

Museums

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This novel begins in a museum. A small white museum which once housed 18th century British colonial military. It is a small building with two floors, wooden and creaky. It has the smell of all colonial buildings, a yellow hand-written papery mustiness which reminds one of khaki breeches, white sea island cotton shirts, endless reams of paper, carbon duplicates and ink wells. It reminds one of interminable waiting. You arrive at the small white museum by climbing or driving up the steepest hill in the town. Up this hill was once a fort. Fort King George. Laid down around 1783, this fort was named for George the third of England. You come past the once regiment buildings, and the once domed iron jail house which rests in one side of the hill. You imagine 18th and 19th century prisoners baking in this iron prison atop this highest of peaks in the town.

On the other side of the narrow road up the hill are flamboyant trees, ranging, graceful and red. As you crest the hill there, there is the ocean, the Atlantic and there a fresh wide breeze relieving the deep flush of heat. From atop this hill you can see over the whole town. Huge black canons overlook the ocean, the harbor and the town's perimeter. If you look right, if your eyes could round the point you would see the Atlantic and the Caribbean in a wet blue embrace. If you come here at night you will surprise lovers, naked or clothing askew groping hurriedly or dangerously languorous, draped against the black gleaming canons of George the third. At night it is cool and breezy here and dark; in the daytime it is stark and chalk white and hot, except for the ever blue sky and the flame trees - their torrid best in the dry season.

This book begins in the small white stone museum left of the canons. As you enter there is the sound of a ceiling fan, whirring somewhere in an office upstairs. A clerk asks you apologetically for five TT dollars and ushers you in. On the first floor are bones, shells, stones, small carvings, arrowheads, broken amulets of the first peoples who inhabited this island. It strikes me that on the first floor of all our consciousnesses, all of our imaginations in the Americas, there are these particular bones, shells carvings, arrowheads, broken amulets of the first peoples who inhabited this new world. The legends on the glass cabinet seem unsure of dates, names, there is not enough money to investigate details, the curator says. To enhance the exhibit the curator has installed a carved boat from Guyana or Surinam, the kind these peoples

must have used two or three thousand years ago to make the trip by water to this island from the South American continent. Already this novel is about forgetting. Several millennia have been consumed in the airless small room of this exhibit. This small wreckage of broken stones, bones and carvings strewn in a glass case without classification or dating is what is left of millions of journeys, million of songs, a million daily acts, millions of memories that no one remembers.

On this hill with its wide sumptuous view of black glittering water at night, its blue forever in the day time, this museum's vain attempt at recollection is visited by few. Guilt makes me want to stop longer at the glass cabinet even though it is possible to see all there is here in a matter of minutes. Fear of disrespect to something quite old makes me linger but then sheepishly move on. Out of the corner of my eye I see a wicker sack where bitter cassava was drained of its poison; I see an arrow whose head might have been tarred with woorara. I make a note without even knowing why and I walk away.

Glancing away from the glass cabinet's debris is looking away from history as well as being filled, uneasily, with history. Moving away is escaping it and this novel is escaping as well as succumbing. Edouard Glissant, the Martiniquan critic says "history is destined to be pleasure or distress... (it) (like literature) is capable of quarrying deep within us, as a consciousness or the emergence of a consciousness, as a neurosis (symptom of loss) and a contraction of the self." This novel begins as I move to the staircase to the second floor. The staircase creaks before my weight has the time to rest on it, it creaks from the thought of another body weighing it down, inquiring. The feeling that I carry from the glass cabinet to the stairs is already in the novel - discomfort. This novel will not breath on those bones, if it does it will be brief like the brief rain the Caribs disappear into on this work's second page, it will be brief and therefore mythic. Those bones warn me that everything after I have made up, I have invented in absence.

Moving up the staircase to the next rooms of the museum where this novel begins, I am distressed, in Glissant's sense, and also curious which is pleasure. The rooms above contain maps, the works of 18th century cartographers growing more and more skilled at forgetting as time passed, maps, ascertaining courses and distances, astronomic observations made on the land, latitudes taken at sea, soundings of banks and harbors and bays, bearings for ships. These cartographers, they were artists and poets. They were dreamers and imaginers as surely as I. On a Chart of The Antilles, or

Charibbee, or, Caribs Islands with the Virgin Isles by Louis De La Rochette, drawn and published in 1784, there are angels, or cherubs, mouths pursed, blowing the trade winds west on the Atlantic. You must remember this is one point of the middle passage. People are to be lost here, drowned here; people are to be sold, backs and hearts broken; those cherubs, their sweet lips pursed, blow a rough trade. Only an artist could render an angel here. Wonderful wind roses adorn these maps, ships under full sail; cartouches of sovereigns, great explorers and welcoming nubile natives.

