

MEETING GEORGE LAMMING IN JAMAICA

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I FIRST BECAME AWARE of George Lamming when I read *In the Castle of my Skin*, which Michael Joseph had brought out in London in 1953. Naipaul was not yet into print, and Lamming's was the first work of fiction by a "British West Indian" writer that I had read, since C. L. R. James' *Minty Alley*, to impress me both with its reality as a record and its artistry as fiction. It was not only the story of his own growing-up, a poor black boy on a British-colonial island; it was, as Gerald Moore has remarked, the "collective autobiography of a whole Barbadian village." But Lamming's *The Emigrants*, which appeared the next year, was too formless and discursive for my liking, and I came away from it with the uneasy feeling that its author, like his boatload of characters, had taken flight to an England that would either reject him, or by accepting, turn him into just another permanent expatriate. It wasn't until 1962, when I began my "homework" on Caribbean literature, in preparation for a reading tour, that I realized how wrong I was, and that Lamming had brought out two more novels, *Of Age and Innocence* and *Season of Adventure*, whose emotional power and maturity proved him to be already an established writer in our common language. From the press notices, however, I gathered he still made his home in London, and I did not expect to find him in Jamaica when I took sea passage there from Trinidad that November.

I remember indeed, as I sat in the darkened lounge of the *Golfito* (while an exotic dawn wasted itself on the harbour, and I waited for the usual unpleasantness of Customs and Immigration), that I was worrying whether there would be anyone on this island I'd ever known or any occasion at all to sound out a single Canadian poem.

But the clang of the lowered gangway had scarcely died when the ship's purser came padding in, with an unusually deferential manner, leading three strangers to my table. A reporter from the island daily, armed with smile and camera, was followed by a handsome light-brown man who introduced himself as John Hearne, the English professor/novelist on the Mona campus of the University of the West Indies. I had written him without answer but he now assured me he had scheduled a week's list of things for me to do. Hearne then introduced me to

a tall very white man, the Acting/High Commissioner for Canada. The latter told me he had already secured me a room and even cleared my bags through Scylla and Charybdis — and here was a packet of mail from home. The world was wonderful again, and became almost unreal when I found myself beside the A/HC and being chauffeured rapidly, red ensign flying, from the stinking docks of Port Royal through a flowering countryside to cozy quarters in a tropical sort of Sussex inn called the Maryfield.

There the desk clerk handed me a note to phone, as soon as possible, an unknown Doctor Figueroa at the University. I rang and got a voice deep and jovial, the accent good London academic with a hint of Jamaican lilt. When was it convenient for him to pick me up for something cool and a spot of lunch at the faculty club? John Hearne would be joining us there and, o yes, an old friend is with me who wants to meet you — George Lamming.

The two arrived in a battered Morris. "Fig," as he preferred to be called, was instantly memorable, a huge chuckling fellow in his forties, a wide multi-racial face haloed with grey beard and alive with warmth and humour. His education, he told me, was as hodge-podge as his genes: grade school on the island, secondary in Massachusetts, college and graduate degrees from the University of London. He had only recently returned from lecturing at that institution to be Mona's Professor of Education. George and Fig had been postgrad students together and had later developed programs for the BBC. But they were both quite plainly happy to be back in Jamaica, and at this moment bent on sharing their euphoria with me.

I was surprised to learn they had read some of my verse, and that George knew *Down the Long Table*. Fig had published only a single chapbook of verse at this time, but had another in a local press. George got him talking half-seriously about a third project: translating Horace into calypso rhythms! I was curious to hear a sample, but they preferred listening to whatever literary gossip I'd brought from Trinidad. There I'd been seeing something of the island's leading young playwright, Errol Hill, and the poet Derek Walcott, who interviewed me on radio. Also, my hosts had been David Wyke, the sculptor-doctor, and his gifted wife, Marguerite, first woman senator of the West Indian Federation; the Wykes had lived in Toronto and been contributors and supporters of the *Canadian Forum* in the thirties. Inevitably with any conversation about Trinidadian personalities, our talking came to focus on "Nello" (C. L. R.) James, Marxist comrade of mine in London in depression years. I was happy to learn that Lamming and James had, more recently, become friends and political allies when both backed Premier Manley's shortlived Federation of the West Indies.

