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Pilgrimage out of Dispossession

returns with tin souvenirs and a claim / to me' in 'The Mulatta as Penelope'. Yet here too she acknowledges a wider dimension of suffering. In the poem 'We are the Women' she proclaims the double dispossession that binds her to all deprived women. The poem skilfully weaves Biblical allusions with the constant anxiety and humiliation that dogs the daily lives of her sisters:

waiting
mouth corner white by sepulchres and
bone yards
for the bodies of our men,
waiting under masses
waiting under masses table
for the trickle down of crumbs.

The outward submission to the master's sexual demands, juxtaposed to their vigil for the unresurrected bodies of their men, is developed into a telling image of their utter economic dependence. It ends with only a faint hint at renewal:

We've buried our hope
too long
at the anchor to our
navel strings
we are rooting at
the burying spot
we are uncovering
our hope.

Will they be able to bring the corpse of hope back to life? They had buried it 'too long', she says. Her poems of dejection, however, usually end with an explicit call to resurrection, to a retrieval of one's original strength in the struggle for dignity and integrity.

The opening to European ships of sea routes to the Caribbean islands was of immediate relevance to Goodison's personal history. As appears from the poem 'Guinea Woman' her 'great grandmother' was an African lady, queenly in her bearing if not an actual princess, who was a victim of the triangular trade between the African coasts and the European plantations on the 'new' continent: she was 'exported' among a cargo of manpower. This, however, is only implicit in the poem. The moment of actual transportation, the Middle Passage, which is the starting point of so many poems by black Caribbean, is glossed over, barely hinted at in 'her gaze' looking out 'to sea', in the loss implied in the use of the word 'memory' at the end of the second stanza, and in the reference to the Jamaican harbour of Lucea in the third. Her fate as a transported slave is revealed through comparisons: the 'headman's hand' that can close on her waist, the 'came stalk' to picture her tall slenderness, which prefigures plantation work. This uprooting, however, is the source of the dispossessions on which the poem focuses.

By the time mother and daughter are separated the perspective has changed, and what the reader feels is the child's dispossession of her mother, and beyond, a whole race's dispossession of their roots:

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Lorna Goodison is a Jamaican poet published by Bloodaxe. She grew up and still lives part of the time in Kingston, but she now works at the University of Michigan and spends most of the year at Ann Arbor. While she is fairly well known in the Caribbean, she has as yet hardly been introduced to European readers. The present paper explores one aspect of her writing which I felt particularly effective: the way she combines personal and collective experience in poems that trace a movement from spoliation and subjugation to release into a condition of responsible self-possession in which the world is ours to protect. Many of Goodison's poems are journeys inside, explorations of the past, a tracing back of roots (with some weeding on the way), a retrieving of lost origins, and so, simultaneously, a way of stepping out into the future: they are a re-sourcing, an un-covering of hidden powers, which starts with herself but is also meant as a gift to all the dispossessed. A pilgrimage, by definition, is a trip back into collective memory and a trip out into new possibilities. In Goodison's poems and watercolours, as in the traditional meaning of the pilgrimage as a releasing ritual, the past is used as a springboard for the future.

Born in a family of mine, Goodison has developed an early awareness of solidarity and a deep concern for justice and love. Her concern for dispossession and for the dispossessed is everywhere present. It is perhaps more in evidence in the collection published in 1988, *Heartease*¹. A poem like 'This is a Hymn', for instance, makes her commitment particularly clear, but does not take it much further than a statement, a side-taking:

This hymn
is for the must-be-blessed
the victims of the world
who know salt best
the world tribe
of the dispossessed
outside the halls of plenty
looking in

In the collection published in 1986 *I Am Becoming My Mother*² heartbreak is part of her own life. Although the birth of a son is there to maintain some balance in the tightrope walking of her life, she records the separation from a man she once loved ('the pillars / of our great love that corroded into hatred' in 'Farewell our Trilogy') and her determination not to be the patient wife any more ('I will not sit and spin and spin / the door open to let the madness in / till the sailor finally weary / of the sea /

¹ Lorna Goodison, *Heartease*, Bloodaxe, 1988.

² Lorna Goodison, *I Am Becoming My Mother*, Bloodaxe, 1986.

They forbade great grandmother's
guinea woman presence
they washed away her scent of
cinnamon and escalions

These spices, suggestive of refinement, had been established as the hallmarks of a regal descent: 'Great grandmother's royal scent of / cinnamon and escalions.' This inheritance was snatched away while the girl's body was washed as if it was sullied by anything African. Similarly the mother's 'antelope-quick walk', was shackled and choked. The offspring is made to conform to other conventions. Yet the last words of the third stanza promise some reversal: those on power dismissed as 'rebellions' (violent questionings of the rightfully established order) movements of revolt that were truly 'uprisings': a claiming of what is due, a standing up for one's trampled rights.

