

In Search Of My Father – Hannah Lowe

The story goes like this:

My father was born in Yallahs Bay in 1925, a small town in the parish of Saint Thomas, Jamaica. He lived with his father, Lo Shu-On, who had arrived from China as a young man ten or so years before. Like many Chinese who migrated to Jamaica, Shu-On set up and ran a general store that sold everything from beeswax and plimsolls to salt-fish and saucepans. The store prospered and Shu-On would have been a rich man if he had not lost his money every month at the Maj-Jong tables of Kingston.

My father's mother, Hermione Harriott, had been Shu-On's maid. She was a poor black girl from the country who Shu-On had seduced and made pregnant. She was only fifteen. When the baby was born, she looked after him the best she could, but she had no family to help her. She couldn't work with a child to care for. When my father was three or four, Shu-On, who had shown little interest in his son, but was a scrupulous man, recognised he would need someone to help him in the daily running of the store. A young boy could be taught the business, to run errands and take orders. So Shu-On made Hermione an offer – an exchange of money for the boy and a promise to raise and provide for him. In desperation, Hermione accepted. The boy was bought to the store, money changed hands, and Shu-On, ever the businessman, wrote Hermione Harriott a receipt for the sale.

The shop continued to do well. My father learnt the business and worked mornings before school and late into the night. He saw his mother now and again when she passed by the store. Shu-On often beat him, sometimes with his fists, sometimes with a belt. After the worst beatings my father would run away to his mother's house by the sea where she would sometimes bathe his wounds and give him something to eat. Each time he would beg to stay with her, and each time she would send him back to his father. One day, searching for dominoes in his father's drawer, he found the receipt for his sale and understood.

This story rises out of my own childhood, full of its own colour and detail, as real to me as though it were my own memory. I am haunted by it, yet I have no clear recollection of how and when I heard it. My father would not have told me this story. More likely it is a combination of my mother's words and my own imagination. But I believe the basic facts to be true, and the sense of my father's devastation has been with me for as long as I can remember. The first poem I wrote was called 'The Receipt', and tells a version of this story that focuses on the moment of discovery. Since then I've written many poems about this sale, from different viewpoints and points in time. Each one re-envisions the tale and changes the detail. I keep going back to the story as though the re-telling of it might soothe the pain of it, or somehow contain it.

I write about many things but a significant theme in my writing is my family, my father in particular. He died eleven years ago, and with him, the story of his childhood, his travels, his life in London. In writing about him, I am on a search for my own identity, and understanding his story is integral to this.

Like hundreds of other young Jamaican men he sailed to America in the early 1940s as part of a government assisted programme to work as a farm labourer, filling the labour shortage caused by the Second World War. He returned to Jamaica in 1946, and left again for England, arriving in Liverpool in March 1947. He stayed there for a while, sharing a room with two boxers he had met on the boat, then made his way to London, seeking out the growing communities of Caribbean migrants. He lived in Notting Hill first and various locations in East London before finally settling in Ilford, where he stayed for the rest of his life. He married twice, had four children (of which I am the last) and worked predominantly as a croupier and gambler in the East End.

These are the facts as I know them. The dates of his migrations are detailed in a notebook he wrote about his childhood, the existence of which signals an interesting tension in his character. He rarely spoke to me about his early life in Jamaica because, I suspect, his memories were dominated by his father's abuse. He was equally silent about his life in London, although for different reasons - his occupation was illicit and dangerous, and I imagine that he was ashamed of what he did. Yet, as he got older, he developed a sense of reflection that prompted him to talk more about his life. At some point in his seventies my mother attempted to record an interview with him but under the pressure of the running tape, he was flustered and confused over dates, unable to give a coherent account. He then began to write the notebook. Its opening paragraphs seems to announce a full autobiography but in fact, there are only twenty pages of handwritten notes detailing the first seventeen years of his life. The notebook is a rich source for my own writing and I am grateful to have it, but it is notable as much for what is missing as what it says. His mother appears only once. There is no mention of the receipt.

