

K+

by the same author

Midsummer
Collected Poems: 1948-1984
The Arkansas Testament

Plays
Three Plays: The Last Carnival;
Beef, No Chicken; A Branch of the Blue Nile

OMEROS
Derek Walcott

ff

faber and faber

LONDON · BOSTON

FOR MY SHIPMATES IN THIS CRAFT,

FOR MY BROTHER, RODERICK,

& FOR ROGER STRAUS

First published in the USA in 1990
by Farrar, Straus and Giroux, Inc., New York
and simultaneously in Canada
by Collins Publishers, Toronto
First published in Great Britain in 1990
by Faber and Faber Limited
3 Queen Square London WC1N 3AU

Printed in England by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

All rights reserved

© Derek Walcott, 1990

Derek Walcott is hereby identified as author of this work
in accordance with Section 77 of the Copyright, Designs and
Patents Act 1988.

"Yesterday" by John Lennon and Paul McCartney © 1965 Northern Songs Ltd.
All rights for the US, Canada and Mexico controlled and administered by EMI Blackwood
Music Inc. under license from ATV Music (MACLEN). International copyright secured.
Used by permission.

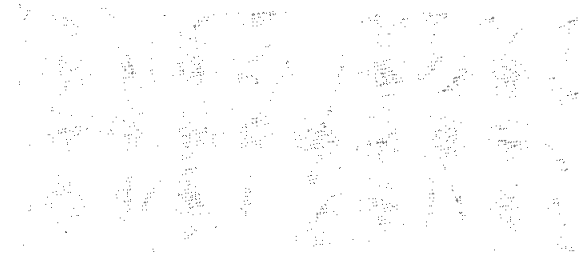
A CIP record of this book
is available from the British Library

ISBN 0-571-16070-0
0-571-14459-4 (Pbk)

Univ.-Bibl.
Bamberg

LC 7768

BOOK ONE



Chapter I

I

"This is how, one sunrise, we cut down them canoes."
Philoctete smiles for the tourists, who try taking
his soul with their cameras. "Once wind bring the news

to the *laurier-cannelles*, their leaves start shaking
the minute the axe of sunlight hit the cedars,
because they could see the axes in our own eyes.

Wind lift the ferns. They sound like the sea that feed us
fishermen all our life, and the ferns nodded 'Yes,
the trees have to die.' So, fists jam in our jacket,

cause the heights was cold and our breath making feathers
like the mist, we pass the rum. When it came back, it
give us the spirit to turn into murderers.

I lift up the axe and pray for strength in my hands
to wound the first cedar. Dew was filling my eyes,
but I fire one more white rum. Then we advance."

For some extra silver, under a sea-almond,
he shows them a scar made by a rusted anchor,
rolling one trouser-leg up with the rising moan

of a conch. It has puckered like the corolla
of a sea-urchin. He does not explain its cure.
“It have some things”—he smiles—“worth more than a dollar.”

He has left it to a garrulous waterfall
to pour out his secret down La Sorcière, since
the tall laurels fell, for the ground-dove’s mating call

to pass on its note to the blue, tacit mountains
whose talkative brooks, carrying it to the sea,
turn into idle pools where the clear minnows shoot

and an egret stalks the reeds with one rusted cry
as it stabs and stabs the mud with one lifting foot.
Then silence is sawn in half by a dragonfly

as eels sign their names along the clear bottom-sand,
when the sunrise brightens the river’s memory
and waves of huge ferns are nodding to the sea’s sound.

Although smoke forgets the earth from which it ascends,
and nettles guard the holes where the laurels were killed,
an iguana hears the axes, clouding each lens

over its lost name, when the hunched island was called
“Iounalao,” “Where the iguana is found.”
But, taking its own time, the iguana will scale

the rigging of vines in a year, its dewlap fanned,
its elbows akimbo, its deliberate tail
moving with the island. The slit pods of its eyes

ripened in a pause that lasted for centuries,
that rose with the Aruacs’ smoke till a new race
unknown to the lizard stood measuring the trees.

These were their pillars that fell, leaving a blue space
for a single God where the old gods stood before.
The first god was a gommier. The generator

began with a whine, and a shark, with sidewise jaw,
sent the chips flying like mackerel over water
into trembling weeds. Now they cut off the saw,

still hot and shaking, to examine the wound it
had made. They scraped off its gangrenous moss, then ripped
the wound clear of the net of vines that still bound it

to this earth, and nodded. The generator whipped
back to its work, and the chips flew much faster as
the shark’s teeth gnawed evenly. They covered their eyes

from the splintering nest. Now, over the pastures
of bananas, the island lifted its horns. Sunrise
trickled down its valleys, blood splashed on the cedars,

and the grove flooded with the light of sacrifice.
A gommier was cracking. Its leaves an enormous
tarpaulin with the ridgepole gone. The creaking sound

made the fishermen leap back as the angling mast
leant slowly towards the troughs of ferns; then the ground
shuddered under the feet in waves, then the waves passed.

Achille looked up at the hole the laurel had left.
He saw the hole silently healing with the foam
of a cloud like a breaker. Then he saw the swift

crossing the cloud-surf, a small thing, far from its home,
confused by the waves of blue hills. A thorn vine gripped
his heel. He tugged it free. Around him, other ships

were shaping from the saw. With his cutlass he made
a swift sign of the cross, his thumb touching his lips
while the height rang with axes. He swayed back the blade,

and hacked the limbs from the dead god, knot after knot,
wrenching the severed veins from the trunk as he prayed:
“Tree! You can be a canoe! Or else you cannot!”

The bearded elders endured the decimation
of their tribe without uttering a syllable
of that language they had uttered as one nation,

the speech taught their saplings: from the towering babble
of the cedar to green vowels of *bois-campêche*.
The *bois-flot* held its tongue with the *laurier-cannelle*,

the red-skinned logwood endured the thorns in its flesh,
while the Aruacs' patois crackled in the smell
of a resinous bonfire that turned the leaves brown

with curling tongues, then ash, and their language was lost.
Like barbarians striding columns they have brought down,
the fishermen shouted. The gods were down at last.

Like pygmies they hacked the trunks of wrinkled giants
for paddles and oars. They were working with the same
concentration as an army of fire-ants.

But vexed by the smoke for defaming their forest,
blow-darts of mosquitoes kept needling Achille's trunk.
He frothed white rum on both forearms that, at least,

those that he flattened to asterisks would die drunk.
They went for his eyes. They circled them with attacks
that made him weep blindly. Then the host retreated

to high bamboo like the archers of Aruacs
running from the muskets of cracking logs, routed
by the fire's banner and the remorseless axe

hacking the branches. The men bound the big logs first
with new hemp and, like ants, trundled them to a cliff
to plunge through tall nettles. The logs gathered that thirst

for the sea which their own vined bodies were born with.
Now the trunks in eagerness to become canoes
ploughed into breakers of bushes, making raw holes

of boulders, feeling not death inside them, but use—
to roof the sea, to be hulls. Then, on the beach, coals
were set in their hollows that were chipped with an adze.

A flat-bed truck had carried their rope-bound bodies.
The charcoals, smouldering, cored the dugouts for days
till heat widened the wood enough for ribbed gunwales.

Under his tapping chisel Achille felt their hollows
exhaling to touch the sea, lunging towards the haze
of bird-printed islets, the beaks of their parted bows.

Then everything fit. The pirogues crouched on the sand like hounds with sprigs in their teeth. The priest sprinkled them with a bell, then he made the swift's sign.

When he smiled at Achille's canoe, *In God We Troust*, Achille said: "Leave it! Is God' spelling and mine." After Mass one sunrise the canoes entered the troughs

of the surpliced shallows, and their nodding prows agreed with the waves to forget their lives as trees; one would serve Hector and another, Achilles.

III

Achille peed in the dark, then bolted the half-door shut. It was rusted from sea-blast. He hoisted the fishpot with the crab of one hand; in the hole under the hut

he hid the cinder-block step. As he neared the depot, the dawn breeze salted him coming up the grey street past sleep-tight houses, under the sodium bars

of street-lamps, to the dry asphalt scraped by his feet; he counted the small blue sparks of separate stars. Banana fronds nodded to the undulating

anger of roosters, their cries screeching like red chalk drawing hills on a board. Like his teacher, waiting, the surf kept chafing at his deliberate walk.

By the time they met at the wall of the concrete shed the morning star had stepped back, hating the odour of nets and fish-guts; the light was hard overhead

and there was a horizon. He put the net by the door of the depot, then washed his hands in its basin. The surf did not raise its voice, even the ribbed hounds

around the canoes were quiet; a flask of l'absinthe was passed by the fishermen, who made smacking sounds and shook at the bitter bark from which it was brewed.

This was the light that Achille was happiest in. When, before their hands gripped the gunwales, they stood for the sea-width to enter them, feeling their day begin.