Thomas Jefferys, Geographer to the King, George the third, writes, in a strangely elegant prose, his observations of this island with the small museum and the cabinet of bones:

"The currents near Tobago are very strong and uncertain especially between this island and Trinidad. At the full and change of the moon the sea will rise four feet perpendicular. The North east trades blow all year round. The numerical figures denote e/y depth of water in fathoms where e/y anchors are exprefsed it is good anchorage Man-o-War Bay, Courland, Sandy Point and King's Bay are for vessels of the largest size. Tyrrel's Bay, Bloody Bay, Parlatuviers Bay at Englishman's Bay, Castara Bay and La Guira's Bay have safe anchorage for vefsels of 150 tuns or under. Halifax Bay is very safe and snug for ships under 250 Tuns but there is a shoal in e/y middle of e/y entrance that makes a Pilot necessary. If you make Tobago toward evening and are afraid of running in with it you must not by any means lay to but fstand to e/y southward under an easy sail otherwise e/y current which always sets to e/y North west or north east will probably occasion your lofsing sight of the island and if it set north west would perhaps carry you so far to e/y leeward that you should not be able to fetch it again. Vefsels sailing from e/y eastward for e/y south side of e/y island, must keep well to e/y southward, otherwise the current round Little Tobago which run always to e/y North west will sweep them away to e/y northwest. To the South west there is nothing to fear, till you come to Courland Bay but what shows itself, except Chesterfield rocks..."

This novel begins most assuredly here in this sublime narrative. I am stunned as I read it with its lispng s's, I am fascinated by its unintended irony, I am in love with its cadence, what movement in, "(Do) not by any means lay to but stand to under an easy sail." I am envious the way it speaks so gently to its hearers, so surely. Its authority in apprehending what others cannot apprehend, its command of the geography of the oceans - How wilting! How majestic! This gorgeous prose dissembles, it obstructs our view of its real directions, it alludes, it masks. But it points, it says, there, that is where you land the ships bringing slaves to this island. It says that it is possible to do this and

still maintain gifts of erudition, or intelligence even playfulness. Language is so wonderful, so deceitful. Which is why two hundred and thirty years later I wrench it from his pen, I tear it from the wall of this museum, I cut it into pieces - one piece for the title of this novel, *At the Full and Change of the Moon*, and the rest I give to my Kamena, who escapes the slave plantation at Mon Chagrin in this novel and who in this novel is searching searching for *Terre Bouillante*, a marronage; who is searching in this novel for a place he will never find. He must instead take Bola, the child of a woman named Marie Ursule, a woman who at the beginning of this novel is about to commit suicide, he must take this child Bola and care for her until she can make generations who will inhabit our century. He never finds what he is looking and longing for, it eludes him, it dissembles, all of his directions lead him nowhere. His observations are unearthly ...

Kamena's unending, and as history will confirm, his inevitably futile search for a homeland is the mirror of the books later generations - their dispersal, their scatterings to the extreme and remote corners of the world, Amsterdam, New York, Toronto; their distraction and flights resound in him and back to him. It is their, condition of being. This is what they give all cities, they inhabit temporariness, elsewhere - thinking of something they cannot remember but thinking furiously. The journey is the destination.

I use Jeffrey's observations not as he had, to show the way to slavery, but to sail my characters into the late twentieth century. The unholy paradox of it does not escape me, I cannot undo Jeffrey's words, which might look like simple directions to some; I cannot unhappen history and neither can my characters. When asked as in Derek Walcott's poem, "Where are your monuments, your battles, martyrs?/ Where your tribal memory?" My characters answer as in that poem, "Sirs,/ in that grey vault. The sea. The sea/ has locked them up." My characters can only tear into pieces, both history and Jeffrey's observations, they can only deliberately misplace directions, and misread observations. They can take north for south, west for east. Anywhere they live is remote. They can in the end impugn the whole theory of directions. They inhabit everywhere, mostly the metropolises of North America and Europe. Their lives take any direction at any moment.

In this museum are records, books, lists, names of the enslaved and their age, sex and physical condition. This novel begins in the jumble of names I've read. I look down each list, I try to imagine someone writing these lists. Would they have written them down at the beginning of the crop at the end of the crop or would they have kept a running record. Would they have had a cup of tea before going to the job or would they

have stopped in the middle gone home to have an afternoon nap and returned thinking what a nuisance paper work was. Or would this someone have written these names quite happily, with flourish in the wrist, congratulating himself or herself on the good condition and quantity of their livestock. I cannot help reading these lists wondering at the personal. What did May, girl, ten. sickly, look like? or Alfred, man, twenty (question mark), good health? There are no ruins of slave houses on this island. Their lodgings were so poorly made, so transient nothing is left of that. Perhaps that is all to the good. Forgetting is a crucial condition of living with any peace. But the records of what and how, are in the living, in our habits, our tastes, our styles - a sweet tooth, a love of starchy foods, a sudden hatred of fields, a desire for big cities, an insistent need for loud colors, beautiful shoes, excess of all kinds whether we can afford them or not.

