a sweet-drink factory up on the main road, and one day they fired all the workers. Then he got a part-time end at the curry factory. But the little end never came home. He said it wasn’t enough. He started to drink and gamble in the recreation club. We lived in the back in a low wooden house and I din’t know how to manage. I couldn’t cook good enough to sell and I had two children to mind.

One morning I got up. Dass had gone for the day already. He had forgotten a full pack of Anchor cigarettes on the table. And right where the window faced the road, I put an empty Klim tin, and two empty condensed milk tins turned upside down on either side of the Klim tin. Then I placed the pack of Anchor on the Klim tin. It wasn’t long before a man came and bought the packet of cigarettes. He was my first customer. He was a tall thin Negro gentleman and I think he was a teacher. He said good morning before he bought the cigarettes and thank you when he left. I was nineteen years old. I bought two potatoes with the money to eat with roti for dinner. I didn’t have to buy flour so I bought some sweetsies with the change and put that in an empty bottle in the window. A Creole woman down the road showed me how to make sugar-cakes and tamarin balls.

Some time after Dass helped me to build a wooden counter just underneath the window. Later we put up a Coca-Cola sign, a Solo sign, and a newspaper sign. People came and bought in my little parlor. And only when Dass and his brother saw how I was making my way, they put together and we started the shop.

Outside now, the rain is pouring. Rain on a galvanized iron roof is the sweetest sound on earth. And when you lie with someone under the sheets in a safe bed while rain pelts down on the roof above, there is no other experience on earth like that. A crystal clear morning after the rain—dewfall, rainfall, footsteps of love. It is Sunday morning. I have lived through the long night.
Rosario Ferré was born in Ponce, Puerto Rico, in 1938. Her first book, Papeles de Pandora, earned her recognition throughout Latin America. She has published four books of children's stories; a collection of poetry, Fábulas de la garza desangrada; a collection of feminist essays, Sito a Eros; a novella, Maldito amor; and most recently another collection of essays, El coloquio de las perras. Through metafictional devices, Ferré explores the power of language to unveil the exclusion of women from a historical process she tries to demythify.

ROSARIO FERRÉ

The Poisoned Story

And the King said to Ruydín the Wise Man:
"Wise Man, there is nothing written."
"Leaf through a few more pages."
The King turned a few more pages, and before long the poison began
to course rapidly through his body. Then the King trembled and cried out:
"This story is poisoned."

A Thousand and One Nights

Rosaura lived in a house of many balconies, shadowed by a
dense overgrowth of crimson bougainvillea vines. She used to
hide once more behind the crimson vines and before long she'd
be deep in her storybook world.
I know I ought to get up and look after the mourners, offer
my clients coffee and serve cognac to their unbearable husbands,
but I feel exhausted. I just want to sit here and rest my aching
feet, listen to my neighbors chatter endlessly about me. When I
met him, Don Lorenzo was an impoverished sugar-cane planter,
who only managed to keep the family afloat by working from
dawn to dusk. First Rosaura, then Lorenzo. What an extraordi-
nary coincidence. He loved the old plantation house, with its
dozen balconies jutting out over the canefields like a windswept
schooner's. He had been born there, and the building's historic
past had made his blood stir with patriotic zeal: It was there that
the criollos' first resistance to the invasion had taken place,
almost a hundred years before.

Don Lorenzo remembered the day very well, and he would
enthusiastically reenact the battle scene as he strode vigorously
through halls and parlors—war whoops, saber, musket and
all—thinking of those heroic ancestors who had gloriously died
for their homeland. In recent years, however, he'd been forced to
exercise some caution in his historic walks, as the wood-planked
floor of the house was eaten through with termites. The chicken
coop and the pigpen that Don Lorenzo was compelled to keep in
the cellar to bolster the family income were now clearly visible,
and the sight of them would always cast a pall over his dreams
of glory. Despite his economic hardships, however, he had never
considered selling the house or the plantation. A man could sell
anything he had—his horse, his cart, his shirt, even the skin off
his back—but one's land, like one's heart, must never be sold.

I mustn't betray my surprise, my growing amazement. After
everything that's happened, to find ourselves at the mercy of a
two-bit writer. As if my customers' bad-mouthing wasn't enough.
I can almost hear them whispering, tearing me apart behind their
fluttering fans: "Whoever would have thought it? from charwoman
to gentlewoman, first wallowing in mud, then wallowing in
wealth. But finery does not a lady make." I couldn't care less.
Thanks to Lorenzo, their claws can't reach me anymore; I'm
beyond their "lower my neckline a little more, Rosita dear, pinch my waist a little tighter there, Rosita darling," as though alterations to their gowns were no work at all and I didn’t have to get paid for them. But I don’t want to think about that now.

When his first wife died, Don Lorenzo behaved like a drowning man in a shipwreck. He thrashed about desperately in an ocean of loneliness for a while, until he finally grabbed on to the nearest piece of flotsam. Rosa offered to keep him afloat, clasped to her broad hips and generous breasts. He married her soon afterwards and, his domestic comfort thus reestablished, Don Lorenzo’s hearty laugh could once again be heard echoing through the house, as he went out of his way to make his daughter happy. An educated man, well-versed in literature and art, he found nothing wrong with Rosaura’s passion for storybooks. He felt guilty about the fact that she had been forced to leave school because of his poor business deals, and perhaps because of it on her birthday he always gave her a lavish, gold-bound storybook as a present.

This story is getting better; it’s funnier by the minute. The small-town, two-bit writer’s style makes me want to laugh; he’s stilted and mawkish and turns everything around for his own benefit. He obviously doesn’t sympathize with me. Rosa was a practical woman, for whom the family’s modest luxuries were unforgivable self-indulgences. Rosaura disliked her because of this. The house, like Rosaura’s books, was a fantasy world, filled with exquisite old dolls in threadbare clothes; musty wardrobes full of satin robes, velvet capes, and crystal candelabras which Rosaura used to swear she’s seen floating through the halls at night, held aloft by flickering ghosts. One day Rosa, without so much as a twinge of guilt, arranged to sell all the family heirlooms to the local antique dealer.

The small-town writer is mistaken. First of all, Lorenzo began pestering me long before his wife passed away. I remember how he used to undress me boldly with his eyes when I was standing by her sickbed, and I was torn between feeling sorry for him and my scorn for his weak, sentimental mooning. I finally married him out of pity and not because I was after his money, as this story falsely implies. I refused him several times, and when I finally weakened and said yes, my family thought I’d gone out of my mind. They believed that my marrying Lorenzo and taking charge of his huge house would mean professional suicide because my designer clothes were already beginning to earn me a reputation. Selling the so-called family heirlooms, moreover, made sense from a psychological as well as from a practical point of view. At my own home we’ve always been proud; I have ten brothers and sisters, but we’ve never gone to bed hungry. The sight of Lorenzo’s empty cupboard, impeccably whitewashed and with a skyrocket to better display its frightening barreness, would have made the bravest one of us shudder. I sold the broken-down furniture and the useless knickknacks to fill that cupboard, to put some honest bread on the table.

But Rosa’s miserliness didn’t stop there. She went on to pawn the silver, the table linen, and the embroidered bedsheets that had once belonged to Rosaura’s mother, and to her mother before her. Her niggardliness extended to the family menu, and even such moderately epicurean dishes as fricassed rabbit, rice with guinea hen, and baby lamb stew were banished forever from the table. This last measure saddened Don Lorenzo deeply because, next to his wife and daughter, he had loved those creollo dishes more than anything else in the world, and the sight of them at dinnertime would always make him beam with happiness.

Who could have strung together this trash, this dirty gossip? The title, one must admit, is perfect: the unwritten page will bear patiently whatever poison you spit on it. Rosa’s frugal ways often made her seem two-faced: she’d be all smiles in public and a shrew at home. "Look at the bright side of things, dear, keep your chin up when the chips are down," she’d say spunkily to Lorenzo as she put on her best clothes for mass on Sunday, insisting he do the same. "We’ve been through hard times before and we’ll weather this one out, too, but there’s no sense in letting our neighbors know." She opened a custom dress shop in one of the small rooms of the first floor of the house and hung a little sign that read "The fall of the Bastille" over its door. Believe it or not, she was so ignorant that she was sure this would win her a
more educated clientele. Soon she began to invest every penny she got from the sale of the family heirlooms in costly materials for her customer’s dresses, and she’d sit night and day in her shop, self-righteously threading needles and sewing seams.

The mayor’s wife just walked in; I’ll nod hello from here, without getting up. She’s wearing one of my exclusive models, which I must have made over at least six times just to please her. I know she expects me to go over and tell her how becoming it looks, but I just don’t feel up to it. I’m tired of acting out the role of high priestess of fashion for the women of this town. At first I felt sorry for them. It broke my heart to see them with nothing to think about but bridge, gossip, and gadfly from luncheon to luncheon. Boredom’s velvet claw had already finished off several of them who’d been interned in mainland sanatoriums for “mysterious health problems,” when I began to preach, from my modest workshop, the doctrine of “salvation through style.” Style heals all, cures all, restores all. Its followers are legion, as can be seen by the hosts of angels in lavishly billowing robes that mill under our cathedral’s frescoed dome.

Thanks to Lorenzo’s generosity, I subscribed to all the latest fashion magazines, which were mailed to me directly from Paris, London, and New York. I began to write about the importance of line and color to a successful business, and not only for advertisement, but for the spiritual well-being of the modern entrepreneur. I began to publish a weekly column of fashion advice in our local gazette, which kept my clientele pegged to the latest fashion trends. Whether the “in” color of the season was orchid or asthama green, whether in springtime the bodice was to be quilted or curled like a cabbage leaf, whether buttons were to be made of tortoise shell or mother-of-pearl, it was all a matter of dogma to them, an article of faith. My shop turned into a beehive of activity, with the town’s most well-to-do ladies constantly coming and going from my door, consulting me about their latest ensembles.

The success of my store soon made us rich. I felt immensely grateful to Lorenzo, who had made it all possible by selling the plantation and lending me the extra bit of money to expand my workshop. Thanks to him, today I’m a free woman; I don’t have to grovel or be polite to anyone. I’m sick of all the bowing and scraping before these good-for-nothing housewives, who must be constantly flattered to feel at peace. Let the mayor’s wife lift her own tail and smell her own cunt for a while. I much prefer to read this vile story rather than speak to her, rather than tell her “how nicely you’ve got yourself up today, my dear, with your witch’s shroud, your whisk-broomed shoes, and your stovepipe bag.”

Don Lorenzo sold his house and his land and moved to town with his family. The change did Rosaura good. She soon looked rosy-cheeked and made new friends, with whom she strolled in the parks and squares of the town. For the first time in her life she lost interest in her storybooks, and when her father made her his usual birthday gift a few months later, she left it half read and forgotten on the parlor table. Don Lorenzo, on the other hand, became more and more bereaved, his heart torn to pieces by the loss of his canefields.

Rosa, in her workshop, took on several seamstresses to help her out and now had more customers than ever before. Her shop took up the whole first floor of the house, and her clientele became more exclusive. She no longer had to cope with the infernal din of the chicken coop and the pigpen, which in the old days had adjoined her workshop and cheapened its atmosphere, making elegant conversation impossible. As these ladies, however, took forever to pay their bills, and Rosa couldn’t resist keeping a number of the lavish couturier models for herself, the business went deeper and deeper into debt.

It was around that time that she began to nag Lorenzo constantly about his will. “If you were to pass away today, I’d have to work till I was old and gray just to pay off our business debts,” she told him one night with tears in her eyes, before putting out the light on their bedside table. “Even if you sold half your estate, we couldn’t even begin to pay them.” And when she saw that he remained silent, his gray head slumped on his chest, and refused to disinherit his daughter for her sake, she began to heap insults on Rosaura, accusing her of not earning her keep.
and of living in a storybook world, while she had to sew her fingers to the bone in order to feed them all. Then, before turning her back to put out the light, she told him that, because he obviously loved his daughter more than anyone else in the world, she had no choice but to leave him.

I feel curiously numb, indifferent to what I’m reading. A sudden chill hangs in the air; I’ve begun to shiver and I feel a bit dizzy. It’s as though this week will never end; they’ll never come to take away the coffin so the gossips can finally go home. Compared to my clients’ sneers, the innuendos of this strange tale barely made me flinch; they bounce off me like harmless needles. After all, I’ve a clear conscience. I was a good wife to Lorenzo and a good mother to Rosaura. That’s the only thing that matters. It’s true I insisted on our moving to town, and it did us all a lot of good. It’s true I insisted he make me the sole executrix of his estate, but that was because I felt I was better fit to administer it than Rosaura while she’s still a minor, because she lives with her head in the clouds. But I never threatened to leave him, that’s a treacherous lie. The family finances were going from bad to worse and each day we were closer to bankruptcy, but Lorenzo didn’t seem to care. He’d always been capricious and whimsical, and he picked precisely that difficult time in our lives to sit down and write a book about the patriots of our island’s independence struggle.

