

Classic Poetry Series

**Derek Walcott**  
**- poems -**

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# Derek Walcott(23 January 1930)

Derek Walcott OBE OCC is a Saint Lucian poet, playwright, writer and visual artist who was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1992 and the T. S. Eliot Prize in 2011 for *White Egrets*. His works include the Homeric epic *Omeros*. Robert Graves wrote that Walcott "handles English with a closer understanding of its inner magic than most, if not any, of his contemporaries".

<b>Life</b>

## Early Life

Walcott was born and raised in Castries, Saint Lucia, in the West Indies with a twin brother, the future playwright Roderick Walcott, and a sister. His mother, a teacher, had a love of the arts who would often recite poetry. His father, who painted and wrote poetry, died at 31 from mastoiditis. The family came from a minority Methodist community, which felt overshadowed by the dominant Catholic culture of the island. As a young man he trained as a painter, mentored by Harold Simmons whose life as a professional artist provided an inspiring example for Walcott. Walcott greatly admired Cézanne and Giorgione and sought to learn from them.

Walcott then studied as a writer, becoming "an elated, exuberant poet madly in love with English" and strongly influenced by modernist poets such as T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound. Walcott had an early sense of a vocation as a writer. In the Poem "Midsummer" (1984), he wrote

Forty years gone, in my island childhood, I felt that  
the gift of poetry had made me one of the chosen,  
that all experience was kindling to the fire of the Muse.

At 14, Walcott published his first poem in *The Voice of St Lucia*, a Miltonic, religious poem. In the newspaper, an English Catholic priest condemned the Methodist-inspired poem as blasphemous. By 19, Walcott had self-published his two first collections, *25 Poems* (1948) and *Epitaph for the Young: XII Cantos* (1949), which he distributed himself. He commented "I went to my mother and said, 'I'd like to publish a book of poems, and I think it's going to cost me two hundred dollars.' She was just a seamstress and a schoolteacher, and I remember her being very upset because she wanted to do it. Somehow she got it—a lot of money for a woman to have found on her salary. She gave it to me, and I sent off to Trinidad and had the book printed. When the books came back I

would sell them to friends. I made the money back." Influential Barbadian poet Frank Collymore critically supported Walcott's early work.

### <b>Career</b>

With a scholarship he studied at the University of the West Indies in Kingston, Jamaica then moved to Trinidad in 1953, becoming a critic, teacher and journalist. Walcott founded the Trinidad Theatre Workshop in 1959 and remains active with its Board of Directors. Exploring the Caribbean and its history in a colonialist and post-colonialist context, his collection *In a Green Night: Poems 1948-1960* (1962) saw him gain an international public profile. He founded the Boston Playwrights' Theatre at Boston University in 1981. Walcott taught literature and writing at Boston University, retiring in 2007. His later collections include *Tiepolo's Hound* (2000), *The Prodigal* (2004) and *White Egrets* (2010), which was the recipient of the T.S. Eliot Prize.

Walcott was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1992, the first Caribbean writer to receive the honor. The Nobel committee described his work as "a poetic oeuvre of great luminosity, sustained by a historical vision, the outcome of a multicultural commitment." In 2009, he began a three-year distinguished scholar-in-residence position at the University of Alberta. In 2010, he became Professor of Poetry at the University of Essex.

### <b>Controversies</b>

In 1981 Walcott was accused of sexual harassment of a freshman student at Harvard University, and reached a settlement in 1996 over a sexual harassment allegation at Boston University. In 2009, Walcott was a leading candidate for the position of Oxford Professor of Poetry but withdrew his candidacy when earlier sexual harassment allegations were revived and the *Sunday Times* revealed that pages from a book describing the harassment cases had been sent anonymously to a number of Oxford academics. No new information about the well-publicised 1996 case came to light at this time. Some at the University had advised against his candidacy, on grounds of these past allegations but others argued that the cases were immaterial since the post does not require student contact.

The other main candidate Ruth Padel criticized the sending of these pages and said she wished he had not withdrawn, but a number of articles appeared in the British press alleging her involvement. She was elected as Chair, however a journalist revealed an email in which she mentioned that some students were angry that the harassment issue had been ignored, and she resigned on the grounds that this could be misinterpreted as activity against Walcott.

Padel was the first woman elected to the post and some commentators attributed press treatment of her to misogyny and a gender war. A letter of support for Walcott published in the Times Literary Supplement from a number of respected poets, including Seamus Heaney and Al Alvarez, criticized the press for raking up Walcott's past, and Padel for her perceived comportment. Others pointed out that both poets were casualties of media interest in a university affair.

The story "had everything, from sex claims to allegations of character assassination". It allowed the press "simultaneously to pursue allegations in Walcott's past and criticize Padel for having mentioned these allegations as a source of voters' disquiet". Letters to The Guardian and The Times criticized unjust denigration of Padel. Other poets including Simon Armitage expressed regret at Padel's resignation and The Observer attributed the media storm to the "toxicity of the metropolitan media."

### **Themes**

Methodism and spirituality have played a significant role from the beginning, in Walcott's work. He commented "I have never separated the writing of poetry from prayer. I have grown up believing it is a vocation, a religious vocation". He describes the experience of the poet: "the body feels it is melting into what it has seen... the "I" not being important. That is the ecstasy...Ultimately, it's what Yeats says: 'Such a sweetness flows into the breast that we laugh at everything and everything we look upon is blessed.' That's always there. It's a benediction, a transference. It's gratitude, really. The more of that a poet keeps, the more genuine his nature". He notes that "if one thinks a poem is coming on...you do make a retreat, a withdrawal into some kind of silence that cuts out everything around you. What you're taking on is really not a renewal of your identity but actually a renewal of your anonymity".

Walcott has published more than twenty plays, the majority of which have been produced by the Trinidad Theatre Workshop, and have also been widely staged elsewhere. Many of them deal, either directly or indirectly, with the liminal status of the West Indies in the postcolonial period. Much of his poetry also seeks to explore the paradoxes and complexities of this legacy. In his 1970 essay "What the Twilight Says: An Overture" discussing art and theatre in his native region (from *Dream on Monkey Mountain and Other Plays*) Walcott reflects on the West Indies as colonized space, and the problems presented by a region with little in the way of truly indigenous forms, and with little national or nationalist identity. He states: "We are all strangers here... Our bodies think in one language and move in another". Discussions of epistemological effects of colonization inform

plays such as *Ti-Jean and his Brothers*. In the play, *Mi-Jean*, one of the eponymous brothers is shown to have much information, but to truly know nothing. Every line *Mi-Jean* recites is rote knowledge gained from the coloniser, and as such is unable to be synthesized and thus is inapplicable to his existence as colonised person.

Yet Walcott notes of the Caribbean "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." Walcott identifies as "absolutely a Caribbean writer", a pioneer, helping to make sense of the legacy of deep colonial damage. In such poems as "*The Castaway*" (1965) and in the play *Pantomime* (1978), he works with the metaphors of shipwreck and *Crusoe* to describe the position of rebuilding after colonialism and slavery: the freedom to re-begin and the challenge of it. He writes "If we continue to sulk and say, Look at what the slave-owner did, and so forth, we will never mature. While we sit moping or writing morose poems and novels that glorify a non-existent past, then time passes us by."

Walcott's work weaves together a variety of forms including the folktale, morality play, allegory, fable and ritual featuring emblematic and mythological characters. His epic book length poem *Omeros*, is an allusive, loose reworking of Homeric story and tradition into a journey within the Caribbean and beyond to Africa, New England, the American West, Canada, and London, with frequent reference to the Greek Islands. His odysseys are not the realm of gods or warriors, but are peopled by everyday folk. Composed in *terza rima* and organized by rhyme and meter, the work echos the themes that run through Walcott's oeuvre, the beauty of the islands, the colonial burden, fragmentation of Caribbean identity, and the role of the poet in salving the rents.

Walcott's friend Joseph Brodsky commented: "For almost forty years his throbbing and relentless lines kept arriving in the English language like tidal waves, coagulating into an archipelago of poems without which the map of modern literature would effectively match wallpaper. He gives us more than himself or 'a world'; he gives us a sense of infinity embodied in the language." A close friend of the Russian Brodsky and the Irish Heaney, Walcott noted that the three of them were a band of poets "outside the American experience". Walcott's writing was also influenced by the work of friends Robert Lowell and Elizabeth Bishop.

## **<b>Awards and Honours</b>**

1969 Cholmondeley Award

1971 Obie Award for Dream on Monkey Mountain

1972 OBE

1981 MacArthur Foundation Fellowship OBIE ("genius award")

1988 Queen's Gold Medal for Poetry

1990 Arts Council of Wales International Writers Prize

1990 WH Smith Literary Award for Omeros

1992 Nobel Prize for Literature

2008 Honorary doctorate from the University of Essex

2011 T.S. Eliot Prize for White Egrets

2011 OCM Bocas Prize for Caribbean Literature for White Egrets

# A City's Death By Fire

After that hot gospeller has levelled all but the church'd sky,  
I wrote the tale by tallow of a city's death by fire;  
Under a candle's eye, that smoked in tears, I  
Wanted to tell, in more than wax, of faiths that were snapped like wire.  
All day I walked abroad among the rubbled tales,  
Shocked at each wall that stood on the street like a liar;  
Loud was the bird-rocked sky, and all the clouds were bales  
Torn open by looting, and white, in spite of the fire.  
By the smoking sea, where Christ walked, I asked, why  
Should a man wax tears, when his wooden world fails?  
In town, leaves were paper, but the hills were a flock of faiths;  
To a boy who walked all day, each leaf was a green breath  
Rebuilding a love I thought was dead as nails,  
Blessing the death and the baptism by fire.

Derek Walcott

# A Far Cry From Africa

A wind is ruffling the tawny pelt  
Of Africa, Kikuyu, quick as flies,  
Batten upon the bloodstreams of the veldt.  
Corpses are scattered through a paradise.  
Only the worm, colonel of carrion, cries:  
'Waste no compassion on these separate dead!'  
Statistics justify and scholars seize  
The salients of colonial policy.  
What is that to the white child hacked in bed?  
To savages, expendable as Jews?  
Threshed out by beaters, the long rushes break  
In a white dust of ibises whose cries  
Have wheeled since civilizations dawn  
>From the parched river or beast-teeming plain.  
The violence of beast on beast is read  
As natural law, but upright man  
Seeks his divinity by inflicting pain.  
Delirious as these worried beasts, his wars  
Dance to the tightened carcass of a drum,  
While he calls courage still that native dread  
Of the white peace contracted by the dead.

Again brutish necessity wipes its hands  
Upon the napkin of a dirty cause, again  
A waste of our compassion, as with Spain,  
The gorilla wrestles with the superman.  
I who am poisoned with the blood of both,  
Where shall I turn, divided to the vein?  
I who have cursed  
The drunken officer of British rule, how choose  
Between this Africa and the English tongue I love?  
Betray them both, or give back what they give?  
How can I face such slaughter and be cool?  
How can I turn from Africa and live?

