

Here after

I saw the bird, that was de last ting me saw... a was it a moth, wings thin as paper, we thought it was coming for the light, but it was coming for me. The light of de oil lamp turned up, so de smell fill de room. De mirror turned to face de wall. That was de last ting me hear, de flutter flutter of wings, and then I slipped into de white light.

Musical refrain

Thing about sugar cane, it has to be teased, like any living ting, that come out of de earth.

Everything that come from de soil, should return to de soil, even we.

The ting about sugar cane is de seasons, there is a time for the harvest. When you must reap, what you sow. You must gather, and harvest in the strict time, before the hard time sets in.

Massa used to like me, him say I strong. I was in de first gang which mean we de hardest workers. We cut and thrash, the soil is yellow, land is always flat, and if you stand, and stretch you can just see the sea.

I saw thirty rains. Not many of us can say that. And in the first gang too. Sometimes the cane is unruly, so you have to bring it to order, hard swing with the wrist, thrash, bring it, split the middle, watch it break in two.

It's de cane dat beats you in de end. As de rains come and go, de soreness in me body, spreads into everything.

Mr Brown watch us, always, he keeping count that we don't slack in de heat, by the end of de day, we there in de store, and he weighs each bale.

Each of us put forward our day's worth, and the scales gives us away, tells tales on who strong, who slack, who weak. Mr Brown give out tobacco, and rum to those of us who done good. He give out de lash to those who haven't.

Mr Brown keeps an eye, we joke when he can't hear, Brown him name, red him face. And it puff up like a swollen fish, when him cross. Many tings make Mr Brown cross and some days it just like you dancing to keep from getting the switch. Trying to work yer hardest, so as to avoid the crack of de horsewhip.

That's why I always warn those who came after to always work, not complain, to use words the bagga and massa cannot understand. If you fret, they must not see.

Out of our beds, before the cock crows, and by oil lamp, we dress and make shadows on the wall. De massa would every Sunday, stand on a box, by the grinding mill, and we would have to gather, like his congregation. It was his church. The Massa would read from the scriptures, we learnt God rewards and punishes disobedience. That's why it important to be good servants, hard work is a virtue of the lord, de Massa said.

De Massa said that Newton is 'de jewel in England's crown,' Barbados is de glory of Great Britain, we are doing a service. We must be proud, an work is its own virtue. What that mean eh?

Sometimes standing there listening to de Massa carrying on, is just as hard on me shins as cutting de cane. Hard on de legs and hard on de back.

De cane is put into de mill, and juice comes out, and we make rum. The crystal is what dem English want. Its de ting we brought here for, cause de English need dem sugar.

Because de English like dem food sweet, we hear, they have this drink called tea, and they like to heap sugar in it.

We does like our sugar too now, Didn't always. What gets left, get sweep up, and use in water. It soothes, quenches thirst. A man needs something that sweetens, in all this harshness.

It was hard to keep answering Amu's questions though, how do you answer when tings don't make sense. It's just what it is.

Everything is about de sugar. And de harvest de hardest time, cause you only have a short while to cut, and gather, before the season over, and you can't let de cane spoil.

Amu was special, not many children on de estate, who saw seven rains like she. Who don't get de fever and die.

I hear her laughter, at the end of de day, de yard, chasing de dogs, chickens dashing bout, yams and meal boiling in de pot, women plaiting hair, bringing de washing up from de river, someone playing

de chat, chat, and me smoking me pipe on de porch, rocking, rocking.

If there could be any peace, it was in dese moments of de day, when it seemed God gave us some grace.

Course that was de trouble... Amu had a quick mind, always asking questions. Her mother say she not get beat enough to keep she spirit in check.

There was a convent near the estate. It had high walls, a shut gate, and a bell that rang on Sundays. Amu had a grandfather who came from over the water and still remembered his village.

The convent bell would ring, summoning people to say their prayers to their God. The grandfathers of Amu used to say their prayers. Only their God was to the east.

Many of those who came from across the water, brought different names with them, names of families, tribes and Gods.

We took fright when we first saw the nuns. We thought they were white demons, duppies allowed to walk among us, bold and unafraid. White hoods and cloth to the ground, they had no feet. When we work, sometimes we see them in a long white line, trailing towards de convent walls. Sometimes one would stop and watch us.

