

by the same author

poetry

SELECTED POEMS
THE GULF
ANOTHER LIFE
SEA GRAPES
THE STAR-APPLE KINGDOM
THE FORTUNATE TRAVELLER
MIDSUMMER
COLLECTED POEMS (1948-1984)
THE ARKANSAS TESTAMENT
THE BOWNTY
TIEPOLO'S HOUND

plays

DREAM ON MONKEY MOUNTAIN and OTHER PLAYS
THE JOKER OF SEVILLE and O BABYLON!
REMEMBRANCE and PANTOMIME
THREE PLAYS: THE LAST CARNIVAL;
BEEF, NO CHICKEN;
A BRANCH OF THE BLUE NILE
THE ODYSSEY: a stage version

OMEROS

Derek Walcott

1990



faber and faber

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."

3

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.

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 Achilles's canoe, *In God We Trust*, Achilles 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.

111

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, thigh-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.

'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 breakerwater 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.

11

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.

III

"*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.*"

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 tangles 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! Pheelosopheeh!"

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.

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

I

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. "Beeeeeh, 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

it was with such distance that it was hard to tell if she had heard your condolence. It was the child, Ma Kilman told them, that made her more beautiful.

111

The rites of the island were simplified by its elements, which changed places. The grooved sea was Achille's garden, the ridged plot of rattling plantains carried their sense

of the sea, and Philoctete, on his height, often heard, in a wind that suddenly churned the rage of deep gorges, the leafy sound of far breakers plunging with smoke,

and for smoke there were the bonfires which the sun catches on the blue heights at sunrise, doing the same work as Philoctete clearing his plot, just as, at sunset,

smoke came from the glowing rim of the horizon as if from his enamel pot. The woodsmoke smelt of a regret that men cannot name. On the charred field, the massive

sawn trunks burnt slowly like towers, and the great indigo dusk slowly plumed down, devouring the still leaves, igniting the firefly huts, lifting the panicky egret

to beat its lagoon and shelve in the cage of the mangroves, take in the spars of its sails, then with quick-pricking head anchor itself shiftingly, and lift its question again.

At night, the island reversed its elements, the heron of a quarter-moon floated from Hector's grave, rain rose upwards from the sea, and the corrugated iron

of the sea glittered with nailheads. Ragged plantains bent and stepped with their rustling powers over the furrows of Philoctete's garden, a chorus of aged

ancestors and straw, and, rustling, surrounded every house in the village with its back garden, with its rank midden of rusted chamber pots, rotting nets, and the moon's cold basin.

They sounded, when they shook, after the moonlit meridian of their crossing, like the night-surf; they gazed in silence at the shadows of their lamplit children.

At Philoctete, groaning and soaking the flower on his shin with hot sulphur, cleaning its edges with yellow Vaseline, and, gripping his knee, squeezing rags from the basin.

At night, when yards are asleep, and the broken line of the surf hisses like Philo, "*Bon Dieu, aie, waie, my sin is this sore?*" the old plantains suffer and shine.

Chapter XLVII

I

Islands of bay leaves in the medicinal bath of a cauldron, a sibylline cure. The citron sprig of a lime-tree dividing the sky in half

dipped its divining rod. The white spray of the thorn, which the swift bends lightly, waited for a black hand to break it in bits and boil its leaves for the wound

from the pronged anchor rusting in clean bottom-sand. Ma Kilman, in a black hat with its berried fringe, eased herself sideways down the broken concrete step

of the rumshop's back door, closed it, and rammed the hinge tight. The bolt caught a finger and with that her instep arch twisted and she let out a soft Catholic

curse, then crossed herself. She closed the gate. The asphalt sweated with the heat, the limp breadfruit leaves were thick over the fence. Her spectacles swam in their sweat.

She plucked an armpit. The damn wig was badly made. She was going to five o'clock Mass, to *la Messe*, and sometimes she had to straighten it as she prayed

until the wafer dissolved her with tenderness, the way a raindrop melts on the tongue of a breeze. In the church's cool cave the sweat dried from her eyes.