Derek Walcott



## A Lesson for This Sunday

The growing idleness of summer grass  
With its frail kites of furious butterflies  
Requests the lemonade of simple praise  
In scansion gentler than my hammock swings  
And rituals no more upsetting than a  
Black maid shaking linen as she sings  
The plain notes of some Protestant hosanna—  
Since I lie idling from the thought in things—

Or so they should, until I hear the cries  
Of two small children hunting yellow wings,  
Who break my Sabbath with the thought of sin.  
Brother and sister, with a common pin,  
Frowning like serious lepidopterists.  
The little surgeon pierces the thin eyes.  
Crouched on plump haunches, as a mantis prays  
She shrieks to eviscerate its abdomen.  
The lesson is the same. The maid removes  
Both prodigies from their interest in science.  
The girl, in lemon frock, begins to scream  
As the maimed, teetering thing attempts its flight.  
She is herself a thing of summery light,  
Frail as a flower in this blue August air,  
Not marked for some late grief that cannot speak.

The mind swings inward on itself in fear  
Swayed towards nausea from each normal sign.  
Heredity of cruelty everywhere,  
And everywhere the frocks of summer torn,  
The long look back to see where choice is born,  
As summer grass sways to the scythe's design.

Derek Walcott

# After The Storm

There are so many islands!  
As many islands as the stars at night  
on that branched tree from which meteors are shaken  
like falling fruit around the schooner Flight.  
But things must fall, and so it always was,  
on one hand Venus, on the other Mars;  
fall, and are one, just as this earth is one  
island in archipelagoes of stars.  
My first friend was the , is my last.  
I stop talking now. I work, then I read,  
cotching under a lantern hooked to the mast.  
I try to forget what happiness was,  
and when that don't work, I study the stars.  
Sometimes is just me, and the soft-scissored foam  
as the deck turn white and the moon open  
a cloud like a door, and the light over me  
is a road in white moonlight taking me home.  
Shabine sang to you from the depths of the sea.

Derek Walcott

# Blues

Those five or six young guys  
lunched 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  
on 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 kcks,  
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 Americans will.  
Still it taught me something  
about love. If it's so tough,  
forget it.

Derek Walcott

# Codicil

Schizophrenic, wrenched by two styles,  
one a hack's hired prose, I earn  
me exile. I trudge this sickle, moonlit beach for miles,

tan, burn  
to slough off  
this live of ocean that's self-love.

To change your language you must change your life.

I cannot right old wrongs.  
Waves tire of horizon and return.  
Gulls screech with rusty tongues

Above the beached, rotting pirogues,  
they were a venomous beaked cloud at Charlotteville.

One I thought love of country was enough,  
now, even if I chose, there is no room at the trough.

I watch the best minds rot like dogs  
for scraps of flavour.  
I am nearing middle  
age, burnt skin  
peels from my hand like paper, onion-thin,  
like Peer Gynt's riddle.

At heart there is nothing, not the dread  
of death. I know too many dead.  
They're all familiar, all in character,

even how they died. On fire,  
the flesh no longer fears that furnace mouth  
of earth,

that kiln or ashpit of the sun,  
nor this clouding, unclouding sickle moon  
withering this beach again like a blank page.

All its indifference is a different rage.

Derek Walcott

# Coral

This coral's hape ecohes the hand  
It hollowed. Its

Immediate absence is heavy. As pumice,  
As your breast in my cupped palm.

Sea-cold, its nipple rasps like sand,  
Its pores, like yours, shone with salt sweat.

Bodies in absence displace their weight,  
And your smooth body, like none other,

Creates an exact absence like this stoneSet on a table with a whitening rack

Of souvenirs. It dares my hand  
To claim what lovers' hands have never known:

The nature of the body of another.

Derek Walcott

# Dark August

So much rain, so much life like the swollen sky  
of this black August. My sister, the sun,  
broods in her yellow room and won't come out.

Everything goes to hell; the mountains fume  
like a kettle, rivers overrun; still,  
she will not rise and turn off the rain.

She is in her room, fondling old things,  
my poems, turning her album. Even if thunder falls  
like a crash of plates from the sky,

she does not come out.

Don't you know I love you but am hopeless  
at fixing the rain ? But I am learning slowly

to love the dark days, the steaming hills,  
the air with gossiping mosquitoes,  
and to sip the medicine of bitterness,

so that when you emerge, my sister,  
parting the beads of the rain,  
with your forehead of flowers and eyes of forgiveness,

all with not be as it was, but it will be true  
(you see they will not let me love  
as I want), because, my sister, then

I would have learnt to love black days like bright ones,  
The black rain, the white hills, when once  
I loved only my happiness and you.

Derek Walcott



# Egypt, Tobago

There is a shattered palm  
on this fierce shore,  
its plumes the rusting helm-  
et of a dead warrior.

Numb Antony, in the torpor  
stretching her inert  
sex near him like a sleeping cat,  
knows his heart is the real desert.

Over the dunes  
of her heaving,  
to his heart's drumming  
fades the mirage of the legions,

across love-tousled sheets,  
the triremes fading.  
Ar the carved door of her temple  
a fly wrings its message.

He brushes a damp hair  
away from an ear  
as perfect as a sleeping child's.  
He stares, inert, the fallen column.

He lies like a copper palm  
tree at three in the afternoon  
by a hot sea  
and a river, in Egypt, Tobago

Her salt marsh dries in the heat  
where he foundered  
without armor.  
He exchanged an empire for her beads of sweat,

the uproar of arenas,  
the changing surf  
of senators, for  
this silent ceiling over silent sand -

this grizzled bear, whose fur,  
moulting, is silvered -  
for this quick fox with her  
sweet stench. By sleep dismembered,

his head  
is in Egypt, his feet  
in Rome, his groin a desert  
trench with its dead soldier.

He drifts a finger  
through her stiff hair  
crisp as a mare's fountaining tail.  
Shadows creep up the palace tile.

He is too tired to move;  
a groan would waken  
trumpets, one more gesture  
war. His glare,

a shield  
reflecting fires,  
a brass brow that cannot frown  
at carnage, sweats the sun's force.

It is not the turmoil  
of autumnal lust,  
its treacheries, that drove  
him, fired and grimed with dust,

this far, not even love,  
but a great rage without  
clamor, that grew great  
because its depth is quiet;

it hears the river  
of her young brown blood,  
it feels the whole sky quiver  
with her blue eyelid.

She sleeps with the soft engine of a child,

that sleep which scythes  
the stalks of lances, fells the  
harvest of legions  
with nothing for its knives,  
that makes Caesars,

sputtering at flies,  
slapping their foreheads  
with the laurel's imprint,  
drunkards, comedians.

All-humbling sleep, whose peace  
is sweet as death,  
whose silence has  
all the sea's weight and volubility,

who swings this globe by a hair's trembling breath.

Shattered and wild and  
palm-crowned Antony,  
rusting in Egypt,  
ready to lose the world,  
to Actium and sand,

everything else  
is vanity, but this tenderness  
for a woman not his mistress  
but his sleeping child.

The sky is cloudless. The afternoon is mild.

Derek Walcott

# Forest Of Europe

The last leaves fell like notes from a piano  
and left their ovals echoing in the ear;  
with gawky music stands, the winter forest  
looks like an empty orchestra, its lines  
ruled on these scattered manuscripts of snow.

The inlaid copper laurel of an oak  
shines though the brown-bricked glass above your head  
as bright as whisky, while the wintry breath  
of lines from Mandelstam, which you recite,  
uncoils as visibly as cigarette smoke.

'The rustling of ruble notes by the lemon Neva.'  
Under your exile's tongue, crisp under heel,  
the gutturals crackle like decaying leaves,  
the phrase from Mandelstam circles with light  
in a brown room, in barren Oklahoma.

There is a Gulag Archipelago  
under this ice, where the salt, mineral spring  
of the long Trail of Tears runnels these plains  
as hard and open as a herdsman's face  
sun-cracked and stubbled with unshaven snow.

Growing in whispers from the Writers' Congress,  
the snow circles like cossacks round the corpse  
of a tired Choctaw till it is a blizzard  
of treaties and white papers as we lose  
sight of the single human through the cause.

So every spring these branches load their shelves,  
like libraries with newly published leaves,  
till waste recycles them—paper to snow—  
but, at zero of suffering, one mind  
lasts like this oak with a few brazen leaves.

As the train passed the forest's tortured icons,  
the flocs clanging like freight yards, then the spires  
of frozen tears, the stations screeching steam,

he drew them in a single winters' breath  
whose freezing consonants turned into stone.

He saw the poetry in forlorn stations  
under clouds vast as Asia, through districts  
that could gulp Oklahoma like a grape,  
not these tree-shaded prairie halts but space  
so desolate it mocked destinations.

Who is that dark child on the parapets  
of Europe, watching the evening river mint  
its sovereigns stamped with power, not with poets,  
the Thames and the Neva rustling like banknotes,  
then, black on gold, the Hudson's silhouettes?

>From frozen Neva to the Hudson pours,  
under the airport domes, the echoing stations,  
the tributary of emigrants whom exile  
has made as classless as the common cold,  
citizens of a language that is now yours,

and every February, every 'last autumn',  
you write far from the threshing harvesters  
folding wheat like a girl plaiting her hair,  
far from Russia's canals quivering with sunstroke,  
a man living with English in one room.

The tourist archipelagoes of my South  
are prisons too, corruptible, and though  
there is no harder prison than writing verse,  
what's poetry, if it is worth its salt,  
but a phrase men can pass from hand to mouth?

>From hand to mouth, across the centuries,  
the bread that lasts when systems have decayed,  
when, in his forest of barbed-wire branches,  
a prisoner circles, chewing the one phrase  
whose music will last longer than the leaves,

whose condensation is the marble sweat  
of angels' foreheads, which will never dry  
till Borealis shuts the peacock lights

of its slow fan from L.A. to Archangel,  
and memory needs nothing to repeat.

Frightened and starved, with divine fever  
Osip Mandelstam shook, and every  
metaphor shuddered him with ague,  
each vowel heavier than a boundary stone,  
'to the rustling of ruble notes by the lemon Neva,'

but now that fever is a fire whose glow  
warms our hands, Joseph, as we grunt like primates  
exchanging gutturals in this wintry cave  
of a brown cottage, while in drifts outside  
mastodons force their systems through the snow.

Derek Walcott

# From 'Omeros'

## BOOK SIX

### Chapter XLIV

#### I

In hill-towns, from San Fernando to Mayagüez,  
the same sunrise stirred the feathered lances of cane  
down the archipelago's highways. The first breeze

rattled the spears and their noise was like distant rain  
marching down from the hills, like a shell at your ears.  
In the cool asphalt Sundays of the Antilles

the light brought the bitter history of sugar  
across the squared fields, heightening towards harvest,  
to the bleached flags of the Indian diaspora.