Amu used to take de most fright when she see dem, and run behind us. Is dem duppie? We laugh. I tell she no. Dem is nun.

What dat. They belong to Jesus, so Mr Brown say. They say they married to him.

Amu look confuse, how come Jesus have so many wife dem. It made me laugh. Well that what Mr Brown tell us. Imagine that.

Amu's grandfather used to tell us that God didn't have a son Jesus who like all women dem. Back home, over de water, we had many Gods, spirits lived in de trees, and rivers and among us. Many were cast in de big river between. Many spirits are still there, trying to find their way home.

Amu's grandfather would tell us, it is a sad thing when you cannot return home. It is all about de spirit.

Every day at noon, de long white trail would head back to de convent, but one of dem would stop and look at us.

You can't see dem faces but I can feel she eyes. And I realise she eyes were on Amu.

One day Mr Brown tell me dat I should bring Amu to de convent. I want to ask what for. But I know it not my place to ask. At least if I carry she, Amu would not be fright. I am de one closest to she, like a mother. Since de day she born, Amu like what de bible say a miracle.

Not many children see seven rains. So many babies we have to bury, who get struck down with fever, yaws, or pain. An if you survive, so many get carried away. Mr Brown allowed Amu's mother, Batta to suckle her.

Amu was born in de fields, as Batta worked, Amu dropped, and tied straight onto Batta's back.

Many women like Batta give birth like this. De cane not wait for anyone. We live and die around de cane.

Mr Brown tell me to fetch Amu to de convent, at such a time. De time when we usually finish up.

De time when de bales get weighed. De time when my work end, I smoke me pipe and me moments of grace. I was vex see.

We trudge up de hill towards de convent. All de while Amu asking questions. Amu I say, Mek sure, you keep your mouth shut, yer hear. If de nun talk to you, den you answer.

I ring de bell, and a small window in de door slide open.

Musical Refrain

The Merchant's Wife

A woman must never divulge her age or her weight. And it is unseemly and rude to ask.

Of course I blame the sugar. There seems to be a growing abundance for it, as well as the taste for it. Sugar sweetens the palette, and one's temperament at that.

My husband the merchant calls it brown gold. At the breakfast table, every morning, his head is bent in papers, prices, figures, commodities, sugar, tobacco, and cotton. I never pay much attention.

I put four lumps in his tea, and bid him eat breakfast.

All that is a husband's business. The mind of a merchant is on greater things. Although I can

surmise from his demeanour if business is going well. If prices fluctuate, and there are heavy rains, there is a tense frown, fist clenching at the table. Apparently heavy rains affects the crops, something like that. Sugar cane has to be harvested within a certain time, otherwise the crop will fail, or spoil. I do not concern myself with these matters. After all what happens in the colonies does not affect me.

Husband should we use the new cotton tablecloth, when the reverend comes to tea? It is quite exquisite. It was a new shipment at the haberdashery. I saw it at and had to purchase it.

Do as you please. He says, eyes still on his papers.

You see it is customary for us wives, to give tea parties, and this time it is my turn. Of course you cannot expect a man to understand those domestic matters of running a house. He attends to the world, and I the home. And that is no easy task, I can tell you.

So of course he would not understand the importance of the tea parties, but that is just one of the duties and expectations of being in society.

The Reverend and his wife, Mrs Boothroyd, and the other wives are coming to tea. The last time Mrs Boothroyd visited, we used the Josiah Wedgewood china. The latest table ware. When Mrs Boothroyd drank her tea, I could see her eyeing my table cloth, as well as the china. Quite a pinch of envy.

‘And have you seen this?’ I say to Mrs Boothroyd. I pick up the sugar bowl, a delicate patterned thing in itself, but brimming with sugar, more than I imagine she has ever seen.

Mrs Boothroyd is not quite of our class, you see, her husband likes to think he’s a merchant. I believe he owns the ship which carries my husband’s cargo. Sometimes he is away in the colonies for a long time. Apparently the ship carries cargo, and if they have intemperate weather, or the cargo is spoilt, in someway, they have losses at sea. And everyone’s profits are affected. That’s what my husband says, but I do not concern my self with the men’s business.