I regret that I didn't ask more about my father's history when he was alive, but in truth, I wasn't interested until it was too late. When I was young, he was a mystery to me and, I have to admit, a source of shame - much older than other fathers (in his mid-fifties when I was born) and black, where my brother and I look entirely white. Like all children, I wanted to fit in, to not be noticed. His difference embarrassed me. When he came to pick me up from ballet lessons, I'd tell the other girls that the old black man hovering in the doorway was the cab driver my mother sent to pick me up. He frequently ferried me around to after-school activities but we rarely spoke in the car.

As a father he was inconsistent and unorthodox, deferring to my mother entirely for my guidance and discipline. He did none of the 'normal' things fathers do, behaving more like a lodger who came and went as he pleased. If anything, his nurture manifested itself through food. Home all day, he did most of the cooking: Jamaican and Chinese food served in copious amounts. My brother and I had little respect for him and as we grew older, we resented the pride that he showed in our achievements. Now I wonder what it must have been like for him to live with his white middle class wife and children. I wonder if the racial isolation he may have experienced in wider society was replicated in his home.

My father was a deeply conflicted man - a committed socialist and staunch atheist, whose upbringing in colonial Jamaican had installed a great respect for the institutions of England to which he had little access. He was largely uneducated, having dropped out of school to work but was an avid reader and prided himself on his intelligence. In England, he was a life-long member of the Labour Party. I still remember trailing him up and down our street as a child posting bright red campaign leaflets through front doors.

I knew he was a gambler. When the phone rang in the house, men with gravelly voices would ask for Chick or Chan and I'd know they meant my father. I had no idea how he'd come by those monikers and didn't think to ask. I told my school friends he was a 'night-worker', but I knew the men on the phone were his cronies from the East End card clubs he frequented most nights, returning at first light to sleep through the morning. Weekends he'd spend at the betting shop or more often - and this is the clearest memory I have of him - sat in an armchair shuffling playing cards, laying them out and sweeping them up, mouthing the numbers and suits to himself.

He was diagnosed with cancer when I was nineteen and died from it three years later. He had often been in ill health, suffering from a collapsed lung, angina and high blood pressure. Because he was so often unwell but always recovered, I didn't accept his dying as a possibility until it was right upon me. The last week of his life, he lay unconscious in a single bed in our living room while I sat beside him crying. My grief was absolute and brought a shocking clarity - his death marked the severing of my connection to Jamaica and my Chinese ancestry and I knew the chance to hear his story was gone. On the day of the funeral, flowers began arriving at dawn - garlands shaped as dice, an enormous ace of hearts. Then at the wake, a host of shady characters in mags and trilbies presented themselves, telling me my father was a legend of a poker player, the best they'd ever known.

I was always an avid reader of prose, but poetry didn't have a particular appeal until I was in my late twenties. I didn't write a poem until I was 29. I was living with friends in London, teaching in an FE college. I'd just come out of a long relationship and I felt utterly lost. My mother had a stroke just before my father died. The stroke had a profound effect on her personality, taking away her confidence and capability and leaving a confused, emotionally fragile woman, much older than her years. I didn't recognise her as my mother and looking back, I effectively lost both my parents that year. To compensate, I'd thrown myself into a relationship that hadn't worked out. On my own again, I was struggling to find meaning in the grind of work and a hedonistic social life.

I wrote two poems that year, one about the receipt, the other about my mother's stroke, and poetry began to seep into my consciousness. I was teaching an anthology for English A Level. One poem that had a strong effect on me was 'God's Grandeur' by Gerard Manley Hopkins, in which the poet laments the damage of industry and toil wrecked on the natural world. But the end of the poem asserts a moving sentiment, that 'for all this, nature is never spent', and concludes with a consolatory exclamation in which the Holy Ghost is envisaged bent over the world with 'warm breast and ah! Bright wings' (531). What I loved then and still love about this poem is its faith. There was no religion in my upbringing nor do I have religious beliefs now but I'm strangely moved by expressions of religious devotion in poetry, music, visual art. I admire that in this poem and how the sprung verse and phonology augment it. At the time, the poem spoke to me of realms beyond my own experience. Lacking Hopkin's religious conviction, I still found it very soothing.