The drizzling light blew across the savannah  
darkening the racehorses' hides; mist slowly erased  
the royal palms on the crests of the hills and the

hills themselves. The brown patches the horses had grazed  
shone as wet as their hides. A skittish stallion  
jerked at his bridle, marble-eyed at the thunder

muffling the hills, but the groom was drawing him in  
like a fisherman, wrapping the slack line under  
one fist, then with the other tightening the rein

and narrowing the circle. The sky cracked asunder  
and a forked tree flashed, and suddenly that black rain  
which can lose an entire archipelago

in broad daylight was pouring tin nails on the roof,  
hammering the balcony. I closed the French window,  
and thought of the horses in their stalls with one hoof

tilted, watching the ropes of rain. I lay in bed  
with current gone from the bed-lamp and heard the roar  
of wind shaking the windows, and I remembered

Achille on his own mattress and desperate Hector  
trying to save his canoe, I thought of Helen  
as my island lost in the haze, and I was sure

I'd never see her again. All of a sudden  
the rain stopped and I heard the sluicing of water  
down the guttering. I opened the window when

the sun came out. It replaced the tiny brooms  
of palms on the ridges. On the red galvanized  
roof of the paddock, the wet sparkled, then the grooms

led the horses over the new grass and exercised  
them again, and there was a different brightness  
in everything, in the leaves, in the horses' eyes.

## II

I smelt the leaves threshing at the top of the year  
in green January over the orange villas  
and military barracks where the Plunketts were,

the harbour flecked by the wind that comes with Christmas,  
edged with the Arctic, that was christened Vent Noël;  
it stayed until March and, with luck, until Easter.

It freshened the cedars, waxed the laurier-cannelle,  
and hid the African swift. I smelt the drizzle  
on the asphalt leaving the Morne, it was the smell

of an iron on damp cloth; I heard the sizzle  
of fried jackfish in oil with their coppery skin;  
I smelt ham studded with cloves, the crusted accra,

the wax in the varnished parlour: Come in. Come in,  
the arm of the Morris chair sticky with lacquer;  
I saw a sail going out and a sail coming in,



and a breeze so fresh it lifted the lace curtains  
like a petticoat, like a sail towards Ithaca;  
I smelt a dead rivulet in the clogged drains.

### III

Ah, twin-headed January, seeing either tense:  
a past, they assured us, born in degradation,  
and a present that lifted us up with the wind's

noise in the breadfruit leaves with such an elation  
that it contradicts what is past! The cannonballs  
of rotting breadfruit from the Battle of the Saints,

the asterisks of bulletholes in the brick walls  
of the redoubt. I lived there with every sense.  
I smelt with my eyes, I could see with my nostrils.

### Chapter XLV

#### I

One side of the coast plunges its precipices  
into the Atlantic. Turns require wide locks,  
since the shoulder is sharp and the curve just misses

a long drop over the wind-bent trees and the rocks  
between the trees. There is a wide view of Dennerly,  
with its stone church and raw ochre cliffs at whose base

the African breakers end. Across the flecked sea  
whose combers veil and unveil the rocks with their lace  
the next port is Dakar. The uninterrupted wind

thuds under the wings of frigates, you see them bent  
from a force that has crossed the world, tilting to find  
purchase in the sudden downdrafts of its current.

The breeze threshed the palms on the cool December road  
where the Comet hurtled with empty leopard seats,  
so fast a man on a donkey trying to read

its oncoming fiery sign heard only two thudding beats  
from the up-tempo zouk that its stereo played  
when it screeched round a bridge and began to ascend

away from the palm-fronds and their wickerwork shade  
that left the windscreen clear as it locked round the bend,  
where Hector suddenly saw the trotting piglet

and thought of Plunkett's warning as he heard it screele  
with the same sound that the tires of the Comet  
made rounding the curve from the sweat-greased steering wheel.

The rear wheels spin to a dead stop, like a helm.  
The piglet trots down the safer side of the road.  
Lodged in their broken branches the curled letters flame.

Hector had both hands on the wheel. His head was bowed  
under the swaying statue of the Madonna  
of the Rocks, her smile swayed under the blue hood,

and when her fluted robe stilled, the smile stayed on her  
dimpled porcelain. She saw, in the bowed man, the calm  
common oval of prayer, the head's usual angle

over the pew of the dashboard. Her lifted palm,  
small as a doll's from its cerulean mantle,  
indicated that he had prayed enough to the lace

of foam round the cliff's altar, that now, if he wished,  
he could lift his head, but he stayed in the same place,  
the way a man will remain when Mass is finished,

not unclenching his hands or freeing one to cross  
forehead, heart, and shoulders swiftly and then kneel  
facing the altar. He bowed in endless remorse,

for her mercy at what he had done to Achille,  
his brother. But his arc was over, for the course

of every comet is such. The fated crescent

was printed on the road by the scorching tires.  
A salt tear ran down the porcelain cheek and it went  
in one slow drop to the clenched knuckle that still gripped

the wheel. On the flecked sea, the uninterrupted  
wind herded the long African combers, and whipped  
the small flag of the island on its silver spearhead.

## II

Drivers leant over the rail. One seized my luggage  
off the porter's cart. The rest burst into patois,  
with gestures of despair at the lost privilege

of driving me, then turned to other customers.  
In the evening pastures horses grazed, their hides wet  
with light that shot its lances over the combers.

I had the transport all to myself.

"You all set?"

Good. A good pal of mine died in that chariot  
of his called the Comet."

He turned in the front seat,

spinning the air with his free hand. I sat, sprawled out  
in the back, discouraging talk, with my crossed feet.  
"You never know when, eh? I was at the airport

that day. I see him take off like a rocket.  
I always said that thing have too much horsepower.  
And so said, so done. The same hotel, chief, correct?"

I saw the coastal villages receding as  
the highway's tongue translated bush into forest,  
the wild savannah into moderate pastures,

that other life going in its "change for the best,"  
its peace paralyzed in a postcard, a concrete  
future ahead of it all, in the cinder-blocks

of hotel development with the obsolete  
craft of the carpenter, as I sensed, in the neat  
marinas, the fisherman's phantom. Old oarlocks

and rusting fretsaw. My craft required the same  
crouching care, the same crabbed, natural devotion  
of the hand that stencilled a flowered window-frame

or planed an elegant canoe; its time was gone  
with the spirit in the wood, as wood grew obsolete  
and plasterers smoothed the blank page of white concrete.

I watched the afternoon sea. Didn't I want the poor  
to stay in the same light so that I could transfix  
them in amber, the afterglow of an empire,

preferring a shed of palm-thatch with tilted sticks  
to that blue bus-stop? Didn't I prefer a road  
from which tracks climbed into the thickening syntax

of colonial travellers, the measured prose I read  
as a schoolboy? That cove, with its brown shallows  
there, Praslin? That heron? Had they waited for me

to develop my craft? Why hallow that pretence  
of preserving what they left, the hypocrisy  
of loving them from hotels, a biscuit-tin fence

smothered in love-vines, scenes to which I was attached  
as blindly as Plunkett with his remorseful research?  
Art is History's nostalgia, it prefers a thatched

roof to a concrete factory, and the huge church  
above a bleached village. The gap between the driver  
and me increased when he said:

"The place changing, eh?"

where an old rumshop had gone, but not that river  
with its clogged shadows. That would make me a stranger.

"All to the good," he said. I said, "All to the good,"

then, &quot;whoever they are,&quot; to myself. I caught his eyes  
in the mirror. We were climbing out of Micoud.  
Hadn't I made their poverty my paradise?

His back could have been Hector's, ferrying tourists  
in the other direction home, the leopard seat  
scratching their damp backs like the fur-covered armrests.

He had driven his burnt-out cargo, tired of sweat,  
who longed for snow on the moon and didn't have to face  
the heat of that sinking sun, who knew a climate

as monotonous as this one could only produce  
from its unvarying vegetation flashes  
of a primal insight like those red-pronged lilies

that shot from the verge, that their dried calabashes  
of fake African masks for a fake Achilles  
rattled with the seeds that came from other men's minds.

So let them think that. Who needed art in this place  
where even the old women strode with stiff-backed spines,  
and the fishermen had such adept thumbs, such grace

these people had, but what they envied most in them  
was the calypso part, the Caribbean lilt  
still in the shells of their ears, like the surf's rhythm,

until too much happiness was shadowed with guilt  
like any Eden, and they sighed at the sign:  
HEWANNORRA (Iounalao), the gold sea

flat as a credit-card, extending its line  
to a beach that now looked just like everywhere else,  
Greece or Hawaii. Now the goddamn souvenir

felt absurd, excessive. The painted gourds, the shells.  
Their own faces as brown as gourds. Mine felt as strange  
as those at the counter feeling their bodies change.

III

Change lay in our silence. We had come to that bend  
where the trees are warped by wind, and the cliffs, raw,  
shelve surely to foam.

&quot;Is right here everything end,&quot;

the driver said, and rammed open the transport door  
on his side, then mine.

&quot;Anyway, chief, the view nice.&quot;

I joined him at the gusting edge.

&quot;His name was Hector.&quot;

The name was bent like the trees on the precipice  
to point inland. In its echo a man-o'-war  
screamed on the wind. The driver moved off for a piss,

then shouted over his shoulder:

&quot;A road-warrior.

He would drive like a madman when the power took.  
He had a nice woman. Maybe he died for her.&quot;

For her and tourism, I thought. The driver shook  
himself, zipping then hoisting his crotch.

&quot;Crazy, but

a gentle fellow anyway, with a very good brain.&quot;

Cut to a leopard galloping on a dry plain  
across Serengeti. Cut to the spraying fans  
drummed by a riderless stallion, its wild mane

scaring the Scamander. Cut to a woman's hands  
clenched towards her mouth with no sound. Cut to the wheel  
of a chariot's spiked hubcap. Cut to the face

of his muscling jaw, then flashback to Achille  
hurling a red tin and a cutlass. Next, a vase  
with a girl's hoarse whisper echoing &quot;Omeros,&quot;

as in a conch-shell. Cut to a shield of silver  
rolling like a hubcap. Rewind, in slow motion,  
myrmidons gathering by a village river

with lances for oars. Cut to the surpliced ocean  
droning its missal. Cut. A crane hoisting a wreck.  
A horse nosing the surf, then shuddering its neck.

He'd paid the penalty of giving up the sea  
as graceless and as treacherous as it had seemed,  
for the taxi-business; he was making money,

but all of that money was making him ashamed  
of the long afternoons of shouting by the wharf  
hustling passengers. He missed the uncertain sand

under his feet, he sighed for the trough of a wave,  
and the jerk of the oar when it turned in his hand,  
and the rose conch sunset with its low pelicans.

Castries was corrupting him with its roaring life,  
its littered market, with too many transport vans  
competing. Castries had been his common-law wife

who, like Helen, he had longed for from a distance,  
and now he had both, but a frightening discontent  
hollowed his face; to find that the sea was a love

he could never lose made every gesture violent:  
ramming the side-door shut, raking the clutch. He drove  
as if driven by furies, but furies paid the rent.