From morning till night he’d go on scribbling page after page about our lost identity, tragically maimed by the “invasion” of 1898, when the truth was that our islanders welcomed the Marines with open arms. It’s true that, as Lorenzo wrote in his book, for almost a hundred years we’ve lived on the verge of civil war, but the only ones who want independence on this island are the romantic and the rich; the ruined landowners who still dream of the past as of a paradise lost; the frustrated, small-town writers; the bitter politicians with a thirst for power and monumental ambitions. The poor of this island have always been for commonwealth or statehood, because they’d rather be dead than squashed once again under the patent leather boot of the bourgeoisie. Each country knows which legs it limps on, and our people know that the rich of this land have always been a plague of vultures. And today they’re still doing it; those families are still trying to scalp the land, calling themselves pro-American and friends of the Yankees to keep their goodwill, when deep down they wish they’d leave, so they would graze once again on the poor man’s empty guts.

On Rosaura’s next birthday, Don Lorenzo gave his daughter the usual book of stories. Rosaura, for her part, decided to cook her father’s favorite guava compote for him, following one of her mother’s old recipes. As she stirred the bubbling, bloodlike syrup on the stove, the compote’s aroma gradually filled the house. At that moment Rosaura felt so happy, she thought she saw her mother waft in and out of the window several times, on a guava-colored cloud. That evening, Don Lorenzo was in a cheerful mood as he sat down to dinner. He ate with more relish than usual, and after dinner he gave Rosaura her book of short stories, with her initials elegantly monogrammed in gold, and bound in gleaming doe-heart’s skin. Ignoring his wife’s furrowed brow, he browsed with his daughter through the exquisite volume, whose thick gold-leaf edges and elegant bindings shone brightly on the lace tablecloth. Sitting stiffly, Rosa looked on in silence, an icy smile playing on her lips. She was dressed in her most luxurious opulent lace gown, as she and Don Lorenzo were to attend a formal dinner at the mayor’s mansion that evening. She was trying hard to keep her patience with Rosaura because she was convinced that being angry made even the most beautifully-dressed woman look ugly.

Don Lorenzo then began to humor his wife, trying to bring her out of her dark mood. He held the book out to her, so she might also enjoy its lavish illustrations of kings and queens, all sumptuously dressed in brocade robes. "They could very well inspire some of your fashionable designs for the incoming season, my dear. Although it would probably take a few more bolts of silk to cover your fullness than it took to cover theirs, I wouldn’t mind footing the bill because you’re a lovable, squeezable woman, and not a stuck-up, storybook doll," he teased her, as he covertly pinched her behind.
Poor Lorenzo, you truly did love me. You had a wonderful sense of humor, and your jokes always made me laugh until my eyes teared. Unyielding and distant, Rosa found the joke in poor taste and showed no interest at all in the book's illustrations. When father and daughter were finally done admiring them, Rosaura got up from her place and went to the kitchen to fetch the guava compote, which had been spreading its delightful perfume through the house all day. As she approached the table, however, she tripped and dropped the silver serving dish, spattering her stepmother's skirt.

I knew something had been bothering me for a while, and now I finally know what it is. The guava compote incident took place years ago, when we still lived in the country and Rosaura was almost a child. The small-town writer is lying again; he's shamelessly and knowingly altered the order of events. He gives the impression the scene he's retelling took place recently, that it actually took place only three months ago, but it's been almost six years since Lorenzo sold the farm. Anyone would think Rosaura was still a girl, when in fact she's a grown woman. She takes after her mother more and more; she fiddles away her time daydreaming, refuses to make herself useful, and lives off the honest sweat of those of us who work.

I remember the guava compote incident clearly. We were on our way to a cocktail party at the mayor's house because he'd finally made you an offer on the sale of the hacienda, which you had nostalgically named "The Sundowns," and the people of the town had rebaptized "Curly Cunt Downs," in revenge for your aristocratic airs. At first you were offended and turned him down, but when the mayor suggested he would restore the house as a historic landmark, where the mementos of the sugar-cane-growing aristocracy would be preserved for future generations, you promised to think about it. The decision finally came when I managed to persuade you, after hours of endless arguments under our bed's threadbare canopy, that we couldn't go on living in that huge house, with no electricity, no hot water, and no adequate toilet facilities; and where one had to move one's bowels on an antique French Provincial latrine, which had been a gift to your grandfather from King Alphonse XII. That's why I was wearing that awful dress the day of Rosaura's petty tantrum. I had managed to cut it from our brocade living-room curtains, just as Vivien Leigh had done in Gone With the Wind, and its gaudy frills and garish flourishes were admittedly in the worst of taste. But I knew that was the only way to impress the mayor's high-flown wife and cater to her boorish, aristocratic longings. The mayor finally bought the house, with all the family antiques and objets d'art, but not to turn it into a museum, as you had so innocently believed, but to enjoy it himself as his opulent country house.

Rosa stood up horrified and stared at the blood-colored streaks of syrup that trickled slowly down her skirt, until they reached the silk-embossed buckles of her shoes. She was trembling with rage, and at first couldn't get a single word out. When her soul finally came back to her body, she began calling Rosaura names, accusing her shrielly of living in a storybook world, while she, Rosa, worked her fingers to the bone in order to keep them all fed. Those damned books were to blame for the girl's shiftlessness, and as they were also undeniable proof of Don Lorenzo's preference for Rosaura, and of the fact that he held his daughter in higher esteem than his wife, she had no choice but to leave him. Unless, of course, Rosaura agreed to get rid of all her books, which should immediately be collected in a heap in the backyard, where they would be set on fire.

Maybe it's the smoking candles, maybe it's the heavy scent of all those myrtles Rosaura heaped on the coffin, but I'm feeling dizzier. I can't stop my hands from trembling and my palms are moist with sweat. The story has begun to fester in some remote corner of my mind, poisoning me with its dregs of resentment. As soon as she ended her speech, Rosa went deathly pale and fell forward to the floor in a heap. Terrified at his wife's fainting spell, Don Lorenzo knelt down beside her and begged her in a faltering voice not to leave him. He promised he'd do everything she'd asked for, if only she'd stay and forgive him. Pacified by his promises, Rosa opened her eyes and smiled at her husband. As a token of goodwill at their reconciliation, she allowed
Rosaura to keep her books and promised she wouldn’t burn them.

That night Rosaura hid her birthday gift under her pillow and wept herself to sleep. She had an unusual dream. She dreamt that one of the tales in her book had been cursed with a mysterious power that would instantly destroy its first reader. The author had gone to great lengths to leave a sign, a definite clue in the story which would serve as a warning, but try as she might in her dream, Rosaura couldn’t bring herself to remember what that sign had been. When she finally woke up she was in a cold sweat, but she was still in the dark as to whether the story worked its evil through the ear, the tongue, or the skin.

Don Lorenzo died peacefully in his bed a few months later, comforted by the cares and prayers of his loving wife and daughter. His body had been solemnly laid out in the parlor for all to see, bedecked with wreaths and surrounded by smoking candles, when Rosa came into the room, carrying in her hand a book elegantly bound in red and gold leather, Don Lorenzo’s last gift to Rosaura. Friends and relatives all stopped talking when they saw her walk in. She nodded a distant hello to the mayor’s wife and went to sit by herself in a corner of the room, as though in need of some peace and quiet to comfort her in her sadness. She opened the book at random and began to turn the pages slowly, pretending she was reading but really admiring the illustrations of the fashionably dressed ladies and queens. As she leafed through the pages, she couldn’t help thinking that now that she was a woman of means, she could well afford one of those lavish robes for herself. Suddenly, she came to a story that caught her eye. Unlike the others, it had no drawings, and it had been printed in a thick, guava-colored ink she’d never seen before. The first sentence took her mildly by surprise, because the heroine’s name was the same as her stepdaughter’s. Her curiosity kindled, she read on quickly, moistening the pages with her index finger because the guava-colored ink made them stick to each other annoyingly. She went from wonder to amazement and from amazement to horror, but in spite of her growing panic, she couldn’t make herself stop reading. The story began . . . "Rosaura lived in a house of many balconies, shadowed by a dense overgrowth of crimson bougainvillea vines . . .,” and how the story ended, Rosa never knew.

Translated by Rosario Ferré and Diana Vélez
Jeanne Hyvrard is a prolific writer who has produced novels, poetry, and short prose pieces about a French Caribbean island which could be either Guadeloupe or Martinique. For a long time Hyvrard refused all interviews and public appearances, and seemed to encourage speculation as to her origins. She is, in fact, a white woman now living in Paris who spent her formative years in the Caribbean. Hyvrard’s fiction is marked by her scathing critique of Western, patriarchal society. The extended metaphor of “woman as nigger” and her fragmented prose are used to explore the voicelessness imposed on women and blacks by male/colonial-oriented discourse.

JEANNE HYVRARD

Opéra Station. Six in the Evening.
For Months . . .

cooling down, crystallized sugar on top of the molasses. The woman against the wall. Marie Galion can’t stand it any longer. Words above our heads. The molasses, in turn, transformed into rum. Alcohol of survival. Writing. The woman in mauve overwhelmed by the music. Opéra. Six o’clock. Opéra six o’clock for months. Going back in the world’s memory. Why go back home when this is where it’s happening? The face recognized among them all. Deserted by the body. What did that face say? A police day. A mercenary day. A day of the French army. A day of trampling. A day of silence. What did that assassinated man say? Down with . . . Down with . . . who was it? You can sleep and not write. He’ll no longer come into town on days of rioting. Toward Aubervilliers. Levallois. Mairie d’Ivry. To dance. To dance for him. To dance again. Dance with my whole body. My story. Our story. History. To dance the transfigured city with my whole body. Opéra. Opéra. Every night. Six o’clock for months, Caribbean musicians. Emergency exit. Blocked passageway. To dance, nonetheless. To dance the lyrebird spreading its wings through music’s grace. To dance the white body abandoned to black music. To dance collective misery. To dance the empire of the world in a single hand. To dance the broken voices reemerging from everywhere.

Translated by Thomas Spear

Born in 1949 in Antigua, Kincaid moved to the United States in 1966. She worked for some years as a staff writer for The New Yorker magazine, where her first prose pieces were published. Her first book of stories, At the Bottom of the River, made her an instant literary celebrity. Her first novel, Annie John (1983), a penetrating study of a young girl’s passage into adolescence, was followed in 1990 by the critically acclaimed Lucy. Praised for her “unique, compelling voice” and ferocious integrity, Kincaid offers powerful evocations of the island of her birth and intense explorations of the mother-daughter relationship. She is among the best known and most highly regarded of contemporary Caribbean writers.

JAMAICA KINCAID

Girl

Wash the white clothes on Monday and put them on the stone heap; wash the color clothes on Tuesday and put them on the clothesline to dry; don’t walk barehead in the hot sun; cook pumpkin fritters in very hot sweet oil; soak your little clothes right after you take them off; when buying cotton to make yourself a nice blouse, be sure that it doesn’t have gum on it, because that way it won’t hold up well after a wash; soak salt fish overnight before you cook it; is it true that you sing benna in Sunday school?; always eat your food in such a way that it won’t turn someone else’s stomach; on Sundays try to walk like a lady and not like the slut you are so bent on becoming; don’t sing benna in Sunday school; you mustn’t speak to wharf-rat boys, not even to give directions; don’t eat fruits on the street—flies will follow you; but I don’t sing benna on Sundays at all and never in Sunday school; this is how to sew on a button; this is how to make a buttonhole for the button you have just sewed on; this
is how to hem a dress when you see the hem coming down and so to prevent yourself from looking like the slut I know you are so bent on becoming; this is how you iron your father's khaki shirt so that it doesn't have a crease; this is how you iron your father's khaki pants so that they don't have a crease; this is how you grow okra—far from the house, because okra tree harbors red ants; when you are growing dasheen, make sure it gets plenty of water or else it makes your throat itch when you are eating it; this is how you sweep a corner; this is how you sweep a whole house; this is how you sweep a yard; this is how you smile to someone you don't like too much; this is how you smile to someone you don't like at all; this is how you smile to someone you like completely; this is how you set a table for tea; this is how you set a table for dinner; this is how you set a table for dinner with an important guest; this is how you set a table for lunch; this is how you set a table for breakfast; this is how you behave in the presence of men who don't know you very well, and this way they won't recognize immediately the slut I have warned you against becoming; be sure to wash every day, even if it is with your own spit; don't squat down to play marbles—you are not a boy, you know; don't pick people's flowers—you might catch something; don't throw stones at blackbirds, because it may not be a blackbird at all; this is how to make a bread pudding; this is how to make doukona; this is how to make pepper pot; this is how to make a good medicine for a cold; this is how to make a good medicine to throw away a child before it even becomes a child; this is how to catch a fish; this is how to throw back a fish you don't like, and that way something bad won't fall on you; this is how to bully a man; this is how a man bullies you; this is how to love a man, and if it doesn't work there are other ways, and if they don't work don't feel too bad about giving up; this is how to spit up in the air if you feel like it, and this is how to move quick so that it doesn't fall on you; this is how to make ends meet; always squeeze bread to make sure it's fresh; but what if the baker won't let me feel the bread?; you mean to say that after all you are really going to be the kind of woman who the baker won't let near the bread?

