

PoetrySlabs celebrates Black History Month at FEAST with readings from the work of Caribbean poets Derek Walcott, David Dabydeen, Christian Campbell and Ishion Hutchinson

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The twin dark shadows of slavery and colonialism inevitably loom large in the work of Caribbean artists and writers, and the poems we'll be encountering (one could almost say 'colliding with') this afternoon – by Derek Walcott, David Dabydeen, Christian Campbell, and Ishion Hutchinson – are no exception. The islands of the Caribbean were settled by Europeans purely for commercial profit, and the legacy of the exploitation that those same Europeans initiated and so very fiendishly refined remains with us to this day.

Derek Walcott, who was born in St Lucia in 1930, made major waves on both sides of the Atlantic with his first collection, *In a Green Night* (published in 1962) and went on to win the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1992, two years after the appearance of his massive poem *Omeros*, an astonishing reinvention of Homer's *Odyssey*. Of his own poetic development while coming to maturity in West Indian culture, he once wrote: 'What we were deprived of was also our privilege. There was a great joy in making a world that so far, up to then, had been undefined... My generation of West Indian writers has felt such a powerful elation at having the privilege of writing about places and people for the first time and, simultaneously, having behind them the tradition of knowing how well it can be done—by a Defoe, a Dickens, a Richardson.' American critic Adam Kirsch considers Walcott 'the postcolonial poet par excellence' and nicely captures the physicality of his word-painting: 'By combining the grammar of vision with the freedom of metaphor, Walcott produces a beautiful style that is also a philosophical style. People perceive the world on dual channels, Walcott's verse suggests, through the senses and through the mind, and each is constantly seeping into the other. The result is a state of perpetual magical thinking, a kind of *Alice in Wonderland* world where concepts have bodies and landscapes are always liable to get up and start talking.'

David Dabydeen, who was born in Guyana in 1955, took his first degree at Cambridge, did his PhD at University College in London, and later lectured for many years throughout Britain. The legacy of slavery is all over his work, which takes no prisoners and has no qualms about calling a spade a spade – but that doesn't prevent many of his poems from being as deeply poignant and funny as they are devastating and, at times, even graphically gruesome. He was made a fellow of the Royal Society of Literature in 2000, becoming only the second West Indian to have

received such an honour (VS Naipaul was the first). He has also been Guyana's ambassador to China.

Christian Campbell, who was born in the Bahamas in 1979 and took degrees in London and the United States, describes himself as 'a nomad that comes from nomads'. In an interview with the *Caribbean Review of Books*, he once said: 'Perhaps I'm something of a Protean poet, a shape-shifter. "Wonder" is a word I love. By "wonder" I mean both the quality of astonishment and that of uncertainty. A kind of (ir)reverent questioning.' Of his debut collection, *Running the Dusk*, one critic has written: 'If you're holding *Running the Dusk* in your hands, you are lucky to be facing the gutsy work of a long-distance runner who possesses the wit and endurance, the staying power of authentic genius. This first collection is controlled beauty and strength, and the exhilaration of images and music encountered are necessary and believable. There's great celebration here.'

Our fourth poet, Ishion Hutchinson, was born in Port Antonio, Jamaica, in 1983 and now teaches courses in poetry and creative writing at Cornell University in the United States. His most recent collection, *House of Lords and Commons*, won America's National Book Critics Circle Award for poetry (a huge achievement) in 2016. In November of last year, New Yorker contributor Dan Chiasson wrote: 'Hutchinson's wildness and his propriety are two sides of the same coin, two expressions of a fundamentally dynastic sense of poetic tradition that is passed down from literary father to son, and that arises partly, these poems suggest, from the void left when Hutchinson's real father vanished. He is a poet of ambivalent homage, feinting but never feigned: this is a form of aesthetic survival in a post-colonial situation, where literary mastery and subjugation are, uncomfortably, closely aligned. You can tell how good Hutchinson is because his poems are full of misfires, phrases chosen by somebody with a hyperkinetic ear and no off switch.'

So here we have four very different poets whose output is becoming foundational to a tradition 'worked up' in a part of the world once dismissed by Europeans as a collection of 'places without a history'. How's that for an alternative fact? It simply isn't true – and I firmly believe we'll be reading a lot more writing (of equally high quality and outstanding relevance) from the Caribbean for years to come.