A man who cursed the sea had cursed his own mother.  
Mer was both mother and sea. In his lost canoe  
he had said his prayers. But now he was in another

kind of life that was changing him with his brand-new  
stereo, its endless garages, where he could not  
whip off his shirt, hearing the conch's summoning note.

## Chapter XLVI

### I

Hector was buried near the sea he had loved once.  
Not too far from the shallows where he fought Achille  
for a tin and Helen. He did not hear the sea-almond's

moan over the bay when Philoctete blew the shell,  
nor the one drumbeat of a wave-thud, nor a sail  
rattling to rest as its day's work was over,

and its mate, gauging depth, bent over the gunwale,  
then wearily sounding the fathoms with an oar,  
the same rite his shipmates would repeat soon enough

when it was their turn to lie quiet as Hector,  
lowering a pitch-pine canoe in the earth's trough,  
to sleep under the piled conchs, through every weather

on the violet-wreathed mound. Crouching for his friend to hear,  
Achille whispered about their ancestral river,  
and those things he would recognize when he got there,

his true home, forever and ever and ever,  
forever, compère. Then Philoctete limped over  
and rested his hand firmly on a shaking shoulder

to anchor his sorrow. Seven Seas and Helen  
did not come nearer. Achille had carried an oar  
to the church and propped it outside with the red tin.

Now his voice strengthened. He said: "Mate, this is your spear,"  
and laid the oar slowly, the same way he had placed  
the parallel oars in the hull of the gommier

the day the African swift and its shadow raced.  
And this was the prayer that Achille could not utter:  
"The spear that I give you, my friend, is only wood.

Vexation is past. I know how well you treat her.  
You never know my admiration, when you stood  
crossing the sun at the bow of the long canoe

with the plates of your chest like a shield; I would say  
any enemy so was a compliment. 'Cause no



African ever hurled his wide seine at the bay

by which he was born with such beauty. You hear me? Men  
did not know you like me. All right. Sleep good. Good night.";  
Achille moved Philoctete's hand, then he saw Helen

standing alone and veiled in the widowing light.  
Then he reached down to the grave and lifted the tin  
to her. Helen nodded. A wind blew out the sun.

## II

Pride set in Helen's face after this, like a stone  
bracketed with Hector's name; her lips were incised  
by its dates in parenthesis. She seemed more stern,

more ennobled by distance as she slowly crossed  
the hot street of the village like a distant sail  
on the horizon. Grief heightened her. When she smiled

it was with such distance that it was hard to tell  
if she had heard your condolence. It was the child,  
Ma Kilman told them, that made her more beautiful.

## III

The rites of the island were simplified by its elements,  
which changed places. The grooved sea was Achille's garden,  
the ridged plot of rattling plantains carried their sense

of the sea, and Philoctete, on his height, often heard, in  
a wind that suddenly churned the rage of deep gorges,  
the leafy sound of far breakers plunging with smoke,

and for smoke there were the bonfires which the sun catches  
on the blue heights at sunrise, doing the same work  
as Philoctete clearing his plot, just as, at sunset,

smoke came from the glowing rim of the horizon as if  
from his enamel pot. The woodsmoke smelt of a regret

that men cannot name. On the charred field, the massive

sawn trunks burnt slowly like towers, and the great  
indigo dusk slowly plumed down, devouring the still leaves,  
igniting the firefly huts, lifting the panicky egret

to beat its lagoon and shelf in the cage of the mangroves,  
take in the spars of its sails, then with quick-pricking head  
anchor itself shiftingly, and lift its question again.

At night, the island reversed its elements, the heron  
of a quarter-moon floated from Hector's grave, rain  
rose upwards from the sea, and the corrugated iron

of the sea glittered with nailheads. Ragged  
plantains bent and stepped with their rustling powers  
over the furrows of Philoctete's garden, a chorus of aged

ancestors and straw, and, rustling, surrounded every house  
in the village with its back garden, with its rank midden  
of rusted chamber pots, rotting nets, and the moon's cold basin.

They sounded, when they shook, after the moonlit meridian  
of their crossing, like the night-surf; they gazed in  
silence at the shadows of their lamplit children.

At Philoctete, groaning and soaking the flower on his shin  
with hot sulphur, cleaning its edges with yellow Vaseline,  
and, gripping his knee, squeezing rags from the basin.

At night, when yards are asleep, and the broken line  
of the surf hisses like Philo, "Bon Dieu, aie, waie, my sin  
is this sore?" the old plantains suffer and shine.

## Chapter XLVII

### I

Islands of bay leaves in the medicinal bath  
of a cauldron, a sibylline cure. The citron

sprig of a lime-tree dividing the sky in half

dipped its divining rod. The white spray of the thorn,  
which the swift bends lightly, waited for a black hand  
to break it in bits and boil its leaves for the wound

from the pronged anchor rusting in clean bottom-sand.  
Ma Kilman, in a black hat with its berried fringe,  
eased herself sideways down the broken concrete step

of the rumshop's back door, closed it, and rammed the hinge  
tight. The bolt caught a finger and with that her instep  
arch twisted and she let out a soft Catholic

curse, then crossed herself. She closed the gate. The asphalt  
sweated with the heat, the limp breadfruit leaves were thick  
over the fence. Her spectacles swam in their sweat.

She plucked an armpit. The damn wig was badly made.  
She was going to five o'clock Mass, to la Messe,  
and sometimes she had to straighten it as she prayed

until the wafer dissolved her with tenderness,  
the way a raindrop melts on the tongue of a breeze.  
In the church's cool cave the sweat dried from her eyes.

She rolled down the elastic bands below the knees  
of her swollen stockings. It was then that their vise  
round her calves reminded her of Philoctete. Then,

numbering her beads, she began her own litany  
of berries, Hail Mary marigolds that stiffen  
their aureoles in the heights, mild anemone

and clear watercress, the sacred heart of Jesus  
pierced like the anthurium, the thorns of logwood,  
called the tree of life, the aloe good for seizures,

the hole in the daisy's palm, with its drying blood  
that was the hole in the fisherman's shin since he was  
pierced by a hook; there was the pale, roadside tisane

of her malarial childhood. There was this one  
for easing a birth-breach, that one for a love-bath,  
before the buds of green sugar-apples in the sun

ripened like her nipples in girlhood. But what path  
led through nettles to the cure, the furious sibyl  
couldn't remember. Mimosa winced from her fingers,

shutting like jealousies at some passing evil  
when she reached for them. The smell of incense lingers  
in her clothes. Inside, the candle-flames are erect

round the bier of the altar while she and her friends  
old-talk on the steps, but the plant keeps its secret  
when her memory reaches, shuttering in its fronds.

## II

The dew had not yet dried on the white-ribbed awnings  
and the nodding palanquins of umbrella yams  
where the dark grove had not heat but early mornings

of perpetual freshness, in which the bearded arms  
of a cedar held council. Between its gnarled toes  
grew the reek of an unknown weed; its pronged flower

sprang like a buried anchor; its windborne odours  
diverted the bee from its pollen, but its power,  
rooted in bitterness, drew her bowed head by the nose

as a spike does a circling bull. To approach it  
Ma Kilman lowered her head to one side and screened  
the stench with a cologned handkerchief. The mulch it

was rooted in carried the smell, when it gangrened,  
of Philoctete's cut. In her black dress, her berried  
black hat, she climbed a goat-path up from the village,

past the stones with dried palms and conchs, where the buried  
suffer the sun all day Sunday, while goats forage  
the new wreaths. Once more she pulled at the itch in her

armpits, nearly dropping her purse. Then she climbed hard  
up the rain-cracked path, the bay closing behind her  
like a wound, and rested. Everything that echoed

repeated its outline: a goat's doddering bleat,  
a hammer multiplying a roof, and, through the back yards,  
a mother cursing a boy too nimble to beat.

Ma Kilman picked up her purse and sighed on upwards  
to the thread of the smell, one arm behind her back,  
passing the cactus, the thorn trees, and then the wood

appeared over her, thick green, the green almost black  
as her dress in its shade, its border of flowers  
flecking the pasture with spray. Then she staggered back

from the line of ants at her feet. She saw the course  
they had kept behind her, following her from church,  
signalling a language she could not recognize.

### III

A swift had carried the strong seed in its stomach  
centuries ago from its antipodal shore,  
skimming the sea-troughs, outdarting ospreys, her luck

held to its shadow. She aimed to carry the cure  
that precedes every wound; the reversible Bight  
of Benin was her bow, her target the ringed haze

of a circling horizon. The star-grains at night  
made her hungrier; the leafless sea with no house  
for her weariness. Sometimes she dozed in her flight

for a swift's second, closing the seeds of her stare,  
then ruddering straight. The dry sea-flakes whitened her  
breast, her feathers thinned. Then, one dawn the day-star

rose slowly from the wrong place and it frightened her  
because all the breakers were blowing from the wrong

east. She saw the horned island and uncurled her claws

with one frail cry, since swifts are not given to song,  
and fluttered down to a beach, ejecting the seed  
in grass near the sand. She nestled in dry seaweed.

In a year she was bleached bone. All of that motion  
a pile of fragile ash from the fire of her will,  
but the vine grew its own wings, out of the ocean

it climbed like the ants, the ancestors of Achille,  
the women carrying coals after the dark door  
slid over the hold. As the weed grew in odour

so did its strength at the damp root of the cedar,  
where the flower was anchored at the mottled root  
as a lizard crawled upwards, foot by fallow foot.

Derek Walcott

# In the Village

I

I came up out of the subway and there were people standing on the steps as if they knew something I didn't. This was in the Cold War, and nuclear fallout. I looked and the whole avenue was empty, I mean utterly, and I thought, The birds have abandoned our cities and the plague of silence multiplies through their arteries, they fought the war and they lost and there's nothing subtle or vague in this horrifying vacuum that is New York. I caught the blare of a loudspeaker repeatedly warning the last few people, maybe strolling lovers in their walk, that the world was about to end that morning on Sixth or Seventh Avenue with no people going to work in that uncontradicted, horrifying perspective. It was no way to die, but it's also no way to live. Well, if we burnt, it was at least New York.

II

Everybody in New York is in a sitcom. I'm in a Latin American novel, one in which an egret-haired viejo shakes with some invisible sorrow, some obscene affliction, and chronicles it secretly, till it shows in his face, the parenthetical wrinkles confirming his fiction to his deep embarrassment. Look, it's just the old story of a heart that won't call it quits whatever the odds, quixotic. It's just one that'll break nobody's heart, even if the grizzled colonel pitches from his steed in a cavalry charge, in a battle that won't make him a statue. It is the hell of ordinary, unrequited love. Watch these egrets trudging the lawn in a dishevelled troop, white banners trailing forlornly; they are the bleached regrets of an old man's memoirs, printed stanzas. showing their hinged wings like wide open secrets.