At that time, I was also reading a Bloodaxe anthology of contemporary poetry, *Staying Alive*, some of which I found not just affecting but emotionally devastating. Anne Sexton's confessional poetry had a big impact as did the writing of Mark Doty. In Doty's 'The Embrace' the narrator recalls a dream in which his dead lover's face appears to him and offers the comfort of his physical presence without letting him believe he is alive. I was dreaming about my father all the time, dreams in which he hadn't died and dreams like Doty's, where I knew my father was dead but was given the chance to talk to him again. I had been suppressing a lot of grief over a sustained period of time, and poetry, with its variable expressions of humanity and identifiable emotion, opened a door on that pain.

Through writing I have brought my father's life to other people's awareness. I feel his story is important because it draws attention to the real, lived experiences of migrants who through the forces of specific and global histories, leave their homelands, renegotiate their identities and learn to live in new places where often they are marginalised. My father was educated in the Jamaican colonial system, 'looking towards England'. He was encouraged to revere English society and to consider himself a citizen of the Commonwealth. He taught himself to speak 'proper' English and anglicised his surname from the Chinese 'Lo' to Lowe to sound more English.

He never once mentioned his experiences of racism in England but I cannot imagine that he could have lived in London for forty years and not have been a victim of prejudice. He was present through the Notting Hill Riots of the late 1950's, the 1960's anti-immigration legislation, Enoch Powell's call for immigrant repatriation and the emergence of skin-head subcultural racism and neo-Nazism in the 1970's and 80's. England offered him little in the way of opportunity in employment and education. His first job was as a shunter in the railways yards at Kings Cross, a common occupation for Caribbean migrants at this time, along with other jobs in public transport and the NHS. Their access to private employment and decent housing was often thwarted by the host society's racism.

My father soon took a different path to survive in England – playing cards and dice for money, skills he had learnt on the Kingston waterfront as a teenager and honed during his years in America. His father's penchant for Maj-Jong may well also have been an influence. In writing about his life, I've researched this underworld of gambling. Before 1968, when commercial casinos were legalised, card and dice games took place in private homes, brothels and makeshift casinos. I don't know exactly when my father began

gambling in England, but it's likely he was playing and dealing in the illegal gaming clubs of London from the early 1950's onwards.

Crucial to my understanding of my father's gambling was tracing Jock McGregor, his oldest friend, who talked to me at length about their livelihood. Theirs was a strange camaraderie, Jock indebted much of his wealth to the craft my father taught him, describing him as his hero. I'll be frank here - my father was considered a master card and dice player from decades of obsessive practice, but he was also a card sharp, who lived by the motto 'if you can't win it straight, win it crooked'. He cut and marked cards, loaded dice, and, according to Jock, had an incredible sleight of hand, able to swap cards into games from behind his tie, from his shirt sleeves and hollow-soled shoes. This fits with my own recollections of the tins of dice, red marker pens and tiny guillotine hidden in our tool cupboard and of my father ironing cellophane around a deck of cards to make them appear new.

According to Jock, there were few social divisions in the gambling world - players were united in their common addiction. While Jock's utopian vision of gambling might be unfounded, I do remember the intermittent appearances of my father's gambling associates at our house, and can testify they came from a range of social and ethnic backgrounds. They walk into my poems with the names I knew them by: Joe the Pilot, Paul from St Lucia, Jimmy Falco, Manchester George.

Many of Jock's anecdotes have worked their way into my writing, as has teaching myself how to play poker and kulooki, and visits to London casinos. The language of card-playing is beautiful. Consider the names of the games: Black Jack, Baccarat, Chemin de Fer - or the images of the playing cards themselves: the stoic Queen, the suave Jack - or the many inventive possibilities the numerical elements of cards and dice might offer a poet. Or just take Jock's description of this simple image: a kitchen table at dawn, somewhere in London, sometime in the 1960s, a young black man showing a young white man over and over how to make a card disappear.