Chapter II

I

Hector was there. Theophile also. In this light, they have only Christian names. Placide, Pancreas, Chrysostom, Maljo, Philoctete with his head white

as the coiled surf. They shipped the lances of oars, placed them parallel in the grave of the gunwales like man and wife. They scooped the leaf-bilge from the planks,

loosened knots from the bodies of flour-sack sails, while Hector, at the shallows' edge, gave a quick thanks, with the sea for a font, before he waded, high-in.

The rest walked up the sand with identical stride except for foam-haired Philoctete. The sore on his shin still unhealed, like a radiant anemone. It had come

from a scraping, rusted anchor. The pronged iron peeled the skin in a backwash. He bent to the foam, sprinkling it with a salt hiss. Soon he would run,

hobbling, to the useless shade of an almond, with locked teeth, then wave them off from the shame of his smell, and once more they would leave him alone

under its leoparding light. This sunrise the same damned business was happening. He felt the sore twitch its wires up to his groin. With his hop-and-drop

limp, hand clutching one knee, he left the printed beach to crawl up the early street to Ma Kilman's shop. She would open and put the white rum within reach.

His shipmates watched him, then they hooked hands like anchors under the hulls, rocking them; the keels sheared dry sand till the wet sand resisted, rattling the oars

that lay parallel amidships; then, to the one sound of curses and prayers at the logs jammed as a wedge, one after one, as their tins began to rattle,

the pirogues slid to the shallows' nibbling edge, towards the encouraging sea. The loose logs swirled in surf, face down, like warriors from a battle

lost somewhere on the other shore of the world. They were dragged to a place under the manchineels to lie there face upward, the sun moving over their brows

with the stare of myrmidons hauled up by the heels high up from the tide-mark where the pale crab burrows. The fishermen brushed their palms. Now all the canoes

were riding the pink morning swell. They drew their bows gently, the way grooms handle horses in the sunrise, flicking the ropes like reins, pinned them by the nose—

Praise Him, Morning Star, St. Lucia, Light of My Eyes, threw bailing tins in them, and folded their bodies across the tilting hulls, then sculled one oar in the slack

of the stern. Hector rattled out his bound canvas to gain ground with the gulls, hoping to come back before that conch-coloured dusk low pelicans cross.

Seven Seas rose in the half-dark to make coffee. Sunrise was heating the ring of the horizon and clouds were rising like loaves. By the heat of the

glowing iron rose he slid the saucepan's base on-to the ring and anchored it there. The saucepan shook from the weight of water in it, then it settled.

His kettle leaked. He groped for the tin chair and took his place near the saucepan to hear when it bubbled. It would boil but not scream like a bosun's whistle

to let him know it was ready. He heard the dog's morning whine under the boards of the house, its tail thudding to be let in, but he envied the pirogues

already miles out at sea. Then he heard the first breeze washing the sea-almond's wares; last night there had been a full moon white as his plate. He saw with his ears.

He warmed with the roofs as the sun began to climb.
Since the disease had obliterated vision,
when the sunset shook the sea's hand for the last time—

and an inward darkness grew where the moon and sun
indistinctly altered—he moved by a sixth sense,
like the moon without an hour or second hand,

wiped clean as the plate that he now began to rinse
while the saucepan bubbled; blindness was not the end.
It was not a palm-tree's dial on the noon sand.

He could feel the sunlight creeping over his wrists.
The sunlight moved like a cat along the palings
of a sandy street; he felt it unclench the fists

of the breadfruit tree in his yard, run the railings
of the short iron bridge like a harp, its racing
stick rippling with the river; he saw the lagoon

behind the church, and in it, stuck like a basin,
the rusting enamel image of the full moon.
He lowered the ring to sunset under the pan.

The dog scratched at the kitchen door for him to open
but he made it wait. He drummed the kitchen table
with his fingers. Two blackbirds quarrelled at breakfast.

Except for one hand he sat as still as marble,
with his egg-white eyes, fingers recounting the past
of another sea, measured by the stroking oars.

O open this day with the conch's moan, Omeros,
as you did in my boyhood, when I was a noun
gently exhaled from the palate of the sunrise.

A lizard on the sea-wall darted its question
at the waking sea, and a net of golden moss
brightened the reef, which the sails of their far canoes

avoided. Only in you, across centuries
of the sea's parchment atlas, can I catch the noise
of the surf lines wandering like the shambling fleece

of the lighthouse's flock, that Cyclops whose blind eye
shut from the sunlight. Then the canoes were galleys
over which a frigate sawed its scythed wings slowly.

In you the seeds of grey almonds guessed a tree's shape,
and the grape leaves rusted like serrated islands,
and the blind lighthouse, sensing the edge of a cape,

paused like a giant, a marble cloud in its hands,
to hurl its boulder that splashed into phosphorous
stars; then a black fisherman, his stubbled chin coarse

as a dry sea-urchin's, hoisted his flour-sack
sail on its bamboo spar, and scanned the opening line
of our epic horizon; now I can look back

to rocks that see their own feet when light nets the waves,
as the dugouts set out with ebony captains,
since it was your light that startled our sunlit wharves

where schooners swayed idly, moored to their cold capstans.
A wind turns the harbour's pages back to the voice
that hummed in the vase of a girl's throat: "Omeros."

"O-meros," she laughed. "That's what we call him in Greek,"
stroking the small bust with its boxer's broken nose,
and I thought of Seven Seas sitting near the reek

of drying fishnets, listening to the shallows' noise.
I said: "Homer and Virg are New England farmers,
and the winged horse guards their gas-station, you're right."

I felt the foam head watching as I stroked an arm, as
cold as its marble, then the shoulders in winter light
in the studio attic. I said, "Omeros,"

and O was the conch-shell's invocation, *mer* was
both mother and sea in our Antillean patois,
os, a grey bone, and the white surf as it crashes

and spreads its sibilant collar on a lace shore.
Omeros was the crunch of dry leaves, and the washes
that echoed from a cave-mouth when the tide has ebbed.

The name stayed in my mouth. I saw how light was webbed
on her Asian cheeks, defined her eyes with a black
almond's outline, as Antigone turned and said:

"I'm tired of America, it's time for me to go back
to Greece. I miss my islands." I write, it returns—
the way she turned and shook out the black gust of hair.

I saw how the surf printed its lace in patterns
on the shore of her neck, then the lowering shallows
of silk swirled at her ankles, like surf without noise,

and felt that another cold bust, not hers, but yours
saw this with stone almonds for eyes, its broken nose
turning away, as the rustling silk agrees.

But if it could read between the lines of her floor
like a white-hot deck uncaulked by Antillean heat,
to the shadows in its hold, its nostrils might flare

at the stench from manacled ankles, the coffed feet
scraping like leaves, and perhaps the inculpable marble
would have turned its white seeds away, to widen

the bow of its mouth at the horror under her table,
from the lyre of her armchair draped with its white chiton,
to do what the past always does: suffer, and stare.

She lay calm as a port, and a cloud covered her
with my shadow; then a prow with painted eyes
slowly emerged from the fragrant rain of black hair.

And I heard a hollow moan exhaled from a vase,
not for kings floundering in lances of rain; the prose
of abrupt fishermen cursing over canoes.

Chapter III

"*Touchez-i, encore: N'ai fendre choux-ous-ou, salope!*"
"Touch it again, and I'll split your arse, you bitch!"
"*Moi j'a dire—'ous pas prêter un rien. 'Ous ni shallope,*

'ous ni seine, 'ous croire 'ous ni choeur campêche?"
"I told you, borrow nothing of mine. You have a canoe,
and a net. Who you think you are? Logwood Heart?"

" 'Ous croire 'ous c'est roi Gros Îlet? Voleur bomme!"
"You think you're king of Gros Îlet, you tin-stealer?"
Then in English: "I go show you who is king! Come!"

Hector came out from the shade. And Achille, the
moment he saw him carrying the cutlass, *un homme*
fou, a madman eaten with envy, replaced the tin

he had borrowed from Hector's canoe neatly back in the prow
of Hector's boat. Then Achille, who had had enough
of this madman, wiped and hefted his own blade.

And now the villagers emerged from the green shade
of the almonds and wax-leaved manchineels, for the face-off
that Hector wanted. Achille walked off and waited

at the warm shallows' edge. Hector strode towards him.
The villagers followed, as the surf abated
its sound, its fear cowering at the beach's rim.

Then, far out at sea, in a sparkling shower
arrows of rain arched from the emerald breakwater
of the reef, the shafts travelling with clear power

in the sun, and behind them, ranged for the slaughter,
stood villagers, shouting, with a sound like the shoal,
and hoisting arms to the light. Hector ran, splashing

in shallows mixed with the drizzle, towards Achille,
his cutlass lifted. The surf, in anger, gnashing
its tail like a foaming dogfight. Men can kill

their own brothers in rage, but the madman who tore
Achille's undershirt from one shoulder also tore
at his heart. The rage that he felt against Hector

was shame. To go crazy for an old bailing tin
crusted with rust! The duel of these fishermen
was over a shadow and its name was Helen.