She rolled down the elastic bands below the knees of her swollen stockings. It was then that their vise round her calves reminded her of Philoctete. Then,

numbering her beads, she began her own litany of berries, Hail Mary marigolds that stiffen their aureoles in the heights, mild anemone

and clear watercress, the sacred heart of Jesus pierced like the anthurium, the thorns of logwood, called the tree of life, the aloe good for seizures,

the hole in the daisy's palm, with its drying blood that was the hole in the fisherman's shin since he was pierced by a hook; there was the pale, roadside tisane

of her malarial childhood. There was this one for easing a birth-breach, that one for a love-bath, before the buds of green sugar-apples in the sun

ripened like her nipples in girlhood. But what path led through nettles to the cure, the furious sibyl couldn't remember. Mimosa winced from her fingers,

shutting like jealousies at some passing evil when she reached for them. The smell of incense lingers in her clothes. Inside, the candle-flames are erect

round the bier of the altar while she and her friends old-talk on the steps, but the plant keeps its secret when her memory reaches, shuttering in its fronds.

11

The dew had not yet dried on the white-ribbed awnings and the nodding palanquins of umbrella yams where the dark grove had not heat but early mornings

of perpetual freshness, in which the bearded arms of a cedar held council. Between its gnarled toes grew the reek of an unknown weed; its pronged flower

sprang like a buried anchor; its windborne odours diverted the bee from its pollen, but its power, rooted in bitterness, drew her bowed head by the nose

as a spike does a circling bull. To approach it Ma Kilman lowered her head to one side and screened the stench with a cologned handkerchief. The mulch it

was rooted in carried the smell, when it gangrened, of Philoctete's cut. In her black dress, her berried black hat, she climbed a goat-path up from the village,

past the stones with dried palms and conchs, where the buried suffer the sun all day Sunday, while goats forage the new wreaths. Once more she pulled at the itch in her

armpits, nearly dropping her purse. Then she climbed hard up the rain-cracked path, the bay closing behind her like a wound, and rested. Everything that echoed

repeated its outline: a goat's doddering bleat, a hammer multiplying a roof, and, through the back yards, a mother cursing a boy too nimble to beat.

Ma Kilman picked up her purse and sighed on upwards to the thread of the smell, one arm behind her back, passing the cactus, the thorn trees, and then the wood appeared over her, thick green, the green almost black as her dress in its shade, its border of flowers flecking the pasture with spray. Then she staggered back from the line of ants at her feet. She saw the course they had kept behind her, following her from church, signalling a language she could not recognize.

A swift had carried the strong seed in its stomach centuries ago from its antipodal shore, skimming the sea-troughs. outdarting ospreys, her luck

held to its shadow. She aimed to carry the cure that precedes every wound; the reversible Bight of Benin was her bow, her target the ringed haze

of a circling horizon. The star-grains at night made her hungrier; the leafless sea with no house for her weariness. Sometimes she dozed in her flight

for a swift's second, closing the seeds of her stare, then ruddering straight. The dry sea-flakes whitened her breast, her feathers thinned. Then, one dawn the day-star

rose slowly from the wrong place and it frightened her because all the breakers were blowing from the wrong east. She saw the horned island and uncurled her claws

with one frail cry, since swifts are not given to song, and fluttered down to a beach, ejecting the seed in grass near the sand. She nestled in dry seaweed.

In a year she was bleached bone. All of that motion a pile of fragile ash from the fire of her will, but the vine grew its own wings, out of the ocean

it climbed like the ants, the ancestors of Achille, the women carrying coals after the dark door slid over the hold. As the weed grew in odour

so did its strength at the damp root of the cedar, where the flower was anchored at the mottled root as a lizard crawled upwards, foot by fallow foot.

Chapter XLVIII

I

Under the thick leaves of the forest, there's a life more intricate than ours, with our vows of love, that seethes under the spider's veil on the wet leaf.

