





POETRY FOUNDATION

The Fist

BY DEREK WALCOTT

The fist clenched round my heart
loosens a little, and I gasp
brightness; but it tightens
again. When have I ever not loved
the pain of love? But this has moved

past love to mania. This has the strong
clench of the madman, this is
gripping the ledge of unreason, before
plunging howling into the abyss.

Hold hard then, heart. This way at least you live.

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Derek Walcott

1930-2017

Born on the island of Saint Lucia, a former British colony in the West Indies, poet and playwright Derek Walcott was trained as a painter but turned to writing as a young man. He published his first poem in the local newspaper at the age of 14. Five years later, he borrowed \$200 to print his first collection, *25 Poems*, which he distributed on street corners. Walcott's major breakthrough came with the collection *In a Green Night: Poems 1948-1960* (1962), a book which celebrates the Caribbean and its history as well as investigates the scars of colonialism. Throughout a long and distinguished career, Walcott returned to those same themes of language, power, and place. His later collections include *Tiepolo's Hound* (2000), *The Prodigal* (2004), *Selected Poems* (2007), *White Egrets* (2010), and *Morning, Paramin* (2016). In 1992, Walcott won the Nobel Prize in Literature. The Nobel committee described his work as "a poetic oeuvre of great luminosity, sustained by a historical vision, the outcome of a multicultural commitment."

Since the 1950s Walcott divided his time between Boston, New York, and Saint Lucia. His work resonates with Western canon and Island influences, shifting between Caribbean patois and English, and often addressing his English and West Indian ancestry. According to *Los Angeles Times Book Review* contributor Arthur Vogelsang, "These continuing polarities shoot an electricity to each other which is questioning and beautiful and which helps form a vision altogether Caribbean and international, personal (him to you, you to him), independent, and essential for readers of contemporary literature on all the continents." Known for his technical control, erudition, and large canvases, Walcott was, according to poet and critic Sean O'Brien, "one of the handful of poets currently at work in English who are capable of making a convincing attempt to write an epic ... His work is conceived on an oceanic scale and one of its fundamental concerns is to give an account of the simultaneous

unity and division created by the ocean and by human dealings with it.”

Many readers and critics point to *Omeros* (1990), an epic poem reimagining the Trojan War as a Caribbean fishermen’s fight, as Walcott’s major achievement. The book is “an effort to touch every aspect of Caribbean experience,” according to O’Brien who also described it as an *ars poetica*, concerned “with art itself—its meaning and importance and the nature of an artistic vocation.” In reviewing Walcott’s *Selected Poems* (2007), poet Glyn Maxwell ascribes Walcott’s power as a poet not so much to his themes as to his ear: “The verse is constantly trembling with a sense of the body in time, the self slung across metre, whether metre is steps, or nights, or breath, whether lines are days, or years, or tides.”

Walcott was also a renowned playwright. In 1971 he won an Obie Award for his play *Dream on Monkey Mountain*, which the *New Yorker* described as “a poem in dramatic form.” Walcott’s plays generally treat aspects of the West Indian experience, often dealing with the socio-political and epistemological implications of post-colonialism and drawing upon various genres such as the fable, allegory, folk, and morality play. With his twin brother, he cofounded the Trinidad Theater Workshop in 1950; in 1981, while teaching at Boston University, he founded the Boston Playwrights’ Theatre. He also taught at Columbia University, Yale University, Rutgers University, and Essex University in England.

In addition to his Nobel Prize, Walcott’s honors included a MacArthur Foundation “genius” award, a Royal Society of Literature Award, and, in 1988, the Queen’s Medal for Poetry. He was an honorary member of the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters. He died in 2017.

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*DEREK WALCOTT**From THE PRODIGAL*

[Desire and disease commingling]

Desire and disease commingling,
 commingling, the white hair and the white page
 with the fear of white sight, blindness, amputation,
 a recurring kidney stone, the plague of AIDS,
 shaken in the mirror by that bewildered look,
 the truculence, the drooping lip of a spiritual lout.
 Look at it any way you like, it's an old man's book
 whenever you write it, whenever it comes out,
 the age in your armpits in the pleats of your crotch,
 the faded perfumes of cherished conversations,
 and the toilet gurgling its eclogues, resurrecting names
 in its hoarse swivelling into an echo after.
 This is the music of memory, water.

[O Serbian sibyl, prophetess]

O Serbian sibyl, prophetess
 peering between your curtains of brown hair
 (or these parentheses), if I were a Jew,
 you'd see me shuffling on the cobblestones
 of some unpronounceable city, you could watch
 my body crumble, like the long, trembling ash
 of a cigarette in the hand of a scholar
 in a sidewalk restaurant, you beauty
 who had the name of a common mountain flower
 that hides in a cleft of the rocks
 on the white-haired ridges of Albania.