### III

Who has removed the typewriter from my desk,  
so that I am a musician without his piano  
with emptiness ahead as clear and grotesque  
as another spring? My veins bud, and I am so  
full of poems, a wastebasket of black wire.  
The notes outside are visible; sparrows will  
line antennae like staves, the way springs were,  
but the roofs are cold and the great grey river  
where a liner glides, huge as a winter hill,  
moves imperceptibly like the accumulating  
years. I have no reason to forgive her  
for what I brought on myself. I am past hating,  
past the longing for Italy where blowing snow  
absolves and whitens a kneeling mountain range  
outside Milan. Through glass, I am waiting  
for the sound of a bird to unhinge the beginning  
of spring, but my hands, my work, feel strange  
without the rusty music of my machine. No words  
for the Arctic liner moving down the Hudson, for the mangle  
of old snow moulting from the roofs. No poems. No birds.

### IV

#### The Sweet Life Café

If I fall into a grizzled stillness  
sometimes, over the red-chequered tablecloth  
outdoors of the Sweet Life Café, when the noise  
of Sunday traffic in the Village is soft as a moth  
working in storage, it is because of age  
which I rarely admit to, or, honestly, even think of.  
I have kept the same furies, though my domestic rage  
is illogical, diabetic, with no lessening of love  
though my hand trembles wildly, but not over this page.  
My lust is in great health, but, if it happens  
that all my towers shrivel to dribbling sand,  
joy will still bend the cane-reeds with my pen's  
elation on the road to Vieuxfort with fever-grass  
white in the sun, and, as for the sea breaking  
in the gap at Praslin, they add up to the grace



I have known and which death will be taking  
from my hand on this chequered tablecloth in this good place.

Derek Walcott

## In The Virgins

You can't put in the ground swell of the organ  
from the Christiansted, , Anglican Church  
behind the paratrooper's voice: 'Turned cop  
after Vietnam. I made thirty jumps.'  
Bells punish the dead street and pigeons lurch  
from the stone belfry, opening their chutes,  
circling until the rings of ringing stop.  
'Salud!' The paratrooper's glass is raised.  
The congregation rises to its feet  
like a patrol, with scuffling shoes and boots,  
repeating orders as the organ thumps:  
'Praise Ye the Lord. The Lord's name be praised.'

You cannot hear, beyond the quiet harbor,  
the breakers cannonading on the bruised  
horizon, or the charter engines gunning for  
Buck Island. The only war here is a war  
of silence between blue sky and sea,  
and just one voice, the marching choir's, is raised  
to draft new conscripts with the ancient cry  
of 'Onward, Christian Soldiers,' into pews  
half-empty still, or like a glass, half-full.  
Pinning itself to a cornice, a gull  
hangs like a medal from the serge-blue sky.

Are these boats all? Is the blue water all?  
The rocks surplined with lace where they are moored,  
dinghy, catamaran, and racing yawl,  
nodding to the ground swell of 'Praise the Lord'?  
Wesley and Watts, their evangelical light  
lanced down the mine shafts to our chapel pew,  
its beam gritted with motes of anthracite  
that drifted on us in our chapel benches:  
from God's slow-grinding mills in Lancashire,  
ash on the dead mired in Flanders' trenches,  
as a gray drizzle now defiles the view

of this blue harbor, framed in windows where  
two yellow palm fronds, jerked by the wind's rain,

agree like horses' necks, and nodding bear,  
slow as a hearse, a haze of tasseled rain,  
and, as the weather changes in a child,  
the paradisaal day outside grows dark,  
the yachts flutter like moths in a gray jar,  
the martial voices fade in thunder, while  
across the harbor, like a timid lure,  
a rainbow casts its seven-colored arc.

Tonight, now Sunday has been put to rest.  
Altar lights ride the black glass where the yachts  
stiffly repeat themselves and phosphoresce  
with every ripple - the wide parking-lots  
of tidal affluence - and every mast  
sways the night's dial as its needle veers  
to find the station which is truly peace.  
Like neon lasers shot across the bars  
discos blast out the music of the spheres,  
and, one by one, science infects the stars.

Derek Walcott

# Koenig Of The River

Koenig knew now there was no one on the river.  
Entering its brown mouth choking with lilies  
and curtained with midges, Koenig poled the shallop  
past the abandoned ferry and the ferry piles  
coated with coal dust. Staying aboard, he saw, up  
in a thick meadow, a sand-colored mule,  
untethered, with no harness, and no signs  
of habitation round the ruined factory wheel  
locked hard in rust, and through whose spokes the vines  
of wild yam leaves leant from overweight;  
the wild bananas in the yellowish sunlight  
were dugged like aching cows with un milked fruit.  
This was the last of the productive mines.  
Only the vegetation here looked right.  
A crab of pain scuttled shooting up his foot  
and fastened on his neck, at the brain's root.  
He felt his reason curling back like parchment  
in this fierce torpor. Well, he no longer taxed  
and tired what was left of his memory;  
he should thank heaven he had escaped the sea,  
and anyway, he had demanded to be sent  
here with the others - why get this river vexed  
with his complaints? Koenig wanted to sing,  
suddenly, if only to keep the river company -  
this was a river, and Koenig, his name meant King.  
They had all caught the missionary fever:  
they were prepared to expiate the sins  
of savages, to tame them as he would tame this river  
subtly, as it flowed, accepting its bends;  
he had seen how other missionaries met their ends -  
swinging in the wind, like a dead clapper when  
a bell is broken, if that sky was a bell -  
for treating savages as if they were men,  
and frightening them with talk of Heaven and Hell.  
But I have forgotten our journey's origins,  
mused Koenig, and our purpose. He knew it was noble,  
based on some phrase, forgotten, from the Bible,  
but he felt bodiless, like a man stumbling from  
the pages of a novel, not a forest,

written a hundred years ago. He stroked his uniform,  
clogged with the hooked burrs that had tried  
to pull him, like the other drowning hands whom  
his panic abandoned. The others had died,  
like real men, by death. I, Koenig, am a ghost,  
ghost-king of rivers. Well, even ghosts must rest.  
If he knew he was lost he was not lost.  
It was when you pretended that you were a fool.  
He banked and leaned tiredly on the pole.  
If I'm a character called Koenig, then I  
shall dominate my future like a fiction  
in which there is a real river and real sky,  
so I'm not really tired, and should push on.

The lights between the leaves were beautiful,  
and, as in that far life, now he was grateful  
for any pool of light between the dull, usual  
clouds of life: a sunspot haloed his tonsure;  
silver and copper coins danced on the river;  
his head felt warm - the light danced on his skull  
like a benediction. Koenig closed his eyes,  
and he felt blessed. It made direction sure.  
He leant on the pole. He must push on some more.  
He said his name. His voice sounded German,  
then he said 'river', but what was German  
if he alone could hear it? Ich spreche Deutsch  
sounded as genuine as his name in English,  
Koenig in Deutsch, and, in English, King.  
Did the river want to be called anything?  
He asked the river. The river said nothing.

Around the bend the river poured its silver  
like some remorseful mine, giving and giving  
everything green and white: white sky, white  
water, and the dull green like a drumbeat  
of the slow-sliding forest, the green heat;  
then, on some sandbar, a mirage ahead:  
fabric of muslin sails, spiderweb rigging,  
a schooner, foundered on black river mud,  
was rising slowly up from the riverbed,  
and a top-hatted native reading an inverted  
newspaper.

'Where's our Queen?' Koenig shouted.  
'Where's our Kaiser?'

The nigger disappeared.  
Koenig felt that he himself was being read  
like the newspaper or a hundred-year-old novel.  
'The Queen dead! Kaiser dead!' the voices shouted.  
And it flashed through him those trunks were not wood  
but that the ghosts of slaughtered Indians stood  
there in the mangroves, their eyes like fireflies  
in the green dark, and that like hummingbirds  
they sailed rather than ran between the trees.  
The river carried him past his shouted words.  
The schooner had gone down without a trace.  
'There was a time when we ruled everything,'  
Koenig sang to his corrugated white reflection.  
'The German Eagle and the British Lion,  
we ruled worlds wider than this river flows,  
worlds with dyed elephants, with tassled howdahs,  
tigers that carried the striped shade when they rose  
from their palm coverts; men shall not see these days  
again; our flags sank with the sunset on the dhows  
of Egypt; we ruled rivers as huge as the Nile,  
the Ganges, and the Congo, we tamed, we ruled  
you when our empires reached their blazing peak.'  
This was a small creek somewhere in the world,  
never mind where - victory was in sight.  
Koenig laughed and spat in the brown creek.  
The mosquitoes now were singing to the night  
that rose up from the river, the fog uncurled  
under the mangroves. Koenig clenched each fist  
around his barge-pole scepter, as a mist  
rises from the river and the page goes white.

Derek Walcott

# Love After Love

The time will come  
when, with elation  
you will greet yourself arriving  
at your own door, in your own mirror  
and each will smile at the other's welcome,

and say, sit here. Eat.

You will love again the stranger who was your self.

Give wine. Give bread. Give back your heart  
to itself, to the stranger who has loved you

all your life, whom you ignored  
for another, who knows you by heart.

Take down the love letters from the bookshelf,

the photographs, the desperate notes,  
peel your own image from the mirror.

Sit. Feast on your life.

Derek Walcott

# Midsummer, Tobago

Broad sun-stoned beaches.

White heat.

A green river.

A bridge,  
scorched yellow palms

from the summer-sleeping house  
drowsing through August.

Days I have held,  
days I have lost,

days that outgrow, like daughters,  
my harbouring arms.

Derek Walcott



# Night In The Gardens Of Port Of Spain

Night, the black summer, simplifies her smells  
into a village; she assumes the impenetrable

musk of the negro, grows secret as sweat,  
her alleys odorous with shucked oyster shells,

coals of gold oranges, braziers of melon.  
Commerce and tambourines increase her heat.

Hellfire or the whorehouse: crossing Park Street,  
a surf of sailor's faces crest, is gone

with the sea's phosphorescence; the boites-de-nuit  
tinkle like fireflies in her thick hair.

Blinded by headlamps, deaf to taxi klaxons,  
she lifts her face from the cheap, pitch oil flare

toward white stars, like cities, flashing neon,  
burning to be the bitch she must become.

As daylight breaks the coolie turns his tumbril  
of hacked, beheaded coconuts towards home.

Derek Walcott

# Parang

Man, I suck me tooth when I hear  
How dem croptime fiddlers lie,  
And de wailing, kiss-me-arse flutes  
That bring water to me eye!  
Oh, when I t'ink how from young  
I wasted time at de fetes,  
I could bawl in a red-eyed rage  
For desire turned to regret,  
Not knowing the truth that I sang  
At parang and la commette.  
Boy, every damned tune them tune  
Of love that go last forever  
Is the wax and the wane of the moon  
Since Adam catch body-fever.

I old, so the young crop won't  
Have these claws to reap their waist,  
But I know 'do more' from 'don't'  
Since the grave cry out 'Make haste!'  
This banjo world have one string  
And all man does dance to that tune:  
That love is a place in the bush  
With music grieving from far,  
As you look past her shoulder and see  
Like her one tear afterwards

The falling of a fixed star.  
Yound men does bring love to disgrace  
With remorseful, regretful words,  
When flesh upon flesh was the tune  
Since the first cloud raise up to disclose  
The breast of the naked moon.