There's a race of beetles whose nature is to bleed the very source that nourishes them, till the host is a rattling carapace; slowly they proceed

to a fecund partner, mounting the dry one's ghost. No, there is no such insect, but there are creatures with two legs only, but with pincers in their eyes,

and arms that clinch and stroke us; they hang like leeches on the greenest vines, from the veins of paradise. And often, in the female, what may seem wilful

will seem like happiness, that spasmic ecstasy which ejects the fatal acid, from which men fall like a desiccated leaf; and this natural history

is not confined to the female of the species, it all depends on who gains purchase, since the male, like the dung-beetle storing up its dry feces,

can leave its exhausted mate hysterical, pale. This is succession, it hides underneath a log, it crawls on a shaken flower, and then both mates

embrace, and forgive; then the usual epilogue occurs, where one lies weeping, which the other hates. All I had gotten I deserved, I now saw this,

and though I had self-contempt for my own deep pain, I lay drained in bed, like the same dry carapace I had made of others, till my turn came again.

It could not lift the heavy agonies I felt for the fatherless wanderings of my own sons, but some sorrows are like stones, and they never melt,

though our tears rain and groove them, and the other ones, the marriages dissolved like sand through the fingers, the *per mea culpa* that had emptied all hope

from cupboards where some scent of happiness lingers in camphor, in a lost hairpin crusted with soap; the love I was good at seemed to have been only

the love of my craft and nature; yes, I was kind, but with such certitude it made others lonely, and with such bent industry it had made me blind.

It was a cry that called from the rock, some water that the sea-swift crossed alone, and the calling stayed like the hoarse echo in the conch; it called me from daughter

and son, it called me from my bed at dawn in darkness like a fisherman walking towards the white noise of paper, then in its hollow craft sets his oars.

It is what Achille learnt under the dark ceiling of sea-grapes dripping with rain that puckered the sand: that there is no error in love, of feeling

the wrong love for the wrong person. The still island seasoned the wound with its salt; he scooped the bucket and emptied the bilge with its leaves of manchineel,

thinking of the stitched, sutured wound that Philoctete was given by the sea, but how the sea could heal the wound also. And that was what Ma Kilman taught.

She glimpsed gods in the leaves, but, their features obscured by the restless shade and light, those momentary guardians, unlike the logwood thorns of her Lord,

or that golden host named for her mother, Mary, thronging around her knees, with some soldiery crushed by the weight of a different prayer, had lost their names

and, therefore, considerable presence. They had rushed across an ocean, swifter than the swift, numerous in loud migration as the African swallows

or bats that circle a cotton-tree at sunset when their sight is strong and branches uphold the house of heaven; so the deities swarmed in the thicket

of the grove, waiting to be known by name; but she had never learnt them, though their sounds were within her, subdued in the rivers of her blood. Erzulie,

Shango, and Ogun; their outlines fading, thinner as belief in them thinned, so that all their power, their roots, and their rituals were concentrated

in the whorled corolla of that stinking flower.

All the unburiéd gods, for three deep centuries dead, but from whose lineage, as if her veins were their roots,

her arms ululated, uplifting the branches of a tree carried across the Atlantic that shoots fresh leaves as its dead trunk wallows on our beaches.

They were there. She called them. They had knotted the shouts in her throat like a vine. They were the bats whose screeches are shriller than what a dog hears. Ma Kilman heard

and saw them when their wings with crisscrossing stitches blurred in the leaf-breaks, building a web overhead, a net that entered her nerves, and her skin itches

as if flailed with a nettle. She foraged for some sign of the stinging bush, and thrashed herself for the sin of doubting their names before the cure could begin.

11

The wild, wire-haired, and generously featured apotheosis of the caverned prophetess began. Ma Kilman unpinned the black, red-berried

straw-hat with its false beads, lifted the press of the henna wig, made of horsehair, from the mark on her forehead. Carefully, she set both aside

on the coiled green follicles of moss in the dark wood. Her hair sprung free as the moss. Ants scurried through the wiry curls, barring, then passing each other

the same message with scribbling fingers and forehead touching forehead. Ma Kilman bent hers forward, and as her lips moved with the ants, her mossed skull heard

the ants talking the language of her great-grandmother, the gossip of a distant market, and she understood, the way we follow our thoughts without any language,

why the ants sent her this message to come to the wood where the wound of the flower, its gangrene, its rage festering for centuries, reeked with corrupted blood,

seeped the pustular drops instead of sunlit dew into the skull, the brain of the earth, in the mind ashamed of its flesh, its hair. On the varnished pew