DEREK WALCOTT

[The day, with all its pain ahead, is yours]

The day, with all its pain ahead, is yours.
The ceaseless creasing of the morning sea,
the fluttering gamboge cedar leaves allegro,
the rods of the yawning branches trolling the breeze,
the rusted meadows, the wind-whitened grass,
the coos of the stone-colored ground doves on the road,
the echo of benediction on a house—
its rooms of pain, its verandah of remorse
when joy lanced through its open-hearted doors
like a hummingbird out to the garden and the pool
in which the sky has fallen. These are all yours,
and pain has made them brighter as absence does
after a death, as the light heals the grass.
And the twig-brown lizard scuttles up its branch
like fingers on the struts of a guitar.
I hear the detonations of agave
the stuttering outbursts of bougainvillea,
I see the acacia's bonfire, the begonia's bayonets,
and the tamarind's thorns and the broadsides of clouds
from the calabash
and the cedars fluttering their white flags of surrender
and the flame trees' siege of the fort.
I saw black bulls, horns lowered, galloping, goring the mist
that rose, unshrouding the hillocks of Santa Cruz
and the olives of Esperanza
Andalusian idyll, and answer
and the moon's blank tambourine
and the drizzle's guitars
and the sunlit wires of the rain
the shawls and the used stars
and the ruined fountains.



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Becune Point

BY DEREK WALCOTT

Stunned heat of noon. In shade, tan, silken cows
hide in the thorned acacias. A butterfly staggers.

Stamping their hooves from thirst, small horses drowse
or whinny for water. On parched, ochre headlands, daggers

of agave bristle in primordial defense,
like a cornered monster backed up against the sea.

A mongoose charges dry grass and fades through a fence
faster than an afterthought. Dust rises easily.

Haze of the Harmattan, Sahara dust, memory's haze
from the dried well of Africa, the headland's desert

or riders in swirling burnouses, mixed with the greys
of hills veiled in Impressionist light. We inherit

two worlds of associations, or references, drought
that we heighten into Delacroix's North Africa,

veils, daggers, lances, herds the Harmattan brought
with a phantom inheritance, which the desperate seeker

of a well-spring staggers in the heat in search of—
heroic ancestors; the other that the dry season brings

is the gust of a European calendar, but it is the one love
that thirsts for confirmations in the circling rings

of the ground dove's cooing on stones, in the acacia's
thorns and the agave's daggers, that they are all ours,

the white horsemen of the Sahara, India's and Asia's
plumed mongoose and crested palmtree, Benin and Pontoise.

We are history's afterthought, as the mongoose races
ahead of its time; in drought we discover our shadows,

our origins that range from the most disparate places,
from the dugouts of Guinea to the Nile's canted dhows.

II

The incredible blue with its bird-inviting cloud,
in which there are crumbling towers, banners and domes,

and the sliding Carthage of sunsets, the marble shroud
drawn over associations that are Greece's and Rome's

and rarely of Africa. They continue at sixty-seven
to echo in the corridors of the head, perspectives

of a corridor in the Vatican that led, not to heaven,
but to more paintings of heaven, ideas in lifted sieves

drained by satiety because great art can exhaust us,
and even the steadiest faith can be clogged by excess,

the self-assured Christs, the Madonnas' inflexible postures
without the mess of motherhood. With this blue I bless

emptiness where these hills are barren of tributes
and the repetitions of power, our sky's naive

ceiling without domes and spires, an earth whose roots
like the thorned acacia's deepen my belief.

Poetry (December 1998).

Source: *Poetry* (Poetry Foundation, 1998)

SEA GRAPES

That sail which leans on light,
tired of islands,
a schooner beating up the Caribbean

for home, could be Odysseus,
home-bound on the Aegean;
that father and husband's

longing, under gnarled sour grapes, is
like the adulterer hearing Nausicaa's name
in every gull's outcry.

This brings nobody peace. The ancient war
between obsession and responsibility
will never finish and has been the same

for the sea-wanderer or the one on shore
now wriggling on his sandals to walk home,
since Troy sighed its last flame,

and the blind giant's boulder heaved the trough
from whose groundswell the great hexameters come
to the conclusions of exhausted surf.

The classics can console. But not enough.

NIGHT FISHING

Line, trawl for each word
with the homesick toss
of a black pirogue anchored
in stuttering phosphorus.

The crab-fishers' torches
keep to the surf's crooked line,
and a cloud's page scorches
with a smell of kerosene.

Thorny stars halo
the sybil's black cry:
"Apothenein thelo
I am longing to die."

But, line, live in the sounds
that ignorant shallows use;
then throw the silvery nouns
to open-mouthed canoes.

SAINT LUCIA'S FIRST COMMUNION

At dusk, on the edge of the asphalt's worn-out ribbon,
in white cotton frock, cotton stockings, a black child stands.
First her, then a small field of her. Ah, it's First Communion!
They hold pink ribboned missals in their hands,

the stiff plaits pinned with their white satin moths.
The caterpillar's accordion, still pumping out the myth
along twigs of cotton from whose parted mouths
the wafer pods in belief without an "if"!

So, all across Saint Lucia thousands of innocents
were arranged on church steps, facing the sun's lens,
erect as candles between squinting parents,
before darkness came on like their blinded saint's.

But if it were possible to pull up on the verge
of the dimming asphalt, before its headlights lance
their eyes, to house each child in my hands,
to lower the window a crack, and delicately urge

the last moth delicately in, I'd let the dark car
enclose their blizzard, and on some black hill,
their pulsing wings undusted, loose them in thousands to stagger
heavenward before it came on: the prejudice, the evil!