Ma Kilman had the oldest bar in the village.
Its gingerbread balcony had mustard gables
with green trim round the eaves, the paint wrinkled with age.

In the cabaret downstairs there were wooden tables
for the downslap of dominoes. A bead curtain
tinkled every time she came through it. A neon

sign endorsed Coca-Cola under the NO PAIN
CAFÉ ALL WELCOME. The NO PAIN was not her own
idea, but her dead husband's. "Is a prophecy,"

Ma Kilman would laugh. A hot street led to the beach
past the small shops and the clubs and a pharmacy
in whose angling shade, his khaki dog on a leash,

the blind man sat on his crate after the pirogues
set out, muttering the dark language of the blind,
gnarled hands on his stick, his ears as sharp as the dog's.

Sometimes he would sing and the scraps blew on the wind
when her beads rubbed their rosary. Old St. Omere.
He claimed he'd sailed round the world. "Monsieur Seven Seas"

they christened him, from a cod-liver-oil label
with its wriggling swordfish. But his words were not clear.
They were Greek to her. Or old African babble.

Across wires of hot asphalt the blind singer
seemed to be numbering things. Who knows if his eyes
saw through the shades, tapping his cane with one finger?

She helped him draw his veteran's compensation
every first of the month from the small Post Office.
He never complained about his situation

like the rest of them. The corner box, and the heat
on his hands would make him shift his box to the shade.
Ma Kilman saw Philoctete hobbling up the street,

so she rose from her corner window, and she laid
out the usual medicine for him, a flask of white
acajou, and a jar of yellow Vaseline,

a small enamel basin of ice. He would wait
in the No Pain Café all day. There he would lean
down and anoint the mouth of the sore on his shin.

111

"*Mais qui ça qui rivait-ous, Philoctete?*"

"*Moin blessé.*"

"But what is wrong wif you, Philoctete?"

"I am blest

wif this wound, Ma Kilman, *qui pas ka guérir pièce.*

18

Which will never heal."

"Well, you must take it easy.
Go home and lie down, give the foot a lickle rest."
Philoctete, his trouser-legs rolled, stares out to sea

from the worn rumshop window. The itch in the sore
tingles like the tendrils of the anemone,
and the puffed blister of Portuguese man-o'-war.

He believed the swelling came from the chained ankles
of his grandfathers. Or else why was there no cure?
That the cross he carried was not only the anchor's

but that of his race, for a village black and poor
as the pigs that rooted in its burning garbage,
then were hooked on the anchors of the abattoir.

Ma Kilman was sewing. She looked up and saw his face
squinting from the white of the street. He was waiting
to pass out on the table. This went on for days.

The ice turned to warm water near the self-hating
gesture of clenching his head tight in both hands. She
heard the boys in blue uniforms, going to school,

screaming at his elbow: "Pheeloh! Pheelosophee!"
A mummy embalmed in Vaseline and alcohol.
In the Egyptian silence she muttered softly:

"It have a flower somewhere, a medicine, and ways
my grandmother would boil it. I used to watch ants
climbing her white flower-pot. But, God, in which place?"

Where was this root? What senna, what tepid tisanes,
could clean the branched river of his corrupted blood,
whose sap was a wounded cedar's? What did it mean,

19

this name that felt like a fever? Well, one good heft of his garden-cutlass would slice the damned name clean from its rotting yam. He said, "Merci." Then he left.

Chapter IV

1

North of the village is a logwood grove whose thorns litter its dry shade. The broken road has boulders, and quartz that glistens like rain. The logwoods were once

part of an estate with its windmill as old as the village below it. The abandoned road runs past huge rusted cauldrons, vats for boiling the sugar,

and blackened pillars. These are the only ruins left here by history, if history is what they are. The twisted logwood trunks are orange from sea-blast;

above them is a stand of surprising cactus. Philoctete limped to his yam garden there. He passed through the estate shuddering, cradling his cutlass,

bayed at by brown, knotted sheep repeating his name. "Beeeee, Philoctete!" Here, in the Atlantic wind, the almonds bent evenly like a candle-flame.

The thought of candles brought his own death to mind. The wind turned the yam leaves like maps of Africa, their veins bled white, as Philoctete, hobbling, went

between the yam beds like a patient growing weaker down a hospital ward. His skin was a nettle, his head a market of ants; he heard the crabs groan

from arthritic pincers, he felt a mole-cricket drill his sore to the bone. His knee was radiant iron, his chest was a sack of ice, and behind the bars

of his rusted teeth, like a mongoose in a cage, a scream was mad to come out; his tongue tickled its claws on the roof of his mouth, rattling its bars in rage.

He saw the blue smoke from the yards, the bamboo poles weighed down by nets, the floating feather of the priest. *When cutlass cut smoke, when cocks surprise their arseholes*

by shitting eggs, he cursed, black people go get rest from God; at which point a fierce cluster of arrows targeted the sore, and he screamed in the yam rows.

He stretched out the foot. He edged the razor-sharp steel through pleading finger and thumb. The yam leaves recoiled in a cold sweat. He hacked every root at the heel.

He hacked them at the heel, noticing how they curled, head-down without their roots. He cursed the yams:

"Salope!
You all see what it's like without roots in this world?" →

Then sobbed, his face down in the slaughtered leaves. A sap trickled from their gaping stems like his own sorrow. A fly quickly washed its hands of the massacre.

Philoctete felt an ant crawling across his brow. It was the breeze. He looked up at a blue acre and a branch where a swift settled without a cry.

He felt the village through his back, heard the sea-hum
of transports below. The sea-swift was watching him.
Then it twittered seaward, swallowed in the cloud-foam.

For as long as it takes a single drop to dry
on the wax of a dasheen leaf, Philoctete lay
on his pebbled spine on hot earth watching the sky

altering white continents with its geography.
He would ask God's pardon. Over the quiet bay
the grass smelt good and the clouds changed beautifully.

Next he heard warriors rushing towards battle,
but it was wind lifting the dead yams, the rattle
of a palm's shaken spears. Herdsmen haieing cattle

who set out to found no cities; they were the found,
who were bound for no victories; they were the bound,
who levelled nothing before them; they were the ground.

He would be the soul of patience, like an old horse
stamping one hoof in a pasture, rattling its mane
or swishing its tail as flies keep circling its sores;

if a horse could endure afflictions so could men.
He held to a branch and tested his dead hoof once
on the springy earth. It felt weightless as a sponge.

I sat on the white terrace waiting for the cheque.
Our waiter, in a black bow-tie, plunged through the sand
between the full deck-chairs, bouncing to discotheque

music from the speakers, a tray sailed in one hand.
The tourists revolved, grilling their backs in their noon
barbecue. The waiter was having a hard time

with his leather soles. They kept sliding down a dune,
but his tray teetered without spilling gin-and-lime
on a scorched back. He was determined to meet the

beach's demands, like a Lawrence of St. Lucia,
except that he was trudging towards a litre
of self-conscious champagne. Like any born loser

he soon kicked the bucket. He rested his tray down,
wiped the sand from the ice-cubes, then plunked the cubes in
the bucket, then the bottle; after this was done,

he seemed ready to help the wife stuff her boobs in
her halter, while her husband sat boiling with rage
like a towelled sheik. Then Lawrence frowned at a mirage.

That was when I turned with him towards the village,
and saw, through the caging wires of the noon sky,
a beach with its padding panther; now the mirage

dissolved to a woman with a madras head-tie,
but the head proud, although it was looking for work.
I felt like standing in homage to a beauty

that left, like a ship, widening eyes in its wake.
"Who the hell is that?" a tourist near my table
asked a waitress. The waitress said, "She? She too proud!"

As the carved lids of the unimaginable
ebony mask unwrapped from its cotton-wool cloud,
the waitress sneered, "Helen." And all the rest followed.

Chapter V

I

Major Plunkett gently settled his Guinness, wiped
the rime of gold foam freckling his pensioned moustache
with a surf-curling tongue. Adjacently, Maud sipped

quietly, wifely, an ale. Under the peaked thatch
designed like a kraal facing the weathered village,
the raffia decor was empty. He heard the squeak

of Maud's weight when she shifted. The usual mirage
of clouds in full canvas steered towards Martinique.
This was their watering-hole, this rigid custom

of lowering the yardarm from the same raffia chairs
once a week at one, between the bank and the farm,
once Maud delivered her orchids, for all these years

of self-examining silence. Maud stirred the ends
of damp curls from her nape. The Major drummed the edge
of the bar and twirled a straw coaster. Their silence

was a mutual communion. They'd been out here
since the war and his wound. Pigs. Orchids. Their marriage
a silver anniversary of bright water

that glittered like Glen-da-Lough in Maud's home county
of Wicklow, but for Dennis, in his khaki shirt
and capacious shorts in which he'd served with Monty,

the crusted tourists were corpses in the desert
from the Afrika Korps. *Pro Rommel, pro mori.*
The regimental brandies stiffened on the shelves

near Napoleonic cognacs. All history
in a dusty Beefeater's gin. We helped ourselves
to these green islands like olives from a saucer,

munched on the pith, then spat their sucked stones on a plate,
like a melon's black seeds. *Pro honoris causa,*
but in whose honour did his head-wound graduate?