Derek Walcott

# Pentecost

Better a jungle in the head  
than rootless concrete.  
Better to stand bewildered  
by the fireflies' crooked street;

winter lamps do not show  
where the sidewalk is lost,  
nor can these tongues of snow  
speak for the Holy Ghost;

the self-increasing silence  
of words dropped from a roof  
points along iron railings,  
direction, in not proof.

But best is this night surf  
with slow scriptures of sand,  
that sends, not quite a seraph,  
but a late cormorant,

whose fading cry propels  
through phosphorescent shoal  
what, in my childhood gospels,  
used to be called the Soul.

Derek Walcott

## R.T.S.L. (1917-1977)

As for that other thing  
which comes when the eyelid is glazed  
and the wax gleam  
from the unwrinkled forehead  
asks no more questions  
of the dry mouth,

whether they open the heart like a shirt  
to release a rage of swallows,  
whether the brain  
is a library for worms,  
on the instant of that knowledge  
of the moment  
when everything became so stiff,

so formal with ironical adieux,  
organ and choir,  
and I must borrow a black tie,  
and at what moment in the oration  
shall I break down and weep -  
there was the startle of wings  
breaking from the closing cage  
of your body, your fist unclenching  
these pigeons circling serenely  
over the page,

and,  
as the parentheses lock like a gate  
1917 to 1977,  
the semicircles close to form a face,  
a world, a wholeness,  
an unbreakable O,  
and something that once had a fearful name  
walks from the thing that used to wear its name,  
transparent, exact representative,  
so that we can see through it  
churches, cars, sunlight,  
and the Boston Common,  
not needing any book.

Derek Walcott

# Ruins Of A Great House

though our longest sun sets at right declensions and  
makes but winter arches,  
it cannot be long before we lie down in darkness, and  
have our light in ashes. . .

Browne, Urn Burial

Stones only, the disjecta membra of this Great House,  
Whose moth-like girls are mixed with candledust,  
Remain to file the lizard's dragonish claws.

The mouths of those gate cherubs shriek with stain;  
Axle and coach wheel silted under the muck  
Of cattle droppings.

Three crows flap for the trees  
And settle, creaking the eucalyptus boughs.

A smell of dead limes quickens in the nose  
The leprosy of empire.

'Farewell, green fields,  
Farewell, ye happy groves!'

Marble like Greece, like Faulkner's South in stone,  
Deciduous beauty prospered and is gone,  
But where the lawn breaks in a rash of trees  
A spade below dead leaves will ring the bone  
Of some dead animal or human thing  
Fallen from evil days, from evil times.

It seems that the original crops were limes  
Grown in that silt that clogs the river's skirt;  
The imperious rakes are gone, their bright girls gone,  
The river flows, obliterating hurt.

I climbed a wall with the grille ironwork  
Of exiled craftsmen protecting that great house  
From guilt, perhaps, but not from the worm's rent  
Nor from the padded calvary of the mouse.  
And when a wind shook in the limes I heard  
What Kipling heard, the death of a great empire, the  
abuse

Of ignorance by Bible and by sword.

A green lawn, broken by low walls of stone,  
Dipped to the rivulet, and pacing, I thought next  
Of men like Hawkins, Walter Raleigh, Drake,  
Ancestral murderers and poets, more perplex4ed

In memory now by every ulcerous crime.  
The world's green age then was rotting lime  
Whose stench became the charnel galleon's text.  
The rot remains with us, the men are gone.  
But, as dead ash is lifted in a wind  
That fans the blackening ember of the mind,  
My eyes burned from the ashen prose of Donne.  
Ablaze with rage I thought,  
Some slave is rotting in this manorial lake,  
But still the coal of my compassion fought  
That Albion too was once  
A colony like ours, 'part of the continent, piece of the  
main',  
Nook-shotten, rook o'erblown, deranged  
By foaming channels and the vain expense  
Of bitter faction.  
All in compassion ends  
So differently from what the heart arranged:  
'as well as if a manor of thy friend's. . . '

Derek Walcott

## Sabbaths, W.I.

Those villages stricken with the melancholia of Sunday,  
in all of whose other streets one dog is sleeping

those volcanoes like ashen roses, or the incurable sore  
of poverty, around whose puckered mouth thin boys are  
selling yellow sulphur stone

the burnt banana leaves that used to dance  
the river whose bed is made of broken bottles  
the cocoa grove where a bird whose cry sounds green and  
yellow and in the lights under the leaves crested with  
orange flame has forgotten its flute

gommiers peeling from sunburn still wrestling to escape the sea

the dead lizard turning blue as stone

those rivers, threads of spittle, that forgot the old music

that dry, brief esplanade under the drier sea almonds  
where the dry old men sat

watching a white schooner stuck in the branches  
and playing draughts with the moving frigate birds

those hillsides like broken pots

those ferns that stamped their skeletons on the skin

and those roads that begin reciting their names at vespers

mention them and they will stop  
those crabs that were willing to let an epoch pass  
those herons like spinsters that doubted their reflections  
inquiring, inquiring

those nettles that waited  
those Sundays, those Sundays



those Sundays when the lights at the road's end were an occasion

those Sundays when my mother lay on her back

those Sundays when the sisters gathered like white moths  
round their street lantern

and cities passed us by on the horizon

Derek Walcott

# The Bounty

[for Alix Walcott]

i

Between the vision of the Tourist Board and the true  
Paradise lies the desert where Isaiah's elations  
force a rose from the sand. The thirty-third canto

cores the dawn clouds with concentric radiance,  
the breadfruit opens its palms in praise of the bounty,  
bois-pain, tree of bread, slave food, the bliss of John Clare,

torn, wandering Tom, stoat-stroker in his county  
of reeds and stalk-crickets, fiddling the dank air,  
lacing his boots with vines, steering glazed beetles

with the tenderest prods, knight of the cockchafer,  
wrapped in the mists of shires, their snail-horned steeples  
palms opening to the cupped pool—but his soul safer

than ours, though iron streams fetter his ankles.  
Frost whitening his stubble, he stands in the ford  
of a brook like the Baptist lifting his branches to bless

cathedrals and snails, the breaking of this new day,  
and the shadows of the beach road near which my mother lies,  
with the traffic of insects going to work anyway.

The lizard on the white wall fixed on the hieroglyph  
of its stone shadow, the palms' rustling archery,  
the souls and sails of circling gulls rhyme with:

"In la sua volont è nostra pace,"  
In His will is our peace. Peace in white harbours,  
in marinas whose masts agree, in crescent melons

left all night in the fridge, in the Egyptian labours  
of ants moving boulders of sugar, words in this sentence,  
shadow and light, who live next door like neighbours,

and in sardines with pepper sauce. My mother lies  
near the white beach stones, John Clare near the sea-almonds,  
yet the bounty returns each daybreak, to my surprise,

to my surprise and betrayal, yes, both at once.

I am moved like you, mad Tom, by a line of ants;  
I behold their industry and they are giants.

ii

There on the beach, in the desert, lies the dark well  
where the rose of my life was lowered, near the shaken plants,  
near a pool of fresh tears, tolled by the golden bell

of allamanda, thorns of the bougainvillea, and that is  
their bounty! They shine with defiance from weed and flower,  
even those that flourish elsewhere, vetch, ivy, clematis,

on whom the sun now rises with all its power,  
not for the Tourist Board or for Dante Alighieri,  
but because there is no other path for its wheel to take

except to make the ruts of the beach road an allegory  
of this poem's career, of yours, that she died for the sake  
of a crowning wreath of false laurel; so, John Clare, forgive me,

for this morning's sake, forgive me, coffee, and pardon me,  
milk with two packets of artificial sugar,  
as I watch these lines grow and the art of poetry harden me

into sorrow as measured as this, to draw the veiled figure  
of Mamma entering the standard elegiac.

No, there is grief, there will always be, but it must not madden,

like Clare, who wept for a beetle's loss, for the weight  
of the world in a bead of dew on clematis or vetch,  
and the fire in these tinder-dry lines of this poem I hate

as much as I love her, poor rain-beaten wretch,  
redeemer of mice, earl of the doomed protectorate  
of cavalry under your cloak; come on now, enough!

Bounty!

In the bells of tree-frogs with their steady clamour  
in the indigo dark before dawn, the fading morse  
of fireflies and crickets, then light on the beetle's armour,

and the toad's too-late presages, nettles of remorse  
that shall spring from her grave from the spade's heartbreak.  
And yet not to have loved her enough is to love more,

if I confess it, and I confess it. The trickle of underground  
springs, the babble of swollen gulches under drenched ferns,  
loosening the grip of their roots, till their hairy clods

like unclenching fists swirl wherever the gulch turns  
them, and the shuddering aftermath bends the rods  
of wild cane. Bounty in the ant's waking fury,

in the snail's chapel stirring under wild yams,  
praise in decay and process, awe in the ordinary  
in wind that reads the lines of the breadfruit's palms

in the sun contained in a globe of the crystal dew,  
bounty in the ants' continuing a line of raw flour,  
mercy on the mongoose scuttling past my door,

in the light's parallelogram laid on the kitchen floor,  
for Thine is the Kingdom, the Glory, and the Power,  
the bells of Saint Clement's in the marigolds on the altar,

in the bougainvillea's thorns, in the imperial lilac  
and the feathery palms that nodded at the entry  
into Jerusalem, the weight of the world on the back

of an ass; dismounting, He left His cross there for sentry  
and sneering centurion; then I believed in His Word,  
in a widow's immaculate husband, in pews of brown wood,

when the cattle-bell of the chapel summoned our herd

into the varnished stalls, in whose rustling hymnals I heard  
the fresh Jacobean springs, the murmur Clare heard

of bounty abiding, the clear language she taught us,  
&quot;as the hart panteth,&quot; at this, her keen ears pronged  
while her three fawns nibbled the soul-freshening waters,

&quot;as the hart panteth for the water-brooks&quot; that belonged  
to the language in which I mourn her now, or when  
I showed her my first elegy, her husband's, and then her own.

iv

But can she or can she not read this? Can you read this,  
Mamma, or hear it? If I took the pulpit, lay-preacher  
like tender Clare, like poor Tom, so that look, Miss!

the ants come to you like children, their beloved teacher  
Alix, but unlike the silent recitation of the infants,  
the choir that Clare and Tom heard in their rainy county,

we have no solace but utterance, hence this wild cry.  
Snails move into harbour, the breadfruit plants on the Bounty  
will be heaved aboard, and the white God is Captain Bligh.

Across white feathery grave-grass the shadow of the soul  
passes, the canvas cracks open on the cross-trees of the Bounty,  
and the Trades lift the shrouds of the resurrected sail.