The recognition and protection offered by the master (on account of her father's blue eyes?) was thus a mixed blessing. But it ensured survival; it left the future open. The last stanza has nothing to do with Mendel's Law or with biology. Each new generation becomes darker ('blood dark') as they are more aware, and more proud, of their African heritage. There is an undertone of threat and revenge which has almost completely disappeared in the later collection. The poem ends as a triumphant hymn to re-collection, re-appropriation of all that had been taken away in the name of spurious cultural superiority. The whole poem, however, not only the vindication of the past made explicit in the last stanza, indicates a movement out of dispossession in so far as it is a celebration of what had been denied and rejected.

The three poems which follow in the collection are devoted to three major figures in the liberation struggle of black people: Rosa Parks, the 'soft-voiced woman' whose refusal to leave her seat in a bus started the Civil Rights Movement, Nelson Mandela in 'Bedspread' ('They wove the bedspread / and knotted notes of hope / in each strand'), and the great Nanny, the legendary Queen Mother of Jamaica maroons.

Mulatta blood is mixed by definition and the vindication of the repressed African element cannot altogether obliterate the European component, the grandmother's blue eyes. The two poems on page 32 and 33 respectively of the collection *I Am Becoming My Mother* are two prayers for a renewing of life forces set, one in the European and one in the African mode. 'Mine, o thou lord of life, send my roots rain' develops the individual sense of desiccation through the running metaphor of the plant needing rain for all its luxuriant flowers while the approach in 'Keith Jarrett - Rainmaker' is more collective (and more straightforward) with the speaker defining herself as a link in a chain. The images in the poem overshadowed by Hopkins's outcry are close to concets. The 'save-face flowers' are in fact wounds: 'red petalled blisters', deceptive only from a distance. The speaker is a plant whose life covers one day ('In my morning', 'In the middle of my life span' which is equated with 'in this noon of my orchard') so that 'at night', which is repetitive and does not, here, suggest any decline, only, literally, a moment in time, may be misleading. This poem too is marked by the influence of T.S. Eliot ('For I've been planted long / in a sere dry place') mixed with direct everyday life touches ('posted signs that speak of scarce water'). The Keith

Jarrett poem is based on syncopated rhythms, close to the magical incantatory drumbeat of this musician's piano.

'Survivor' is a remarkable illustration of the movement from a statement of dispossession to a promise of future life. The first seventeen lines describe the conquest of the 'New World' in an almost detached, deliberately unemotional tone. The facts are terrible enough. The 'strangers' greed was as thoughtless as it was ruthless. 'Now that genus is extinct', we read about a 'rare species / with half-extended wings', which can recall the dodo, exterminated on Mauritius, but can also stand for the tribes once living on the conquered islands, some of which have not survived. 'Savage' between brackets might on a first careless reading be seen as referring to those whose ribs are broken. Yet clearly it can only describe the conquerors themselves, however they prided themselves on a superior culture. This form of desecrated cannibalism was not literally true, but it is most apt for their absence of respect for what they feed on. What is left is utterly desolate: 'the wind plays / mourning notes'. Yet this statement about the present is a turning point. The very thoroughness of destruction yields music, leads back to creation. The broken rib is transmuted into 'bone flute music'. The mere fact of recording, of listening to 'the dead story it tells' is a new start, the beginning of a renewed creation, which is what the second part is about. The surviving woman has stored and protected the possibility of future life: 'seeds stored / under her tongue / and one remaining barrel of rain'. She has a son too. She will plant the seeds for a future harvest, and bring her son up with stories and 'grace songs'.

The contrast between the modes of presentation of the protagonists is arresting. Whereas the strangers are reduced to a shapeless and faceless pronoun, the woman comes out vividly as an almost sensuous presence. She has 'bare feet', bells twinkling at her ankle and hair which is bound when outdoors and which she loosens inside.

The poem combines myths from Europe and from the Caribbean. There are definite echoes of T.S. Eliot's poetry in the scansion and in some of the images. The land laid waste by the unfortunate stroke, awaiting the regenerating question, God's creativeness with ribs, which may recall Ezekiel as well as Genesis, these come from our Western lore. But the potential creativeness of bones is also part and parcel of the Caribbean mythology ('bone flute music').

This poem is both very sad (things have been irretrievably broken or lost) and never desperate. It bounces back at the end into the resilient promise of continued life, in the combined music of death and grace.

Though *Heartease* is more outwardly concerned with collective issues than *I Am Becoming My Mother* the collection essentially records Goodison's mystical experience of inner illumination. Such experience helps, individually, to reach a condition of balance and peace. It should also help to change the world. Shared awareness of a different reality will radiate such healing power that darkness turns into light and evil is overruled. This, at least, is the hopeful utopia expressed with particular clarity in 'Some Nights I Don't Sleep'. The movement in this poem is from unease to 'heartease', from sleeplessness experienced as deprivation of sleep because of too much worrying to waking as a condition necessary to the uncovering (recovery) of light within and without.