This union of Jamaica, Trinidad, Barbados and some smaller islands, born in 1958, had dissolved a few months before my visit, whereupon James, never a disciplined politician, had quarrelled publicly with Manley, declared he was

“through with the West Indies,” and returned “for good” to London. There was a rumour he had even abjured Marxism.

THERE WAS A CERTAIN UNREALITY for me, sitting gnawing at a mango under a grape-like bougainvillea that cooled the verandah of this thatched guest-lodge Tenniel might have drawn for Alice in her Wonderland. For I was feeling immediate kinship with two natives to these isles whom I'd met only minutes before. A strange variety of hummingbird zinged over hedges of oleander and hibiscus beside me; beyond the too-green lawns *lignum vitae* flamed and royal palm trees towered. Yet however diverse our flora we three were cousin writers and brothers political, united in puzzling over the peculiar tangles that empires leave for their ex-colonials to straighten. And we were agreed that, of all the “British” West Indians we had known, C. L. R. James was the most eloquent in voice and in print, a many-talented, informed and courageous fighter for the freedom of exploited peoples, whether in Africa, the U.S.S.R. or the U.S.A. His apparent giving-up was a shock.

Lamming now told me Nello had been seriously hurt in a car accident in the U.S., and looked aged and bent from it. It was hard for me to accept that image, for I remembered him as a youth in Britain in the thirties, when he was a wildly energetic orator who earned his living reporting cricket for the *Manchester Guardian*, and who spent his nights either on platforms denouncing the stupidities of both the Social-Democrats and the Stalinists, or in smoky committee rooms plotting Panafrican liberation and world revolution under the banner of a Fourth International. And somehow between night and day he had written and published, before that decade was out, not only a book-length analysis of the “rise and fall of the communist international,” but also his *History of Negro Revolt*, *The Case for West-Indian Self-Government*, several short stories, a novel, a play, a lighthearted memoir of his days as a cricketer, and the definitive biography of Toussaint L'Ouverture, *The Black Jacobins* — a work of scholarship today regarded as a classic in its field.

I remember asking if James hadn't burned himself out even before the war. No, George said, but he was too bookish for us, a one-man party, a scholar not an executive. Did I know he had been lecturing at American universities on American literature, and had privately published a book on Melville in New York? I didn't.

Fig, grown restless, had been wandering about my genteel inn inspecting its notices and embroidered cushions, my huge flaking bathtub, the framed fox-hunting prints, as if he were in a museum. Indeed that's what Maryfield Lodge was, the last hotel in Jamaica that harboured only whites, a cheap retreat for

Victorian ancients too poor or too asthmatic to return "home." I was here, Fig explained, only because this was near the University (where there were no vacant rooms) and because I would feed at his place or anyplace where overboiled veg and suet pudding were not *de rigueur*. This reminded him that he was hungry, and they bore me off to their faculty club. The road ran east between lush cane-fields and banana groves toward the tall wave of hills, their ancient cones blurred by dark woods. I was startled when George told me the highest was almost 7,500 feet above the Caribbean. These were the famed Blue Mountains where runaway slaves hid out in the 1830's. Some of their descendants were still there. "If you like," George said, "we'll make a trip up." I made polite protests that I was monopolizing his time but George was firm. He and Fig had visited Vancouver a while back, when I wasn't there, and had been treated royally, he said; they were going to see that I had as high a time in Jamaica.

At the Mona campus we joined John Hearne, who had drinks waiting for us. Our conversation moved quickly from the mysteries of *academia* to our varied origins and roots and favourite places: Montreal, where Hearne was born and I had worked; and to dear dirty all-comprehending London, where all of us had one time or another lived, studied, and loved. But it was questions about my recent travels that, despite the comforting sub-tropical sunshine and the leisurely eating, bogged us down in politics and the ominous present. This island, only a little larger than Cape Breton, with a population less than Toronto's, had been set loose by its own voters a few months before and was now its own democratic "nation." And its nearest neighbour, a mere hundred miles away, was Castro's Cuba. I hadn't yet been there, but a few weeks earlier I had given a poetry reading to students at Peru's national university, most of whom went from my classroom to demonstrate with makeshift banners but no guns in a Lima square in support of Castro's Cuba against Kennedy's America. Some of those students certainly died that bloody afternoon, machine-gunned by the junta's militia. The next day, when everybody thought the world might end, with Kennedy and Krushchev in eyeball confrontation, I was flying to Santiago de Chile, not too sure there would be an earth to land on. At the airport I was asked what Chilean writers I wanted to meet. I said "Pablo Neruda," and was nearly arrested. Chile's finest poet had been publicly cheering for Castro, and the President of Chile had sworn out a warrant for his arrest. A few days later in Buenos Aires I witnessed the police of yet another junta firing on another crowd of unarmed demonstrators against American imperialism. Could it all happen here, I asked my table companions, and got strangely varied answers.

