



4.75"

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1 LONDON TOWN

london, you are not quite what i expected
i beg your pardon if i seem dejected
from the colony you one neglected
outside child coming home
america had the muscle but you had the mind
they had the hustle but you had the design
that wound worlds together like rope from twine
i thought as i walked up the serpentine

we once wanted to be like you
bowler hats, garbadine suits
now we ape and empire closer to home
mimic men, to the end, you bred it in our bones
we were the margin, you were the metropole
we were the fragment, you were the whole
we were the flesh, you were the mind and soul
at least that is how we heard the story told

london, your sun is set
but the night has not quite fallen yet
all the stars once caught in your galaxy
flicker like lamps here in your city
in you london town
walking the streets, history crashing all around....

long time, london, since your flag came down
long time since we moved along
but now i see just how entwined
we were left by the years that we left behind
with you, londontown....

Some years ago, a tour brought me to London for the first time. I spent my time off walking up and down streets quite aimlessly, taken aback by how familiar it all seemed - names which I had seen again and again in Trinidad, Barbados, Grenada, Canada, Belize, Pakistan... anywhere touched by the rule of that far-flung empire whose nervous centre I was then traversing on foot. It was late winter and the weather was bleak and during my wandering I wrote this song of post-colonial homecoming.

12 AS THEY SLEEP

you should watch your children as they sleep
eyes plunged down into the higher deep
there will be vows to make and vows to keep
in the still air of the room

when the evening's protesting cries
have fallen all to lullabies
oh, i advise you stay awhile
before you tiptoe away

when the flash of anger has left those cheeks
and you trace the lines where the tears left streaks
and kiss the lids over eyes that seek
all their answers from you

memories are for them like they are for us
some loom like mountains, others blow away like dust
some lodge like splinters and others, like rust,
must be scraped off before you can shine

so sitting here by this bedside
fumbling for words to entreat the divine
and render thanks for this blessed life
that has become the reason for mine...

For my children, and for all those mothers and fathers who have collapsed in exhaustion at the end of the day and in the sleepy stillness felt they were blessed beyond measure.

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11 WORLD IS TURNING

in the shrine on the mountain
no bells ring to call
no candles burn late and low
to greet the nightfall
and wooden saint keep watching
from their shelves on the wall
over the changing world....

the world is turning
time marching on
the field is burning
it ent waiting for none
the sea is churning
the world we know
is just a passing shadow

in the fort on the coastline
two guns rust away
on guard against the galleons
of a long vanished day
while they gaze from their outpost
on the still quiet bay
over the changing world....

in the field on the flatlands
no spades break the soil
no calloused hands now catch the fruit
before it falls and it spoils
and the great house stares blankly
across the years of blood and toil
over the changing world....

The verses of this song are like a series of musical postcards, each from a different place which suggests something of the past that has shaped Trinidad and the wider Caribbean: a dilapidated old church in the village of La Pastora, a derelict Great House lost in the grasses of the Central Plain, and Fort Abercromby, a forgotten outpost on the north coast of Trinidad where two small rusted cannons point to an empty bay, suggesting that you are on the very edge of nowhere - the forgotten periphery of an empire whose centre and attention were a world away.

2 WHEN JONAS SAW THE LIGHT

when jonas saw the light did he take fright
did he recoil when it seemed to spoil his mood
when jonas met that dawn, did he curse the sun that shone
upon that gloom which he consumed like it was food

did jonas regret the years spent in that vale of tears
which he would not let himself leave behind
and did jonas shut his ears from the singing of the spheres
or did it soothe his overused and aching mind

high above the town
what did he see when he looked down
at the edge of space
did he look down to see he had a place
and of the faces rushing by
as he scaled the summit of the sky
of those flying past
did one linger as the last

when jonas met that day was he dismayed
did he bid it go away, wish it was night
or was jonas overjoyed to be flung into that void
where all he knew vanished from view, slipped from his sight

did jonas lament at last how quick his days had passed
did he mourn to be torn from them so soon
and did jonas have a care from those now waiting there
gathered in his dim and silent room

up through the thinning air
did his sight become more clear
did he alight upon that place
that could erase his pride and pain
and in those starlit climes
did he reflect on misspent times
did he wish he could undo his days
and live them all again

when jonas saw the light....

I once came across an interesting passage on the afterlife... from St. Gregory of Nyssa, I think. He stated that when the veil of this life was torn, all would come face to face with the staggering love of the Creator - the source of all being and the unknown aim of all our desire. For those who were prepared for it - having cultivated kindness within their hearts - he said it would be an indescribable joy, while for those closed off to it by their own selfishness it would prove an unbearable torment. Which had me wondering if (should such hopes in the soul's immortality prove true) when faced with the dawn of that unending day, I could ever crawl out of my petty self and into It.