But sometimes I fear my marriage can be governed by the state of winds, heavy rains and fluctuating sugar prices.

It has been a while since my husband, the merchant has drawn breath, to even look at me.

For the Reverend’s tea party, it is important that everything is impeccable and in place. Of course I can rely on my servant Amelia.

My husband the merchant, brought her back with him from the colonies, and she has been with us for several years now. She is a mannerly girl.

I recall when he produced her. I’d never seen anything like her. This young creature, thin, and shivering, and of course very dark. And her hair. Strangely like wool to the touch.

Will she bite? I asked my husband.

No my dear, he laughed. This one was seasoned on the plantation. She’s not like the rest of them. This one can even read and write. Really, apparently she was taught by nuns.

Anyway, since Amelia came to us, she has been quite a success. She’s become my maid servant.

Mrs Boothroyd was quite envious, and after the last tea, asked me if my husband would consider bringing another one back from the colonies. Everyone simply wants a negro servant in finery now. But I had Amelia first.

I like to bring Amelia out when we have tea, as she is well mannered and has a good temperament.

When she opens her mouth, she has perfect white teeth. Extraordinary. Sometimes, we wives just marvel at them. Most of the wives, including myself I fear, tend to suffer from decay, and weakened teeth. Sadly some of mine have had to be removed. They became that painful.

The wives do find Amelia fascinating, not just because she has extraordinary teeth, but she can read the scriptures, if you put a bible in front of her.

I believe my husband and I are one of the more considerate employers. I often wonder, if you can train a negro like that, does that not mean they could live or be like us? I have to confess a little anxiety about this question, when I see Amelia.

I asked my husband, the merchant one day at breakfast, and said husband are we sure that God would allow us to enslave the negro like this? It was one of those rare moments, I saw my husband genuinely conflicted.

'My dear, if God did not approve of the enslavement of the negro he would have given us a sign, some token of his displeasure. Therefore God's silence is his consent'.

And of course The Reverend agreed whole heartedly, when he thanked my husband for his generous donation.

"It is impossible to disentangle the negro from the production of sugar. They are interdependent and entwined. One is impossible without the other". That's what my husband, the merchant says.

But I do not concern myself with a husband's business.

Anyway, of course at my forthcoming tea party there has to be cake. Plentiful buns, sugar coated buns, oh and those exquisite marzipans. Simply delicious. I fear those are beginning to show on my hips. My husband ever the considerate man, simply draws his newspaper higher, whenever I complain.

Before the tea party, I instruct Amelia to help me dress. As my maid, it is one of her light duties. Besides sewing, attending garment repairs, assisting with laundry, assisting the housekeeper, scouring the pots and pans, oh keeping an eye on the drawing room fire. Of course she does not carry the coals. Well not always.

I often tell Amelia, you have no idea how lucky you are. My husband rescued her, from a life of toil, in fields and savagery. Where else would she live in a fine house, wear her mistresses' fine dresses.

Amelia is helping to fasten the back of my dress. Her hands are rough, and she is tugging too hard. How difficult can it be to fasten a button.

'No really Amelia, be careful, you will rip the dress.'

'But miss' she says. 'The dress too tight.'

I turn round and slap her face.

There is a moment. She holds her cheek, and looks as if she's about to cry.

A good servant is an obedient servant.

My husband, the merchant says they can be immature, like unruly children, you have to impose discipline and moral guidance. It is for their own good.

Anyway I've noticed there is something creeping in lately, an air of impertinence. You have to nip something in the bud, as my husband would say. Sometimes the husbands would tell us terrible stories about the colonies...the negroes...always show them you're in charge, establish that from the start, then you have order. Amelia is lucky, I often tell her. Would you rather be sent back there, and have the whip used.

I choose another gown. I feel unsettled now. Now look what you have made me do Amelia. It is enough distress hosting teas, and endless luncheons. Sometimes...Sometimes even these do not always nourish. After the table of food has been eaten, one can still feel wanting.

Sometimes. I see him watching her. At the table, breakfast, luncheon, supper, dinner. He notices too she has lean brown arms.