For the moment the U.S. had won the bluffing duel, Hearne said, and made the Russians ferry their missiles back home. Kennedy had circled Cuba now with warships and Castro would never have another chance to grab Jamaica. "God," said George, "who would want to? This country's bankrupt! We've got a debt of

a hundred and fifteen million bucks from the British, and Bustamente's busy doubling it."

But Alex B—, I think it was, pointed out that U.S. capital investments in Jamaican bauxite, sugar, and luxury hotels had increased significantly since Jamaica got independence. There was dry laughter from George and Fig. Our bauxite, declared the latter, is not owned by Jamaicans, creates almost no work for them, and is destroying the soil of the island. George argued that although tourism was now a forty million dollar industry "the profit goes back to the U.S. and comes from hotels no Jamaican can afford to stay in. Most Jamaicans sleep in one-room shacks in the Kingston slums or on the sugar cane plantations, where they work for subsistence wages. One in five doesn't work at all; he's unemployed."

I said it sounded like Cuba before Castro. "Was it better here when you were a British colony?" There was an unhesitating "No" from all of them. "We have a democracy, at least," Hearne said. "A bourgeois one," George added, "and we must use it to vote Bustamente out. That egomaniac has already sold us to Yankee imperialism. We must get Manley back and make the bugger socialize this country the way he promised." Somebody who was a government employee, on the table's fringe, tut-tutted, and somebody else accused us all of talking red expropriation — Castro stuff. "We don't want a bloody revolution here." "Agreed," said George, and got up. As we walked to Hearne's car, he muttered — "But we still need a revolution."

Hearne left me at my lodge for a welcome siesta (I'd been waked at five by the ship's steward) but he was back in an hour to drive me for drinks at his home. Like most of the Kingston middle-class, he had bought well up the mountainside, where the climate's cooler. He drove us expertly and with considerable speed up a maze of narrow and dangerously twisting roads sunk in groves of fern and vine-hung trees. We came out on his terrace in time to watch a glorious sunset suffuse the sea and the lights twinkle on in the Kingston slums "far away and very far below."

Over drinks I complimented him sincerely on his driving, and learned he had joined the RAF at seventeen in the middle of the war and served as an air gunner for the next three years. He had married and gone to university afterwards and had not begun writing his fiction until a few years ago. Yet he had already published five novels with Faber in London, as well as several short stories and two television plays. Since I had read far too little of Hearne's at this time we talked more about other Caribbean writers, the Haitians friend of Malcolm Lowry, Philippe Thoby-Marcelin, whom I'd visited in his U.S. exile recently, and my favourite Cuban poet, Nicolás Guillen. Hearne impressed me as a sensitive, imaginative man, although with still an uncertain image of himself. Jamaican born but "white," versatile, intelligent, an individualist with a social conscience,

he was a bookish man who was also an adventurer. I would have liked to talk longer but soon had to rush off in a taxi to join George at a dinner given by a lawyer friend of his.

IT WAS A PARTY OF HARD-DRINKING, heavy-eating blacks who, it seemed, were newly-rich on real estate, and owned most of the immediate mountainside. The talk was of local cabarets, travels, the Wall Street market and — perhaps as a courtesy to this odd Canadian pal of George's — Montreal's St. James Street. About midnight most of the guests left for their homes but the rest carried George and me off to find a good night club. Our driver was wildly drunk and sped down the mountain at about 80 mph, barely missing various parked trucks, tethered roadside goats and farmers pushing handcarts down to the Kingston market. He paid no attention to our cries of warning, and I remember feeling much the same sort of helplessness I'd been experiencing about the world situation. But the driver had madman's luck, and though we never found a night club, we came safely to a stop at his own home. There we played calypso records and ate a four a.m. pre-breakfast before George got a cab and dropped me at my guesthouse.