All move in their passage to the same mother-country,  
the dirt-clawing weasel, the blank owl or sunning seal.  
Faith grows mutinous. The ribbed body with its cargo

stalls in its doldrums, the God-captain is cast adrift  
by a mutinous Christian, in the wake of the turning Argo  
plants bob in the ocean's furrows, their shoots dip and lift,

and the soul's Australia is like the New Testament  
after the Old World, the code of an eye for an eye;  
the horizon spins slowly and Authority's argument

diminishes in power, in the longboat with Captain Bligh.  
This was one of your earliest lessons, how the Christ-Son  
questions the Father, to settle on another island, haunted by Him,

by the speck of a raging deity on the ruled horizon,  
diminishing in meaning and distance, growing more dim:  
all these predictable passages that we first disobey

before we become what we challenged; but you never altered  
your voice, either sighing or sewing, you would pray  
to your husband aloud, pedalling the hymns we all heard

in the varnished pew: "There Is a Green Hill Far Away,"  
&"Jerusalem the Golden." Your melody faltered  
but never your faith in the bounty which is His Word.

v

All of these waves crepitate from the culture of Ovid,  
its sibilants and consonants; a universal metre  
piles up these signatures like inscriptions of seaweed

that dry in the pungent sun, lines ruled by mitre  
and laurel, or spray swiftly garlanding the forehead  
of an outcrop (and I hope this settles the matter

of presences). No soul was ever invented,  
yet every presence is transparent; if I met her  
(in her nightdress ankling barefoot, crooning to the shallows),

should I call her shadow that of a pattern invented  
by Graeco-Roman design, columns of shadows  
cast by the Forum, Augustan perspectives—

poplars, casuarina-colonnades, the in-and-out light of almonds  
made from original Latin, no leaf but the olive's?  
Questions of pitch. Faced with seraphic radiance

(don't interrupt!), mortals rub their skeptical eyes  
that hell is a beach-fire at night where embers dance,  
with temporal fireflies like thoughts of Paradise;

but there are inexplicable instincts that keep recurring  
not from hope or fear only, that are real as stones,  
the faces of the dead we wait for as ants are transferring

their cities, though we no longer believe in the shining ones.  
I half-expect to see you no longer, then more than half,  
almost never, or never then—there I have said it—

but felt something less than final at the edge of your grave,  
some other something somewhere, equally dreaded,  
since the fear of the infinite is the same as death,

unendurable brightness, the substantial dreading  
its own substance, dissolving to gases and vapours,  
like our dread of distance; we need a horizon,

a dividing line that turns the stars into neighbours  
though infinity separates them, we can think of only one sun:  
all I am saying is that the dread of death is in the faces

we love, the dread of our dying, or theirs;  
therefore we see in the glint of immeasurable spaces  
not stars or falling embers, not meteors, but tears.

vi

The mango trees serenely rust when they are in flower,  
nobody knows the name for that voluble cedar  
whose bell-flowers fall, the pomme-arac purples its floor.

The blue hills in late afternoon always look sadder.  
The country night waiting to come in outside the door;  
the firefly keeps striking matches, and the hillside fumes

with a bluish signal of charcoal, then the smoke burns  
into a larger question, one that forms and unforms,  
then loses itself in a cloud, till the question returns.

Buckets clatter under pipes, villages begin at corners.  
A man and his trotting dog come back from their garden.

The sea blazes beyond the rust roofs, dark is on us

before we know it. The earth smells of what's done,  
small yards brighten, day dies and its mourners  
begin, the first wreath of gnats; this was when we sat down

on bright verandahs watching the hills die. Nothing is trite  
once the beloved have vanished; empty clothes in a row,  
but perhaps our sadness tires them who cherished delight;

not only are they relieved of our customary sorrow,  
they are without hunger, without any appetite,  
but are part of earth's vegetal fury; their veins grow

with the wild mammy-apple, the open-handed breadfruit,  
their heart in the open pomegranate, in the sliced avocado;  
ground-doves pick from their palms; ants carry the freight

of their sweetness, their absence in all that we eat,  
their savour that sweetens all of our multiple juices,  
their faith that we break and chew in a wedge of cassava,

and here at first is the astonishment: that earth rejoices  
in the middle of our agony, earth that will have her  
for good: wind shines white stones and the shallows' voices.

vii

In spring, after the bear's self-burial, the stuttering  
crocuses open and choir, glaciers shelve and thaw,  
frozen ponds crack into maps, green lances spring

from the melting fields, flags of rooks rise and tatter  
the pierced light, the crumbling quiet avalanches  
of an unsteady sky; the vole uncoils and the otter

worries his sleek head through the verge's branches;  
crannies, culverts, and creeks roar with wrist-numbing water.  
Deer vault invisible hurdles and sniff the sharp air,

squirrels spring up like questions, berries easily redden,



edges delight in their own shapes (whoever their shaper).  
But here there is one season, our viridian Eden

is that of the primal garden that engendered decay,  
from the seed of a beetle's shard or a dead hare  
white and forgotten as winter with spring on its way.

There is no change now, no cycles of spring, autumn, winter,  
nor an island's perpetual summer; she took time with her;  
no climate, no calendar except for this bountiful day.

As poor Tom fed his last crust to trembling birds,  
as by reeds and cold pools John Clare blest these thin musicians,  
let the ants teach me again with the long lines of words,

my business and duty, the lesson you taught your sons,  
to write of the light's bounty on familiar things  
that stand on the verge of translating themselves into news:

the crab, the frigate that floats on cruciform wings,  
and that nailed and thorn riddled tree that opens its pews  
to the blackbird that hasn't forgotten her because it sings.

Derek Walcott

# The Fist

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.

Derek Walcott

# The Glory Trumpeter

Old Eddie's face, wrinkled with river lights,  
Looked like a Mississippi man's. The eyes,  
Derisive and avuncular at once,  
Swivelling, fixed me. They'd seen  
Too many wakes, too many cathouse nights.  
The bony, idle fingers on the valves  
Of his knee-cradled horn could tear  
Through 'Georgia on My Mind' or 'Jesus Saves'  
With the same fury of indifference,  
If what propelled such frenzy was despair.

Now, as the eyes sealed in the ashen flesh,  
And Eddie, like a deacon at his prayer,  
Rose, tilting the bright horn, I saw a flash  
Of gulls and pigeons from the dunes of coal  
Near my grandmother's barracks near the wharves,  
I saw the sallow faces of those men  
Who sighed as if they spoke into their graves  
About the Negro in America. That was when  
The Sunday comics sprawled out on her floor,  
Sent from the States, had a particular odour,  
A smell of money mingled with man's sweat.

And yet, if Eddie's features held our fate,  
Secure in childhood I did not know then  
A jesus-ragtime or gut-bucket blues  
To the bowed heads of the lean, compliant men  
Back from the states in their funereal serge,  
Black, rusty Homburgs and limp waiters' ties  
With honey accents and lard-coloured eyes  
Was Joshua's ram's horn wailing for the Jews  
Of patient bitterness or patient siege.

Now it was that as Eddie turned his back  
On our young crowd out feteing, swilling liquor,  
And blew, eyes closed, one foot up, out to sea,  
His horned aimed at those cities of the Gulf,  
Mobile and Galveston and sweetly meted  
The horn of plenty through a bitter cup,

In lonely exaltation blaming me  
For all whom race and exile have defeated,  
For my own uncle in America,  
That living there I could never look up.

Derek Walcott

# The Saddhu Of Couva

When sunset, a brass gong,  
vibrate through Couva,  
is then I see my soul, swiftly unsheathed,  
like a white cattle bird growing more small  
over the ocean of the evening canes,  
and I sit quiet, waiting for it to return  
like a hog-cattle blistered with mud,  
because, for my spirit, India is too far.  
And to that gong  
sometimes bald clouds in saffron robes assemble  
sacred to the evening,  
sacred even to Ramlochan,  
singing Indian hits from his jute hammock  
while evening strokes the flanks  
and silver horns of his maroon taxi,  
as the mosquitoes whine their evening mantras,  
my friend Anopheles, on the sitar,  
and the fireflies making every dusk Divali.

I knot my head with a cloud,  
my white mustache bristle like horns,  
my hands are brittle as the pages of Ramayana.  
Once the sacred monkeys multiplied like branches  
in the ancient temples: I did not miss them,  
because these fields sang of Bengal,  
behind Ramlochan Repairs there was Uttar Pradesh;  
but time roars in my ears like a river,  
old age is a conflagration  
as fierce as the cane fires of crop time.  
I will pass through these people like a cloud,  
they will see a white bird beating the evening sea  
of the canes behind Couva,  
and who will point it as my soul unsheathed?  
Neither the bridegroom in beads,  
nor the bride in her veils,  
their sacred language on the cinema hoardings.

I talked too damn much on the Couva Village Council.  
I talked too softly, I was always drowned

by the loudspeakers in front of the stores  
or the loudspeakers with the greatest pictures.  
I am best suited to stalk like a white cattle bird  
on legs like sticks, with sticking to the Path  
between the canes on a district road at dusk.  
Playing the Elder. There are no more elders.  
Is only old people.

My friends spit on the government.  
I do not think is just the government.  
Suppose all the gods too old,  
Suppose they dead and they burning them,  
supposing when some cane cutter  
start chopping up snakes with a cutlass  
he is severing the snake-armed god,  
and suppose some hunter has caught  
Hanuman in his mischief in a monkey cage.  
Suppose all the gods were killed by electric light?  
Sunset, a bonfire, roars in my ears;  
embers of brown swallows dart and cry,  
like women distracted,  
around its cremation.  
I ascend to my bed of sweet sandalwood.

Derek Walcott

# The Sea Is History

Where are your monuments, your battles, martyrs?  
Where is your tribal memory? Sirs,  
in that gray vault. The sea. The sea  
has locked them up. The sea is History.

First, there was the heaving oil,  
heavy as chaos;  
then, like a light at the end of a tunnel,

the lantern of a caravel,  
and that was Genesis.  
Then there were the packed cries,  
the shit, the moaning:

Exodus.  
Bone soldered by coral to bone,  
mosaics  
mantled by the benediction of the shark's shadow,

that was the Ark of the Covenant.  
Then came from the plucked wires  
of sunlight on the sea floor

the plangent harp of the Babylonian bondage,  
as the white cowries clustered like manacles  
on the drowned women,

and those were the ivory bracelets  
of the Song of Solomon,  
but the ocean kept turning blank pages

looking for History.  
Then came the men with eyes heavy as anchors  
who sank without tombs,

brigands who barbecued cattle,  
leaving their charred ribs like palm leaves on the shore,  
then the foaming, rabid maw

of the tidal wave swallowing Port Royal,  
and that was Jonah,  
but where is your Renaissance?

Sir, it is locked in them sea sands  
out there past the reef's moiling shelf,  
where the men-o'-war floated down;

strop on these goggles, I'll guide you there myself.  
It's all subtle and submarine,  
through colonnades of coral,

past the gothic windows of sea fans  
to where the crusty grouper, onyx-eyed,  
blinks, weighted by its jewels, like a bald queen;

and these groined caves with barnacles  
pitted like stone  
are our cathedrals,

and the furnace before the hurricanes:  
Gomorrah. Bones ground by windmills  
into marl and cornmeal,

and that was Lamentations -  
that was just Lamentations,  
it was not History;

then came, like scum on the river's drying lip,  
the brown reeds of villages  
mantling and congealing into towns,

and at evening, the midges' choirs,  
and above them, the spires  
lancing the side of God

as His son set, and that was the New Testament.

