

Bajan Bestiary

Background

For a shift of brain hemisphere and mode of discourse, I insert here a suite of poems that may serve as mid-book interlude. Having vowed that I would write no more utilitarian prose while recharging myself in Barbados from the two methods books, I began writing for fun little sketches of some of the critters I saw almost daily around the converted sugarmill house where we were living or down at the sea nearby, where I spear-fished with a native.

Writing these poems was a different process for me, and the immediate pleasure was very different from the long-range satisfaction of the writing I was more used to. I tinkered. I lingered over single words and phrases, toyed over and over with lines, experimenting with sound play other than rhyme and with the juxtaposition of images. It was all a luxury. I sat on a patio surrounded by the old coral-stone boiling house and conical mill and tall cane fields. I watched and wrote, watched and wrote.

Three of the four animals comprising the bestiary had folk names, as I indicate in the poems, by which the natives call them and which gave me mythic, metaphorical departure points. I wanted to imagine what was in Bajan¹ minds when they invented these names. I tried to share their metaphors. But then images of my own came to me, and the poems took more personal turns. Obviously, the folk names were only “story starters” to get me going, but I liked the feeling of immersing myself first in external terms and surroundings. The outward focus made expressing myself easier and more creative. I suspect most literary writers employ some such indirection to tease out and flesh out their insides.

Whatever the worth of these poems, making them showed me a great deal about the underground working of intuition in writing. Searching within the constraints of a given image, rhythm, phrasing, you surprise yourself as these constraints force verbal felicities or turns of idea that you would not have arrived at by common pondering. When finished, I was astonished to find that I had created a progression from air to land to sea, corresponding to an increasing descent into unconscious material and to a deepening of several themes that I had unintentionally carried over from poem to poem. One such theme touched on writing itself.

¹Barbadian, of Barbados

The first poem was published in the *English Journal* of May 1974. I had thought the whole suite was being printed, but the other poems somehow got detached and lost in the editorial offices.



Hummingbird

1

Barbados' "doctor bird" is making rounds,
 Inoculating flowers, tapping samples,
 Hemming the blossomed hedge a pause a stitch
 As doctors moving room to room suture
 Up the corridors (he drops who stops),
 So curtly prodding tendered guts he leaves
 An aftermath of open-mouthed patients,
 Zips off to query the next expectant
 Corolla, flight a rapid riffling fillip,
 Then sticks in space and tucks his tail, upheld
 By focus only, wings a thicker air,
 Doomed to higher metabolic rate,
 Like surgeon freezing speed, for who else
 Staying steady operates so fleet?

2

Still, sip-sipping belles, he's tip-tupping
 A whole blooming harem by himself.
 Have they been drained or plenished, healed or had?
 That sheen of golden green suffusing black
 Betrays a garb of greenhead flies rippling
 In iridescent Baudelarian evil
 Perhaps, or just a sober-coated servant,
 Depending which reflection winks the mind.
 A blurring-motored airship takes a station
 To kill or succor—*some* exquisite coupling.
 A tiny vampire drinks the liquid life
 Away but, incubus, pollinates the sleep.

Lizard

1

Black-eyed chartreuse lizards blink the heat,
 Tautly menace flies, or scout the court
 And stop to tilt a head and roll an eye.
 Called a "cock," the male's a thrusting intent,
 A footed phallus arousing housewives,
 Who call him cute and feed him bacon scraps
 But think: The charming little carnivore
 Lumbers exactly like an alligator.
 (A reptile's a reptile and, warm clime or not,
 They're cold-blooded and don't feel the way we do.
 Or at least don't think the way we do.
 Or at any rate don't know they're thinking.)
 Tumid emotion balloons his throat, conveys
 To males a threat to overwhelm with choler,
 To mates a promise to overwhelm with lust:
I'm about to pop
With something that has to do with you.
Get out of my sight
Or deal with what you make me feel.

2

Across stone-coral walls they scroll their length
 In florid arabesquing signatures:
 Scrawled on chalky hall a green graffito;
 Embossed on door a hieroglyph; on bell
 Of clarinet a clef in bas relief;
 A cursive monogram subscribes a painting.
 At every turn a flourish of self, and that's
 How a body writes his autograph.

Crab

The inland crab is solid, red and black;
 The seaside crab is weightless, washed of color,
 Or sandy rather, as though beach showed through shell.
 He scuttles ghostly over tiny dunes

To sky-reflecting flats that make him pause
To contemplate the waves. A fit of folly:
He cocks his elbows, gets a running start, and
Like a maniac pianist's treble hand
Scribbling wild arpeggios down the keys
He sideways sprints the stretch and bams the sea
As if to bounce that wave right back to France.
He's lost to sight, a foamed-over beau geste
Hissed by seething surf. Then drifting with
The froth, two black knobs on stems pop up,
Fix on you, bespeak a shrug (you can't win
Them all) and make the mute schlemiel's appeal.

One night a tiny Saxon helmet thresh-
Holds between patio and parlor, gleaming,
Borne upon six clustered legs and peering
Eyeless at us, some local crab who'd found
A metal cone to play the hermit in,
Substituting navy gear for shell
(Quite logically, given the goal of each).
A teutonic opera extra missing spear,
Unsure of cue, helmet blocking eyes,
He stumbles toward the onstage light and sound
But, unprojecting, lingers near the wings.

Another night a bigger bumbler finds
Himself clutching my daughter's coral wall,
Witlessly weighing his pointless position,
A trophy lobster lacking varnished plaque.
Waving monstrous claws, it beetles the pillow
At just the ritual hour of nightly tale
When dad and daughter put the beasts to peace,
Fêting the safety of drapes and counterpane.
I knock him clacking down and we square off:
That crustacean's itching to pinch my flesh
And I expect to crunch his exoskeleton.
He readies curving pincers like a wrestler
Aping a ballerina rounding arms.
His straight-edged mandible lifts and drops
As wooden as a puppet's clapping chin.
They're funny all right, but that's one clown I killed.

Octopus

“Sea cats” have a feline grace and trace the
Ocean floor in muscular liquefaction.
Small, and prized as food, they’re stalked in shallows
With crook or spear. You poke a pocket of rock
That seems too small for even a junior cat
But you hook and pull until the hole
Explodes as flailing star several times
The size of where it hid and webbed around
From stretching tendrils every way at once.
The skewered center ripples out in spasms
To tips encircling nothing but open sea.
You grasp the pulsing terror about the head
And feel at once the slimy tight adhesion
Of eight mucoused whips astounding your arm
And sucking with ringed holes of piccolos.
A tighter embrace one could not dread or hope
(From man amok or virgin just delivered).
So you palp the hump of grafted viscera
Then stick two fingers up a slippery sheath
While underwater nimbus clouds are rolling
About your hands to roil the deed from view
(Some defense! to hide from what you hug)
And, pressing thumb to dome, turn the insides
Out. Faint like lovers sinking back, you
Both subside, it to die a-languishing
(For instant death you bite between the eyes)
And you to wonder whether any critter
That lumps its brains and guts together deserves
The rape it gets, or whether thus to kill
A mollusk—evict, eviscerate—may not
Evince demented need to twice expose,
By entering in while looking at, instead
Of alternating. To see by feel you kill.
Such disclosing confuses thought with touch
Even more than mollusks do and causes
Lunatics to disembowel women
For secrets never learned if brought to light.
Of course I don’t undo an octopus
To understand the universe but just
To sport with feeling in deeps behind the ink,
Despite the lashing of a cat o’ eight tails.