I scour this museum to understand what is already written in this novel; what is already written in this novel writing itself. I scour many museums. In these museums are signs of exits from the door of no return. In another museum, on another island I find an eighteenth century prison dress once worn by a woman who was a slave. It is hanging on an iron mannequin in a dank room in the belly of another eighteenth century fort. It is stiff, mildewed and for one moment I think why, why have they kept this since there seems to be no reason in the assortment of items here, sugar boiling coppers of various sizes, saddles, ladles... Why this dress. A dour dress as any prison dress might be in any century, doubtless, but a dress as if waiting for this novel to inhabit it, to give it life. Writers, I know, are egotistical sad beings but this dress was waiting for me, it was waiting for the fiction of my Marie Ursule to inhabit it. Looking at this dress I felt a chill, a determination which I could never have myself, I could not be that single minded or have that much conviction or perhaps that much love to last several centuries to inhabit a novel. The memory of this dress arrives one night along with a memory of V.S. Naipaul's *The Loss of Eldorado: a History*. In it he tells of a woman, Thisbe, who was a slave and the main suspect in a mass death by poisoning on a plantation. After being tried for several months and tortured throughout she was sentenced to death. Thisbe was 'hanged, her body mutilated and burnt and her head spiked on a pole. At her hanging she was reported to have said, "This is but a drink of water to what I have already suffered." My character, named Marie Ursule, wakes up in the first morning of the novel heading for that dour mildewed prison dress and those words which Naipaul snatched from history and which I receive from him, gratefully. And the novel begins, "Marie Ursule woke up the morning, knowing what morning it was and that it might be her last."

This novel begins in a memoir of Pere Labat a French priest who went out to Martinique and the French colonies in the seventeenth century. There, in cheery recollections of his adventures and life among the colonists, I find two Ursuline nuns, Mere Marguerite de St Joseph and Soeur de Clemy. They have a convent, two novices, a plantation and nineteen slaves. They are very good business women because, according to Pere Labat, when they die without consecrating their novices into nuns, the Jesuit priests claim their estate. Pere Labat's sanguine account of all this, his own travels and business dealings, the ways of planters, the workings of capital machines, his fascination and disdain for the rituals of the indigenous peoples, his enthusiasm for the whole matter of colonizing make you understand just how plain and ordinary this all was, how commonplace and regular, and not in the least bit extraordinary, brutality and exploitation are. And how god is tied up in it up to his neck. The nuns sparkle in Pere Labat's narrative even though he only deals with them briefly. I imagine them moving calmly and ghostly among the teeming crowds at the docks in Marseille in 1680 or so, their habit dragging the ground, their barrels or bundles carried by the novices, making passage on the ship called 'Tranquille'. They are going to the colonies to convert savages. When I meet them in Pere Labat's narrative I write them into ever. In the novel they are hundreds of years old. They hover over the work.

This novel flees from that century. It does all it can do to make distance between itself and those catastrophes - Marie Ursule, the nuns, the cartographers; it makes haste through the hurricane of 1875 when a boy is swept away from all his might have beens; another goes off to the first world war only to find himself digging latrines; one woman has a sudden and great lust for the glint of gold things and fine cloth; the descendants of those early narratives cross to the mainland of South America step back onto the archipelago time and again unknown and known to each other, aware and unaware of their history. Some make their way by water and guile all the way to North America and Europe. That 18th century cartographer's theory of directions is unraveling in this novel. By the end of the twentieth century what the lines on Jeffrey's map have conspired to hold in has burst out. What he had not counted on was Marie Ursule but Marie Ursule had counted on nothing just whim, a decision to let her child Bola escape with Kamena. Counting on her own theory, the theory of nothing, she had opened up the world. In every city in the old world are Marie Ursule's new world wanderers real and chimeric.

Museums, museums are not only enclosures of and for the dead. They are also wide vistas and dark alley ways, car rides across the backs of cities and bodies wrapped in cold coats. This novel begins with the living in Dam square, Amsterdam, 1992.