Born in Puerto Rico in 1938, Olga Nolla started her literary career in Zona de carga y descarga, an influential literary journal she edited with her cousin Rosario Ferré. The author of three acclaimed volumes of poetry, Nolla has written numerous short stories scattered in journals and newspapers in Puerto Rico. A handful of these appeared in her first collection, Porque no queremos tanto, published in 1990. Her work is marked by its painstaking skill and its sensitive and evocative exploration of the seemingly flawless and idyllic Puerto Rican upper-class world, whose dark underside is dramatically, violently, laid bare.

OLGA NOLLA

No Dust Is Allowed in This House

Every day at exactly nine thirty in the morning, they grab me by my wooden handle, painted black and worn out from many years of use, and they shake me mechanically, purely by habit since it's impossible to gather dust overnight, much less in a house like this, where they even sweep under the rugs and behind the furniture every day, each day of the week they dismantle a room to make sure there is no dust behind the bedposts, or around the legs of the armoires, Eusebio has the written instructions tacked to a wall in his room, in long and elegant letters on an already yellowed piece of paper that should have been removed from the wall a long time ago, the thumbtacks are rusty but the paper still remains nailed there despite the fact that after so many years of following the same routine it's
sunlight and the blue-gray sky. And the arrow shoots out. Piercing the silence, it strikes the woman right in the heart; a star-shaped red flower stains the delicate chest. A body crumples, and the golden sand slowly drinks the vermilion floodtide.

N’Gaou withdraws toward the forest. He is calm, strangely appeased: Aloka is free forever. His own son will never be a white man’s slave.

The great black warrior walks toward the putrid swamp lapping in the setting sun. The brackish water closes upon him with a greedy click of its wet tongue.

A red flower floats on the surface for an instant, and then slowly folds into itself and disappears.

*Translated by Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert*

Rhys was born in Dominica in 1894 but lived in England from 1910 until her death in 1979. Having written most of her fiction—The Left Bank, Quartet, After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie, Voyage to the Dark, and Good Morning, Midnight—between 1928 and 1939, Rhys slipped out of sight and was generally thought to be dead. In 1966 she made a dramatic comeback with Wide Sargasso Sea, which won the W. H. Smith Literary Award, the Heinemann Award, and the Royal Society of Literature Prize. Almost obsessively concerned with women’s alienation in a patriarchal world, Rhys explores in her fiction the psychological disintegration of her poignant characters.

JEAN RHYS

The Day They Burned the Books

My friend Eddie was a small, thin boy. You could see the blue veins in his wrists and temples. People said that he had consumption and wasn’t long for this world. I loved, but sometimes despised him.

His father, Mr. Sawyer, was a strange man. Nobody could make out what he was doing in our part of the world at all. He was not a planter or a doctor or a lawyer or a banker. He didn’t keep a store. He wasn’t a schoolmaster or a government official. He wasn’t—that was the point—a gentleman. We had several resident romantics who had fallen in love with the moon on the Caribees—they were all gentlemen and quite unlike Mr. Sawyer who hadn’t an "h" in his composition. Besides, he detested the moon and everything else about the Caribbean and he didn’t mind telling you so.

He was agent for a small steamship line which in those days
linked up Venezuela and Trinidad with the smaller islands, but he couldn't make much out of that. He must have a private income, people decided, but they never decided why he had chosen to settle in a place he didn't like and to marry a colored woman. Though a decent, respectable, nicely educated colored woman, mind you.

Mrs. Sawyer must have been very pretty once but, what with one thing and another, that was in days gone by.

When Mr. Sawyer was drunk—this often happened—he used to be very rude to her. She never answered him.

"Look at the nigger showing off," he would say; and she would smile as if she knew she ought to see the joke but couldn't. "You damned, long-eyed, gloomy half-caste, you don't smell right," he would say; and she never answered, not even to whisper, "You don't smell right to me either."

The story went that once they had ventured to give a dinner party and that when the servant, Mildred, was bringing in coffee, he had pulled Mrs. Sawyer's hair. "Not a wig, you see," he bawled. Even then, if you can believe it, Mrs. Sawyer had laughed and tried to pretend that it was all part of a joke, this mysterious, obscure, sacred English joke.

But Mildred told the other servants in the town that her eyes had gone wicked, like a sourciant's eyes, and that afterwards she had picked up some of the hair he pulled out and put it in an envelope, and that Mr. Sawyer ought to look out (hair is obeah as well as hands).

Of course, Mrs. Sawyer had her compensations. They lived in a very pleasant house in Hill Street. The garden was large and they had a fine mango tree, which bore prolifically. The fruit was small, round, very sweet and juicy—a lovely, red-and-yellow colour when it was ripe. Perhaps it was one of the compensations, I used to think.

Mr. Sawyer built a room on the back of his house. It was unpainted inside and the wood smelt very sweet. Bookshelves lined the walls. Every time the Royal Mail steamer came in it brought a package for him, and gradually the empty shelves filled.

Once I went there with Eddie to borrow The Arabian Nights. That was on a Saturday afternoon, one of those hot, still afternoons when you felt that everything had gone to sleep, even the water in the gutters. But Mrs. Sawyer was not asleep. She put her head in at the door and looked at us, and I knew that she hated the room and hated the books.

It was Eddie with the pale blue eyes and straw-coloured hair—the living image of his father, though often as silent as his mother—who first infected me with doubts about "home," meaning England. He would be so quiet when others who had never seen it—none of us had ever seen it—were talking about its delights, gesticulating freely as we talked—London, the beautiful, rosy-cheeked ladies, the theatres, the shops, the fog, the blazing coal fires in winter, the exotic food (whitebait eaten to the sound of violins), strawberry and cream—the word "strawberries" always spoken with a guttural and throaty sound which we imagined to be the proper English pronunciation.

"I don't like strawberries," Eddie said on one occasion. "You don't like strawberries?"

"No, and I don't like daffodils either. Dad's always going on about them. He says they lick the flowers here into a cocked hat and I bet that's a lie."

We were all too shocked to say, "You don't know a thing about it." We were so shocked that nobody spoke to him for the rest of the day. But I for one admired him. I also was tired of learning and reciting poems in praise of daffodils, and my relations with the few "real" English boys and girls I had met were awkward. I had discovered that if I called myself English they would snub me haughtily: "You're not English; you're a horrid colonial." "Well, I don't much want to be English," I would say. "It's much more fun to be French or Spanish or something like that—and, as a matter of fact, I am a bit." Then I was too killingly funny, quite ridiculous. Not only a horrid colonial, but also ridiculous. Heads I win, tails you lose—that was the English. I had thought about all this, and thought hard, but I had never dared to tell anybody what I thought and I realized that Eddie had been very bold.
But he was bold, and stronger than you would think. For one thing, he never felt the heat; some coldness in his fair skin resisted it. He didn’t burn red or brown, he didn’t freckle much.

Hot days seemed to make him feel especially energetic. "Now we’ll run twice round the lawn and then you can pretend you’re dying of thirst in the desert and that I’m an Arab chieftain bringing you water."

"You must drink slowly," he would say, "for if you’re very thirsty and you drink quickly you die."

So I learnt the voluptuousness of drinking slowly when you are very thirsty—small mouthful by small mouthful, until the glass of pink, iced Coca-Cola was empty.

Just after my twelfth birthday Mr. Sawyer died suddenly, and as Eddie’s special friend I went to the funeral, wearing a new white dress. My straight hair was damped with sugar and water the night before and plaited into tight little plaits, so that it should be fluffy for the occasion.

When it was all over everybody said how nice Mrs. Sawyer had looked, walking like a queen behind the coffin and crying her eyeballs out at the right moment, and wasn’t Eddie a funny boy? He hadn’t cried at all.

After this Eddie and I took possession of the room with the books. No one else ever entered it, except Mildred to sweep and dust in the mornings, and gradually the ghost of Mr. Sawyer pulling Mrs. Sawyer’s hair faded though this took a little time. The blinds were always halfway down and going in out of the sun was like stepping into a pool of brown-green water. It was empty except for the bookshelves, a desk with a green baize top and a wicker rocking-chair.

"My room," Eddie called it. "My books," he would say, "my books."

I don’t know how long this lasted. I don’t know whether it was weeks after Mr. Sawyer’s death or months after, that I see myself and Eddie in the room. But there we are and there, unexpectedly, are Mrs. Sawyer and Mildred. Mrs. Sawyer’s mouth tight, her eyes pleased. She is pulling all the books out of the shelves and piling them into two heaps. The big, fat glossy

ones—the good-looking ones, Mildred explains in a whisper—lie in one heap. The Encyclopaedia Britannica, British Flowers, Birds and Beasts, various histories, books with maps, Froude’s English in the West Indies and so on—they are going to be sold. The unimportant books, with paper covers or damaged covers or torn pages, lie in another heap. They are going to be burnt—yes, burnt.

Mildred’s expression was extraordinary as she said that—half hugely delighted, half-shocked, even frightened. And as for Mrs. Sawyer’s—well, I knew bad temper (I had often seen it), I knew rage, but this was hate. I recognized the difference at once and stared at her curiously. I edged closer to her so that I could see the titles of the books she was handling.

It was the poetry shelf. Poems, Lord Byron, Poetical Works, Milton, and so on. Vlun, vlung, vlung—all thrown into the heap that were to be sold. But a book by Christina Rossetti, though also bound in leather, went into the heap that was to be burnt, and by a flicker in Mrs. Sawyer’s eyes I knew that worse than men who wrote books were women who wrote books—indefinitely worse. Men could be mercifully shot; women must be tortured.

Mrs. Sawyer did not seem to notice that we were there, but she was breathing free and easy and her hands had got the rhythm of tearing and pitching. She looked beautiful, too—beautiful as the sky outside which was a very dark blue, or the mango tree, long sprays of brown and gold.

When Eddie said "No," she did not even glance at him.

"No," he said again in a high voice. "Not that one. I was reading that one."

She laughed and he rushed at her, his eyes starting out of his head, shrieking. "Now I’ve got to hate you too. Now I hate you too."

He snatched the book out of her hand and gave her a violent push. She fell into the rocking-chair.

Well, I wasn’t going to be left out of all this, so I grabbed a book from the condemned pile and dived under Mildred’s outstretched arm.

Then we were both in the garden. We ran along the path, bordered with crotons. We peled down the path, though they
did not follow us and we could hear Mildred laughing—kyah, kyah, kyah, kyah. As I ran I put the book I had taken into the loose front of my brown holland dress. It felt warm and alive.

When we got into the street we walked sedately, for we feared the black children's ridicule. I felt very happy, because I had saved this book and it was my book and I would read it from the beginning to the triumphant words "The End". But I was uneasy when I thought of Mrs. Sawyer.

"What will she do?" I said.
"Nothing," Eddie said. "Not to me."
He was white as a ghost in his sailor suit, a blue-white even in the setting sun, and his father's sneer was clamped on his face.
"But she'll tell your mother all sorts of lies about you," he said.
"She's an awful liar. She can't make up a story to save her life, but she makes up lies about people all right."
"My mother won't take any notice of her." I said. Though I was not at all sure.
"Why not? Because she's... because she isn't white?"
Well, I knew the answer to that one. Whenever the subject was brought up—people's relations and whether they had a drop of colored blood or whether they hadn't—my father would grow impatient and interrupt. "Who's white?" he would say. "Damned few."

So I said, "Who's white? Damned few."
"You can go to the devil," Eddie said. "She's prettier than your mother. When she's asleep her mouth smiles and she has curling eyelashes and quantities and quantities and quantities of hair."
"Yes," I said truthfully. "She's prettier than my mother."
It was a red sunset that evening, a huge, sad, frightening sunset.
"Look, let's go back," I said. "If you're sure she won't be vexed with you, let's go back. It'll be dark soon."
At his gate he asked me not to go. "Don't go yet, don't go yet."

We sat under the mango tree and I was holding his hand when he began to cry. Drops fell on my hand like the water from the dripstone in the filter in our yard. Then I began to cry too and when I felt my own tears on my hand I thought, "Now perhaps we're married."
"Yes, certainly, now we're married," I thought. But I didn't say anything. I didn't say a thing until I was sure he had stopped. Then I asked, "What's your book?"
"It's Kim," he said. "But it got torn. It starts at page twenty now. What's the one you took?"
"I don't know; it's too dark to see," I said.

When I got home I rushed into my bedroom and locked the door because I knew that this book was the most important thing that had ever happened to me and I did not want anybody to be there when I looked at it.

But I was very disappointed, because it was in French and seemed dull. *Fort Comme La Mort*, it was called. . . .
Olive Senior was born in 1941 and grew up in rural Jamaica and Canada. She has had an outstanding career as a journalist, researcher, writer, editor, and publisher, and was for many years editor of Jamaica Journal. She has won numerous awards for her poetry and short stories, most recently the Commonwealth Writers' Prize in 1987 for her first collection of short stories, Summer Lightning. She has recently published a new collection, Arrival of the Snake Woman (1989). Senior's fiction brilliantly captures the beauty and anguish of common people's lives in Jamaica. She had an unerring sense for the dramatic which surfaces in the often surprising endings of her tales. Senior is presently living in England.