of the church, she remembered the frantic messenger that had paused, making desperate signs, its oars lifted, but she had ignored the deaf-mute anger

of the insect signing a language that was not hers, but now Ma Kilman, her hair wild, followed the vine of the generations of silent black workers, their hands

passing stones so quickly against the white line of breakers, with coal-baskets, with invisible sounds, and the cries of the insects led her where she bowed

her bare head and unbuttoned the small bone buttons of her church dress. Ma Kilman, in agony, bayed up at the lights moving in the high leaves, like aeons,

like atoms, her digs shifting like the sow's in a shift of cheap satin. She rubbed dirt in her hair, she prayed in the language of ants and her grandmother, to lift

the sore from its roots in Philoctete's rotting shin, from the flower on his shin-blade, puckering inwards; she scraped the earth with her nails, and the sun

put the clouds to its ears as her screech reeled backwards to its beginning, from the black original cave of the sibyl's mouth, her howl made the emerald lizard

lift one clawed leg, remembering the sound. Philoctete shook himself up from the bed of his grave, and felt the pain draining, as surf-flowers sink through sand.

III

See her there, my mother, my grandmother, my great-grandmother. See the black ants of their sons, their coal-carrying mothers. Feel the shame, the self-hate

draining from all our bodies in the exhausted sleeping of a rumshop closed Sunday. There was no difference between me and Philoctete. One wound gibbers in the weeping

mouth of the sibyl, the obeah-woman, in the swell of the huge white satin belly, the dark gust that bent her limbs till she was a tree of snakes, the spidery sibyl

hanging in a sack from the cave at Cumae, the obeah that possessed her that the priests considered evil in their white satin frocks, because ants had lent her

their language, the flower that withered on the floor of moss smelt sweet and spread its antipodal odour from the seed of the swift; now through a hot meadow

of unnamed flowers, a large woman in a red-berried hat is walking. She comes down the broken brown road past the first houses, past the sun-stricken yards, the bed

of a rivulet, past the crunching goats, where the buried lie under the cement stones at whose base the moss is evergreen, then the galvanized fences of rusted

tin-covers, as if she had stopped off after Mass to gossip with neighbours, like ants at the end of a log, or the end of a street. Where Seven Seas, and a dog

coiled in the dial's shade of the pharmacy, closed for Sunday, senses her black, passing shape, and the only sound is the hot, lazy drum of the sea.

Chapter XLIX

I

She bathed him in the brew of the root. The basin was one of those cauldrons from the old sugar-mill, with its charred pillars, rock pasture, and one grazing

horse, looking like helmets that have tumbled downhill from an infantry charge. Children rang them with stones. Wildflowers sprung in them when the dirt found a seam.

She had one in her back yard, close to the crotons, agape in its crusted, agonized O: the scream of centuries. She scraped its rusted scabs, she scoured

the mouth of the cauldron, then fed a crackling pyre with palms and banana-trash. In the scream she poured tin after kerosene tin, its base black from fire,

of seawater and sulphur. Into this she then fed the bubbling root and leaves. She led Philoctete to the gurgling lava. Trembling, he entered

his bath like a boy. The lime leaves leached to his wet knuckled spine like islands that cling to the basin of the rusted Caribbean. An icy sweat

glazed his scalp, but he could feel the putrescent shin drain in the seethe like sucked marrow, he felt it drag the slime from his shame. She rammed him back to his place

as he tried climbing out with: "*Not yet!*" With a rag sogged in a basin of ice she rubbed his squeezed face the way boys enjoy their mother's ritual rage,

and as he surrendered to her, the foul flower on his shin whitened and puckered, the corolla closed its thorns like the sea-egg. What else did it cure?

11

The bow leapt back to the palm of the warrior. The yoke of the wrong name lifted from his shoulders. His muscles loosened like those of a brown river

that was dammed with silt, and then silken its boulders with refreshing strength. His ribs thudded like a horse cantering on a beach that bursts into full gallop

while a boy yanks at its rein with terrified "Whoas!" The white foam unlocked his coffles, his ribbed shallop broke from its anchor, and the water, which he swirled

like a child, steered his brow into the right current,
as calm as *In God We Trust* to that other world,
and his flexed palm enclosed an oar with the ident-

ical closure of a mouth around its own name,
the way a sea-anemone closes slyly
into a secrecy many mistake for shame.