**DEREK WALCOTT (1930–2017, b. Saint Lucia), DAVID DABYDEEN
(b. 1955, Guyana), CHRISTIAN CAMPBELL (b. 1979, Bahamas),
ISHION HUTCHINSON (b. 1983, Jamaica)**

DEREK WALCOTT

HOMEcomings: ANSE LA RAYE

from 'The Gulf and Other Poems' (1963)

Whatever else we learned
at school, like solemn Afro-Greeks eager for grades,
of Helen and the shades
of borrowed ancestors,
there are no rites
for those who have returned
only, when her looms fade,
drilled in our skulls, the doom-
surge-haunted nights,
only this well-known passage
under the coconuts' salt-rusted
swords, these rotted
leathery sea-grape leaves,
the sea crabs' brittle helmets, and
this barbecue of branches, like the ribs
of sacrificial oxen on scorched sand;
only this fish-gut reeking beach
whose frigate stuck like buzzards overhead
whose spindly, sugar-headed children race
pelting up from the shallows
because your clothes,
your posture
seem a tourist's.
They swarm like flies
round your heart's sore.

Suffer them to come,
entering their needle's eye
knowing whether they live or die,
what others make of life will pass them by
like that far silvery freighter
threading the horizon like a toy;
for once, like them,
you wanted no career >

but this sheer light, this clear,
infinite, boring, paradisal sea,
but hoped it would mean something to declare
today, I am your poet, yours,
all this you knew,
but never guessed you'd come
to know there are homecomings without home.

You give them nothing.
Their curses melt in air.
The black cliffs scowl,
the ocean sucks its teeth,
like that long dugout canoe
like a small petal fallen in a cup,
reflecting nothing but its image,
you sway, reflecting nothing.
The freighter's silvery ghost
is gone, the children gone.
Dazed by the sun
you trudge back to the village
past the white, salty esplanade
under whose palms dead
fishermen move their draughts in shade,
crossing, eating their islands,
and one, with a politician's
ignorant, sweet smile, nods
as if all fate
swayed in his lifted hand.

DAVID DABYDEEN

'CATCHING CRABS'

from Turner: New & Selected Poems (1994)

Ruby and me stalking savannah
Crab season with cutlass and sack like big folk.
Hiding behind stones or clumps of bush
Crabs locked knee-deep in mud mating
And Ruby seven years old feeling strange at the sex
And me horrified to pick them up
Plunge them into the darkness of bag,
So all day we scout to catch the lonesome ones
Who don't mind cooking they no prospect
Of family, and squelching through the mud,
Cutlass clearing bush at our feet, >

We come home tired slow, weighted down with plenty
Which Ma throw live into boiling pot piece-piece.
Tonight we'll have one big happy curry feed,
We'll test out who teeth and jaw strongest
Who will grow up to be the biggest
Or who will make most terrible cannibal.

We leave behind a mess of bones and shell
And come to England and America
Where Ruby hustles in a New York tenement
And me writing poetry at Cambridge,
Death long catch Ma, the house boarded up
Breeding wasps, woodlice in its dark-sack belly:
I am afraid to walk through weed yard,
Reach the door, prise open, look,
In case the pot still bubbles magical
On the fireside, and I see Ma
Working a ladle, slow –
Limbed, crustacean-old, alone,
In case the woodsmoke and curry steam
Burn my child-eye and make it cry.

CHRISTIAN CAMPBELL
'OLD MAN CHANT'
from Running the Dusk (2010)

To Mr. Romeo Farrington, veteran
limo driver, who appeared in a red
shortsleeve serge suit with white shoes,
praise. To the head server at *Twin*
Brothers in silver and lilac polyester,
praise. To the snow-beard man
two pews behind me in cream coat,
cream hat, cream shoes, praise.
To you grandfathers and your stingy
brims, your tie-clips and your canes, your
coloured hankies, your thick black belts
and your blazing wingtips. To the sweat
you rain down in the name of chest-out
and swag. To you Guru Dandies,
old heads with limps and ailments,
casuarina¹ aces. To the Black Colonial
Bush Jackets of Ministers and Doctors. >

You are men named Harlington,
Errol, Clive, Israel, Theophilus,
Cleveland, Allardyce. You are
black men named Pompey,
Solomon, Ezekiel, Napoleon,
Augustus, Elijah. You men
of two-initials-and-a-last-name
nobility. You men who went
to the *Cat 'n Fiddle* after church.
You men who smell of rum
and tiger balm, sometimes Limacol
and the musky smell of Old Spice.
You men of trembling hands
and missing teeth, sugared, sallow eyes.