Truthfully this novel begins because I have lost my luggage on my way to Amsterdam. In Glasgow I search and search for my suitcase until the plane to Amsterdam is about to leave. I board my flight to Schipol feeling somewhat bereft. I have the clothes on my back. I am in Europe with only the clothes on my back but I have my passport and my money and thank goodness the volume of poetry I am to read from the following night. My most horrible nightmare will not come true. The nightmare where I am at a poetry reading and I discover that I have forgotten my book at home and I cannot remember a single line of my poetry. My luggage...to be without luggage, I wonder if this is how they felt in that other century, no familiar thing which would suggest that you decided to travel, you have a destination, a place you will land and open your suitcase and put your things away and then go outside and see what is there. You will be a traveler, you will look at your surroundings as a place to discover, you will decide what to eat, who to speak with, where to sleep. You will expect recognition and interest even fellowship.

I land at Schiphol, Amsterdam, without my luggage. Unlike Jefferys. I have no compass. Nor do I have a dispensation from a king to map a shoreline or in my case a city. Anyway it is 1992. And travel is now different though sometimes the same. I am a traveler but I do not travel to the new world (as travelers do today) to encounter a shaman who will take me to my inner soul; a shaman whom I will consume with the greed of a coca-cola drinker; a shaman who will disappoint me eventually and inevitably since in the grand narrative the outcome of such encounters must confirm the fallibility of the Shaman's magic and the infallibility of my coca-cola. I travel to the old world to be... well ...to be an exotic. I am not a traveler then, I am an exotic and that in the best of circumstances, an out of place nuisance in the worst. The mythology is already known, already in place, my travelogues will not be sent home to make maps for science and commerce. I cannot reflect, question, demonise or assimilate the monuments of Europe. I have no center which domesticates the periphery.(Gikande) I do not even have my own luggage. I do not know Amsterdam, I do not have a map, the ex-policeman concierge who told me that he had been to Canada to a police convention gestures in the direction of a flea market where I might find some second hand clothes to wear. I should not be coy here, there is no prison dress waiting for me only haunting. It will take a day or two to get my luggage. It has apparently gone to New York. Following the ex-policeman's directions I wander over to the flea market,

buy a shirt then wander about other streets looking for clothing stores. I walk along the canal getting lost, losing my bearings, until something else takes my eyes, a window. A woman is in the window, she is standing next to a table, she looks at ease. I say to myself, "oh, of course there are Black people here, Curacao, Surinam, the Dutch West Indies." I stare at her, she stares back until I feel that I am intruding. I miss my step like a gazing child. When I look up there is another window with another woman, then another, then another. It dawns on me slowly as history, "Oh!" How artless of me. Oh yes its Amsterdam. I am struck that all the scenes in the windows are domestic. My character Maya stares at me impatiently waiting for me to recognize her then as if having no time with my innocence she goes about her business. This window and this woman, the one sitting so casually, finds it way into the novel.

Eduardo Galeano writes in *Walking Words* 'Window on the City (II)', "I'm alone in a foreign city, and I don't know anyone, nor do I understand the language. But suddenly someone shines in the middle of the crowd, shining suddenly like a word lost on the page or any patch of grass on the skin of the earth." In Dam Square I spot my character Adrian, it is night, he is walking busily back and forth in a jerky walk. He is wiping sweat from his face with a distracted hand. His body is light and wind bent though there is no wind. He gathers his coat up around his ears though it is summer. But he is cold from something missing in his veins. He is trembling. With my usual preciousness at first I do not catch the play for some minutes. Then he shines. That is Kamena's boy, the boy lost to directions. Then I am sad on Dam Square. All the way here, all the way here to look so dry faced on Dam Square. I feel like sitting there, right there beneath the statue covered in pigeon waste, I feel like sitting there and crying, I feel bereft. I feel abandoned by Marie Ursule to city squares and windows and public places where I am on display and must make a display, like exotica. I feel marooned like Kamena. Marooned now in outposts and suburbs and street corners any where in the world. I am adrift, spilled out, with Adrian and Maya at the end of this century in any city all over the world with nothing as certain as Marie Ursule coming. We are all abandoned, all scattered in Marie Ursule's hopelessness and her skill.

This novel doesn't begin because of any of this. It begins because I am a writer and I like to make things up. I like the way a word can bloom a whole other set of words, and I like the gesture of an arm on a street corner or in a church, I like the faint whiff of perfume, a hip shotted walk, a trail of cloth, dappling light off a tree through a curtain at a window, strong coffee artichoke hearts and dry white wine. The novel begins because I am sitting in a two story pine house in the middle of winter in Burnt River

drinking coffee, and a spider is figuring out how to catch the flies buzzing on the window pane and by this time I have no other skill so I begin to write.