OLIVE SENIOR

Bright Thursdays

Thursday was the worst day. While she had no expectations of any other day of the week, every Thursday turned out to be either very good or very bad, and she had no way of knowing in advance which one it would be. Sometimes there would be so many bad Thursdays in a row that she wanted to write home to her mother, "Please please take me home for I cannot stand the clouds." But then she would remember her mother saying, "Laura, this is a new life for you. This is opportunity. Now dont let yu mama down. Chile, swallow yu tongue before yu talk lest yu say the wrong thing and dontmek yu eye big for everything yu see. Dont give Miss Christie no cause for complain and most of all, let them know you have broughtupcy."

Miss Christie was the lady she now lived with, her father's mother. She didn't know her father except for a photograph of him on Miss Christie's bureau where he was almost lost in a forest of photographs of all her children and grandchildren all brown-skinned with straight hair and confident smiles on their faces. When she saw these photographs she understood why Miss Christie couldn't put hers there. Every week as she dusted the bureau, Laura looked at herself in the mirror and tried to smile with the confidence of those in the photographs, but all she saw was a being so strange, so far removed from those in the pictures, that she knew that she could never be like them. To smile so at a camera one had to be born to certain things—a big house with heavy mahogany furniture and many rooms, fixed mealtimes, a mother and father who were married to each other and lived together in the same house, who would chastise and praise, who would send you to school with the proper clothes so you would look like, be like everyone else, fit neatly into the space Life had created for you.

But even though others kept pushing her, and she tried to ease, to work her way into that space too, she sometimes felt that Life had played her tricks, and there was, after all, no space allotted for her. For how else could she explain this discomfort, this pain it caused her in this her father's house to confront even the slightest event. Such as sitting at table and eating a meal.

In her mother's house she simply came in from school or wherever and sat on a stool in a corner of the lean-to kitchen or on the steps while Mama dished up a plate of food which one ate with whatever implement happened to be handy. Mama herself would more often than not stand to eat, sometimes out of the pot, and the boys too would sit wherever their fancy took them. Everything would be black from the soot from the fireside which hung now like grotesque torn ribbons from the roof. After the meal, Laura would wash the plates and pots in an enamel basin outside and sweep out the ashes from the fireside. A meal was something as natural as breathing.

But here in this house of her father's parents a meal was a ritual, something for which you prepared yourself by washing your hands and combing your hair and straightening your dress before approaching the Table. The Table was in the Dining Room
and at least twelve could have comfortably sat around it. Now Laura and the grandparents huddled together at one end and in the somber shadows of the room, Laura sometimes imagined that they so unbalanced the table that it would come toppling over onto them. At other times, when she polished the mahogany she placed each of the children of the household at a place around this table, along with their mother and father and their be-whiskered and beribboned grandparents who looked down from oval picture frames. When they were all seated, they fitted in so neatly in their slots that there was now no place left for her. Sometimes she didn't mind.

But now at the real mealtimes, the ghosts were no longer there and she sat with the old people in this empty echoing space. Each time she sat down with dread in her heart, for mealtime was not a time to eat so much as a time for lessons in Table Manners.

First Mirle the cook would tinkle a little silver bell that would summon them to the dining room, and the house would stir with soft footsteps scurrying like mice and the swish of water in the basin. All the inhabitants of the house were washing and combing and straightening themselves in preparation for the Meal. She tried not to be the last one to the table for that was an occasion for chastisement. Then she had to remember to take the stiffly starched white napkin from its silver ring and place it in her lap.

"Now sit up straight, child. Don't slump so," Miss Christie would say as she lifted the covers off tureen. Miss Christie sat at the table uncovering dishes of food, but by the time Laura was served, her throat was already full and she got so confused that she would forget the knife and start to eat with her fork.

"Now dear, please use your knife. And don't cut your meat into little pieces all at once."

At the sulkily look which came over Laura's face, Miss Christie would say, "You'll thank me for this one day you know, Laura. If you are going to get anywhere, you must learn how to do things properly. I just can't imagine what your mother has been doing with you all this time. How a child your age can be so ignorant of the most elementary things is beyond me."

The first time Miss Christie had mentioned her mother in this way, Laura had burst into tears and fled from the room. But now, remembering her mother's words, she refused to cry.

Laura's father had never married her mother. The question never came up for, said Myrtle without even a hint of malice in her voice, "Mr. Bertram was a young man of high estate. Very high estate." She was fond of telling this to everyone who came to her house and did not know the story of Laura's father. How Mr. Bertram had come visiting the Wheelers where Myrtle was a young servant. They had had what she liked to call "a romance" but which was hardly even imprinted on Mr. Bertram's mind, and Laura was the result. The fact that Mr. Bertram was a man of "high estate" had in itself elevated Miss Myrtle so far in her own eyes that no one else could understand how she could have managed to bear her sons afterward for two undoubtedly humble fathers.

Laura had come out with dark skin but almost straight hair which Miss Myrtle did her best to improve by rubbing it with coconut oil and brushing it every day, at the same time rubbing cocoa butter into her skin to keep it soft and make it "clear." Miss Myrtle made the child wear a broad straw hat to keep off the sun, assuring her that her skin was "too delicate."

Miss Myrtle had no regrets about her encounter with Mr. Bertram even though his only acknowledgment of the birth was a ten-dollar note sent to her at the time. But then he had been shipped off to the United States by his angry parents and nothing further had been heard from him.

Miss Myrtle was unfortunate in her choice of fathers for her children for none of them gave her any support. She single-handedly raised them in a little house on family land and took in sewing to augment what she got from her cultivation of food for the pot and ginger for the market. She did not worry about the fate of her sons for they were, after all, boys, and well able to fend for themselves when the time came. But her daughter was a constant source of concern to her, for a child with such long curly hair, with such a straight nose, with such soft skin
Dear Miss Kristie

Greetings to you in Jesus Holy Name I trust that this letter will find that you an Mister Dolfy ar enjoin the best of helth. Wel Miss Kristie I write you this letter in fear and trimblin for I am the Little One and you are the Big One but I hope you will not take me too forrad but mr. Bertram little girl now nine year old and bright as a button wel my dear Mam wish you could see her a good little girl and lern her lesson wel she would go far in Life if she could have some Help but I am a Poor Woman! With Nothing! To Help I am in the fields morning til night. I can tel you that in looks she take after her Father but I am no Asking Mr. Bertram for anything I know. He have his Life to live for but if you can fine it in You Power to do Anything for the little girl God Richest Blessing wil come down on You May the Good Lord Bles and Keep you Miss Kristie also Mas Dolfy. And give you a long Life until you find Eternal Rest Safe in the arms of the Savor

Your Humble Servant
Myrtle Johnstone.

The letter caused consternation when it was received by the old people for they had almost forgotten about what the family referred to as "Bertram's Mistake" and they thought that the woman had forgotten about it too. Although Myrtle was only seventeen at the time and their son was twenty-eight, they had never forgiven what Miss Christie called the uppity black gal for seducing their son. "Dying to raise their color all of them," Miss Christie had cried, "dying to raise their color. That's why you can't be too careful with them." Now like a ghost suddenly materializing they could see this old scandal coming back to haunt them.

At first the two old people were angry, then as they talked about the subject for days on end, they soon dismissed their first decision which was to ignore the letter, for the little girl, no matter how common and scheming her mother was, was nevertheless family and something would have to be done about her. Eventually they decided on limited help—enough to save their consciences but not too much so that Myrtle would get the idea that they were a limitless source of wealth. Miss Christie composed the first of her brief and cool letters to the child's mother.

Dear Myrtle,

In response to your call for help we are sending a little money for the child, also a parcel which should soon arrive. But please don't think that we can do this all the time as we ourselves are finding it hard to make ends meet. Besides, people who have children should worry about how they are going to support them before they have them.

Yours truly,
Mrs. C. Watson

They made, of course, no reference to the child's father who was now married and living in New Jersey.

Myrtle was overjoyed to get the letter and the parcel for they were the tangible indications that the child's family would indeed rescue her from a life of poverty in the mountains. Now
she devoted even more care and attention to the little girl, taking pains to remind her of the fineness of her hair, the straightness of her nose, and the high estate of her father. While she allowed the child to continue to help with the chores around the house, she was no longer sent on errands. When all the other children were busy minding goats, fetching water or firewood, all of these chores in her household now fell on Laura's brothers. Myrtle was busy grooming Laura for a golden future.

Because of her mother's strictures, the child soon felt alienated from others. If she played with other children, her mother warned her not to get her clothes too dirty. Not to get too burnt in the sun. Not to talk so broad. Instead of making her filled with pride as her mother intended, these attentions made the child supremely conscious of being different from the children around her, and she soon became withdrawn and lacking in spontaneity.

Myrtle approved of the child's new quietness as a sign of "quality" in her. She sent a flood of letters to Miss Christie, although the answers she got were meager and few. She kept her constantly informed of the child's progress in school, of her ability to read so well, and occasionally made the child write a few sentences in the letter to her grandmother to show off her fine handwriting. Finally, one Christmas, to flesh out the image of the child she had been building up over the years, she took most of the rat-cut coffee money and took the child to the nearest big town to have her photograph taken in a professional studio.

It was a posed, stilted photograph in a style that went out of fashion thirty years before. The child was dressed in a frilly white dress trimmed with ribbons, much too long for her age. She wore long white nylon socks and white T-strap shoes. Her hair was done in perfect drop curls, with a part to the side and two front curls caught up with a large white bow. In the photograph she stood quite straight with her feet together and her right hand stiffly bent to touch an artificial rose in a vase on a rattan table beside her. She did not smile.

Her grandparents who were the recipients of a large framed print on matte paper saw a dark-skinned child with long dark hair, a straight nose, and enormous, very serious eyes. Despite the fancy clothes, everything about her had a countrified air except for the penetrating eyes which had none of the softness and shyness of country children. Miss Christie was a little embarrassed by this gift, and hid the picture in her bureau drawer for it had none of the gloss of the photos of her children and grandchildren which stood on her bureau. But she could not put the picture away entirely; something about the child haunted her and she constantly looked at it to see what in this child was of her flesh and blood. The child had her father's weak mouth, it seemed, though the defiant chin and the bold eyes undoubtedly came from her mother. Maybe it was the serious, steady, unchildlike gaze that caused Miss Christie sometimes to look at the picture for minutes at a time as if it mesmerized her. Then she would get hold of herself again and angrily put the picture back into the drawer.

Despite her better judgment, Miss Christie found herself intensely curious about this child whose mother made her into such a little paragon and whose eyes gazed out at the world so directly.

Soon, she broached the subject obliquely to her husband. One evening at dusk as the two of them sat on the veranda, she said, "Well, just look at the two of us. Look how many children and grandchildren we have, and not a one to keep our company."

"Hm. So life stay. Once your children go to town, country too lonely for them after that."

"I suppose so. But it really would be nice to have a young person about the house again." They dropped the subject then, but she kept bringing it up from time to time.

Finally she said, as if thinking about it for the first time, "But Delphie, why don't we get Myrtle's little girl here?"

"What! And rake up that old thing again? You must be mad."

"But nobody has to know who she is."

"Then you don't know how ol' nayga fas'. They bound to find out."

"Well, they can't prove anything. She doesn't have our name. She bears her mother's name."

They argued about it on and off for weeks, then finally they
decided to invite the child to stay for a week or two.

When Laura came, she was overawed by the big house, the patrician old couple who were always so clean and sweet-smelling as if perpetually laundered each day anew by Mirie the cook. She fell even more silent, speaking only when spoken to, and then in a low voice which could hardly be heard.

Miss Christie was gratified that she was so much lighter than the photograph (indeed, Myrtle had quarrelled with the photographer for just this reason) and although she was exactly like a country mouse, she did fill the house with her presence. Already Miss Christie was busy planning the child's future, getting her into decent clothes, correcting her speech, erasing her country accent, teaching her table manners, getting her to take a complete bath every day—a fact which was so novel to the child who came from a place where everyone bathed in a bath pan once a week since the water had to be carried on their heads one mile uphill from the spring.

In the child Miss Christie saw a lump of clay which held every promise of being molded into something satisfactory. The same energy with which Miss Christie entered into a "good" marriage, successfully raised six children and saw that they made good marriages themselves, that impelled her to organize the Mothers Union and the School Board—that energy was now to be expended on this latest product which relatives in the know referred to as "Bertram's stray shot."

Although her husband fussed and fumed, he too liked the idea of having a child in the house once more though he thought her a funny little thing who hardly made a sound all day, unlike the boisterous family they had reared. And so, as if in a dream, the child found herself permanently transported from her mother's two-room house to this mansion of her father's.

Of course her father was never mentioned and she only knew it was him from the photograph because he had signed it. She gazed often at this photograph, trying to transmute it into a being of flesh and blood from which she had been created, but failed utterly. In fact, she was quite unable to deduce even the smallest facet of his character from the picture. All that she saw was a smiling face that in some indefinable way looked like all the faces in the other photographs. All were bland and sweet. In none of these faces were there lines, or frowns, or blemishes, or marks of ugliness such as a squint eye, or a broken nose, or kinky hair, or big ears, or broken teeth which afflicted all the other people she had known. Faced with such perfection, she ceased to look at herself in the mirror.