You men from Cat Island
and Crooked Island and Andros
and Long Island and Inagua
and Abaco and all. You men
who walked to the Panama
Canal, to the Project in Florida,
and walked the long way back.
You men with perpendicular
backs now bending. You men
who were born barefoot
but earned your shoes.
You men who still look
me straight in the eyes,
even from the Thursday
Obits. You Biblical men
with too many children. You
men who loved women
as much as you beat them.

You men of faintly British
accents in the presence of good
company. You men who could
not enter the Savoy Theatre,
walking around always alone.
You men of so many secrets
kept names and stories, borne ache.

To you men who learned
to wear out the world,
I wave the hands of praise.

ISHION HUTCHINSON

'BRYAN'S BAY REVISITED'

from Far District (2010)

It was this beach, a rub-a-dub summer
night, the day-torched sand trampled
into a holy ground of bare feet, in the sultry
scent of herb smoke and roasted peanuts,
my father clung cool-and-deadly to my mother
in a haul-and-pull dance, the first time they met, >
not easing off to take a piss or point fingers
at the sky, luminous with gun salutes.
They ended up in his beach-shanty, holey boards
stuffed with sand grains and newspapers.

It is an empty arena today, the fugitive sun
ramboes across the sky, and in the near horizon,
my father is falling into its arc, a buoy bobbing
like a woman forgotten on the dance floor,
sand on her heels, music slapping the leaves
of her hair, and as the breeze combs through mine,
I take off in one brisk gallop into the sea's mouth,
sucking salt of all I know of the sea, of her wide
skirt, the holes of his merino straining red, gold,
and green, the hot spokes of their love, broken, turn.

DEREK WALCOTT

'BLUES' / S 43

from 'The Gulf and Other Poems' (1963)

Those five or six young guys
hunched on the stoop
that oven-hot summer night
whistled me over. Nice
and friendly. So, I stop.
MacDougal or Christopher
Street in chains of light.

A summer festival. Or some
saint's. I wasn't too far from
home, but not too bright
for a nigger, and not too dark. >

I figured we were all
one, wop, nigger, jew,
besides, this wasn't Central Park.
I'm coming on too strong? You figure
right! They beat this yellow nigger
black and blue.

Yeah. During all this, scared
in case one used a knife,
I hung my olive-green, just-bought
sports coat on a fire plug.
I did nothing. They fought
each other, really. Life
gives them a few kicks,
that's all. The spades, the spicks.

My face smashed in, my bloody mug
pouring, my olive-branch jacket saved
from cuts and tears,
I crawled four flights upstairs.
Sprawled in the gutter, I
remember a few watchers waved
loudly, and one kid's mother shouting
like 'Jackie' or 'Terry',
'now that's enough!'
It's nothing really.
They don't get enough love.

You know they wouldn't kill
you. Just playing rough,
like young America will.
Still, it taught me something.
about love. If it's so tough,
forget it.

DAVID DABYDEEN

'COOLIE SON (THE TOILET ATTENDANT WRITES HOME)'

from Turner: New & Selected Poems (1994)

Taana boy, how you do?
How Shanti stay? And Sukhoo?
Mosquito still a-bite all-you?
Juncha dead true-true? >

Mala bruk-foot set?
Food deh foh eat yet?

Englan nice, snow and dem ting,
A land dey say fit for a king,
Iceapple plenty on de tree and bird a-sing –
Is de beginning of what dey call ‘The Spring’.

And I eating enough for all a-we
And reading book bad-bad.

But is what make Matam wife fall sick
And Sonnel cow suck dry wid tick?

Soon, I go turn lawya or dacta,
But, just now, passage money run out
So I tek lil wuk –
I is a Deputy Sanitary Inspecta,
Big-big office, boy! Tie round me neck!
Brand new uniform, one big bunch keys!
If Ma can see me now how she go please...

CHRISTIAN CAMPBELL

‘YELLOW ROOMS’

from Running the Dusk (2010)

In Grenada, my woman island, for the first time
without her, at my writer-friend place
in Morne Jaloux, verandah view

out to bush bush bush
then the Carenage,
we were liming in the kitchen

talking good talk bout books
and freshness over oil-down
cook up by her boxer-boyfriend

when, just so, a bat fly in the place,
winging wild, nearly buck up
the walls. Everybody duck,

scream with a kind of delight.
It fly fly fly like a madness, >

like moth on fire.