Another poet I discovered in that Bloodaxe anthology was Philip Levine. I love his poetry both because of his subject matter - family, memory, migrant identities, working class lives - and his voice. In an essay on his early writing, he describes the pleasure and surprise he found in the discovery of a voice in poetry, recognisable to himself and others and different from his everyday voice. At fourteen this 'sense of who I was or was becoming' scared him:

It was a little frightening to learn suddenly that I was a person who cared for the world far more than he could admit to anyone, a person who possessed a voice...vulnerable to the shock of its own emotions' (16)

Levine's statement has real resonance for me. Poetry has allowed me something similar, not only as a way to articulate thoughts and feelings that I couldn't express before but also to hone in on those feelings - ones that without writing, I might not have listened to, let alone understood. Like Levine, I've been surprised how my thinking takes place through language. Writing about my life and family has bought me into a different consciousness about the way people relate to each other, how deeply felt our connections are, no matter how troubled or difficult.

There is no doubt that writing about my father has had a therapeutic effect, helping me to move through the complexities of loss and regret. I am very interested in the link between writing and therapy. My own sense of the sustenance writing can offer is anecdotal, but I believe poetry in particular has had a unique and multifarious function, beyond the simple outpouring of emotion. In writing, I have often revisited difficult experiences and sought to articulate the emotional truth of them. I feel strongly that both the process of writing the poem and the poem itself can then contain that experience, that truth, and allow me to move on from it.

Truth is subjective of course and there is a danger in the common assumption that poetry is truthful. I explore the line between truth and fiction and the nature of memory itself. Like the story of the receipt, there are anecdotes I recall from childhood but have no way to confirm. One is that my father held a gun to Shu-On's head the night before he left Jamaica for America, but lost his nerve, jumped out the window and ran. Likewise the undocumented history of the gambling dens my father frequented means I have to exercise my imagination to write about them. There is no truth to access.

Poetic form is crucial to these acts of creativity. In the words of the poet George Szirtes, 'the constraints of form are...the chief producers of imagination' (416). Working against a formal constraint, such as metre or rhyme, poets are forced to make imaginative gestures. I use form to negotiate between the emotional truth at the core of the poem and the words I need to find my way to that truth, such is in the poem 'Those Long Car Silences' where I remember the car journeys with my father, using a terza rima rhyme scheme and slant rhyme to create a sense of movement:

All those long car silences, the miles and miles
you drove me through this city, strange signs
lit up in neon: *Lucky House, The Taj Mahal, Halal.*

I kept my voice held back for nothing
but to punish you. I see us from the outside now,
our tail-lights disappearing in the rain,

along the street, around the corner, into the shadow
of a railway bridge. You wanted me to get us lost,
a game you thought I'd like. You had to follow

my instructions *turn right, turn left.* We crossed
the river, past a broken clock tower, a monolithic factory
then rows and rows of battered council blocks,

their windows, dominoes of light.... (12)

Terza rima employs tercets and repeating chains of rhyme which can create an echoing effect, typical of the dreams I had about my father where visual features and events repeat themselves. The images used here are part memory, part imagination, produced against the constraint of rhyme. For me, this process and the finished poem itself have the potential to reconfigure memory. Now when I recall those journeys, I remember them through these images, which may not be accurate. But what is important to me is that the poem 'rings true' and expresses an emotional truth that both myself and a reader is convinced by, not one that would necessarily stand up in a court of law.

Poetry makes sense for me in other ways. I feel strongly that the satisfaction I've gained from writing poetry emanates from a fundamental source, as it bridges the gap between two things I loved doing as a child – drawing and playing music. My visual imagination was always strong. I see poems as much as I hear them, and I grew up in a musical household – generations of pianists on my mother's side; my father's first cousin was Joe Harriott, the free jazz saxophonist. The discipline of writing often reminds me of my years practicing for piano exams. There's tenacity and commitment involved, and a resolution not to stand up and leave the room when it's not working.

It feels good to return to and foster this creativity. The educational psychologist Ken Robinson makes a moving case for forging an education system that nurtures, rather than undermines, creativity. He argues that all the world's education systems value some disciplines (science, for example) over others (dance, music, art) and that all children are born creative, then 'educated out of creativity' (2006). His ideas certainly apply to my past experience as a student and my current one as a teacher. We separate the analysis of literature from its production in strange and stringent ways. The essay is the currency of our

schools and universities. It didn't really occur to me to write creatively when I was younger because I was too busy producing clever analytical essays about what others had written.