She had gone to live there during the summer holidays and Miss Christie took every opportunity to add polish to her protégé whom she introduced everywhere as "my little adopted." As part of the child's education, Miss Christie taught her to polish mahogany furniture and to bake cakes, to polish silver and clean panes of glass, all of which objects had been foreign to the child's former upbringing.

The child liked to remain inside the house which was cool and dark and shaded, for outside, with its huge treeless lawn and beyond, the endless pastures, frightened her.

She had grown up in a part of the mountain cockpits where a gravel road was the only thing that broke the monotony of the humpbacked hills and endless hills everywhere. There were so many hills that for half of the day their house and yard were damp and dark and moss grew on the sides of the clay path. It was only at midday when the sun was directly overhead that they received light. The houses were perched precariously up the hillsides with slippery paths leading to them from the road, and if anyone bothered to climb to the tops of the hills, all they would see was more mountains. Because it was so hilly the area seemed constantly to be in a dark blue haze, broken only by the occasional hibiscus or croton and the streams of brightly colored birds dashing through the foliage. They were hemmed in by the mountains on all sides and Laura liked it, because all her life was spent in space that was enclosed and finite, protecting her from what dangers she did not even know.

And then, from the moment she had journeyed to the railway station some ten miles away and got on to the train and it had begun to travel through the endless cane fields, she had begun to feel afraid. For suddenly the skies had opened up so wide all
around her; the sun beat down and there was the endless noisy clacking of the train wheels. She felt naked and anxious, as if suddenly exposed, and there was nowhere to hide.

When she got off the train at the other end, there were no canefields there, but the land was still flat and open, for this was all rolling pastureland. Her curiosity about the herds of cattle she saw grazing in the shade of an occasional tree could not diminish the fear she felt at being so exposed.

Her father's parents' house was set on the top of a hill from where they could see for miles in all directions. Whenever she went outside she felt dizzy for the sky was so wide it was like being enclosed within a huge blue bowl. The summer was cloudless. And the hills were so far away they were lost in blue. But then summer came to an end and it was time for her to go to school. The nearest school was three miles away. Her grandmother, deciding that this was too far for her to walk—though walking greater distances had meant nothing in her former life—had arranged for her to travel to and from school on the bus which went by at the right time each day. This single fact impressed her most as showing the power and might of her grandmother.

She was glad of the bus for she did not want to walk alone to school. Now the clear summer days were ending, the clouds had begun to gather in the sky, fat cumulus clouds that traveled in packs and in this strange and empty country became ugly and menacing. They reminded her of the pictures she used to get in Sunday School showing Jesus coming to earth again, floating down on one of these fat white clouds. And because the Jesus of their church was a man who had come to judge and punish sinners, these pictures only served to remind her that she was a sinner and that God would one day soon appear out of the sky flashing fire and brimstone to judge and condemn her. And until he came, the clouds were there to watch her. For why else did they move, change themselves, assume shapes of creatures awesome and frightful, if not to torment her with her unworthiness? Sometimes when she stood on the barbecue and looked back at the house outlined against the sky, the house itself seemed to move and she would feel a wave of dizziness as if the whole earth was moving away off course and leaving her standing there alone in the emptiness.

She would run quickly inside and find Miss Christie or Mirie or somebody. As long as it was another human being to share the world with.

While all day long she would feel a vague longing for her mother and brothers and all the people she had known since childhood, she never felt lonely, for if her mother had given her nothing else, in taking her out of one life without guaranteeing her placement in the next, she had unwittingly raised her for a life of solitude. Here in this big house she wandered from room to room and said nothing all day, for now her lips were sealed from shyness. To her newly sensitized ears, her words came out flat and unmusical and she would look with guilt at the photographs and silently beg pardon for being there.

There were no other children around the house and she was now so physically removed from others that she had no chance to meet anyone. Sometimes she would walk down the driveway to the tall black gate hoping that some child would pass along and talk so that they could be friends, but whenever anyone happened by, her shyness would cause her to hide behind the stone pillar so they would not see her. And although her grandmother said nothing on the subject, she instinctively knew after a while that she would never in this place find anyone good enough to bring into Miss Christie's house.

Although she liked the feeling of importance it gave her to get on and off the bus at the school gate—the only child to do so—most times she watched with envy the other children walking home from school, playing, yelling, and rolling in the road. They wore no shoes and she envied them this freedom, for her feet, once free like theirs except for Sundays, were now encased in socks and patent leather shoes handed down from one or the other of the rightful grandchildren who lived in Kingston or New York.

Most days the bus was on time. Every morning she would wait by the tall black gate for the bus to arrive. The bus would
arrive on time every day. Except Thursday. Sometimes on Thursdays the bus wouldn’t arrive until late evening. She would nevertheless every Thursday go to the gates and wait, knowing in her heart that the bus would not come. Miss Christie would sometimes walk out and stand by the gate and look the road up and down.

Sometimes Mass Dolfie passing on his way from one pasture to the next would rein in his horse and would also stand by the gate and look up the road. All three would stand silently. The road swayed white in an empty world. The silence hummed like telegraph wires. Her life hung in the air waiting on a word from Miss Christie. Her chest began to swell like a balloon getting bigger and bigger. "The bus isn’t coming. You’ll have to walk," Miss Christie pronounced with finality.

"Oh Miss Christie, just a few minutes more," she begged. It was the only thing she begged for. But she knew that the bus wouldn’t come, and now, at this terribly late hour, she would have to walk alone the three miles to school in a world that was empty of people. She would walk very fast, the dust of the marl road swirling round her ankles, along this lonely road that curved past the graveyard. Above, following every step of the way, the fat clouds sat smirking and smug in the pale blue sky. She hated them for all they knew about her. Her clumsiness, her awkwardness, the fact that she did not belong in this light and splendid place. They sat there in judgment on her every Thursday. Thursday, the day before market day. The day of her Armageddon.

Thursdays the old bus would sit on the road miles above, packed with huggers and their crocus bags, bankras and chickens. The bus would start right enough: somewhere on the road above the bus would start in the dawn hours, full and happy. And then, a few miles after, the bus would gently shudder and like a torn metal bird would ease to a halt with a cough and a sigh and settle down on the road, too tired and worn out to move. It would remain there until evening, the market women sitting in the shade and fanning the flies away with the men importantly gathered around the machine, arguing and cursing

until evening when the earth was cool again and the driver would go slowly, everything patched up till next Thursday when the huggers descended with their crocus bags and their bankras, their laughter and their girth and their quarrelling and their ferocious energy which would prove too much for the old bus. Then with a sigh it would again lie still on the road above her. Every Thursday.

Sometimes, though, if she managed to dawdle long enough Miss Christie would say, "Heavens, it’s 10 o’clock. You can’t go to school again."

"O Miss Christie," she would cry silently, "thank you, thank you."

Sometimes when she didn’t go to school Mass Dolfie would let her dig around in his Irish potato patch collecting the tiny potatoes for herself.

Digging potatoes was safe. She could not see the sky. And she never knew when a really big potato would turn up among all the tiny ones.

"Like catching fish, eh?" Mass Dolfie said and she agreed though she didn’t know how that was, having never seen the sea. But she would laugh too.

II

One day they got a letter from the child’s father. He was coming home with his wife on a visit. It wasn’t long after their initial joy at hearing the news that the grandparents realized that difficulties were bound to arise with the child. For one thing, they hadn’t told their son about her, being a little ashamed that they had not consulted him at all before coming to the decision to take her. Besides, it was a little awkward to write to him about such matters at his home, since from all they had heard of American women they believed that there was a strong possibility that his wife would open his letters.

Their immediate decision was to send the child home, but that too presented certain problems since it was still during the school term and they couldn’t quite make up their minds what they
would tell her mother to explain a change of heart. They certainly couldn't tell her the truth for even to them the truth seemed absurd: that they wanted to return the little girl because her father was coming. For once, Miss Christie was at a loss. It was Mr. Dolphie who took a firm line. "Write and ask him what to do," he instructed his wife, "after all, it's his child. If he doesn't want her here when he comes then he can tell us what we should do with her."

They were surprised but not overly so when their son wrote that they should do nothing about the child as he would be greatly amused to see her.

Mr. Dolphie didn't see any cause for amusement in the situation and thought that it was just like his youngest son to take a serious thing and make a joke of it and all in all act in a reckless and irresponsible manner. He had certainly hoped that Bertram had finally settled down to the seriousness of life.

Long before they told the child the news of her father's coming, she knew, for without deliberately listening to their conversations, she seemed to absorb and intuitively understand everything that happened in the house.

Since hearing the news there had been a joy in her heart, for her mother had told her so often that one day this mysterious father of hers would come and claim her as his own that she had grown to believe it. She knew that he would come and rescue her from fears as tenuous as clouds and provide her with nothing but bright Thursdays.

But when she searched out the photograph from the ones on the bureau, his face held that unreadable, bland smile and his eyes gave off nothing that would show her just how he intended to present his love for her.

One day Miss Christie said to her, "Laura, our son is coming on a visit. Mr. Bertram." She said it as if the child and the man bore no relationship to each other. "He is coming with his wife. We haven't seen him for so many years."

Yes. Since I was born, Laura thought.

"Now Laura, I expect you to be on your best behavior when they are here."

"Yes, mam."

Laura showed no emotion at all as Miss Christie continued to chat on the subject. How does one behave with a father? Laura thought. She had no experience of this. There were so few fathers among all the people she knew.

Miss Christie turned the house upside down in a frenzy of preparation for her son's visit. Without being told so, Laura understood that such preparation was not so much for the son as for his white wife. She was quite right, for as Miss Christie told Mirie, "These foreign women are really too fresh, you know. Half of them don't really come from anywhere but they believe that everybody from Jamaica is a monkey and lives in trees. I am really glad my son is bringing her here so that she can see how we live." Laura silently assented to that, for who in the wide world could keep up a life that was as spotless and well-ordered as Miss Christie's?

Laura longed to talk to somebody about her father. To find out what he was really like. But she did not want to ask Miss Christie. She thought of writing secretly to her mother and telling her that Mr. Bertram was coming, asking what he was really like, but she was too timid to do anything behind Miss Christie's back for Miss Christie was so all-knowing she was bound to find out. Sometimes she wanted to ask Mirie the cook who had been working with the family for nearly forty years. But although she got into the habit of dropping into the roomy kitchen and sitting at the table there for hours, she never got up the nerve to address Mirie, a silent and morose woman, never addressed her at all. She believed, though, that Mirie liked her, for frequently, without saying a word, she would give her some tidbit from the pot, or a sample of the cookies, or bread and guava jelly, though she knew that Miss Christie did not approve of eating between meals. But apart from grunting every now and then as she went about her tasks, Mirie said nothing at all on the subject of Mr. Bertram or any other being. Laura wished that Mirie would talk to her, for she found the kitchen the most comforting part of the house.

Her father and his wife arrived one day when she was at
school. When she got home, she was too shy to go in, and was hanging around trying to hide behind a post when Miss Christie spotted her.

"Oh Laura, come and meet my son," said Miss Christie and swept her into the living room. "Mina," she said to a yellow-haired woman sitting there, "this is Laura, the little adopted I was telling you about." Laura first vaguely made out the woman, then Mass Dolphi, then a strange man in the shadows, but she was too shy to give him more than a covert glance. He did not address her but gave a smile which barely moved his lips. In days to come she would get accustomed to that smile, which was not as bland as in the photograph. To his daughter, he paid no more attention. It was his wife who fusses over the little girl, asking questions and exclaiming over her curls. Laura could hardly understand anything the woman said, but was impressed at how trim and neat she was, at the endless fascination of her clothes, her jewelry, her laughter, her accent, her perfume, her assurance. Looking at her long polished nails, Laura had a picture of her mother's hands, the nails cracked and broken like a man's from her work in the fields; of her mother's dark face, her coarse shrill voice. And she was bitterly ashamed. Knowing the mother she had come from, it was no wonder, she thought, that her father could not acknowledge her.

She was extremely uneasy with the guests in the house. Their presence strained to the fullest the new social graces that Miss Christie had inculcated in her. Now she had a two-fold anxiety: not to let her mother down to Miss Christie, and not to let Miss Christie down in front of this white woman from the United States of America.

For all the woman's attentions, it was the man that she wanted to attend her, acknowledge her, love her. But he never did. She contrived at all times to be near him, to sit in his line of vision, to "accidentally" appear on the path when he went walking through the pastures. The man did not see her. He loved to talk, his voice going on and on in a low rumble like the waves of the sea she had never seen, the ash on his cigarette getting longer till it fell on his clothes or Miss Christie's highly polished floor. But he never talked to her. This caused her even greater anxiety than Miss Christie's efforts at "polishing" her, for while she felt that Miss Christie was trying, however painful it was, to build her up, she could not help feeling that her father's indifference did nothing so much as to reduce her, nullify her. Laura would have wondered if he knew who she was if he hadn't known that Miss Christie had written to him on the subject. She decided then that all his indifference was merely part of a play, that he wanted to surprise her when he did claim her, and was working up to one magical moment of recognition that would thereafter illuminate both their lives forever and ever. In the daytime that is how she consoled herself but at nights she cried in the little room where she slept alone in the fearful shadow of the breadfruit tree against the window pane.