This was their Saturday place, not a corner-pub,
not the wrought-iron Victoria. He had resigned
from that haunt of middle-clarse farts, an old club

with more pompous arses than any flea could find,
a replica of the Raj, with gins-and-tonic
from black, white-jacketed servitors whose sonic

judgement couldn't distinguish a secondhand-car
salesman from Manchester from the phony pukka
tones of ex-patriates. He was no officer,

but he'd found himself saying things like "Loverly,"
"Right-o," and, Jesus Christ, "Ta!" from a wicker chair,
with the other farts exchanging their brusque volley

in the class war. Every one of them a liar
dyeing his roots, their irrepressible Cockney,
overdoing impatience. Clods from Lancashire

surprised by servants, outpricing their own value
and their red-kneed wives with accents like cutlery
spilled from a drawer. For them, the fields of his valour,

the war in the desert under Montgomery,
and the lilac flowers under the crosses were
preserved by being pickled at the Victoria.

He'd played the officer's pitch. Though he felt ashamed,
it paid off. The sand grit in his throat, the Rover,
all that sort of stuff. The khaki shorts that proclaimed

his forgotten service. Well, all that was over,
but not the class war that denigrated the dead
face down in the sand, beyond Alexandria.

The flags pinned to a map. The prone crosses
of tourists sprawled out far from the red lifeguard's flag,
like those of his comrades with sand seaming their eyes.

What was it all for? A bagpipe's screech and a rag.
Well, why not? In war, the glory was the yeoman's;
the kids from drizzling streets; they fell like those Yanks

in a sun twice as fierce, Tobruk and Alamein's,
their corpses black in the shade of the shattered tanks,
their bodies dragged like towels to a palm-tree's shade.

Those lines of white surf raced like the applauding streets
alongside the Eighth Army when Montgomery broke
the back of the Afrika Korps. Blokes in white sheets

flinging caps like spray as we piped into Tobruk
and I leant on the tank turret while bagpipes screeched
ahead of those grinning Tommies. I wept with pride.

Tears prickled his eyes. Maud reached across the saucer
and gripped his fingers. He knew she could see inside
the wound in his head. His white nurse. His officer.

11

Not club-mates. Chums, companions. Comrades-in-arms.
They crouched, hands on helmets, while the Messerschmitt's gun
stitched, in staccato succession, miniature palms

along the top of the trench. He shot up. Again
Tumbly pulled him down. "Just keep yer bleedin' 'ead low!"
Scott was running to them, laughing, but the only thing

funny about him was the fact that one elbow
didn't have the rest of the arm. He jerked the thing
from the stump, mimicking a Kraut salute; then, as

his astonishment passed, he sagged down from the knees
with that grin. And I turned to Tumbly and his eyes
were open but not moving; then an awful noise

lifted all of us up from the sand and I guess
I was hit then, but I could remember nothing
for months, in casualty. Oh yes! that business

of Tumbly's eyes. The sky in them. Scottie laughing.
Tell them that at the Victoria, in the noise
of ice-cubes tinkling and the draft-beer frothing.

This wound I have stitched into Plunkett's character.
He has to be wounded, affliction is one theme
of this work, this fiction, since every "I" is a

fiction finally. Phantom narrator, resume:
Tumbly. Blue holes for his eyes. And Scottie wiser
when the shock passed. Plain men. Not striking. Not handsome.

Through the Moorish arches of the hospital ward,
with a cloud wrapped around his head like an Arab,
he saw the blue Mediterranean, then Maud

lying on her back on the cliff and the scarab
of the troop ship far on the roadstead. Two days' leave
before they set out, and he thought he would never

see her again, but if he did, a different life
had to be made whenever the war was over,
even if it lasted ten years, if she would wait,

not on this grass cliff but somewhere on the other
side of the world, somewhere, with its sunlit islands,
where what they called history could not happen. Where?

Where could this world renew the Mediterranean's
innocence? She deserved Eden after this war.
Past that islet out there was the Battle of the Saints.

Old Maud was ruddy as a tea-rose; once her hair
was gold as a beer-stein in firelight, but now
she'd stretch a mapped arm from her nightdress. "It's a rare

chart of the Seychelles or something." "Oh, my love, no!"
"You are my tea-rose, my crown, my cause, my honour,
my desert's white lily, the queen for whom I fought."

Sometimes the same old longing descended on her
to see Ireland. He set down his glass in the ring
of a fine marriage. Only a son was missing.

III

How fast it fades! Maud thought; the enamelled sky,
the gilded palms, the bars like altars of raffia,
even for that Madonna bathing her baby

with his little shrimp thing! One day the Mafia
will spin these islands round like roulette. What use is
Dennis's devotion when their own ministers

cash in on casinos with their old excuses
of more jobs? Their future felt as sinister as
that of that ebony girl in her yellow dress.

"There's our trouble," Maud muttered into her glass. In
a gust that leant the triangular sails of the
surfers, Plunkett saw the pride of Helen passing

in the same yellow frock Maud had altered for her.
"She looks better in it"—Maud smiled—"but the girl lies
so much, and she stole. What'll happen to her life?"

"God knows," said Plunkett, following the butterfly's
yellow-panelled wings that once belonged to his wife,
the black V of the velvet back, near the shallows.

Her head was lowered; she seemed to drift like a waif,
not like the arrogant servant that ruled their house.
It was at that moment that he felt a duty

towards her hopelessness, something to redress
(he punned relentlessly) that desolate beauty
so like her island's. He drained the foaming Guinness.

Seychelles. Seashells. One more. In the olive saucer,
the dry stones were piling up, their green pith sucked dry.
Got what we took from them, yes sir! Quick, because the

Empire was ebbing. He watched the silhouette
of his wife, her fine profile set in an oval
ivory cloud, like a Victorian locket,

as when, under crossed swords, she lifted the lace veil.
The flag then was sliding down from the hill-stations
of the Upper Punjab, like a collapsing sail;

an elephant folded its knees, its striations
wrinkling like the tea-pavilions after the Raj,
whose ebbing surf lifted the coastlines of nations

as lacy as Helen's shift. In the noon's mirage
the golden palms shook their tassels, Eden's Egypt
sank in the tinted sand. The Giza pyramids

darkened with the sharpening Pitons, as Achille shipped
both oars like rifles. Clouds of delivered Muslims
foamed into the caves of mosques, and honour and glory

faded like crested brandies. Then remorseful hymns
soared in the stone-webbed Abbey. *Memento mori*
in the drumbeat of Remembrance Day. Pigeons whirr

over Trafalgar. Helen needed a history,
that was the pity that Plunkett felt towards her.
Not his, but her story. Not theirs, but Helen's war.

The name, with its historic hallucination,
brightened the beach; the butterfly, to Plunkett's joy,
twinkling from myrmidon to myrmidon, from one

sprawled tourist to another. Her village was Troy,
its smoke obscuring soldiers fallen in battle.
Then her unclouding face, her breasts were its Pitons,

the palms' rusted lances swirled in the death-rattle
of the gargling shoal; for her Gaul and Briton
had mounted fort and redoubt, the ruined barracks

with its bushy tunnel and its penile cannon;
for her cedars fell in green sunrise to the axe.
His mind drifted with the smoke of his reverie

out to the channel. Lawrence arrived. He said:
"I changing shift, Major. Major?" Maud tapped his knee.
"Dennis. The bill." But the bill had never been paid.

Not to that housemaid swinging a plastic sandal
by the noon sea, in a dress that she had to steal.
Wars. Wars thin like sea-smoke, but their dead were real.

He smiled at the mythical hallucination
that went with the name's shadow; the island was once
named Helen; its Homeric association

rose like smoke from a siege; the Battle of the Saints
was launched with that sound, from what was the "Gibraltar
of the Caribbean," after thirteen treaties

while she changed prayers often as knees at an altar,
till between French and British her final peace
was signed at Versailles. All of this came to his mind

as Lawrence came staggering up the terrace
with the cheque finally, and that treaty was signed;
the paper was crossed by the shadow of her face

as it was at Versailles, two centuries before,
by the shade of Admiral Rodney's gathering force;
a lion-headed island remembering war,

its crouched flanks tawny with drought, and on its ridge, grass
stirred like its mane. For a while he watched the waiter
move through the white iron shields of the white terrace.