Poetry also makes sense to me because of father's love of it. In the colonial schools of Jamaica, pupils were instructed to learn English poetry by heart. Some of these poems clearly struck a chord in him. Fifty years later, he could still recite *If* by Rudyard Kipling and *Invictus* by William Ernest Henley. My brother read *Invictus* at his funeral. I think the resolute sentiment of the poem and its insistence on self-determination appealed strongly to my father who sought to define himself against his troubled upbringing and oppressive social circumstances. These are the last lines: 'It matters not how strait the gate /How charged with punishments the scroll /I am the master of my fate/I am the captain of my soul.' (113: 19-22)

When I first started writing about my father, I thought that I would write one whole collection based on his life. In the end I wrote about many other things as well, but over half the poems in my new collection *Chick* are in some way about him. Now I want and need to write about his childhood in Jamaica and his migration to England. His notebook is an anchor of this new project, which also involves tracing long-lost relatives, reading about Jamaican history and visiting Jamaica next year to undertake research. Of course I'm also interested in the stories of my grand-parents. Shu-On was one of thousands of Chinese who came to Jamaica, originally as indentured labourers from the mid-nineteenth century, but by Shu-On's time, as economic migrants sponsored by family already settled there. The Chinese have been part of Jamaican society for a long time, as have Lebanese, Syrian, Jewish and Asian communities, evidence that Jamaica is far more culturally pluralist than is commonly assumed. My grandmother, Hermione, was very light-skinned and anecdotally, I know her ancestry includes Irish blood. I am near certain that my investigation of her heritage will lead straight to the plantation, where the sexual exploitation of black slaves by their white owners and overseers was common and accounts significantly for the large variety of skin shades in the Caribbean.

This new work is a departure for me, not only because I want to write in my father's voice, but also because it shines a light on my own relationship with Jamaica. Mine is a strange position. My father's Anglo-centric upbringing meant that he did not identify with contemporary Caribbean culture or its manifestations in Britain. His Caribbean was a shadist society that strongly conflated skin colour and social class. My father was light-skinned and mixed race which inferred on him a degree of social superiority. He left Jamaica before the pan-African sentiments of Rastafarianism, before race consciousness, and the reclaiming of the term black as a political referent.

I identify with Jamaica as his place of birth, but also because of the reggae music that I fell in love with at university and because I've lived in the heart of the Caribbean diasporic community in Brixton for most of my adult life. I connect strongly with aspects of Caribbean culture – I recognise it – but I feel inevitably alienated from it too because of a range of complex racial discourses. For most of my life, I have defined myself as white-English, not necessarily because I felt it, but because I was treated automatically as such, and because it overwrote the complexities of an alternative. Context is everything here. English society is still divided on lines of race; the legacies of colonialism and slavery are still pervasive. I cannot identify myself as black in the way that a visibly mixed-race person might do and I am highly conscious of the way any tenuous claim to a Caribbean identity might be perceived. And yet, after all these years, I feel the need to stake a different claim on identity, however uneasy and problematic this might be, and although I never intended for it to be, my writing has perhaps become the territory on which I make this claim. I explore some of these issues in this poem which touches on the complexities of race and identity and its important links, for me, to music:

Reggae Story

My father liked the blues and Lady Day.

He left Jamaica way before the reggae
 rocked all night in backstreet studios,
 before King Tubby or Augustus Pablo.
 But I used to love a boy who loved
 dub reggae, loved thick lugs of ganga, loved
 on Sunday nights to cross the river, take me
 to The House Of Roots and Aba-shanti
 in the cobbled arches under Vauxhall
 where the Lion of Judah decked the walls
 and stacks of speakers pumped electric bass,
 a single bulb above the smoky haze
 and on the stage a little dreadlocked man
 like Rumpelstiltskin, shouted *Jab!* and spun
 his blistering tunes on a single turntable
 and shut-eyed men called back over the vinyl
Jab, Rastafari. Next door, the old guys
 were like wizened goats with yellow eyes
 hunched over games of chess and ginger tea,
 below the golden framed Haile Selassie,
 king of kings. That boy didn't know my father
 was a white-haired godless pensioner
 and reggae music never really got me
 until I played it on my own: Bob Marley,
 U-Roy, Johnny Clark, and even then
 it came like hymns or Faure's *Requiem*,
 Vivaldi's *Gloria*. He thought I had
 a Rasta like Prince Far-I for a dad
 not the silent island man who sat
 beyond the bedroom door I'd listen at
 to catch a woman crooning down a melody
I Can't Give You Anything, But Love, Baby (50)