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3 KING SUGAR

king sugar dead
that's is what they said
king sugar
eh, eh come again

from the cane to the rum, now rum to kingdom come
it was the reason we came from where we came from
from the carrack to the barrack, to press out the syrup
to send the best away and drink the rest as guarap
glucose, fructose, maltose, overdose
last mill closed, old king comatose
so from island to island and coast to coast
gone is the king that sat on the throne

long was his reign, the years of lash and chain
horn blown in the night to start the canboulay
where flames burn night and day keeping snakes at bay
to sweeten cakes a continent away
none mourned his demise, bittersweet enterprise
none surprised to see the king capsize
so from island to island and coast to coast
gone is the sovereign that held the throne

while rum glowed like gold in the glasses
blood flowed thick and slow like molasses
gilded age, birds sang in the cage,
but time is always turning another page
kingdom overgrown in the grasses
none can hold back time as it passes
of his domain all that remains
are ruins standing in fields of cane

From the Gold Coast of Africa to India's Deccan Plain,
and from the ports of Canton to the Portuguese island
of Madeira – land of my own ancestors – they came to
toil away in the cane fields, mills and distilleries that
turned out rum and sugar destined for faraway lands.
In the last few years, the mills have closed all across
the islands, marking the final passing of that industry
that once reigned supreme - with the power to shape
entire lands and the peoples that worked them. Their
now-derelict barracks and scattered stones, glimpsed
amid the bright green spears of wild sugarcane,
whisper to our own time that nothing is permanent...
that what seems immovable today is gone tomorrow.

10 BEFORE THE DAY STAR

before the day star you were formed in the womb
by the light of the spirit warmed
before flesh and blood were stitched to bone
before the day star you were known

before the day star you were willed
then by breath and being filled
in that unseen place where you would grow
before the day star you were known

before the day star you were made
no accident, no mistake
you say your mama barely knew your dad
before the day star you were planned

before the day star you were conceived
in the mind of god, to be received
into the waiting arms of all that is
before the day star you were his

you are the meeting place between dust and grace
the infinity of heaven, the lines of time and space
the apple of all-seeing eyes
before the day star you were prized

before the waters split into sky and sea
before the day star you were called to be
a ray reaching back to that ageless light
which before the day star was burning bright....

A hymn to the unassailable worth of the human person:
if I was ever asked to render my credo in a song, this
would be it.

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9 KARACHI BURNING

last night i awoke to the sound
the town of karachi burning down
people was adding wrong to wrong
the town of karachi burning down
they were burning buses and looting stalls
the town of karachi burning down
man, they beating the rickshawallah and all

i never seen in all of my days
how grief could set a city ablaze
i never seen in all of my days
how grief could set a city ablaze

some people beating their chest in shame
the town of karachi burning down
some people chanting miss bhutto's name
the town of karachi burning down
and to underscore what they mean
the town of karachi burning down
they dousing the whole place in kerosene
the town of karachi burning down

as if the sticks and stones and strife
could restore a leader to life
as if the sticks and stones and strife
could restore a leader to life

some people said it was taliban
the town of karachi burning down
some was out battling for imran khan
the town of karachi burning down
some even said it was she own husband
the town of karachi burning down
rumours was flying through the land
the town of karachi burning down

as if all the malicious talk
could make the dead to get up and walk
as if all the malicious talk
could make the dead to get up and walk

Some years ago, I visited the city of Karachi in Pakistan. The day after I arrived, former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto was assassinated and the city went up in flames as rioters took to the streets to give vent to their grief and outrage. The ensuing sights and sounds and rumours that flew around are the subject of this piece of calypso journalism.

4 GUAYAGUAYARE

i dreamt a long and lonely bay
first to catch the light of day
as dawn comes rushing over waves
in guayaguayare

first stop of those who, passing through,
declared the world they found was new
you almost might believe it to
in guayaguayare

three sails went by, not long ago,
years of fire to unfold
the embers are still growing cold
at guayaguayare

black as oil, yellow as gold
the sands spell dangers to the soul
thy are grey as death if truth be told
in guayaguayare

row on row of green crowned trees
len out over tossing seas
as if pulled back by memories
in guayaguayare

and when the dawn begins to break
its light refracted by the spray
send colours rolling over waves
across the silent bay
across the silent bay
across the silence broken by
the coming of the day

i dreamt a far forgotten bay
whose long and winding name remain
to tell us of a vanished age
guayaguayare

It is said that this remote bay on the southeast coast of Trinidad was the first sight Columbus had of the island on his third voyage to the New World. If someone on the beach was looking out to sea on that afternoon, could they have known the fast-approaching, world-shattering future portended by the sight of those strange billowing triangles on the horizon?