The next day I took time to call dutifully on the Canadian High Commission and then took a nostalgic walk through dock and market areas where I had first set foot on this island, in 1934, when I was a deckhand on a limy coaler bound from Port Alberni to Grimsby on the North Sea. The changes were not notable; the slums seemed bigger and stinkier, their inhabitants less friendly, the beggars and the whores more numerous, less glamorous. But of course I was no longer 30, and I had a hangover.

George Lamming routed me out from the Maryfield at seven the next morning and into a two-door jeep for the mountain expedition he'd promised me the first day. He slid nimbly into the back seat where a cuddlesome chocolate girl sat and was introduced to me as "one of my Mona students escaped from Guyana." The driver was none other than the Chief Engineer of Jamaica's most important agricultural development, the Yallahs Valley Land Authority, one of whose projects we were setting off to visit. Behind us, in a big rickety army truck, was the Hon. A. C. Dogsboddy, O.B.E., and an entourage of stenos, reporters, handymen, and political henchmen, all of whom had joined our expedition, it was soon obvious, more for fun than for information about Yallahs.

Engineer Martin was a light-brown man with a rugged face and a bluff friendly air. I'm always happy on mountains, especially on a tricky route with a good driver, which Martin quickly proved to be. For the next four hours our two-car caravan climbed and dipped, roared and climbed again, on slippery dirt

roads that gradually narrowed to nothing much more than goat tracks, while Martin, a great talker, filled me in on Yallahs. A long branching river system with fertile slopes rising up thousands of feet had already in the eighteenth century been turned from wilderness to coffee and cocoa estates by the simple process of burning down the forests. Slave-holding planters built their bungalows on the crests, like feudal barons. But the soil was quickly exhausted, or carried away by flooding rains that eventually destroyed even the banana plantations in the river bottoms. The owners moved to other mountains. Between the bared rocks the jungle crept back, thick enough to hide escaped slaves in flight from the slavers' hounds. Through the nineteenth century the survivors and free descendants of these "hill negroes" developed their own precarious farms and backpacked their scrawny root crops down to the valley markets. With independence, in the 1930's, came the Authority. It turned the tracks into jeep roads, installed cement bridges and run-offs, reforested where the hillsides were bared, hired the farmers to terrace the slopes, and taught them the rudiments of mixed-crop farming.

Now, Martin told me, there were 15,000 farmers making a living from 50,000 acres on these hillsides. He pointed out, as we came to a viewpoint, rows of fountaining banana "palms" far below and the dim shadows of coffee bushes between them. Up where we were, mango trees were spreading, and occasional rows of oranges and other citrus trees, shading lines of corn and root crops. Above us, where the soil was thinnest, some goats were grazing. All this was being "mothered," Martin said, from the Kingston offices of "Government" — a magic word in Jamaica now — supervised by college-trained agriculturalists, and his engineers. Already they had flooding licked, but not pests — fruit flies, animal diseases, goat abortion, and so on. Somebody comes up once a month to hold talks with the farmers, inspect crops and livestock. "But today is special," Martin said, and looked quizzical. "Guests . . . that's why I brought a jug." He brushed a sack by his feet to reveal a gallon jugful of something. "Rum." George gave a cheer from the back seat. "Not just for you guys; there's the Honourable Dogsboddy behind us, and all his supporters, come up for a good time. Practically a national holiday. The great man has supplied several jugs and they seem to have lifted a cork or two already." There were fitful snatches of singing from the truck now.

We stopped then on a hilltop at an ancient planter's house which the Authority was reconstructing into a guest lodge. "We're in luck," Martin said, "the old ballad girl's here." He hailed a very small and wizened woman mopping a verandah floor with a witch's broom. George, directed by Martin, filled a mickey from our jug and the four of us walked over. The old girl swiftly found a glass and as promptly filled and emptied it. She then stood, broom in hand, and in a remarkably clear and strong voice began singing a succession of haunting Jamaican ballads and folksongs, comic and tragic. Was it possible, I asked George,

that some of them had been passed down to her from a great-grandparent who had escaped and founded a family up here? "Quite possible. I heard that Lomax plans to record her on his next trip to Jamaica." Perhaps more than even her singing moved me. When she had stopped unexpectedly she made a little speech, in a quaint Victorian style, wishing us all brotherly love and loving-kindness.