This poem is written in strict iambic rhyming couplets, a form typical of traditional English verse. I chose to write it in this way to reflect the tension between my father's upbringing in English traditions and the radical anti-colonial, anti-Western sentiments expressed in some reggae music, particularly the sort played at the dub sound clashes I attended as a young woman. Reggae music is syncopated music that exploits the 'off-beat' rhythm, while the poem follows a traditional, emphatic metrical pattern. Having made this choice, the tight metre and rhyme constraint directed the narrative and imagistic course of the poem, a process I find so enabling in writing. Ironically, a lack of formal freedom can generate a powerful freedom in creative expression.

Here are the first lines from my father's notebook:

I do not know the date or year of my father's arrival in Jamaica from China but my guess was that it was about 1918...this vagueness comes about because my father rarely spoke to me other than to give a command in relation to the running of the shop which was our livelihood.

These matter-of-fact words render both sorrow and anger, but he also writes later with tremendous verve of the 'marvellous sweet oranges' that hung from a tree behind the store, of a bush bath¹ given to him when he had malaria and of a small barefoot boy walking into the shop to announce himself as his half-brother, one of a number of local children fathered by Shu-On. Another episode tells of Shu-On torching

¹ Common to rural Caribbean societies, a 'bush bath' is a bath made with the extract of certain plants, the application of which is supposed to cure a period of bad luck or sickness

the store to claim insurance money to pay gambling debts, and of my father's memories of waking in a truck full of their possessions, crossing a river, the shop in flames a mile behind them.

The notebook also names the boat my father arrived on, the SS Ormonde. The Ormonde is important part of his story and links with my desire to place his life into the wider context of the Caribbean diaspora. It is commonly assumed that the Empire Windrush was the first boat to bring Caribbean immigrants to Britain in 1948, but this is a misapprehension: other boats arrived earlier, including the Ormonde which carried around a hundred Jamaican men to Liverpool. Very little is documented about this voyage, other than a mention in the *Evening Standard* of that year, concerning the trial of the eleven stowaways on board. Last year, I placed an advert in the *Liverpool Gazette* looking for Ormonde passengers, most of whom would be in their eighties. I heard nothing. The voyage of the Ormonde raises interesting questions about cultural memory and how easily, with time, the truth dissolves.

There is an important postscript to the story of the receipt. Last year I made contact with my father's cousin, Lorna, who had stayed in Jamaica and lived for a time with her Aunt 'Ida', otherwise known as Hermione. Lorna told me lots of stories about Hermione, who went on to marry a wealthy man called Walwyn Pennyfeather. When I told Lorna about the receipt, she was adamant that my father was mistaken, and that the receipt must have dated back to when my father lived with his mother and was one of many that Shu-On insisted on writing when he gave her money for my father's care.

Suddenly the story shatters and reconfigures itself with new ideas and images, new meaning. Did Shu-On really care for my father? Why did Hermione then give him up? Was Lorna sure? I could ponder on the truth here indefinitely, and be no closer to it. Like me, Lorna found it profoundly sad that my father died believing himself to have been the 'product' sold on that receipt.

I feel a great sadness that I didn't talk to my father more when he was alive. He still appears in my dreams, sat in the car waiting for me. A few years ago I began to get to know his first son, my half-brother, and found that he also wrote poetry. It made me wonder if in another life, my father might not have been a poet too. The poetry I have written about him, and that which I intend to write, is my attempt to give him a voice, to have this important story told, and sometimes when I write, I feel him sat in the armchair behind me, shuffling his cards.

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