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5 SCARBOROUGH GIRL

january, frozen winter day
down by the bus stop dancing the cold away
bitter wind, blowing the snow around
but she don't notice she's captured by the sound
coming through headphones from far away
songs that bring the light and sing the green of day
sounds stream making her troubles seem
to be passing like a dream

midnight, busy hospital floor
worn down, doesn't know how she will endure
tomorrow's day shift at the grocery store
but for the children she would do all that and more
hoe for a quick change of uniform
time to kiss two cheeks and rush out the door
manager uptight, ready to fight,
he don't know what she does it for

mother dear, whatever brought you here
to this place so far from all that you held near
i know it was hard, you never let your worries show,
mother dear, you are so much stronger that you
know....

One morning, amid the swirling snows of a blizzard in
Scarborough (Ontario, not Tobago), I saw two young
Caribbean women at a bus stop dancing and singing
dancehall tunes with their iPods in hand. Struck by this
incongruity of climate and behaviour, I further noted that
they were dressed in nursing scrubs and I thought of my
own mother and mothers like her who worked night after
night – and sometimes night after day – to provide for
the children who they were struggling to raise alone in
a new home.

8 SMOKESTACKS AND STEEPLES

smokestacks, not steeples, towered over the people
no bells, now whistles kept the time
and men sought nothing higher than sated desire
while neon, not fire, lit the signs

it was a time very like our own
when gods and princes were overthrown
it was a time very like our own
when gods and and princes were overthrown
it was an age when things were rearranged
put the devils out of sight and the heaven's within range
for some it was wonder, for others passing strange
santimanite

smokestacks, not steeples, towered over the people
no bells, now whistles kept the time
and men no longer wanted a world that was haunted
still haunted by the divine

it was a time very like our own
when long held customs were outgrown
young men in boots marched to new absolutes
trying to pull the tree up by the roots
they sought relief in the arms of unbelief
but the emptiness that followed send them rushing after dreams
which paraded down their promenades, went dancing across their screens
santimanite

bridge:
and prophets of doom said the end would come soon
we'd fade into the night just like the waning of the moon
and sour statisticians said we were running out of room
there was no light to pierce the gloom

Mark Twain once said "history doesn't repeat itself... but it
rhymes." Like recurring refrains in a song, so many of the
political quarrels and culture wars of our time are really
the latest skirmishes in a clash of worldviews that began
a very long time ago. It is easy to feel that our problems
and struggles are unique to our time, but a quick look
back always reminds us that there is nothing new under
the sun.

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7 WHAT THE SEA REMEMBERS

on this place by the shore
 could ask for nothing more
 this place by the shore
 can't help but suspect something more
 lies way down in the deep
 long hidden by the sea
 way down in the gloom
 where ships and seamen met their doom
 remnants of that golden tide
 which drew men across the ocean wide
 left by those times
 which these wide waters try to hide
 down in the deep where colours fade
 where slaving ships and pirate raids
 left silver coins and rusted chains
 half eaten by the waves

what the sea remembers
 is all it takes away
 what the sea remembers
 will it spit it out some day
 what the sea remembers
 it buries in the blue
 what the sea remembers could have been me and you

The idea for this song (and the album) came to me a few years ago when I was out on the Gulf of Paria, a pocket of the Caribbean Sea which stretches between Trinidad and Venezuela. On the way out to the location, beneath the shallow silty water, lay the rusted wreck of an old barge. Looking down, I was struck by how much of our history, like that sunken vessel, lies buried under waves - its outline barely visible in the blue shadows. Indeed, beneath this much traversed patch of ocean lie Spanish galleons, slaving ships, pirogues (fishing boats), oil tankers and even German U-Boat submarines - all covered by that vast water which serves as both a barrier and bridge between our islands and the wider world.

6 STRANGE DREAM

the other night i had a dream
 strange and portentous it did seem
 the other night i had a dream
 strange and portentous it did seem
 a man in a top hat with stars and stripes
 was dancing with a lady all dressed in white
 and as the crowd gathered around
 man, they were the talk and toast of the town

chorus
 we ent going home before day morning
 not until the sun is high in he sky
 we ent going home before day morning

the band was playing on
 the gent and the dame dancing up a storm
 she waving a flambeau in she hand
 he plotting to win her affection
 a bulldog was barking by she feet
 and he beat it like an old pothound in the street
 and as the crown started to cheer
 he get brave and he fighting condor and bear

this display of courage and might
 made the young lady to scream with delight
 so he started making outrageous claims
 in an attempt to further impress the dame
 he said "come leh we travel in class
 from the berlin wall to the khyber pass
 and when get tired of the west indies
 we go bathe in the tigris and euphrates..."

by the end of the dance
 interest had bloomed into romance
 which soon turned to jealousy
 he didn't want no one else talking to she
 he said come leh we build a home
 she said she could belong to no man alone
 in a rage he cuffed the dame to the ground
 and the fire from the torch burned the whole place down

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