In the village Olympiad, on St. Peter's Day,
he served as official starter with a flare-gun
borrowed from the manager of the marina.

It wasn't Aegean. They climbed no Parthenon
to be laurelled. The depot faced their arena,
the sea's amphitheatre. When one wore a crown—

victor ludorum—no one knew what it meant, or
cared to be told. The Latin syllables would drown
in the clapping dialect of the crowd. Hector

would win, or Achille by a hair; but everyone
knew as the crossing ovals of their thighs would soar
in jumps down the cheering aisle, or their marathon

six times round the village, that the true bounty was
Helen, not a shield nor the ham saved for Christmas;
as one slid down the greased pole to factional roars.

Chapter VI

I

These were the rites of morning by a low concrete
parapet under the copper spears of the palms,
since men sought fame as centaurs, or with their own feet,

or wrestlers circling with pincer-extended arms,
or oblong silhouettes racing round a white vase
of scalloped sand, when a boy on a pounding horse

divided the wrestlers with their lowering claws
like crabs. As in your day, so with ours, Omeros,
as it is with islands and men, so with our games.

A horse is skittering spray with rope for its rein.
Only silhouettes last. No one remembers the names
of foam-sprinters. Time halts the arc of a javelin.

This was repeated behind Helen's back, in the shade
of the wall. She was gossiping with two women
about finding work as a waitress, but both said

the tables was full. What the white manager mean
to say was she was too rude, 'cause she dint take no shit
from white people and some of them tourist—the men

only out to touch local girls; every minute—
was brushing their hand from her backside so one day
she get fed up with all their nastiness so she tell

the cashier that wasn't part of her fucking pay,
take off her costume, and walk straight out the hotel
naked as God make me, when I pass by the pool,

people nearly drown, not naked completely, I
still had panty and bra, a man shout out, "Beautiful!
More!" So I show him my ass. People nearly die.

The two women screamed with laughter, then Helen leant
with her skirt tucked into her thighs, and asked, elbows
on her knees, if it had work in the beach restaurant

with the Chinee. They said "None." Behind her, footballers
were heading the world. Helen said: "Girl, I pregnant,
but I don't know for who." "For who," she heard an echoing call,

with oo's for rings a dove moaned in the manchineel.
Helen stood up, brushing her skirt. "Is no sense at all
spending change on transport"; easing straps from each heel.

11

Change burns at the beach's end. She has to decide
to enter the smoke or to skirt it. In that pause
that divides the smoke with a sword, white Helen died;

in that space between the lines of two lifted oars,
her shadow ambles, filly of Menelaus,
while black piglets root the midden of Gros Îlet,

but smoke leaves no signature on its page of sand.
"Yesterday, all my troubles seem so far away,"
she croons, her clear plastic sandals swung by one hand.

34

111

Far down the beach, where the boy had wheeled it around,
the stallion was widening. Helen heard its hooves
drumming through her bare feet, and turned, as the unreined

horse plunged with its dolphining neck, the wheezing halves
of its chest distended by the ruffling nostrils
like a bellows, as spray fanned from the punished waves,

while the boy with an Indian whoop hammered his heels
on the barrel of the belly into thick smoke
where its blur spun, whinnying, and the stallion's sound

scalded her scalp with memory. A battle broke
out. Lances of sunlight hurled themselves into sand,
the horse hardened to wood, Troy burned, and a soundless

wrestling of smoke-plumed warriors was spun
from the blowing veils, while she dangled her sandals
and passed through that door of black smoke into the sun.

And yesterday these shallows were the Scamander,
and armed shadows leapt from the horse, and the bronze nuts
were helmets, Agamemnon was the commander

of weed-bearded captains; yesterday, the black fleet
anchored there in the swift's road, in the wiry nets
thrown past the surf when the sea and a river meet;

yesterday the sightless holes of a driftwood log
heard the harp-wires on the sea, the white thunder
off Barrel of Beef, and Seven Seas and a dog

35

sat in a wineshop's shade; a red sail entered the
drifting tree of a rainspout, and the faint pirogue
slow as a snail whose fingers untie the reef-knots

of a common horizon left a silvery slime
in its wake; yesterday, in that sea without time,
the golden moss of the reef fleeced the Argonauts.

I saw her once after that moment on the beach
when her face shook my heart, and that incredible
stare paralyzed me past any figure of speech,

when, because they thought her moods uncontrollable,
her tongue too tart for a waitress to take orders,
she set up shop: beads, hair-pick, and trestle table.

She braided the tourists' flaxen hair with bright beads
cane-row style, then would sit apart from the vendors
on her sweet-drink crate while they bickered like blackbirds

over who had stolen whose sale, in the shadows
of the thatched hut with T-shirts and flowered sarongs.
Her carved face flickering with light-wave patterns cast

among the coconut masks, the coral earrings
reflected the sea's patience. Once, when I passed
her shadow mixed with those shadows, I saw the rage

of her measuring eyes, and felt again the chill
of a panther hidden in the dark of its cage
that drew me towards its shape as it did Achille.

I stopped, but it took me all the strength in the world
to approach her stall, as it takes for a hunter
to approach a branch where a pantheress lies curled

with leaf-light on its black silk. To stand in front of her
and pretend I was interested in the sale
of a mask or a T-shirt? Her gaze looked too bored,

and just as a pantheress stops swinging its tail
to lightly leap into grass, she yawned and entered
a thicket of palm-printed cloth, while I stood there

stunned by that feline swiftness, by the speed
of her vanishing, and behind her, trembling air
divided by her echo that shook like a reed.

Chapter VII

I

Where did it start? The iron roar of the market,
with its crescent moons of Mohammedan melons,
with hands of bananas from a Pharaoh's casket,

lemons gold as the balls of Etruscan lions,
the dead moon of a glaring mackerel; it increases
its pain down the stalls, the curled heads of cabbages

crammed on a tray to please implacable Caesars,
slaves head-down on a hook, the gutted carcasses
of crucified rebels, from orange-tiled villas,

from laurels of watercress, and now it passes
the small hearts of peppers, nipped sapodillas
of virgins proffered to the Conquistadores.

The stalls of the market contained the Antilles' history as well as Rome's, the fruit of an evil, where the brass scales swung and were only made level

by the iron tear of the weight, each brass basin balanced on a horizon, but never equal, like the old world and new, as just as things might seem.

They came out of the iron market. Achille gave Helen back the filled basket. Helen said: "*Ba moin!*" "Give it to me!"

Achille said: "Look! I not your slave!

You bound to show off for people?" Of course, she laughed with that loud ringing laugh of hers, then walked ahead of him. And he, feeling like a dog that is left

to nose the scraps of her footsteps, suddenly heard his own voice ringing over the street. People turned their heads at the shout. Achille saw the yellow dress

fold into the closing crowd. Helen never turned, carrying the basket with both hands. Her stubbornness made him crazy. He caught up with her. Then he tried

retrieving the basket, but she yanked it from him. "You not my slave!" she said.

He said, "My hands tired."

He followed her to that part of the harbour's rim, past the charcoal vendors, where the transports were ranged like chariots, blunt-nosed and glaring, with the hum of idling motors. She stopped, and in her deranged

fury screamed: "Leave me, little boy!"

Achille rammed her against a van. He had startled a panther. Claws raked his face in a flash; when he gripped an arm, her

fine teeth sawed his knuckles, she clawed at his good clothes, so he, in turn, ripped the yellow dress in his rage. Hector, whose transport this was, led her inside it,

a trainer urging a panther back to its cage. Achille felt his body drained of all the pride it contained, as the crowd came between him and Hector.

Achille had tears in his eyes. He could not hide it. Her elbow moved when Hector climbed in next to her. The van raced the harbour. Achille picked up the fruit.

I I

She was not home. He remembered the morning when he lost faith in her, and almost lost his reason on the clearest of days. He had not told Helen

they needed quick money. Lobsters was off-season, or diving for coral; shells was not to be sold to tourists, but he had done this before without

getting catch himself, he knew that his luck would hold. He was diving conchs under the lower redoubt of the fort that ridged the lion-headed islet,

on a breezy morning, chopping the anchored skiff, piling the conchs aboard with their frilled violet palates, and sometimes a starfish like a stone leaf.

One elbow hooked on the tilted hull of the boat,
he saw, along the high wall, a yellow dress whipped
like a sail in the wind when the wind comes about,

then a fellow at the parapet's end. He slipped
slowly from the thudding hull. Helen and Hector.
He stayed underwater, the keel bumping his head,

then to the lee side, using one arm for an oar,
knowing from their height the clicking shells could be heard
because sounds travel for miles over calm water.

He tugged up the rope and eased its anchor aboard.
He paddled alongside the hull, hearing the shells
rattling on the floorboards, as his own teeth chattered.