Centuries weigh down the head of the swamp-lily,
its tribal burden arches the sea-almond's spine,
in barracoons back yards the soul-smoke still passes,

but the wound has found her own cure. The soft days spin
the spittle of the spider in webbed glasses,
as she drenches the burning trash to its last flame,

and the embers steam and hiss to the schoolboys' cries
when he'd weep in the window for their tribal shame.
A shame for the loss of words, and a language tired

of accepting that loss, and then all accepted.

That was why the sea stank from the frothing urine
of surf, and fish-guts reeked from the government shed,

and why God pissed on the village for months of rain.
But now, quite clearly the tears trickled down his face
like rainwater down a cracked carafe from Choiseul,

as he stood like a boy in his bath with the first clay's
innocent prick! So she threw Adam a towel.

And the yard was Eden. And its light the first day's.

And I felt the wrong love leaving me where I stood
on the café balcony facing the small square
and the tower with its banyan. I heard my blood

echoing the lifted leaves of the hills, and fear
leaving them like the rain; I felt her voice draining
from mine. A drizzle passed, but the sprinkled asphalt,

since the rain was shining and the sun was raining,
dried quickly with the smell of a singeing iron,
and whipped up the wet in sheets. My eyes were so clear

that I counted the barrack-arches on the Morne,
and traced the gauze of fine rain towards Soufrière
and imagined it cooling the bubbling pits of

the Malebolge, and beading its volcanic ferns
with clear, sliding drops. The roofs glittered with that love
which loses the other; clearer when it returns.

The process, the proof of a self-healing island
whose every cove was a wound, from the sibyl's art
renewed my rain-washed eyes. I felt an elation

opening and closing the valves of my panelled heart
like a book or a butterfly. The drying roofs
glittered with an interior light like Lucia's

and my joy was pounding like a stallion's hooves
on a morning beach scattering the crabbed wrestlers
near Helen's wall to this thudding metre it loves.

Helen came into the shop, and she had that slow feline smile of a pregnant woman, the slow grace that can go with it. Sometimes the gods will hallow

all of a race's beauty in a single face.

She wanted some margarine. Ma Kilman showed her where the tubs were kept in the freezer. Helen chose one,

then she paid Ma Kilman and left. The dividing air closed in her wake, and the shop went into shadow, with the map on the floor, as if she were the sun.

"She making child," she said. "Achille want to give it, even is Hector's, an African name. Helen don't want no African child. He say he'll leave it

till the day of the christening. That Helen must learn where she from. Philo standing godfather. You see? Standing, Philo, standing straight! That sore used to burn that man till he bawl, *songez?*"

"I heard his agony from the yam garden," Seven Seas said. "They doing well, the white yams. The sea-breeze does season them with salt."

He hummed in the silence. The song of the chanterelle, the river griot, the Sioux shaman. Asphalt rippled its wires, like a harp. The street was still.

Seven Seas sighed. What was the original fault? "Plunkett promise me a pig next Christmas. He'll heal in time, too."

"We shall all heal."

The incurable

wound of time pierced them down the long, sharp-shadowed street. A thudding wave. The sunlight setting a table. And the distant drone of a comet. The sibilant

snored. Seven Seas sat there as if carved in marble. His beard white, his hands on the cane, very still. A swift squeaked like a hinge, then shot from the windowsill.

111

I followed a sea-swift to both sides of this text; her hyphen stitched its seam, like the interlocking basins of a globe in which one half fits the next

into an equator, both shores neatly clicking into a globe; except that its meridian

was not North and South but East and West. One, the New

World, made exactly like the Old, halves of one brain, or the beat of both hands rowing that bear the two vessels of the heart with balance, weight, and design.

Her wing-beat carries these islands to Africa, she sewed the Atlantic rift with a needle's line, the rift in the soul. Now, as vision grows weaker,

it glimpses the straightened X of the soaring swift,
like a cedar's branches widening in sunrise,
in oars that are crossed and settled in calm water,

since the place held all I needed of paradise,
with no other sign but a lizard's signature,
and no other laurel but the *laurier-cannelle*'s.