Then Thursday came round again and in this anxiety she even forgot about her father. As usual the bus was late and Laura hung around the gate hoping that Miss Christie would forget she was there until it was too late to walk to school. The road curved white and lonely in the empty morning, silent save for the humming of bees and the beating of her own heart. Then Miss Christie and Mina appeared on the veranda and obviously saw her. Talking together, they started to walk slowly toward the gate where she stood, trapped by several impulses. Laura's heart beat faster then almost stopped as her father appeared from the orange grove and approached the two women. Now the three of them were walking toward her. They were now near enough for Laura to hear what they were saying but her eyes were only on her father.

"Oh dear, that old bus. Laura is going to be late again," Miss Christie said.

"Oh, for chrissake. Why don't you stop fussing so much about the bloody little bastard," her son shouted.

Laura heard no more for after one long moment when her heart somersaulted once there was no time for hearing anything else for her feet of their own volition had set off at a run down the road and by the time she got to the school gates she had made herself an orphan and there were no more clouds.
Bea Vianen was born in Paramaribo, Surinam, in 1935. She began her career as a writer with the publication of a collection of poems, Cautal, in 1965, and has since published several volumes of poetry and five novels, among them Sarnami, hai (Surinam, I am), Strafhok (Punishment coop), and Ik eet, ik eet, tot ik niet meer kan (I eat, I eat, until I am full). Vianen’s works center on vulnerable individuals who resist social injustice and individual cruelty. Her later work is deeply pessimistic, centering on a multiracial nightmare where integrity can only be preserved by escaping into mental and physical illness or by creating a fictional world in one’s imagination.

**BEA VIANEN**

![Illustration](image)

**Of Nuns and Punishments**

A dream woke me up. I dreamed that I was in boarding school and was walking in a line. Next to Norine. A rosary in my hand. I heard the voice of the Mother Superior. She was mumbling. Ahead of me, the girls jostled each other, mocking the sister’s prayer. I was eight. My mother was in the hospital. She would be there for years. Hand in hand with my father, I climbed the broad, high steps of the convent on Gravenstraat. The sun was going down. I think it was four o’clock. I was crying. The silence in the lobby of the convent overwhelmed me. I felt imprisoned, far from the games I so enjoyed: catching earthworms with long blades of grass, made wet with our saliva to attract the soekroeboes, as we called the little worms. I felt far from the hangalampoe hedges, whose leaves I used to pierce with the hard thorns of the baby grape. And then my tadja made of sand, decorated with the yellow flowers I used to pick along the gutter in front of our house. The buzzing honeybees, caught with a piece of paper.

Well, I was eight when I was introduced to long prayer services, punishments, corridors, lobbies, dining rooms, laundry rooms, coops, halls, confessional.

The boarding school of the Order of the Franciscans was a microcosm centered on the power of Christian colonialism. A small world where all races of our society suffered the same punishments, confessed the same sins, and spoke the same language. Dutch. The medium of communication. The language of the civilized. Spoken by Chinese girls from the Nickerie district and from Morowijne. Spoken by Indian girls, the brazen daughters of the Caribs and the Arawaks from Donderskamp and Corneliskondre at the lower course of the Coppename river. Spoken by so many others whom I remember so very well. Especially the rebels, just as brazen as the Indian girls whom I deeply admired: Stella, Wilma, Joosje, with their surname of “Indian.” I got along well with them, even though they were much older. Yet I never dared ask if it was true that three-fingered Indians wandered about at night in the darkness of the palm garden.

The boarding school was a part of the convent, connected to the chapel by a path covered by a corrugated zinc roof shored up on both sides by white painted wooden poles. The house was also painted white, with green windows and doors that looked out on the bleaching field: lawns where the white laundry was put out to bleach. The lawns were separated from each other by paths made of crushed shells. Short orange trees dropped their leaves on the soft grass. Once a year, when their fruits were ripe, they gave the impression of orange bouquets. Orange bouquets for orphans, half-orphans, girls whose parents had taken them to the city to attend high school or to learn a trade. Orange bouquets for the punishments in the darkness of the bleaching field, the darkness of the coops. The darkness of the attic. In the attic the laundry would be hung to dry: wide dresses with pleated skirts that reached far below the knee. Pants with buttons on the back of the yoke and long legs, connected to the bodice by
buttons or by cords. Even during the day the attic was dark and terribly quiet. Peeping bats behind the rafters. In a corner a coffin. Covered by a black cloth with white skulls sewn onto it. The sister, dragging you by the hair upstairs, would say "a devil will come out of each corner" and would leave you there with your bedding. The best you could do was to wrap the sheet around you so that only your nose stuck out. He will come out of every corner. Our clothes hanging outside in the convent gardens looked like scarecrows. Like ghosts.

Our ages ranged from three to twenty-five. The dormitory was divided into three sections. One for the little ones. One for the in-between, and one for the big girls. Our dormitory, that of the in-betweens, was notorious for its chamber-pot closet. A low space under the stairs that led to the attic. It smelled of the creosote and Lysol used to wash the little one's chamber pots. There were also other closets, coops, in which they would lock us up to ponder our sins. The Clemens closet in the lobby with the broad staircase to our dormitories. Next to the stairway stood the life-size statue of holy Joseph on a pedestal. The statue was as white as a sheet, hollow on the inside, and had a large hole in its head. One day, when I returned from school, I saw the statue of Saint Joseph outside on the bleaching field to be cleaned. The orange and plantain peelings thrown into the hole in his head had drawn the Mother Superior's attention. To the right of the lobby with the marble statue of the holy Joseph were the dining halls, then the brick part with the lavatories and the bathrooms. One of the bathrooms at the end of the brick hall was called the broom closet. We could be locked up there too.

You could also relax if you were lucky. All around the convent were beautiful gardens with the sweet smell of sunflowers, Saint Joseph lilies, and roses. You could stare at them and dream of bees, butterflies, or dragonflies. You could also romp about. The schools connected to the convent had enough playgrounds and recreation areas for us to enjoy ourselves. Our intimate playground was next to the lavatories and the bathrooms. We would get there by going down a wooden staircase with black oily banisters. One part of it was bricked in, covered with a corrugated roof and closed off on one side by a wall. At shoulder height were cubicles for our notebooks and tin boxes filled with fluff, dolls, and other toys. Below the cubicles a long wooden bench with narrow dowels. Across from this bench were tables with heavy, functional school benches. We would sit there reading or chattering with each other when it was raining. We would sit there, deadly quiet, waiting our turn for the daily bath at three o'clock in the afternoon. I can still see myself: the soapbox, toothpaste, and toothbrush wrapped inside my towel and on my lap the pants that were far too long. Under my feet I feel the sand of the floorless section next to the tables and desks. I see the gigantic mango tree with its branches stretched above my head and the corrugated roof. During the hottest part of the day there was a large shadow under that tree. We loved sitting on the protruding roots, hard as iron, around the wide and crooked trunk. We would also sit there in order to be able to jump up as quickly as possible, during the mango harvest time when its clusters were yellow and tempting. We were hungry all the time. The three scant meals with a snack in between were not enough to relieve our hunger. The snack? At ten o'clock half of a 5-penny roll covered with butter: bread with butter. Or covered with guava jam, peanut butter, or goat muck, a sour milk product. The cheese was as transparent as nylon. The guava jam often had ants in it. The rice had maggots. A half-Jewish girl named Victorine collected them in a bottle. She showed her mother the bottle. After that she was gone. Some of us would not touch our rice, just like Victorine, and ate only the vegetables. It meant that you were even more hungry and would pace, like a kind of starving herbivore, under and between the trees on the playground. It was forbidden to eat a mango or a mammee apple that had dropped. Or a sapodilla plum. Instead, you were supposed to put them in a large wooden box. That was called "collecting fruit." When I discovered that the box was meant for the convent, I began to steal fruit in a variety of ways. I could aim well. The hood hindered the sister. She could not supervise the playing girls very well. Inconspicuously my sticks would reach the tree-ripe mangoes and sapodillas, the tamarinds,
almonds, avocados. I hid the half-ripe fruit on the ground under withered leaves. I would regularly return to the spot where my fruit was hidden to inspect the ripening process. When the fruits felt soft, I would divide them among a number of accomplice girls who had kept watch for me. We would eat the fruit in the lavatories. You were safe in the lavatories. That was the only place where you could escape the watchful eye of the nun on surveillance duty. During the half-hour recess, you could stay there as long as you wanted. Who could prove you were not constipated? That is what I first believed. Later I realized how many informers I had to take into account. Some of us were finally pulled out of the lavatories, with leaking, half-eaten mangoes in our hands, the yellow juice dripping from our mouths. We would be punished. Locked up in one of the coops. We had transgressed against the fifth commandment: Thou shalt not steal. And we had stolen; we knew that.

But we were often punished for things we did not know about and for which not a single explanation was given. I know now that it was because of the sixth and ninth commandments. Thou shalt not do anything unchaste. Thou shalt not desire anything unchaste. How is it possible, I still ask myself. How is it possible that some girls underwent the medieval punishments without rebelling? Not that I was a heroine. I was skinny and deathly afraid of beatings and the loneliness of the punishment cells. Yet I did not tell on Magdalena Ramaatarsingh. She had beautiful, pearly white teeth that she brushed at least three times per afternoon. She did that between hanging up our pants and gathering them again into full tubs. One afternoon, Mother Superior allowed me to help her. Before I went upstairs, Mother Superior whispered to me that I had to check what Magdalena did and that I had to tell her later. I told her that I had not seen anything. A lie. Magdalena had been waving to a young man in the Wulfighstreet from behind the window of the attic stairs. I was locked up. From that day I was treated differently by several of the big girls. They had always treated me. I thought of them as heroines and followed their rages and temper tantrums with an innate rebelliousness and a secret pleasure. I thought it just

that they yelled ugly and angry things aimed at the Dutch. I sympathized when they resisted as they were slapped right on the face by the Mother Superior or by a sister from the kitchen. Too bad that most of them were orphans. They were at the mercy of their family’s social and economic conditions or of a godmother. They were twenty and sometimes older when they left the boarding school. They would then end up in families who received them against their wills in the poor back alleys of the slums. They would become servants for ladies of colonial status. Or they would become hat weavers, with a salary of twenty-five guilders per month. They would seek refuge in a man’s love. The love which was held up to us year in and year out as a mortal sin. A friendly approach. A few handkerchiefs. A few bars of chocolate. A piece of cloth. A pair of shoes. Enough to secure motherhood. They would be deserted. In the slums they would be called names and be driven away from the door and the yard with a broom. Those years behind the high metal fences of Mgr. Wulfighstreet! I wonder if the convent chapel floors, the stairs, the classrooms floors, and the boarding school floors are still being scrubbed red and shiny before and during every vacation. Now that these girls are no longer there. How they wore themselves out to clean the desks, the stone steps, and the lavatories. To scrub. I also wonder if the由此可见 needlework, the embroidered tablecloths and sheets intended for the mission continue to be as high. Yes, certainly. There will always be orphans.

"Put on your socks," in my mind I still hear the sister telling us. "With your face to the wall. Put on your clothes and cover your body. With your face to the wall. Do not talk to the outside children. They are bad."

Strange. We knew that money was collected every school day. Money for Petrus Donders. Money for the holy Antonius. Money for Saint Joseph. Money for Mother Maria. Money for the statue of Fatima. Money from outside children. The bad children. What then was the difference between us and the girls who lived at home with their parents? The difference between deceit and truth? I do not think there was a difference. In the outside world
there was much covered up as well, forbidden, made out as bad. There was no difference. The nuns were only afraid that we, through contact with the outside children, would hear stories that had to do with boys. The word boy was taboo.

We rarely went out. Sometimes we went to the doctor to swallow oil—castor oil—to prevent worms. Sometimes we would walk in the city. The streets gave me the jitters. The large office buildings along the Gravenstreet and the houses too were not as large as those in my memory. We were allowed to speak to each other softly. When we passed the cathedral we had to make a sign of the cross respectfully and repeat a little prayer. We were not allowed to look at bad pictures. We had to stop close to the movie theater, and we were reminded that all eyes were focused on us. We were the example of a good upbringing. Of modesty. We were not allowed to look at the posters on the theater wall. I myself never looked. I did not care if there were others who did look, giggling, amused themselves. After the boring walks through the town, several girls would be punished. According to the sister, they had looked at the dirty pictures and had also laughed. "That is not true at all, sister," the girls would say. "We did not look, let alone laugh." But the mother had no mercy. "Dirty street sluts, you would run with boys into the woods."

Resistance mounted. I had been in the boarding school one year. On the playground in those days the song about Indonesia was sung every afternoon. Indonesia shortly before its independence. "In the land of brown people. In the land of sugar cane. Where wealth knows no boundaries, all is riches where one looks. There one sees a brown man going to the fields. I often wonder to myself, what is a poor Java man... In the fields, I see them struggling, up to their knees in the water. They humbly greet every white man who passes. If ever the greeting is answered, they gaze in amazement. I often wonder to myself what is a poor Java man... Far away in the village lives a beautiful Java girl. The white man goes to her. He soon finds her. And Sarina who once sang so beautifully... Europeans, poor and rich, injustice also has its limits. Show your civilization. Treat the Javanese as human beings. For they are born here. This is their place. Who was it that took their rights away? It is the cruel, cruel European."