He unwound the bow-rope and clenched it in his teeth,
with frog-shadow strokes, *In God We Trust* overhead,
the fast foam-flowers circling his head with a wreath,

and is God only to trust now, his shadow said,
because now he was horned like the island; the shells
with their hard snail-like horns were devils, their red grin

as they rolled in the salt heat over him, were hell's
lovely creatures, and his wound was Philoctete's shin.
For a long time he had sensed this thing with Hector,

now he must concentrate on carrying the conchs
safely. On certain days it had an inspector
from the Tourist Board watching the boats, and if once

they catch you, they could fine you and seize your license.
Now, when he felt he was a sufficient distance
from the redoubt, he hauled himself up with both hands.

Then, one by one, he lifted the beautiful conchs,
weighed each in his palm, considering the deep pain
of their silence, their palates arched like the sunrise,

delicate as vulvas when their petals open,
and as the fisherman drowned them he closed his eyes,
because they sank to the sand without any cries

from their parted, bubbling mouths. They were not his
property any more than Helen, but the sea's.
The thought was noble. It did not bring him any peace.

I I I

In this boat we were shipmates. Something had begun
to gnaw the foundations, like surf nibbling a pier,
of a love whose breezy vows assured me again

that never in my life had I been happier.
Look past that wire fence: we had said the word there,
in the shade of rattling almonds by the airport,

as if the noise of the leaves came from her blown hair,
and the salt light gusted, furrowing the waves apart,
and, three bays beyond this, in a calm cove at noon,

we swayed together in that metamorphosis
that cannot tell one body from the other one,
where a barrier reef is vaulted by white horses,

by a stone breakwater which the old slaves had built.
They joined with the slithery coupling of porpoises,
then the zebra-streaked afternoon on a white quilt,

hearing breadfruit palms scraping the roof, the noises
of the town below them, and the little crab-cries
of her parting shell, her forehead glazed with the sweat

of the bride-sleep that soothed Adam in paradise,
before it gaped into a wound, like Philoctete,
and pale slugs crawl from the sand with their newborn eyes.

And now I would wake up, troubled and inexact,
from that shallow sleep in which dreams precede sunrise,
as the vague mind cautiously acknowledges the fact

of another's outline, watching the fall and rise
of suspiring linen, like a skiff at anchor,
nodding in the dawn swell, while a sea-swift takes off

from the bow-rope, twittering, for some other shore.
And a quiet canoe is drawn, gently, with love
as one leans over and draws the wrapped shape nearer

by an invisible rope, and she parts one eye
and smiles, tapping your knuckles, and you leave her there
and stand on the morning boards of the verandah

and see between the broad leaves the small white town
below it, and a liner, and on the Morne, the
rust-roofed barracks, and insect cars crawling down.

Chapter VIII

I

In the islet's museum there is a twisted
wine-bottle, crusted with fool's gold from the iron-
cold depth below the redoubt. It has been listed

variously by experts: one, that a galleon
blown by a hurricane out of Cartagena,
this far east, had bled a trail of gold bullion

and wine from its hold (a view held by many a
diver lowering himself); the other was nonsense
and far too simple: that the gold-crusted bottle

came from a flagship in the Battle of the Saints,
but the glass was so crusted it was hard to tell.
Still, the myth widened its rings every century:

that the *Ville de Paris* sank there, not a galleon
crammed with imperial coin, and for her sentry,
an octopus-cyclops, its one eye like the moon.

Deep as a diver's faith but never discovered,
their trust in the relic converted the village,
who came to believe that circling frigates hovered

over the relic, that gulls attacked them in rage.
They kept their faith when the experts' ended in doubt.
The galleon's shadow rode over the ruled page

where Achille, rough weather coming, counted his debt
by the wick of his kerosene lamp; the dark ship
divided his dreams, while the moon's octopus eye

climbed from the palms that lifted their tentacles' shape.
It glared like a shilling. Everything was money.
Money will change her, he thought. Is this bad living

that make her come wicked. He had mocked the belief
in a wrecked ship out there. Now he began diving
in a small shallop beyond the line of the reef,

with spear-gun and lobster-pot. He had to make sure
no sail would surprise him, feathering the oars back
without clicking the oarlocks. He fed the anchor

carefully overside. He tied the cinder-block
to one heel with a slip-knot for faster descent,
then slipped the waterproof bag around his shoulders

for a money-pouch. She go get every red cent,
he swore, crossing himself as he dived. Wedged in boulders
down there was salvation and change. The concrete, tied

to his heel, pulled him down faster than a lead-
weighted, canvas-bound carcass, the stone heart inside
his chest added its poundage. What if love was dead

inside her already? What good lay in pouring
silver coins on a belly that had warmed him once?
This weighed him down even more, so he kept falling

for fathoms towards his fortune: moldores, doubloons,
while the slow-curling fingers of weeds kept calling;
he felt the cold of the drowned entering his loins.

Why was he down here, from their coral palaces,
pope-headed turtles asked him, waving their paddles
crusted with rings, nudged by curious porpoises

with black friendly skins. Why? asked the glass sea-horses,
curling like questions. What on earth had he come for,
when he had a good life up there? The sea-mosses

shook their beards angrily, like submarine cedars,
while he trod the dark water. Wasn't love worth more
than the coins of light pouring from the galleon's doors?

In the corals' bone kingdom his skin calcifies.
In that wavering garden huge fans on hinges
swayed, while fingers of seaweed pocketed the eyes

of coins with the profiles of Iberian kings;
here the sea-floor was mud, not corrugating sand
that showed you its ribs; here, the mutating fishes

had goggling eye-bulbs; in that world without sound,
they sucked the white coral, draining it like leeches,
and what looked like boulders sprung the pincers of crabs.

This was not a world meant for the living, he thought.
The dead didn't need money, like him, but perhaps
they hated surrendering things their hands had brought.

The shreds of the ocean's floor passed him from corpses
that had perished in the crossing, their hair like weeds,
their bones were long coral fingers, bubbles of eyes

watched him, a brain-coral gurgled their words,
and every bubble englobed a biography,
no less than the wine-bottle's mouth, but for Achille,

treading the mulch floor of the Caribbean Sea,
no coins were enough to repay its deep evil.
The ransom of centuries shone through the mossy doors

that the moon-blind Cyclops counted, every tendril
raked in the guineas it tested with its soft jaws.
Light paved the ceiling with silver with every swell.

Then he saw the galleon. Her swaying cabin-doors
fanned vaults of silvery mackerel. He caught the glint
of their coin-packed scales, then the tentacle-shadows

whose motion was a miser's harvesting his mint.
He loosened the block and shot up. Next day, her stealth
increased, her tentacles calling, until the wreck

vanished with all hope of Helen. Once more the whelk
was his coin, his bank the sea-conch's. Now, every day
he was clear-headed as the sea, wrenching lace fans

from the forbidden reef, or tailing a sting-ray
floating like a crucifix when it sensed his lance,
and saving the conch-shells he himself had drowned.

And though he lost faith in any fictional ship,
an anchor still forked his brow whenever he frowned,
for she was a spectre now, in her ribbed shape,

he did not know where she was. She'd never be found.
He thought of the white skulls rolling out there like dice
rolled by the hand of the swell, their luck was like his;

he saw drowned Portuguese captains, their coral eyes
entered by minnows, as he hauled the lobster-pot,
bearded with moss, in the cold shade of the redoubt.

III

Philoctete tried to make peace between them. He told
Hector that they were men, that he bore his own wound
as patiently as God allowed him, that the bad blood

between them was worse, that they had a common bond
between them: the sea. The sea that changed the cedars
into canoes, from the day they had hacked the trees

in the heights. He said, whatever a woman does,
that is her business, but men are bound by their work.
But neither listened. Like Hector. Like Achilles.

Chapter IX

I

In hurricane season, when everything is rough,
Achille ran out of money. His mate, Philoctete,
found him land-work. His canoe was a concrete trough

in Plunkett's pig-farm. A broom his oar. Through the wet,
whistling grass near the road, a sack shielding his head,
he saved money and walked six miles to the estate.

Rain hissed under black leaves, a white ground mist drifted from the torn pastures, the hillside bamboos were broke as he was. In the dirty gusts he missed the sea's

smell. He was glad that Plunkett still gave him a break after Helen and the house. Cows groaned under trees, the ochre track to the farm zigzagged in runnels

of soft, squelchy clay that fretted between his toes. There was no sun, he was sure. No scorching gunwales where the hot oars idled, no sea with its bleached sails.

In sucking Wellingtons he shovelled out the mash into the steaming troughs of the jostling pen, then jumped back from the bristling boulders that would crash

against his knees as their wooden gate swung open. Then Achille scraped the dung-caked cement with a yard broom, and the clogged shit spidered out into the drain

when he swung the galvanized-iron bucket hard at the reeking wall, then hurled it harder again in repetitious rage, the way that combers hit

a braced sea-rock, streaming. Inside, he cursed the screams of the doomed, panicking swine matted with their shit, their skidding trotters entered the gate of his dreams.