The two parts of the poem coincide with these two moments, with these two ways (passive and active) of approaching man's pervasive destructiveness in the world around. As the first four 'sleepless' stanzas testify, yoga practice and the discovery of a personal poise have not shut Goodison's consciousness or conscience to the human potential for cruelty or irresponsibility. This poem is a precarious attempt at reconciling the two experiences, at applying the power of love as reached through meditation to healing scars not usually confronted in this way. In one way its structure is unsatisfactorily shambling. But the mere attempt at bringing social and mystical awareness together today, that is in a time when mysticism is either exploited as a trade or dismissed as a cheap form of escapism, was a daunting challenge, and some lines are throbbing gems of many-layered meanings.

The first four lines suggest, in the resonance of words such as 'chips . . . lodged in my memory', the chaffing aggravation of some unwanted splinters as a physical equivalent for her awareness of all too pervasive forms of killing and torture and discrimination. Her indignation at Pinochet's dictatorship (emblematic of most military dictatorships) is given fresh momentum from its being indirectly introduced by her shock at realizing the absence of any awareness in some ('And maybe she did not know'), and the inclination to forgetfulness in others. In the third stanza the images (unfortunately all quite literal, no figure of speech at all) are closer to the conventional presentation of horror: 'bodies floating', 'shocking stadiums / running with young blood'. But they are vivified but the way they clash into one another: the 'water system' leads to the 'running blood'; the flowing movement in both is abruptly checked in the cementing silence that follows. People are actually buried alive, or have their tongues amputated, or are threatened into silence. Poetry too falls victim to power such as abused. The fourth stanza is about discrimination against black people and their particularly virulent form in South Africa. Again she does not think in general abstract terms: her unease is connected to the photograph of a boy in whom she sees '[her] son's double'. The Nile reflected in their eyes is the age-old symbol of African wisdom.

The transition is effected in a deliberately awkward sentence:

Some nights are divided
four ways
quartered and a moon.

She is, we have been given to feel, torn asunder, quartered, as in the medieval form of torture plus capital execution. Her nights fall apart. But the moon too is quartered, or has quarters, and the moon (even though a full moon may induce sleeplessness) is an essentially inspiring and restful sight. So the painful quartering is converted, through the mere mention of the moon, into a four-step method of liberation.

The first two quarters are emergency-aid remedies, as it were. They are still heavy with the lead of dispossession, also expressed in the [w] alliterations. The 'legacy of stone' refers to the violence bred by deprivation — 'intifada' or L.A. riots. At the same time it powerfully conveys the crushing weight of some millstone dragging one down into further misery. The 'sankey' of the following stanza is a reference to the

popular hymn book by the American Evangelical ministers Moody and Sankey, so to the help the dispossessed might find in religion to encounter their lot and look up from the garbage to which they seem to be condemned.

With the third quarter we move from destitution to the dispossession of one's soul. 'A mantra', that is, one of the sacred syllabic sounds that encompasses in its resonance various forms of wisdom and harmony according to Tantric and Buddhist traditions, is called upon to counter the teachings of another church, the 'church of every man for himself', which have become even more frighteningly prevalent with the aggressively anti-cooperative ideology put forward and implemented by Thatcher and Reagan in the 80s. Their celebration of 'destroy or get destroyed' is a blatant distortion, a 'twisted anthem' borrowed from a song by Tina Turner, where the line has a completely different meaning: 'What has love got to do with it?' The answer flares up with sudden lyrical fervour in a rhyming couplet, a fiery exhortation to an altogether different kind of celebration with echoes of the Psalms ('children of light' would there have been 'children of Israel'):

Sing, O children of light, sing
For love is all and everything.

The last two stanzas are thoroughly released, but are set in the form of promises and imperatives. The third quarter marks the breaking through to the other side of the imprisoning walls of misery in all its guises. It expresses a sense of lightness and reconciliation reinforced by the repetition of [ai] sounds and by a number of very short lines. While the only concrete image in that stanza is that of the 'green bush' of life, images and abstractions intertwine in the last stanza. Traditional medicine is alluded to in the 'black pepper grains' blowing from the 'healing trees' in the 'doctor breeze'. The recovered 'real sleep' can be heard and felt in the rhythm and sounds of the two lines

Light filled and lulled
by a more merciful breeze.

With the last six lines she reverts to the opening absence of sleep, but it has now become a choice: 'some night is not for sleep'. And the poem ends with the promise of a resplendent homecoming where 'heartease', a sense of well-being which makes it possible to act positively upon the world, is felt as a place to which we rightly belong.

Cultural traditions are still eroded or erased all over the world, and now the victims themselves are often eager to wash away the scent of cinnamon and escalation in their impatience to comply with the luring standards of a uniformizing world culture made in U.S.A. and Japan. Goodison presents a living alternative to those dead supermarket alleys: the crazy and splendid hope that we can change things.

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