The radar off, my friend say.
The damn thing couldn't find
the door it fly in from.

Is a fruit bat right?
I laugh a tremble-laugh.
This creature just come

and mash up all the vibes,
all blind, hairy, all blur.
Even love, I learn, could be just so,

not meant for this house,
these small, yellow rooms,
a notion, a so-and-so,

old suckblood idea;
who say it could fly in
dance up in the air and thing?

Not a window open again
to chase the thing back out.
Come in like it want stay

for true,
come cause commotion
in I heart.

ISHION HUTCHINSON

'WOODCUTTER'

from Far District (2010)

In the morning, the cedar mind
split open to a bare room
and the fat wife by the coal stove.
Is evil how coal burn from black
to red and the pot of water
hissing like the wife, hissing that she
want more wood axe and how I is man
sleeping till sun hot on God land.
I step off the bed, closer to the heat
of the stove and her body, all the fire, >

all the evil heat in the woman
skin and she hissing me
hissing me outside axing like a jack-
ass, not morning good yet, but fowls
off roost fussing round me
as if I not swinging an axe – should
take one of them head off
and they scratching between splinters,
and I axing the damn wood, for it is
not morning yet, but Pansy, that fast
neighbour, pissing at her house-side, bawling
her damn lazy boy to get up, how he
want be in bed till God sun on the land.
The axe ring on the wood till sweat
down me back, making stream in me ass.
Last night in the heat of the room,
the woman big hand cross me chest. I
was dreaming a sweat-labour dream,
how I is fifty this month, still going
off to bush, still loading donkey
grass and coming home to the same
woman, and as big as I big,
I can't stop for the little rum, is so
I dream; I labouring and I want
some rum, just a little joy and sweetness.
In the dream I stop at Chung Bar,
that Chiney bitch who if I owe
for a piece of salt-fish, he sending
that damn red gal here, so I stop at Chung
and all of them boys there: I see Alston
and Boy-Boy and Blacka and Courtney and Percival,
all throwing back whites with they face
shine and happy, and as I knock back one,
is the woman that, all the way in me dream,
flinging her fire on me, that I left from morning
and I not back when I know I have to axe
more wood for the fire and she shaming me,
shaming me bad bad, till I lef and just
like it happening now, I axing wood
with fowls at me foot and the sun barely out.

DEREK WALCOTT

SHABINE LEAVES THE REPUBLIC

from 'The Star Apple Kingdom' (1980)

I had no nation now but the imagination.
After the white man, the niggers didn't want me
when the power swing to their side.
The first chain my hands and apologize, "History";
the next said I wasn't black enough for their pride.
Tell me, what power, on these unknown rocks—
a spray-plane Air Force, the Fire Brigade,
the Red Cross, the Regiment, two, three police dogs
that pass before you finish bawling "Parade!"?
I met History once, but he ain't recognize me,
a parchment Creole, with warts
like an old sea bottle, crawling like a crab
through the holes of shadow cast by the net
of a grille balcony; cream linen, cream hat.
I confront him and shout, "Sir, is Shabine!
They say I'se your grandson. You remember Grandma,
your black cook, at all?" The bitch hawk and spat.
A spit like that worth any number of words.
But that's all them bastards have left us: words.

I no longer believed in the revolution.
I was losing faith in the love of my woman.
I had seen that moment Aleksandr Blok
crystallize in *The Twelve*. Was between
the Police Marine Branch and Hotel Venezuelana
one Sunday at noon. Young men without flags
using shirts, their chests waiting for holes.
They kept marching into the mountains, and
their noise ceased as foam sinks into sand.
They sank in the bright hills like rain, every one
with his own nimbus, leaving shirts in the street,
and the echo of power at the end of the street.
Propeller-blade fans turn over the Senate;
the judges, they say, still sweat in carmine,
on Frederick Street the idlers all marching
by standing still, the Budget turns a new leaf.
In the 12:30 movies the projectors best
not break down, or you go see revolution. Aleksandr Blok >

enters and sits in the third row of pit eating chocolate cone,
waiting for a spaghetti Western
with Clint Eastwood and featuring Lee Van Cleef.