"I miss the light northern rain, I miss the seasons," Maud moaned, implying the climate lacked subtlety. Some breeze reported the insult, since the monsoon's

anger coarsened the rain, until between the sty and water-roped porch grew an impenetrable jungle that drummed with increasing monotony,

its fraying lianas whipping from each gable, the galvanized guttering belching with its roar. Then, soaked like paper, the hills were a Chinese scroll

and she saw a subtlety where none was before. Bamboo strokes. Wet cloud. Peasant with straw hat and pole. Fern spray. White mist. Heron crossing fresh waterfall.

The map of heaven was breaking up in nations, and a soggy nimbus haloed the loaded moon when Achille saw the mare's tails, prognostications

of a grumbling sky that underlined each omen—from the widowed veils of the indigo rainspouts to candles of egrets screwed on a swaying branch,

then the match of lightning; in irascible knots freckling the hot glass of the Coleman lanterns termites singed their glazed wings and fell away as ants.

Then, next day, the stillness. And in it, the bitterns and the gulls circling inland. Then, in the distance, the strange yellow light. He went to buy kerosene

from Ma Kilman's crowded shop, and he was on his way back, half-blind from her searing gas-lamp, when a blue sheen lit the roofs and the street widened with a forked crack

of lightning igniting the egrets, splashing the palms on the cracked plaster sky. Achille dropped the bottle. Rain on the galvanized night. Helen in his arms.

The wind changed gear like a transport with the throttle of the racing sea. He picked up the bottle. Before he could, sprinting to it, fight with the rusted latch,

thudding lances of rain pinned him against the door,
but he shouldered it open, then he heard the crash
of thousands of iron nails poured in a basin

of rain on his tin roof. The cloud galleons warred
with flashing blue broadsides. Achille, soaked to the skin,
filled the lamp and lit it; he angled the brass guard

leeward of the wind and whipped off his shirt in bed.
Shadows writhed from the wick, the plantains in the yard
were wrestling to share the small roof over his head.

After a while, he got used to the heavy sound
on the galvanize. He ate cold jackfish and prayed
that his cold canoe was all right on the high sand.

He imagined the galleon, its ghost, through the frayed
ropes of the hurricane as he lowered the wick.
Hector and Helen. He lay in the dark, awake.

I I

Hector wasn't with Helen. He was with the sea,
trying to save his canoe when its anchor-rope
had loosened, but sheets of black rain mercilessly

spun the bow back in the wave-troughs when he would grope
at the mooring, and in the brown, nut-littered troughs
the hull was swamping as bilge whirlpooled round his feet;

he saw how every wash crashed. Spray high as a house!
Then the long, cannon-loud boom breaking after it,
not seeing land through the rain, thinking it was close

50

from the sand-chirred water, and then he was afraid
when he saw how they were heading past the lighthouse
that spun in the gusts, with the anchor gone, the boat

keeling to the gunwale, so he shifted his weight,
he paddled hard with the short oar to come about,
but he paddled air, the wave crests brownish-white,

churning with wrenched palm-fronds; he stood up with the oar,
rocking on the keel-board, then he sat, his soul wet
and shaking. He crept to the bow, then dived ashore,

but the spinning stern clubbed him, so he stayed under
the debris to find some calm and depth, but the more
he dived, the faster the current spun him, thunder

and lightning cracked and he saw the canoe founder
without any grief; he rode a trough for a while,
paddling on his back, to measure the right rhythm

of the crests, then slid down a slow-gathering wall
like a surfer: once he caught the beat, he could swim
with the crumbling surf, not against the sea's will,

letting it spin him if it chose, even if it chose
to treat him like its garbage; then he felt the swirl
of fine sand and staggered up straight in the shallows.

I I I

The Cyclone, howling because one of the lances
of a flinging palm has narrowly grazed his one eye,
wades knee-deep in troughs. As he blindly advances,

51

Lightning, his stilt-walking messenger, jiggers the sky
with his forked stride, or he crackles over the troughs
like a split electric wishbone. His wife, Ma Rain,

hurls buckets from the balcony of her upstairs house.
She shakes the sodden mops of the palms and once again
changes her furniture, the cloud-sofas' grumbling casters

not waking the Sun. The Sun had been working all day
and would sleep through it all. After their disasters
it was he who cleaned up after their goddamned party.

So he went straight to bed at the first sign of a drizzle.
Now, like a large coalpot with headlands for its handles,
the Sea cooks up a storm, raindrops start to sizzle

like grease, there is a brisk business in candles
in Ma Kilman's shop. Candles, nails, a sudden increase in
the faithful, and a mark-up on matches and bread.

In the grey vertical forest of the hurricane season,
when the dirty sea returns the wreaths of the dead,
all the village could do was listen to the gods in session,

playing any instruments that came into their craniums,
the harp-sighing ripple of a hither-and-zithering sea,
the knucklebone pebbles, the abrupt Shango drums

made Neptune rock in the caves. Fête start! Erzulie
rattling her ra-ra; Ogun, the blacksmith, feeling
No Pain; Damballa winding like a zandoli

lizard, as their huge feet thudded on the ceiling,
as the sea-god, drunk, lurched from wall to wall, saying:
"Mama, this music so loud, I going in seine,"

then throwing up at his pun. People were praying,
but then the gods, who were tired, were throwing a fête,
and their fêtes went on for days, and their music ranged

from polkas of rain to waves dancing La Comète,
and the surf clapped hands whenever the patterns changed.
For the gods aren't men, they get on well together,

holding a hurricane-party in their cloud-house,
and what brings the gods close is the thunderous weather,
where Ogun can fire one with his partner Zeus.

Achille in his shack heard chac-chac and violin
in the telephone wires, a sound like Helen
moaning, or Seven Seas, blind as a sail in rain.

In the devastated valleys, crumpling brown water
at their prows, headlights on, passenger-vans floated
slowly up roads that were rivers, through the slaughter

of the year's banana-crop, past stiff cows bloated
from engorging mud as the antlers of trees tossed
past the banks like migrating elk. It was as if

the rivers, envying the sea, tired of being crossed
in one leap, had joined in a power so massive
that it made islands of villages, made bridges

the sieves of a force that shouldered culverts aside.
The rain passed, but people looked up to the ridges
fraying with its return, and the flood, in its pride,

entered the sea; then Achille could hear the tunnels
of brown water roaring in the mangroves; its tide
hid the keels of the canoes, and their wet gunwales

were high with rainwater that could warp them rotten
if they were not bailed. The river was satisfied.
It was a god too. Too much had been forgotten.

Then, a mouse after a fête, its claws curled like moss,
nosing the dew as the lighthouse opened its eye,
the sunlight peeped out, and people surveyed the loss

that the gods had made under a clearing-up sky.
Candles shortened and died. The big yellow tractors
tossed up the salad of trees, in yellow jackets

men straightened the chairs of dead poles, the contractors
in white helmets and slickers heard the castanets
of the waves going up the islands, moving on

from here to Guadeloupe, the beaded wires were still.
They saw the mess the gods made in one night alone,
as Lightning lifted his stilts over the last hill.

Achille bailed out his canoe under an almond
that shuddered with rain. There would be brilliant days still,
till the next storm, and their freshness was wonderful.

Chapter X

I

For Plunkett, despair came with this shitty weather,
from the industrious torrents of mid-July
till the farm was drubbed to a standstill. This year, the

rain was an unshifting thicket, the branched sky
grew downwards like mangroves, or an immense banyan.
The bulbs dangled weakly from the roof of the pens,

their cords sticky with flies, till he, like everyone
else, watched the drifts, hating the separate silence
that settled his labourers when their work was done.

He saw that their view of him would always remain
one of patronage; his roof was over their heads,
as they sat disconsolately watching the rain

erode and dissolve the mounds of Maud's garden-beds,
their eyes glazed and clouded with some forgotten pain
from the white shambles of lilies, the dripping boards

of rope-twisted water blown from the leaking pen,
while Maud sat embroidering her tapestry of birds
in the lamplit house which each horizontal gust

blew farther from him. He saw her in the windows
and felt she was drifting away, just like the ghost
of the drowned galleon. He bolted up to the house.

He stayed in the house. The ginger tom boxed its paws
at the yarn-knitting window. Hogs ran to slaughter
like infantry tired of trenches and shovels,

and rain-maddened lilies chose a death by water,
like pregnant virgins in Victorian novels.
Maud rescued some. In rain hat and yellow slicker,

she bent over their beds in the gentler drizzles;
then the beds would darken, the drizzles grow thicker
in an even heavier downpour than the last.