The thirst for freedom grew stronger. The big girls searched for an outlet. They found that in cracks and slits in the metal fences. Small holes would be made larger. By us. By the boys in the street. It often happened that a hole or crack was darkened by a boy's eye. There were whistles; names of the big girls would be called. The girls began to talk noisily. They would burst out laughing, pulling each other's braids and running around excitedly in the yard. Some would stand close to the fence and would dance to their own rhythm. They would try their utmost to move their hips under their wide skirts without anyone noticing. They preferred singing a song about the pleasures of alcohol. Mi lob, mi lob mi sopi so'te, sere bamba. Sometimes they were caught. They would be beaten and isolated for a few days in one of the coops. They did not get food, or it would be brought too late, when they were not expecting it.

It is difficult to sum up systematically the punishments we received. It is actually impossible. You could be punished for anything. Every five minutes you would risk doing something that was not permitted. At five o'clock in the morning, we would be awakened by the ringing of a copper bell. We slept on the floor but called it our bed. We had to shake out our bedding quickly, fold it, and put it on the lowest shelf against the wall. On the top shelf, the minimum of toiletries—a toothbrush, toothpaste, a hand mirror, Pond's talcum powder, a washcloth, and a towel. We would quickly grab our washcloth, toothbrush, toothpaste to be among the first at the sink. We ran past each other in long white nightgowns. We did not like to brush our teeth in tubs with water that had been used before. We hated to stand at the washstands full of spit and spit-out toothpaste. The water that was poured out over the washstand once in a while was not enough to rinse away the spit and toothpaste completely. Thrift was one of the major requirements in the boarding school. Therefore, I was surprised that some girls of the middle group went downstairs certain days of the week to wash themselves. I envied them. Much, much later, I understood that that was not
a privilege but a hygienic measure. But at that age I could only be amazed at things around me. The punishments. The venom of the tattletales. Their scheming. They would hurry to the Mother Superior to tell her that there were girls who had "saved" their beds, as we euphemistically referred to it. While upstairs water ran over the washstands and the rinsing sounds of mouths and throats took turns, the cries of the girls who had wet their beds would resound in the lobby. They were beaten in front of the statue of Saint Joseph. The slab that was used was called John. Crying, their faces hidden behind their elbows, they returned to the dormitories, followed by a sister. They were lined up in the middle of the hall. On their heads the damp sheets that stank of urine. Off and on they were ridiculed by the tattletales who hissed between their teeth, "Piss the bed! Piss the bed!" No one was allowed to talk in the dormitory.

Piss the bed! Piss the bed! An important occasion. The story would go from room to room: Who was beaten and why? And how did they come back? And afterwards? And then? Everyone had her own opinion. The elder ones favored the girls who had wet their beds and became rebellious. But the majority of the middle group was silent. That is an opinion also. To be afraid is also an opinion. Norine was one exception. Like me she had been sent away to private school. We were in the same grade. She had trouble learning. Her parents were divorced. Maybe she was sad. Or maybe she was really stupid. But she possessed something that very few girls of the middle group did. She was honest, rude, and said exactly what she thought. She knew that I would get a cheese and peanut butter sandwich from a school friend each Monday morning. She never betrayed me. She knew I sent letters with complaints home. She never told on me. The tasks she was assigned to allowed her a lot of privileges. In retrospect I realized that she received preferential treatment because her father paid twice as much as most of the parents of the children who were not orphans. Maybe more. It was the time when people were throwing their money around in the Antilles, a time to get rich. I was not jealous of her. I was relieved that she did not report me. Yet I did not always feel at ease when I walked next to her and was conscious of my own presence. Norine wore totally different clothes than most of us. Her dresses were of American confection, very modern, and terrific for that time. The little shorts and culottes that I wore at home were deeply hidden in the closet of the boarding school. I wore pants made of cotton and unbleached cotton. Pants with long legs that stuck way out from under my skirts. Later my dresses were lengthened with a band of white cotton. That made me happy. Almost all the girls of the middle group disliked Norine. But everyone was afraid of her. She was the favorite of the sister who made the meals and cared for the sick. The wounded. The lice-infected heads. The toes with sand fleas. Norijnte, as the sister called her, took milk and chocolate milk to the little ones. She often ate with them. Sundays, she would often go out and then return in tears. Up to this day I do not know why she suddenly left for the Antilles. Without saying goodbye to me. I still remember so well her large, light brown eyes, the long eyelashes under her Panama hat which she wore with pink ribbons, pulled forward. "Square" we called this tilt of our hats and our berets. The fashion. I also had a Panama hat, slanted and pulled steeply forward to hide my eyes. That was easy. The main part of my head was hair. "You first see her hair, then her face," said the big girls with whom I studied in the afternoon.

The relationships among the girls in the middle group were not always as stiff and boring. Especially later when other students arrived. I also learned that it was safe for me to try to associate with the tattletales. I knew their weak spot. They too were hungry. I promised them a portion of the fruits that I poached or a potion of the potatoes that I snitched from the convent's cellar. I had found the way to the cellar through a nun who would come once in a while to look after us. I liked her and asked her during the cleanup if I could lug the brooms to the cellar. The sister saw that I snitched potatoes but pretended she had a bloody nose. The tattletales listened intensely when I told them that I had potatoes from the cellar. They tried to find favor with the nun. They had no success. The young sister smiled at them. Reserved. Ironic. They were not allowed to go to the cellar
alone. Potatoes were a delicacy because we seldom got them on our plates. The tattletales needed me and made sure that I got salt to boil the potatoes. They stole salt from the cellar in the dining hall. During recess, I would boil the potatoes on the fire lit under the large iron kettles in which the convent clothes were boiled. The kettles were in one end of the laundry room. I hid behind the woodstack against the heated wall. I listened to the water simmering in the oatmeal canisters on the red-hot logs. But there wasn't always fruit or potatoes to soften up the tattletales. I received one bad mark after another.

It was not only forbidden to talk in the dormitories. You were not allowed to talk anywhere without permission. If you did talk, you received a bad mark. Every morning your name would be read from a list and you had to confess where you had talked. Five bad marks would be noted for talking in the dormitory. Seven for the bathroom. Seven for the lavatories. The one who had said something to someone in the line to or from chapel would receive two. At the end of the week the bad marks would be added up. Anyone with ten marks got no candy and no rusk with sugar on Sunday. Those with fourteen got the punishment cells. Punishment on Sunday also meant that you were not allowed to see your parents or other visitors. It happened often that my "nowhere, sister" was answered with a raised hand: "She did talk, sister," I would hear behind my back. "That is not true, sister," I would answer. "She's lying, sister." It did not help. I would get bad marks anyhow. Once I was so furious that I yelled right through the dining room, "everywhere, sister." I immediately received fourteen bad marks. No one investigated these accusations. You would be punished solely on the basis of an accusation. And yet, the sisters did not get much out of me. I hated to embroider and crochet. After my "everywhere, sister" I was locked up in the Clemens closet. It was dusty and cramped. My throat itched. I was thirsty. There were old convent mats on the floor, woven with pieces of black, red, and yellow fabric. Large spiders hung in the corners against the low ceiling. Light fell inside through the branches of the cherry tree onto the copper screen. I sat in a daze, staring in front of me. When I got tired, I lay down on the dusty mats, my hands behind my head. Later in the day, a few cherries fell through the holes in the screen. My dress got full of stains. The cherries were too large for the opening and burst as someone tried to push them inside. I recognized the hand, just as brown as mine. It was Agnes, Agnes Indian. I was happy. Someone had thought of me, someone had missed me on the playground. I was hungry; I devoured the cherries. I hoped that the door would open. That someone would bring me hot food. No one. I wasn't released from the coop until late in the evening. I was allowed to bathe. Afterwards I had to eat by myself in the dining hall. No rice. I did not like plantains. The girl who normally would give me her feelings in exchange for my plantain was already asleep. Eight o'clock. I washed my plate and my orange plastic mug in the back of the dining room. I dropped the plantain into the skull of the holy Joseph. I was eleven years old.

Things were never investigated. You would be accused, and once accused you were guilty. We were sitting in the catechism classroom one evening. We were sitting on long benches, painted brown. In front of us behind a table sat the Mother Superior of the boarding school, a middle-aged woman. She gave us religious instruction. The cream-colored statue of the baby Jesus stood on the table, surrounded by the flickering flames of three white candles. We crossed ourselves. Again and again. We crossed ourselves and prayed little prayers all day long. The long evening prayer on our knees had just ended. The Mother Superior had apparently forgotten that. She started her long-winded prayer again, first for the world and its sinners, then for the sick, the murderers possessed by Satan's will. We crossed ourselves again. The end of the invocation. We said "Amen." My name was called. Once before my name had been called during a religion class and without an explanation I had been told to stand in the darkness of the bleaching field. What would it be this time? My heart pounded in my throat. I walked up to the front. Maybe it had something to do with taking turns. "Dirty child," said the sister, "Dirty child." She pulled my skirt tight over my pants. I felt the heat of the stick, bit my lips, and then walked
out of the catechism hall with bowed head. Years later I accidentally learned why I had been beaten. I was told by a girl with whom I had gone to high school. According to her, one of the others had told the sister that I had taken off my pants at night. The blood drained from my face. I was furious. It was a lie. Or had I dreamt that I was in the lavatory? I had trouble with nightmares. Sometimes I would lie awake, my body wet with sweat in the heat of the hall. We slept with the windows closed to keep the mosquitoes out. Other girls were also bothered by nightmares. I would see them get up and walk in their sleep. They would hide behind the closet door, stand in a corner of the hall, or walk toward the stairs. I often heard them scream. Sometimes the little ones would walk into our hall, looking for something. Calling out. I could not understand what they said. I could not make it out. There were so many other things I could not understand, that were not clear to me. Like the punishment I received on Saint Nicholas Eve.

A few days before the celebration, I was suddenly surprised by Zwarte Piet. He had little bells on his feet. With much tinkling, he jumped out of a window of a classroom behind me. I quickly looked around and immediately made myself scarce. I hid in the first lavatory of the playground. I locked the door. That same evening I found all kinds of untidy, scribbled notes on the place where I slept. Scribbles about my behavior, written in chalk and in clumsy Dutch. Zwarte Piet, Black Piet, the Moor, came from Spain, we were taught. Zwarte Piet with the bag. I had misgivings. Would Mother Superior lock me up again? I hated to embroider. During recess I would read a book. It was forbidden to be alone or with just one more person. Then you would think bad thoughts. Therefore, I must have thought bad thoughts. But which ones? I quickly covered the notes with my bed sheets, made my bed, and crawled under the blanket. I could not sleep. I did not care much for birthdays and religious celebrations. Happiness only came from within. To me parties were nothing but forced get-togethers. The Saint Nicholas celebration left me indifferent. I would get a present. Probably a puzzle. My father had little imagination in this respect. I knew all this. But I was afraid to have to stay behind, alone in the darkness of a hallway. The bleaching field, the staircase, or a coop. I put my hand under the mattress and rubbed out the scribbles. On the way to the auditorium I was picked out of a row of talking girls. "What did I do?" I asked while I was taken away by the shoulder. Mother Superior did not answer me. She locked me up in a broom closet. She moved away and turned off the light between the bathrooms and the lavatories. Voices, steps, fifteen minutes later. Light! I was put into a burlap sack. The Mother Superior and another sister tied the bag several times around my torso and tightened it around my legs. When I was bound and could no longer resist, they lifted me from the floor and carried me away. First I did not know where they were carrying me. I thought of the attic and went crazy with fright. My head dangled out of the opening of the bag. I screamed. The sisters walked through the dining halls. They went past the statue of the holy Joseph. I quieted down. Apparently they were not taking me to the bats. Nor to the black cloth with the skulls. I was locked up in a cupboard under the stairs to the chapel. I lay on the floor in the bag. I tried to free myself, got claustrophobic. In the cupboard hung a faint smell of coffee grounds and refuse of the convent kitchen. Again I began to cry. I screamed when I heard voices. They were already in the auditorium and were loudly singing: "Look, the moon is shining through the trees."

There was indeed a full moon. A white cat was sitting on the softly cream-colored sand. It meowed, its slender head turning to the clear sky. I saw it through a split in the wooden door. I tried again to take my arms out of the bag. After trying for a long time I managed to untie the top knot of the cord with my mouth. My arms were out. The rest was simple. I kicked the bag away. I jumped, staggered, and almost fell. I pressed my nose against the copper-screen window at the top of the door and looked outside. The evening was cool. The cat was still there. The lights behind the green shutters of the convent's dining hall were extinguished. At this hour the true mystery of convent life begins. Where were those women who tyrannized us? What were
they doing now? And the other sisters? The shadows in the chapel. Shadows standing in a long line going to confession. Shadows seated one behind the other on the long shiny benches in front of the chapel. Shadows with black, sliding rosary beads between pale skinny fingers. Shadows that walked from one station of the cross to the next doing penance, kneeling with raised arms for the sins of the world. Penance for their own sins: *Mea culpa, mea culpa, mea maxima culpa... Et libera nos a malo...* Shadows that once every two weeks entered and left the confessional to confess their sins while saying "Reverend Father, please bless me. My last confession was..." Just like us. Shadows that chilled you when you ran into them unexpectedly in the darkness of the playgrounds. The schoolyard. Shadows that scared you stiff when you woke up at night. Because of their shaven heads and their long lilac-colored robes. Shadows you never heard laugh. Like us. Like the outsiders.