Our ears were almost at once, however, taken over by the spastic rhythms of a hit parade programme pulsing in from another verandah to which the Honourable Dogsbody and most of his retinue had retreated long ago to listen on a stenographer's transistor to the selections being wafted from Puerto Rico by an American disc jockey. It seemed these Jamaicans were striving as anxiously to keep in tune with the North American present as I was to understand their West Indian past.

We drove on beside steep terraces and under brilliant flowering trees to the village splayed against the hilltop which had been chosen for the day's festivities. These were held in the open on muddy terraces. The rum went round and the excited Jamaican talk that seems half-melody, half-quarrelling, till it breaks to laughter. At last, from a great cauldron, I was ladled out my own bowl of something so pungent it almost knocked me down the slope. "Rongone so-ap," they seemed to shout, laughing hugely. "Ram and rum," Martin said, and slurped his down.

Now the Honourable Dogsbody began a speech, while half-listening farm wives brought us green boiled plantains wallowing in a stew of mackerel and curried goat. The rice tasted of the paraffin that fueled the cook-fires but the general effect was marvellous, especially when combined with the soup, to which we kept returning.

The Honourable D. finished his speech to much applause and began moving unsteadily about, apparently for the purpose of pinching the ladies' bottoms. "More roam," the males called. By now I didn't know what was rum, ram or roam. "A whole ram in the soup?" I asked George. "No," he said, "just the balls. And lots of rum on top."

Later, Martin went charging with us back down the mountain through oncoming darkness to get George and me on time to an evening lecture/discussion on the West Indian theatre. We arrived at Mona late and too sodden to contribute much to what appeared already a dull affair, and soon broke away for blessed sleep.

THE NEXT DAY I WANDERED ALONE, browsing in a bookstore on Kingston's main street. The quiet shop made me feel I was back in Victoria, B.C.: genteel English accents from the clerks, the poetry shelves lined with Victorian English classics and a few Americans but of course no Canadians or

Jamaicans. There were “seasonal” cards, all holly and Santas in the snow, and white-faced angels decorating the windows.

I walked a block or two away from the town centre and was into board-and-cardboard slums. Rastafarians in eccentric garbs glowered at my corpse face. The alleys were filled with the idling workless. Eyes carefully blank or turned away from me. I began to feel a little in danger and certainly very guilty for showing myself to these luckless ones. I took a bus to the other extreme, the beautiful Hope Gardens. At least I was seeing flowers not on Victorian Christmas cards. I strolled past great banks of poinsettias under tulip and ginger trees, flamboyantes, white petria, and sat beside a pool patterned by blue waterlilies. It was easy to forget the world of flesh — until a covey of motorcyclists burst roaring across the green lawn, splaying turf in all directions.

In the evening I went with Lamming and Fugueroa to dinner in the Students’ Union and a poetry reading. This had been elaborately programmed (before it was known I’d be on the island) by some colonially-minded member of the English department. A few resident poets, including George and Fig, had been allowed to begin the affair by reading one short poem of their own and then one from the textbook anthology currently in use at Mona. So we listened to a pot-pourri of Marvell, Ogden Nash, Blake, Roy Campbell, Frost, Auden, Dickinson, and Hopkins. We would have had a Hardy, too, but Fig had persuaded the departmental committee to drop the old boy and let the Canadian recite something short of his own.

After this anti-climax came the star of the evening, Louise Bennett. A buxom Jamaican lady in her forties, she at once rescued us from our academic parlour games by launching into an hour of lusty folksongs, dialect ballads, and “mentos” — a more melodic and satiric Jamaican cousin of the calypso. I could see why George had urged me not to leave early. Admittedly, Louise was no Emily Dickinson, nor was she trying to be. She was a Jamaican-born “woman of the people” but also a professional: a lecturer in drama, folklorist, actress graduate of RADA, experienced radio performer on BBC — in short an entertainer with international experience. For the first time I listened to an artist’s use of “West Indian English,” its sharp yet good-humoured wit now concentrated and its melodic qualities fully exploited. When George told me she had published six books I felt ashamed I’d never even heard of her. But then, as I discovered when I talked with her, she had just returned from a TV gig with CBC in Montreal and had never heard of me or my eight books. The reasons were clear: she was published in Kingston and I in Toronto. Three years later I waved at her in London at the Commonwealth Arts Festival. I don’t think she recognized me, but that was the festival where nobody had heard of anybody.