Trees and power poles fell. Lamps came on in the house.
A winter besieged them with limp weeklies and tea.
Beyond the orchids she watched the grey-shawled showers

cross the grey lawn, then go down towards the grey sea.
By the crystal teardrop lamp she'd brought from Ireland,
humming then stopping, then humming. Settling the bulbs

of saved lilies in vases with her leaf-veined hand.
Seychelles. Seashells. He watched her, then, with glottal gulps
that maddened her, sucked his tea. He felt murderous

as the monsoon when she started playing some tripe
about "Bendemeer's stream," each chord binding the house
with nerves of itching ivy; he crammed in his pipe,

then bit it erect, and in a raw, sodden rage
strode to the unshawled piano and slammed the lid,
missing her fingers. Maud waited. She closed the page

of *Airs from Erin* and, very carefully, hid
it under the velvet of the piano stool,
brushed past him with her shawl, and climbed up the slow stairs,

tugging at her fingers. No fool like an old fool,
the Major raged. The window was streaming with tears,
but none came. When? It was the old wound in his head.

Rubbish. Easy excuse. He never blamed the war.
It was like original sin. Then the Major heard
someone knocking carefully. The voice said: "Major?"

Major, we going," and left. The ginger uncurled
from the dark sofa. He lifted him carefully,
placed him by the window to look out on this world

the way he no longer did. Then, his heart full, he
went up, eased the door: Sleeping. But she never slept
with one elbow over her eyes. Sorrow dissolved

him, and he sat on the bed, and then both of them wept
the forgiving rain of those who have truly loved.
It seemed long as the season, and then the rain stopped.

II

Once the rains passed they took the olive Land Rover
round the shining island, up mornes with red smudges
of fresh immortelles with old things to discover;

the deep-green crescents held African villages
that, over centuries, had roofed their shacks with tins,
erected a square stone church, until by stages,

the shacks would creep down the ridges to become towns.
That was how History saw them. He studied the course
that it offered: the broken roads, the clear rivers

that congealed to sepia lagoons, from which some case
of bilharzia would erupt in kids whose livers
caught the hookworm's sickle. Pretty, dangerous streams.

Their past was flat as a postcard, and their future,
a brighter and flatter postcard, printed the schemes
of charters with their poverty-guaranteed tour.

In the frayed whisks of the vanished storm he felt his
own scalp, freckled, with its skeins of thinning hair,
but sunshine broke through the misty precipices

with a double rainbow that turbanned La Sorcière,
the sorceress mountain with a madras kerchief
and flashing spectacles. They called her Ma Kilman

because the village was darkened by their belief
in her as a *gardeuse*, sybil, obeh-woman
webbed with a spider's knowledge of an after-life

in her cracked lenses. She took Holy Communion
with Maud sometimes, but there was an old African
doubt that paused before taking the wafer's white leaf.

The Rover whined up the Morne till they saw, below
a shelf of sunshot asphalt, the expansive plunge
of Cul-de-Sac valley and the soaked indigo

serration of peaks. A sky, loaded like a sponge,
dabbed at, then dried the defiant beads of moisture
on the levelled bananas with their fecal smell

of new mud; but their irrigation ditches were
channels of light and the oval potholes small
mirrors of blueing cloud that the tires shattered,

that almost instantly reglazed their reflection,
until the storm's green ruin no longer mattered,
and the sparkling road only increased affection

when they watched the sunlight redefining Roseau's
old sugar-factory roof. The road climbed the bay,
as a cool wind thatched the bamboos like osiers,

urging them with light tongues downward to Anse La Raye,
chattering with expectation at the young sprouts
that would spring from the storm. Their delight was strengthened

by boys racing the Rover with half-naked shouts,
offering them bananas, until the bends straightened
and left them gasping for breath against the wet trees,

till others sprouted from grass around the next bend;
then the sea widened its blue around Canaries,
and the road, coiling with ochre precipices,

was like a rope that bound them, much closer even /
than the hurricane, by its azure silences,
the way lianas knot their inseparable vine

around two tree trunks sometimes, or a mast grows leaves
in the heart of a forest, binding every vein,
rooted in the island for the rest of their lives.

The horns of the island were peaks split asunder
by a volcanic massif. Through ferns, Soufrière
waited under springs whose smoke signalled the thunder

of the dead. It was a place where an ancient fear
increased as he neared it. Holes of boiling lava
bubbled in the Malebolge, where the mud-caked skulls

climbed, multiplying in heads over and over,
while the zircon gas from the flues climbed the bald hills.
This was the gate of sulphur through which he must pass,

singeing his memory, though he pinched his nostrils
until the stench faded into verdurous peace,
like registering skulls in the lime-pits of Auschwitz.

The wound closed in smoke, then wind would reopen it,
a geyser would jet its gas through a cracked fissure
the way that steam suddenly hissed from the bonnet

of the uncapped radiator, scalding his face
if he didn't leap clear. He filled the cooling ring
from a stream in the ferns. Then they went on climbing

around larger and greener ferns, their wide fronds
large as a fan belt's, passing the old sulphur mine
with its rusted wheel, its hawsers of lianas,

where a Messrs. Bennett & Ward, his countrymen,
in 1836 went home to England as
bush and high taxes foreclosed their wild enterprise.

Wreaths of funereal moss draped their endeavour.
A huge wheel's teeth locked in rust. What had stopped their sche
Quarrels over money? Had one caught a fever,

and, yellow as that leaf, in his delirium
babbled of an alchemy that could turn sulphur
gold, while his partner dabbed the cold sweat of a dream

from his forehead? Had they had another offer
somewhere on the outer boundaries of freedom
and free enterprise that came with an empire?

What was their force? How would they extract the mineral
from the mine and transport it? Transport it to where?
Or had they run out of money and that was all,

until fever grass and bush foreclosed the idea
and their banks were weed? He saw the sprocketed wheel
gritting its teeth at the sulphur that still lay there.

In the sharp blue heights beyond them there were orchids
springing from the side-paths. Sometimes, a resinous
woodsman would startle them, his bag full of snake-heads

to flog to Der Guva'ment. He walked without noise,
a shaft of light angling the floor of the forest
without shaking the ferns, his soles quiet as moss.

Through stumps of brown teeth he pointed out the hillcrest
with gaping, precipitous valleys, where smoke rose
from a charcoal pit, and under the smoke, the lines

of a white, amnesiac Atlantic, then with a bow,
and a patois blessing with old African signs,
as soundless as light on the road they watched him go.

England seemed to him merely the place of his birth.
How odd to prefer, over its pastoral sites—
reasonable leaves shading reasonable earth—

these loud-mouthed forests on their illiterate heights,
these springs speaking a dialect that cooled his mind
more than pastures with castles! To prefer the hush

of a hazed Atlantic worried by the salt wind!
Others could read it as "going back to the bush,"
but harbour after crescent harbour closed his wound.

There was a lot in the island that Maud hated:
the moisture rotting their library; that was the worst.
It seeped through the shawled piano and created

havoc with the felt hammers, so the tuner cost
a regular fortune. After that, the cluttered light
on the choked market steps; insects of any kind,

especially rain-flies; a small, riddling termite
that cored houses into shells and left windows blind;
barefoot Americans strolling into the banks—

there was a plague of them now, worse than the insects
who, at least, were natives. Turbanned religious cranks
urging sisters with candles to the joy of sects,

the velocity of passenger transports on
uncurbed highway, comets that hurtled out of sight
and brought a flash to the heart; the darkening monsoon

of merciless July with patches of sunlight
mercurial as Helen, the slanted, almond eyes
of her ebony beauty. And then an elate

sunrise would flood Maud's garden, pouring relentless
light in angelic lilies, yellow chalices
of morning-glories, and Queen Anne's seraphic lace.

Just then he saw the butterfly pinned to a blade
like a nervous pennant. She had followed him here.
The dilating panels pulsed to his trembling blood,

the wing-folded palms in their parody of prayer;
then they would widen, like the eyes of Maud's scissors
following a seam. Was he condemned to see her

every time one twinkled up out of Maud's garden?
What did she want? For History to exorcise her
theft of the yellow frock? Did she crave his pardon?

After a while the happiness grew oppressive.
Only the dead can endure it in paradise,
and it felt selfish for so long. He felt as if

the still, lemon panels were painted with her eyes.
There's too much poverty below us. Every leaf
defines its limits. All roots have their histories.

"It's so still. It's like Adam and Eve all over,"
Maud whispered. "Before the snake. Without all the sin."
And their peace was so deep, they sat in the Rover

listening to the bamboos. He switched on the engine
and they bucketed, wobbling over rain-ruts, hurled
on the groaning springs down to the flat, real world.

Chapter XI

I

Pigs were his business. These people were not resigned
to living with garbage, drifting in numbed content
as the filth narrowed the drains. They had not designed

the Attic ideal of the first slave-settlement,
with sea-grapes for olives and black philosophers
with clouds over their elbows. They had not laid out

narrow-gauge pipes for buckets, but none for sewers.
They had not sucked the cane till sugar was played out.
Empires were swinish. These had splendid habits