The lives of the sisters remained a mystery to me. I knew that they were people. Women just like our mothers. But the distance between us and most of the nuns was so great. There was something unreal about them, I thought. Something supernatural, something that I could not grasp. Sister Hupert was one of the few exceptions. When I stood in front of her or behind her or walked next to her, her hand in mine, I had the feeling that she was a school friend or one of our mothers. She was disturbed and in her eighties. She worked in the laundry room with another nun. She often walked away. It was my task to look for her and to take her back to the laundry room or to the chapel hall if it had gotten late. I had the feeling that I was walking hand in hand with Sister Hupert. I usually found her by the grotto of Maria of Lourdes, among the green bushes of the Tears of Jesus. She always sang the same tune: "In heaven, in heaven we will be forever." Sister Hupert played a game with me. She would change her hiding place every time so that I sometimes had trouble finding her. Her last hiding place was the cemetery along the Somselidjick creek. I was happy she had found this hiding place. I loved the young tamarind trees, threw sticks at the branches before I would gently touch the shoulder of the childlike nun.

One morning she did not wake up. She was buried in the shadows of the tamarind trees. The end of a life, the end of a task I had been given because I usually finished my homework in half the time. I missed the deceased sister. She was dead. Nobody mentioned her anymore. Nobody laughed anymore about the punishments she meted out to the crucifix: "Well, well, how do you like it up there? Now it is your turn to be punished, right?" Sister Hupert had had the habit of leaving the crucifix in the corner of her cell. Now she was dead. I stayed in the study hall the whole afternoon. More than once I asked the nun who had to watch us do our homework if I could go to the lavatory. Then I locked myself in and cried over the dead nun.

Around that time the Mother Superior of the boarding school was suddenly gone. The big girls whispered among themselves that there was something funny going on. They believed that the Mother Superior had held her hood too close to the face of Father X, the priest for the orphans. "I'm glad that she's got what was coming to her," Eline said in the study hall. "The more pious the spirit, the more bestial the body," added Agnes Indian. Agnes was still furious over the beatings she had received when the Mother Superior had noticed how short her dress was. From cowboy books I had read I knew how proud an Indian can be of what he has and who he is. The Indian girls had short legs with solid muscular calves. They preferred the shorter length of their ponchos and hated long western dresses. They would turn up the hems of their dresses in the lavatories and in the darkness of the dormitories. Agnes Indian was the first one caught. She was beaten in the lobby after mass.

The new Mother Superior was called Selesia. The cruelest nun I have ever known. She was big and had broad round hips. Her face was as round as a ball, red as a chicken wattle. On some days during the month her cheeks were loaded with big pus pimples. Her mouth stank. "Her mouth stinks like the lavatory," was the going expression. We immediately stepped back when she stood in front of us. In the dining hall we would move our plates away as quickly as lightning. The spit from her mouth
would spritz like water from a sprayer. We called her "Spritzer." I was under the impression that she was not pleased with her new position and that she hated children. She would pinch the skinny arms of the little ones with a sadistic expression on her face. She enjoyed it when they screamed with pain.

Sister Selesia did not strike you with "John," the thick slat. She hit with her own heavy, masculine hand. The girls in my dormitory could not stand her, but they remained silent because they were afraid they would be sent away. They knew they could not expect anything from their families. Life outside. They kept their mouths shut and offered their services, just as I had expected. During recess and on Friday evening, the only evening that we, the ones in the middle, were allowed to stay up, they embroidered more diligently than ever. I sat secretly reading a book in the corner, and once in a while I would pretend I was crocheting. Sometimes Sister Selesia's voice would scare us all. She would scold us because she thought we were acting like fishwives. After such rebukes came a tjeerie, a displeased sound with her lips. We started to form plots against Sister Selesia. Plans that were never executed. It never went beyond their mimicking in various tones her "Good morning, holy Joseph" and "My Jesus, full of grace" in the morning on the way to the chapel.

In the beginning the big girls were also scared of Selesia. They would act up against the nun on duty in the study hall. The sister was short, hunchbacked, and wore glasses with copper frames. Her nickname was "Penny Puff." She could not control the big girls. The girls would make all kinds of remarks about the food and asked her about freedom and fashion. The Sister liked me. She enjoyed hearing me recite my lessons. She would listen to my responses with great devotion. It was through her that I had been given the responsibility of looking for Sister Huperta and take her back to the laundry room. Now that the sister had died I was bored for at least an hour every afternoon, listening to the stories, the conversations, the remarks of the big girls. "Read," Agnes said one afternoon. She shoved her Dutch history book under my nose. Softly I started to read. "Loud," she said. "She won't do anything." I read out loud, "The East Indian Company was founded in 1604 by Jan Pieterszoon Coen. The Dutch have always been sharp smugglers. The Dutch are . . . " There was a general "boo, boo, boo." The next afternoon I was called away immediately after I had recited my lesson. I was allowed to help in the garden. I pulled grass out of the flower beds and the vegetable beds diligently. My diligence began to wane by the following afternoon. I had discovered where I could best work and would not leave the radishes. I pulled them out and hid them in a paper sack. This went well for a few days. Then I got caught. I was not allowed to help in the garden anymore.

I got sick. A hundred-and-two-degree fever. I was given weak tea without sugar and dry soda crackers. I was happy to be sick, happy to be left alone. I was much relieved to have the whole dormitory to myself during the day. I could go to the lavatory whenever I wanted. In the chapel I would sometimes sit with a pale face, while the cold sweat would break out under my nose, because I had to go to the lavatory and the sister would not allow it. Now I was alone. I was finally spared the moralizing sermons in the dining room and the religious instruction hall. I did not need to pray. I was deathly ill.

When I felt a little better I looked after the little girls. They would go to bed at five in the afternoon. As soon as the Angelus bell sounded at six, the sister who had put them to bed would be relieved by the laundry-room sister. Every afternoon the big ones among the little girls would anxiously await this moment. As soon as the sister disappeared, they would jump wildly out of their beds. With the sheets over their heads they would run from one corner to the other. "Boo! Boo!" they screamed to scare each other. The littlest ones would wake up scared, rub their eyes, and look sleepily at the girls who would hide behind the door or who would all want to sit on the communal pot in the wooden box: "Auntie Aliia! Auntie Aliia! Auntie Aliia! I do not like salt meat." The voice of a blond Antillean girl. I would laugh, and quickly run back when I heard the laundry-room sister.

I was well after two weeks. The first step on the stairs to the lobby, the green of the bleaching field and the leaves of the
orange trees, the orange flowers, all made a fairytale-like impression on me. I had the feeling that this was my first day in the boarding school and that it would not last long. Everything would soon be like it used to be.

Translated by Hilda van Neck-Yoder

Myriam Warner-Vieyra was born in Guadeloupe, but has lived in Senegal for many years. The author of two novels—Le Quimboiseur l'avait dit and Juletane, both translated into English—and of a collection of short stories, Femmes Échouées, Warner-Vieyra is gaining increased recognition for her sensitive portrayals of Caribbean and African women in self-destroying conflicts with patriarchal institutions. Her novel Juletane has been praised for its keen analysis of women's limited choices. Warner-Vieyra works as a librarian and researcher at the University of Dakar.

MYRIAM WARNER-VIEYRA

Passport to Paradise

Eloise was a strong countrywoman, tireless and carefree as a carnival night. At thirty, she had a lovely family: four boys and four girls who were bursting with health. Her pregnancies had never stopped her from doing her work. She did not suffer from any of the usual discomforts other women experienced. Florette, her eldest, now almost nine, was already her mother's right hand. Eloise took her last baby, just three months old, to the field with her every day, in a basket which she carried on her head securely balanced on a cotta of rolled-up rags. She put down her baby in the shade, where she could see him, under the watchful eye of one of the bigger ones, who had been given this task, and attacked her work.

Their cane crop had all been harvested the day before, so that day she had begun to weed her vegetable garden. As she always did, she sang one of the old tunes which came from deep in her memory to keep time with her hoe as she dug up the weeds. She loved her man, her healthy children, her clean house; she was
blessed with the strength and the courage to work. For her that was what happiness really meant.

Eugenio had just delivered his last cartload of cane to the Derouler factory. He would still have to wait several days before he could exchange the slip he had been given for a few bank-notes which would be barely enough to wipe out his debts at the store and allow the family to eke out their meager existence by the grace of God, until the next crop. He was tired. At forty, he had spent thirty years at hard labor in the fields, and Clairin, that clear liquid which he constantly consumed, was certainly partly responsible for his being old before his time. But he did not know that. Besides, his physical weariness did not dampen his zest for life. His wife’s good planning and her enthusiasm for work relieved him of all domestic chores. He loved her very much, but he was also a man with a craving. A fervent disciple of the god Taia, he had, as a final will and testament, asked his wife Eloise to put a little flask of this firewater in his coffin, whenever he was ready to depart from this world.

That day Eugenio stopped in front of Miss Adelaide’s rum shop at about five o’clock. He shouted “whoa” to his two mules and jumped down from his cart to have a few drinks with his regular companions before dinnertime. He rarely remembered the taste of this meal, because by then he was usually drunk enough to sleep with his eyes wide open on a pile of stones. “Trouble don’t set like rain.” He had hardly had time to swallow his first drink when an altercation broke out between two men. Eugenio, who was still quite sober, unlike the others, attempted to calm them down but to no avail. The quarrel grew louder and louder and they came to blows. The first was fatal; a bottle split open a skull: Eugenio’s. He sank silently to the ground, died with one last hiccup, blood smelling of rum trickling from his mouth . . .

Eugenio’s friends gave him a memorable wake, their favorite liquid flowed freely . . .

The next day, very, very early, Eloise dispatched a friend and neighbor to see “Monsieur le Curé,” their village priest, to ask him if he would kindly come and bless the body. She did not have the wherewithall to give him a first-, second-, or even third-class funeral. Still, as a believer it was very important to her for the body to be blessed, and for the priest to recite one of his prayers in Latin, the key that would open the gates of heaven.

The neighbor came back with the priest’s reply, as serious as it was unjust: Eugenio, a notorious alcoholic, living in sin, had died without going to confession. No act of contrition, no absolution, no extreme unction, no benediction.

When she heard the news, Eloise felt the blood rush to her head. A multicolored veil, mostly red and black, blinded her vision. For a moment she could not even speak. Her man was going to burn in hell, not because of his sins, but because he was poor and black. The rich békés of the land openly kept several concubines; their skins and their eyes had the greenish tint of the absinthe which they drank like coconut water and which aged them as rapidly as the cartman’s white rum. Yet, when one of them died, he was given the grandest of funerals. The whole clergy, in their robes, walked in procession before the hearse with crosses and banners. Masses sung in Latin were celebrated for months on end for the repose of their souls . . .

Faced with Eloise’s deep depression, Eunice, her neighbor, remembered a stranger who had recently arrived from Asia. Everyone in the marketplace said he possessed the power to make amulets which were passports to paradise. You had only to lay the charm on the chest of the deceased and he was sure to go to heaven. Eloise was ready to try anything to save her man’s soul, even if she had to give hers to the devil in exchange. She gave Eunice her most valuable possession, a ring that Eugenio had given her on the day that they had set up house together, ten years before.

Eunice set off in search of the magician, and one hour later she brought back the precious viaticum. It was a piece of goatskin on which there were strange markings, Chinese or Arabic characters, to the two women it was one and the same. Eloise kissed the sacred parchment, and entrusted it with her love as well, to go with the beloved on his journey. She placed it on Eugenio’s bosom, under the only white shirt he had ever possessed in his whole life. At that moment she experienced the relief of having
Mirta Yáñez was born in Havana in 1947 and received a degree in language and literature from the University of Havana. She has published poems and short stories in various Cuban publications, as well as two collections of short stories. Todos los negros tomamos café and La Habana es una ciudad bien grande, and a novel, La hora de los mameyes. Yáñez's fiction draws primarily on her experiences as a brigadista—a member of the brigades of young Cubans who did agricultural work in the 1960s and 1970s—in a coffee plantation in rural Cuba, and gives testimony of her deep interest in cultural history and the Cuban peasantry.

MIRTA YÁÑEZ

Of Natural Causes

Some men, estranged by one reason or another from their homeland, find themselves the object of people's wonderment, of constant curiosity concerning every peculiarity of their existence. Whenever these men form a small community, when they gather as if family, settle on a piece of land, or find a way to earn a living, neighboring people watch them with the amazement of children perusing the contours of a deserted island enclave on a school map.

The Haitians from the Mayarí Arriba mountains belong to that species of humans who are both attached and unattached to a place. They belong to their plots of land but at the same time they are marked by an air of rootlessness, by gusts of absence, and unknown seas.

For many years these men have lived in narrow barracks, men alone, so old that they have forgotten each other's ages, as their