DAVID DABYDEEN

'EL DORADO'

from Turner: New & Selected Poems (1994)

Juncha slowly dying of jaundice
Or yellow fever or blight or jumbie² or neighbour's spite,
No one knows why he turns the colour of cane.

Small boys come to peep, wondering
At the hush of the death-hut
Until their mothers bawl them out.

Skin flaking like goldleaf
Casts a halo round his bed.
He goes out in a puff of gold dust.

Bathed like a newborn child by the women.
Laid out in his hammock in the yard.
Put out to feel the last sun.

They bury him like treasure,
The coolie who worked two shillings all day
But kept his value from the overseer.

CHRISTIAN CAMPBELL

'AT BUCKINGHAM PALACE'

from Running the Dusk (2010)

I

I am the first of my family
to go to Buckingham Palace.
I had the flu, I nearly stayed home;
left my hair in all its might,
wore a beige linen suit. >

² jumbie = the spirit of a dead person

Her Majesty was in a red dress
with horrid black gloves,
her hair like rigor mortis.
This was not the White House.
She was very, very calm.

Van Dyck, Rubens,
Rembrandt, Canaletto
from all angles, oil paintings
on the ceilings and walls. The eyes
of Anglo nobles glaring down,
draperies, mirrors and all.
Sèvres porcelain, Canova
and Chantrey sculpture,
servants, secret rooms,
French furniture.
But no crown jewels
from India in sight,
none from Benin.

*Mister Mister,
where have you been?
I been to London
to see the Queen.*

Some of the ladies curtsied,
some of the men bowed.
The Queen raised her black glove
high (as with rings and bent wrists)
and I received the Royal Chalice:

*Light up your spliff,
Light up your chalice,
Make we smoke it inna
Buk In Hamm Palace.*

II

The Queen came to Nassau
when I was eight.
The whole family walked
to streets lined like Boxing Day,
to see her pass in a green Jaguar,
to see that white-gloved wave
borrowed in pageants, float parades. >

Benjamin Zephaniah, Rasta poet,
turned down the OBE. *Up yours,*
he said, *No way Mr. Blair, no way Mrs. Queen.*
When my grandfather got that MBE,
name blazing on the Queen's
New Year's Honours List,
Her Majesty told him something
that he would stage for guests
for years, displaying his medal
as a child shows a good wound.
Wear your best suit, he would have said,
Make sure cut your hair, shine up
your shoes.

ISHION HUTCHINSON

'OUTER EDEN (FAR DISTRICT, PART ONE)' *from Far District (2010)*

When nothing existed in the district
and I walked around with knapsack and notebook,
like Adam in the garden, naming things,

a derelict at Half Way Tree Square told me
the sea is our genesis and the horizon, exodus.
I wanted to recant, "There is nothing here,

no visible history." My tongue stoned,
dried-brain, I boarded the sardine-can bus
to school. Packed in that heat, a memory

sparked and died in the murmur of tired bodies.
I limboed between the aqueducts and poui³ trees
on campus before History, the histrionic

ghost staring at the blackboard, at centuries
chalked in white like the professor's hair,
his liver-spotted hand holding the ruler,

stabbing timelines, then stopping at 1492.
"Before that date, nothing. A less barbaric
term, a civil one in the light of the tropic – I mean >

topic – is an *area of darkness*. A few primal inventions; tools fashioned from bones and stones, but no real industry there, until sugar.”

He meant that shit hole east of Portland, Outer Eden. Back there calendar was useless. I knew days by studying the sugar-cane cutters: >

Monday, a trickle, Tuesday a drove, Wednesday and Thursday, a river swell that on payday-Friday flooded the town square.

Sunday mornings I knew by two happenings. First the lashing of Cre-Cre’s albino woman by Cre-Cre before the first cock crowed,

and then before church time, that perennial hog, Hyacinth, shuffling yard-to-yard, hawking her dry goods. Today, Friday, if I leave

this lecture and go back, the talks wouldn’t be *Niña, Pinta and Santa Maria* – not those nothings – but how nothing happens there.

And I’d hiss my teeth; stasis in any name is stasis. That benign parish is the heart’s dark interior, the island’s bushed-in mindset, a place

forgotten by the cartographer, but buried inside me to decompose. Here I am, planted in this desk

of a nascent history, and it dawned that the mad, hermeneutic Rasta was wrong; my beginning was not the sea,

my departure not the horizon: I am nothing, I am dirt, where no light can reach. There this monody I unearthed.