My travel notes tell me that George and I lunched next day with Fig and his lively East Indian wife, and that she made us an excellent curry. I think it was on

that occasion we talked about the hoped-for "United States of the Caribbean" which my friends felt it would be logical now for the U.S. to back, if only to prevent the spread of Castroism. First revive the Federation, only recently expired, add Bermuda and the Bahamas and then begin to forge a multilingual English-French-Spanish unity of sovereign states with Haiti and the Dominican Republic. The masses throughout the Caribbean wanted peaceful socialist governments such as the Scandinavians had achieved. They cared less about island identities than about building towards West Indian unity through a customs and immigration union. I reminded them that U.S. voters always rejected socialist ideas, and that U.S. governments had repeatedly used force to overthrow even peaceful liberal regimes in the islands and the mainland states bordering the Caribbean. My friends, however, thought Kennedy had learned a lesson and might have to give the Puerto Ricans independence rather than deal with a second Castro.

Moreover, George pointed out, we were forgetting Mexico. That country didn't want Russians all over its Gulf, or the Americans either. I told George I hoped he was right but I had a feeling that every day more of Mexico became the property of the U.S.A. and might soon be so much in debt to Wall Street it could not risk the possibility of American marines landing again in Vera Cruz. In any case, I believed that Bustamente was still in the saddle in Kingston and riding the country back to colonialism. I think at that timely moment John Hearne arrived and drove me off for an interview on Kingston radio and then to tea with the English department, before I gave a reading.

I gave my usual violin piece of this tour — a talk, with readings, on contemporary Canadian literature. The audience of about forty, staff and students, was attentive but, as often in academic surroundings, most of the students were too shy to ask questions and the faculty too eager to get home for supper.

I was able consequently to make off myself by six to a supper party arranged for me by three former U.B.C. students of mine now batching together on the Kingston slopes. One was Wayne Hubble, the third secretary at the Canadian High Commission. The other two were with Kingston business firms. The trio had persuaded their Jamaican girlfriends to cook a dinner in their residence for us all.

Both the food and the company are still memorable after twenty years, perhaps because they prompted a poem, "Saltfish and Akee." My hostesses explained to me that akee is the pulp of a ripe pod which, when cooked, looks and even tastes like highly spiced scrambled eggs, and that saltfish in Jamaica is cured Newfoundland cod. Akee's Linnaean name, *Blighia sapida*, perpetuates a story with perhaps an allegory. Some of Captain Bligh's crew, just before the *Bounty* was to sail out of Port Royal for the Pacific, ate their akee from unripe pods, and died. Unless the seeds are black the fruit is poisonous.

There had been rum cocktails, followed by good dry Beaune, and inhibitions were loosened enough for someone to remark that we seven were seeds of different colours. Eloise, who had come with Wayne, promptly claimed to be the blackest and therefore quite harmless, and that Wayne, whose skin was parchment white under fiery red hair, must be definitely not edible. I came rather weakly to his defence by telling her the last time I'd seen him he was brown-skinned, decked in eagle feathers, and had passed for a B.C. Indian chief in a U.B.C. players club presentation of my "Damnation of Vancouver." There was then a more serious attempt to compare origins. Tony, dusky-white, had been born in Victoria, B.C., of Welsh and Italian parents. Swarthy-brown Roger, a failed medical student but now an enterprising importer, was half Greek, half Irish. I was English and perhaps Norman from my father, Shetland-Norse from my mother. Tony's girl, the journalist daughter of a successful Kingston publisher, was "velvet-skinned and graceful as a dark gladiolus." She thought there were Ibo slaves and a colonial Britisher in her family tree, and maybe others, but she didn't know for sure and plainly didn't care. Roger's partner, the truly beautiful creature present, was racially the most complex. Chinese, South Indian, West African, Spanish.

They seemed happier than most of the other groups I had been with in the West Indies. Was it only because they were a little younger? No, I thought, it's because they're successful here in Jamaica as well as young. They are in no immediate fear of joblessness or exile; they have climbed to a special middle-class shelf where origins are unimportant and politics a bore; they can joke with their white boyfriends about Black Power in a country where nine out of ten are at least part-African. I thought it a precarious perch, yet silently hoped they would never fall but climb to a "new found land" more civilized and sunny than any my own country had created.