Then came the white sisters clapping  
to the waves' progress,  
and that was Emancipation -



jubilant, O jubilation -  
vanishing swiftly  
as the sea's lace dries in the sun,

but that was not History,  
that was only faith,  
and then each rock broke into its own nation;

then came the synod of flies,  
then came the secretarial heron,  
then came the bullfrog bellowing for a vote,

fireflies with bright ideas  
and bats like jetting ambassadors  
and the mantis, like khaki police,

and the furred caterpillars of judges  
examining each case closely,  
and then in the dark ears of ferns

and in the salt chuckle of rocks  
with their sea pools, there was the sound  
like a rumour without any echo

of History, really beginning.

Derek Walcott

# The Season of Phantasmal Peace

Then all the nations of birds lifted together  
the huge net of the shadows of this earth  
in multitudinous dialects, twittering tongues,  
stitching and crossing it. They lifted up  
the shadows of long pines down trackless slopes,  
the shadows of glass-faced towers down evening streets,  
the shadow of a frail plant on a city sill—  
the net rising soundless as night, the birds' cries soundless, until  
there was no longer dusk, or season, decline, or weather,  
only this passage of phantasmal light  
that not the narrowest shadow dared to sever.

And men could not see, looking up, what the wild geese drew,  
what the ospreys trailed behind them in silvery ropes  
that flashed in the icy sunlight; they could not hear  
battalions of starlings waging peaceful cries,  
bearing the net higher, covering this world  
like the vines of an orchard, or a mother drawing  
the trembling gauze over the trembling eyes  
of a child fluttering to sleep;

it was the light

that you will see at evening on the side of a hill  
in yellow October, and no one hearing knew  
what change had brought into the raven's cawing,  
the killdeer's screech, the ember-circling chough  
such an immense, soundless, and high concern  
for the fields and cities where the birds belong,  
except it was their seasonal passing, Love,  
made seasonless, or, from the high privilege of their birth,  
something brighter than pity for the wingless ones  
below them who shared dark holes in windows and in houses,  
and higher they lifted the net with soundless voices  
above all change, betrayals of falling suns,  
and this season lasted one moment, like the pause  
between dusk and darkness, between fury and peace,  
but, for such as our earth is now, it lasted long.

Derek Walcott

# The Star-Apple Kingdom

There were still shards of an ancient pastoral  
in those shires of the island where the cattle drank  
their pools of shadow from an older sky,  
surviving from when the landscape copied such objects as  
'Herefords at Sunset in the valley of the Wye.'

The mountain water that fell white from the mill wheel  
sprinkling like petals from the star-apple trees,  
and all of the windmills and sugar mills moved by mules  
on the treadmill of Monday to Monday, would repeat  
in tongues of water and wind and fire, in tongues  
of Mission School pickaninnies, like rivers remembering  
their source, Parish Trelawny, Parish St David, Parish  
St Andrew, the names afflicting the pastures,  
the lime groves and fences of marl stone and the cattle  
with a docile longing, an epochal content.

And there were, like old wedding lace in an attic,  
among the boas and parasols and the tea-colored  
daguerreotypes, hints of an epochal happiness  
as ordered and infinite to the child  
as the great house road to the Great House  
down a perspective of casuarinas plunging green manes  
in time to the horses, an orderly life  
reduced by lorgnettes day and night, one disc the sun,  
the other the moon, reduced into a pier glass:  
nannies diminished to dolls, mahogany stairways  
no larger than those of an album in which  
the flash of cutlery yellows, as gamboge as  
the piled cakes of teatime on that latticed  
bougainvillea verandah that looked down toward  
a prospect of Cuyp-like Herefords under a sky  
lurid as a porcelain souvenir with these words:  
'Herefords at Sunset in the Valley of the Wye.'

Strange, that the rancor of hatred hid in that dream  
of slow rivers and lily-like parasols, in snaps  
of fine old colonial families, curled at the edge  
not from age or from fire or the chemicals, no, not at all,  
but because, off at its edges, innocently excluded  
stood the groom, the cattle boy, the housemaid, the gardeners,

the tenants, the good Negroes down in the village,  
their mouth in the locked jaw of a silent scream.  
A scream which would open the doors to swing wildly  
all night, that was bringing in heavier clouds,  
more black smoke than cloud, frightening the cattle  
in whose bulging eyes the Great House diminished;  
a scorching wind of a scream  
that began to extinguish the fireflies,  
that dried the water mill creaking to a stop  
as it was about to pronounce Parish Trelawny  
all over, in the ancient pastoral voice,  
a wind that blew all without bending anything,  
neither the leaves of the album nor the lime groves;  
blew Nanny floating back in white from a feather  
to a chimerical, chemical pin speck that shrank  
the drinking Herefords to brown porcelain cows  
on a mantelpiece, Trelawny trembling with dusk,  
the scorched pastures of the old benign Custos; blew  
far the decent servants and the lifelong cook,  
and shriveled to a shard that ancient pastoral  
of dusk in a gilt-edged frame now catching the evening sun  
in Jamaica, making both epochs one.

He looked out from the Great House windows on  
clouds that still held the fragrance of fire,  
he saw the Botanical Gardens officially drown  
in a formal dusk, where governors had strolled  
and black gardeners had smiled over glinting shears  
at the lilies of parasols on the floating lawns,  
the flame trees obeyed his will and lowered their wicks,  
the flowers tightened their fists in the name of thrift,  
the porcelain lamps of ripe cocoa, the magnolia's jet  
dimmed on the one circuit with the ginger lilies  
and left a lonely bulb on the verandah,  
and, had his mandate extended to that ceiling  
of star-apple candelabra, he would have ordered  
the sky to sleep, saying, I'm tired,  
save the starlight for victories, we can't afford it,  
leave the moon on for one more hour, and that's it.  
But though his power, the given mandate, extended  
from tangerine daybreaks to star-apple dusks,  
his hand could not dam that ceaseless torrent of dust

that carried the shacks of the poor, to their root-rock music,  
down the gullies of Yallahs and August Town,  
to lodge them on thorns of maca, with their rags  
crucified by cactus, tins, old tires, cartons;  
from the black Warieka Hills the sky glowed fierce as  
the dials of a million radios,  
a throbbing sunset that glowed like a grid  
where the dread beat rose from the jukebox of Kingston.  
He saw the fountains dried of quadrilles, the water-music  
of the country dancers, the fiddlers like fifes  
put aside. He had to heal  
this malarial island in its bath of bay leaves,  
its forests tossing with fever, the dry cattle  
groaning like winches, the grass that kept shaking  
its head to remember its name. No vowels left  
in the mill wheel, the river. Rock stone. Rock stone.

The mountains rolled like whales through phosphorous stars,  
as he swayed like a stone down fathoms into sleep,  
drawn by that magnet which pulls down half the world  
between a star and a star, by that black power  
that has the assassin dreaming of snow,  
that poleaxes the tyrant to a sleeping child.  
The house is rocking at anchor, but as he falls  
his mind is a mill wheel in moonlight,  
and he hears, in the sleep of his moonlight, the drowned  
bell of Port Royal's cathedral, sees the copper pennies  
of bubbles rising from the empty eye-pockets  
of green buccaneers, the parrot fish floating  
from the frayed shoulders of pirates, sea horses  
drawing gowned ladies in their liquid promenade  
across the moss-green meadows of the sea;  
he heard the drowned choirs under Palisadoes,  
a hymn ascending to earth from a heaven inverted  
by water, a crab climbing the steeple,  
and he climbed from that submarine kingdom  
as the evening lights came on in the institute,  
the scholars lamplit in their own aquarium,  
he saw them mouthing like parrot fish, as he passed  
upward from that baptism, their history lessons,  
the bubbles like ideas which he could not break:  
Jamaica was captured by Penn and Venables,

Port Royal perished in a cataclysmic earthquake.

Before the coruscating façades of cathedrals  
from Santiago to Caracas, where penitential archbishops  
washed the feet of paupers (a parenthetical moment  
that made the Caribbean a baptismal font,  
turned butterflies to stone, and whitened like doves  
the buzzards circling municipal garbage),  
the Caribbean was borne like an elliptical basin  
in the hands of acolytes, and a people were absolved  
of a history which they did not commit;  
the slave pardoned his whip, and the dispossessed  
said the rosary of islands for three hundred years,  
a hymn that resounded like the hum of the sea  
inside a sea cave, as their knees turned to stone,  
while the bodies of patriots were melting down walls  
still crusted with mute outcries of La Revolucion!  
'San Salvador, pray for us, St. Thomas, San Domingo,  
ora pro nobis, intercede for us, Sancta Lucia  
of no eyes,' and when the circular chaplet  
reached the last black bead of Sancta Trinidad  
they began again, their knees drilled into stone,  
where Colon had begun, with San Salvador's bead,  
beads of black colonies round the necks of Indians.  
And while they prayed for an economic miracle,  
ulcers formed on the municipal portraits,  
the hotels went up, and the casinos and brothels,  
and the empires of tobacco, sugar, and bananas,  
until a black woman, shawled like a buzzard,  
climbed up the stairs and knocked at the door  
of his dream, whispering in the ear of the keyhole:  
'Let me in, I'm finished with praying, I'm the Revolution.  
I am the darker, the older America.'

She was as beautiful as a stone in the sunrise,  
her voice had the gutturals of machine guns  
across khaki deserts where the cactus flower  
detonates like grenades, her sex was the slit throat  
of an Indian, her hair had the blue-black sheen of the crow.  
She was a black umbrella blown inside out  
by the wind of revolution, La Madre Dolorosa,  
a black rose of sorrow, a black mine of silence,

raped wife, empty mother, Aztec virgin  
transfixed by arrows from a thousand guitars,  
a stone full of silence, which, if it gave tongue  
to the tortures done in the name of the Father,  
would curdle the blood of the marauding wolf,  
the fountain of generals, poets, and cripples  
who danced without moving over their graves  
with each revolution; her Caesarean was stitched  
by the teeth of machine guns, and every sunset  
she carried the Caribbean's elliptical basin  
as she had once carried the penitential napkins  
to be the footbath of dictators, Trujillo, Machado,  
and those whose faces had yellowed like posters  
on municipal walls. Now she stroked his hair  
until it turned white, but she would not understand  
that he wanted no other power but peace,  
that he wanted a revolution without any bloodshed,  
he wanted a history without any memory,  
streets without statues,  
and a geography without myth. He wanted no armies  
but those regiments of bananas, thick lances of cane,  
and he sobbed, 'I am powerless, except for love.'  
She faded from him, because he could not kill;  
she shrunk to a bat that hung day and night  
in the back of his brain. He rose in his dream.

Derek Walcott