When he is away which can sometimes be several weeks, months, I have much to keep myself gainfully employed. Mark my words there is much to do in running a household. The domestic realm is not a trite matter.

Sometimes of an evening, and there is only the sound of a clock ticking, I do my embroidery and there are too many empty chairs, that's when I call Amelia in. And we play cards, she reads the scriptures and sometimes we do our needlework side by side. Not talking. But moments like that are indeed pleasant. Peaceful.

The forthcoming tea party. The Reverend, his wife, Mrs Boothroyd and the other wives, are coming. And one of the matters I hope we can discuss is the delicate question of a church plaque. Now of course it is not about agrandisement. My husband's continual generosity to the church is a matter between him and God. It is not a matter of show. But. It is the Reverend who really insists on marking gratitude. As the Reverend has seen fit to establish a plaque for the Boothroyd's, I think it is only fitting then that there should be one for us.

I intended to speak about the plaque to my husband, that morning at the breakfast table, but he seemed sullen. In a foul mood. I suspect it is something to do with the colonies. It always is. The

heavy rains...the crops. I can sense some darkness. Whenever he comes back from that wretched place, he always seems a little more...vacant. The tropics have browned and hardened him a little. As if he has grown a shell.

How can one measure a husband's happiness by the fluctuating cost of sugar.

It is not my business, but I know it is best maybe not to distract him. It is always best to leave a man to his thoughts I find, so I ring for Amelia and ask her to clear the breakfast table, and see if my husband requires any more tea.

Amelia hesitates for some reason. Some disquiet there even. I suspect it's more impudence.

'Go' I have to be sharp with her. It is the only way. She seems timid, like a shrunk creature, as she enters the breakfast room.

Of course yet again she has made me feel wretched. Now my nerves are all asunder.

All I simply want is for the afternoon tea party to be perfect, memorable. So that the Reverend, and the wives say...that was well done. Mrs Perry. I have my mark.

Suddenly there's a crash, scream, my husband shouting. There is pandemonium as everyone dashes to the breakfast room.

I do not understand what I am seeing...there is my poor husband, clutching his hand, in pain, and I can see a trickle of blood...are those bite marks? he is furious. But there is Amelia on the other side of the room, tears coursing down her face, but oh I can see rage and wickedness in those eyes.

But then I see it...on the floor...smashed... in pieces...my china sugar bowl...and sugar spilt... scattered across the carpet. The wanton wicked waste of it!

I look at her, I can barely speak. How dare you girl? I step forward to slap her, but my slippered feet get caught on a shard of china...ouch.

She flees before I can touch her. I look at my husband.

The teeth marks are deep, and have imprinted themselves in his flesh. He is marked with her now.

I am incensed. Why would that creature bite you like that?

But my good husband, the considerate man that he is, merely puts his good hand out to comfort me. And he says...my dear, no matter how much one endeavours to civilize the negro... there is always a deep place that cannot be touched. It is alas their nature.

Well moral duty or not I will not have her in this house any longer. She can be sent back to the colonies where she belongs.

I push forward down the stairs to the basement of the house, where her room is. It is not a part of the house I am familiar with, I miss my footing, as it is dark.

There is her small room between the cellar and the laundry.

I can hear her moaning inside. I push the door open. She is lying on the bed, and does not even stand when I enter. But I am surprised when my eyes adjust to the dim light. There is a picture of the Virgin Mary on the wall. But there are.... Books. Many of them. Ours. Jonathan Swift, Thackeray...Something called the memoirs of Equiano.

A good servant is an obedient servant. What are you doing with those books?

And she looks at me and says. You know I read Mistress. But I choose to read, more than just the bible for your tea parties.

You choose? A servant cannot choose. Why?

'I want to learn'. She says.

You should only be reading the Bible. That is your salvation. You would think she has a mind...of her own...

I expected gratitude from you, my husband rescued you from the fields and savagery and look at how you repay us? We saved you.

And Amelia staggers to her feet. Are you sick Amelia?

Yes, she says. Yes I am sick and tired of you. And my name is not Amelia.

She tilts her chin at me. Her voice defiant. 'My name is Amu'.