On the beach the next afternoon by chance I came across another U.B.C. student, a Jamaican girl who had returned a year earlier with an M.A. in sociology to take up a post in the Manley government — and been dropped from it when Bustamente's party came to power. She was not in economic straits, since her father was a successful lawyer in Kingston, but she was not a happy girl. She had been long enough in Canada to appreciate the wider opportunities there, but also to realize that her negritude was a handicap limiting sharply her opportunities to succeed as a teacher of anything. On impulse, and hoping to rally her from depression, I asked Lane to be my partner that evening for a party at Figueroa's. She accepted and offered to call for me with her father's car.

It was a huge affair, with George as joint host. Fig now owned what had been a plantation house on the edge of town, with ample gardens and driveways. He also had an ample family, and had dressed eight of his offspring East Indian style and posted them with flashlights to guide cars into parking areas under the magnolia trees and by the night-blooming cereus. The beautiful children were

omnipresent with trays of nuts, fruits, drinks, and other goodies. Apart from those who crashed, there were 150 invited guests. I remember, of course, that I at last met Manley, by now only leader of the opposition in the Jamaica government — a lean-faced, intense, intelligent man, and an undoubted idealist. He was too beset by old friends and well-wishers, however, for true conversation. I had more time with his English wife, Edna; since Mrs. Manley was a sculptor, we talked of David Wyke, a friend in common, and about her hopes for an intercultural West Indies. I felt she rather assumed too easily such a creation would follow quickly on her husband's return to power.

But it was not really a party for talking, only for dancing, for hour after dreamy hour of sambas and twists, tangos, rumbas, boleros, mambos, waltzes, and a dozen other sinuous prancings with a succession of lithe girls (most of whom, it seemed, were friends of George). Later I learned they were part of the surplus of island maidens which large Jamaican parties were always careful to invite. We danced on and on to the music of marimbas and marimboas, guitars and maracas, congas and bongos. My shy Lana, however, had wilted by midnight and insisted on driving herself home; as the guest responsible for the occasion, I stayed, willingly enough, till the party broke up at three.

I'm sure I'd hoped to sleep through most of that day, since it was Sunday, but I see from my notes that Wayne Hubble (who had not made Fig's party) dug me out of my ancient guest lodge bed at noon for a visit to the antiquities in the Spanish Town museum, followed by a tour of the fort Captain Morgan built when he was the island's Pirate Governor, and a *cuba libre* at a sombre white-only country club back in Kingston. Wayne then drove me to the YWCA for another reading of contemporary CanLit.

It was the hottest and most humid day I'd encountered in Jamaica and there wasn't even a hand fan moving. Sweat rolled into my mouth as I spoke, and the audience was sparse. However, it did include the A/HC of C and his wife, the President of the Canadian Club, and a Kingston poetess, and though I performed indifferently, my listeners were much more attentive than I'd have been had I been listening to me. Afterwards there was a brief reception from which George and his little Guyanese girl whisked me to the apartment of a girlfriend of hers, Rosalie, for a small farewell party — the four of us and three other couples.

Rosalie was a treasure, a lively, witty, and curvaceous lady who possessed also a flat, superior rum, a good playback and a great set of records, including the best bawdy calypsos I'd ever heard and a wide range of dance bands. There was a moment, just before we broke up at one in the morning, when all of us linked hands and moved in a dancing circle. I caught sight of myself in a mirror, an instant of heightened happiness, and the title of George's first book flashed in my mind.

My first act, when I got settled aboard a ship in Port Royal the next afternoon, bound for Spain, was to write a thank-you letter in verse for George Lamming, which ends:

more than rum happy
I was giddy
from sudden friendship
wanted undeserved
Black tulip faces
self swaying forgotten
laughter in dance
Suddenly on a wall mirror
my face assaulted me
stunned to see itself
like a white snail
in the supple dark flowers
Always now I move grateful
to all of you
who let me walk thoughtless
and unchallenged
in the gardens
in the castles
of your skins.

REHEARSAL

Cyril Dabydeen

*“Language the chameleon seeks to explain
the chameleon reality.” A.I.*

Old father tongue sticking out
over the fenced yard,
scampering out from the coop,
this reptilean self
breaking out without a warning —

changeable again, across the barrier
scattering feathers —
a life gone rampant
in dreams; the insane among us presenting
emblems from the scuttled sea —