Chapter LXIV

I

I sang of quiet Achille, Afolabe's son,
who never ascended in an elevator,
who had no passport, since the horizon needs none,
never begged nor borrowed, was nobody's waiter,
whose end, when it comes, will be a death by water
(which is not for this book, which will remain unknown
and unread by him). I sang the only slaughter
that brought him delight, and that from necessity—
of fish, sang the channels of his back in the sun.

I sang our wide country, the Caribbean Sea.
Who hated shoes, whose soles were as cracked as a stone,
who was gentle with ropes, who had one suit alone,
whom no man dared insult and who insulted no one,
whose grin was a white breaker cresting, but whose frown
was a growing thunderhead, whose fist of iron

would do me a greater honour if it held on
to my casket's oarlocks than mine lifting his own
when both anchors are lowered in the one island,

but now the idyll dies, the goblet is broken,
and rainwater trickles down the brown cheek of a jar
from the clay of Choiseul. So much left unspoken

by my chirping nib! And my earth-door lies ajar.
I lie wrapped in a flour-sack sail. The clods thud
on my rope-lowered canoe. Rasping shovels scrape

a dry rain of dirt on its hold, but turn your head
when the sea-almond rattles or the rust-leaved grape
from the shells of my unpharaonic pyramid

towards paper shredded by the wind and scattered
like white gulls that separate their names from the foam
and nod to a fisherman with his khaki dog

that skitters from the wave-crash, then frown at his form
for one swift second. In its earth-trough, my pirogue
with its brass-handled oarlocks is sailing. Not from

but with them, with Hector, with Maud in the rhythm
of her beds trowelled over, with a swirling log
lifting its mossed head from the swell; let the deep hymn

of the Caribbean continue my epilogue;
may waves remove their shawls as my mourners walk home
to their rusted villages, good shoes in one hand,

passing a boy who walked through the ignorant foam,
and saw a sail going out or else coming in,
and watched asterisks of rain puckering the sand.

You can see Helen at the Halcyon. She is dressed in the national costume: white, low-cut bodice, with frilled lace at the collar, just a cleft of a breast

for the customers when she places their orders on the shields of the tables. They can guess the rest under the madras skirt with its golden borders

and the flirtatious knot of the madras head-tie. She pauses between the tables, holding a tray over her stomach to hide the wave-rounded sigh

of her pregnancy. There is something too remote about her stillness. Women study her beauty, but turn their faces away if their eyes should meet,

like an ebony carving. But if she should swerve that silhouette hammered out of the sea's metal like a profile on a shield, its sinuous neck

longing like a palm's, you might recall that battle for which they named an island or the heaving wreck of the *Ville de Paris* in her foam-frilled bodice,

or just think, "What a fine local woman!" and her head will turn when you snap your fingers, the slow eyes approaching you with the leisure of a panther

through white tables with palm-green iron umbrellas, past children wading with water-wings in the pool; and Africa strides, not alabaster Hellas,

and half the world lies open to show its black pearl. She waits for your order and you lower your eyes away from hers that have never carried the spoil

of Troy, that never betrayed horned Menelaus or netted Agamemnon in their irises. But the name Helen had gripped my wrist in its vise

to plunge it into the foaming page. For three years, phantom hearer, I kept wandering to a voice hoarse as winter's echo in the throat of a vase!

Like Philoctete's wound, this language carries its cure, its radiant affliction; reluctantly now, like Achille's, my craft slips the chain of its anchor,

moored to its cross as I leave it; its nodding prow lettered as simply, ribbed in our native timber, riding these last worried lines; its rhythm agrees

that all it forgot a swift made it remember since that green sunrise of axes and laurel-trees, till the sunset chars it, slowly, to an ember.

And Achille himself had been one of those children whose voices are surf under a galvanized roof; sheep bleating in the schoolyard; a Caribbean

whose woolly crests were the backs of the Cyclops's flock, with the smart man under one's belly. Blue stories we recited as children lifted with the rock

of Polyphemus. From a plaster Omeros the smoke and the scarves of mare's tails, continually chalked associate phantoms across our own sky.