

Not Sound but the Memory of Sound

SHARA MCCALLUM

Of my childhood in Jamaica, comprising nearly my first nine years of life, I am left with scraps of memories. Many are non-sequential impressions, fleeting sights, smells, and sounds that startle me with their force when they arrive, sometimes unbidden, on my doorstep. But these specters of the past refuse to behave. They fidget and won't sit still long enough for me to line them up. Mischievous children, they play hide-and-seek or run away, glancing over their shoulders to laugh at my feeble efforts to catch them.

In the summer of 1981, the year I entered the United States, my three younger sisters and I had been taken out of Kingston by our maternal grandparents, in response partly to the breakdown inside our home, partly to the political upheaval in the city and country at the time. The period of slavery notwithstanding, the decade of the '70s into which I was born remains one of the most violent in Jamaica's history. When my sisters and I arrived in America in 1981, for a variety of complex reasons, including U.S. immigration policy and the expense encumbered by my grandparents to get us all here, we landed without our parents. My mother would join us a year later, but days after I arrived in Miami, my father died suddenly.

The first time I went back to Jamaica was in 1995, nearly fifteen years after my departure and after this entangled loss of country and father had occurred. By then, I was in my early twenties, a student in a graduate creative writing program. A strange sequence of events occasioned my return. The director of my MFA program was the patient of a physician who'd been, for years, leading

annual medical missions to an infirmary in Lucea, a small, rural town in the parish of Hanover on the island's north coast. At one of her appointments, Joyce's doctor mentioned that he thought it would be great to have a writer accompany them on the upcoming trip. Someone, he felt, should preserve the stories of the elder residents at the infirmary. "As luck would have it, I have a graduate student from Jamaica," she'd told him.

I hadn't the foggiest idea of what I was going there to do. I wasn't an oral historian but an aspiring poet. I identified readily as Jamaican but was painfully aware even then of the quicksand nature of my identity: I hadn't returned to the place of my birth since parts of my family and I had, in our minds, fled. And while every poem I was writing kept pulling me back to Jamaica, I found myself unraveled by the thought of actually stepping foot in the country.

The day our group was to depart from BWI, a freakish snowstorm hit the Baltimore/DC area, shutting down airports, canceling flights. The group of us—and my now-husband who had come to see me off—were put up at an airport hotel. I was a wreck that night and came close to backing out of the trip altogether. I who professed not to believe in signs kept telling Steve, "This is a bad sign." It was too much like my leaving Jamaica had been, too much like the eerie feeling I had carried inside me for years, that I was living a life on repeat, the needle of a turntable stuck and scratching out the same bars of the same song.

The day I'd left Jamaica for good, we missed our first flight. When my grandmother arrived at our home, she found my parents gone, my sisters and I unpacked and unkempt, our passports missing, the house in disarray. That day, we sat in Manley Airport waiting standby while my parents, elsewhere on the island, were attending Bob Marley's funeral. That day, when we finally got out on the last flight bound for Miami, the feeling in me began—no, that's false. It could not have been then as then I was most likely full only of the exhilaration a child knows of the present, of going on an adventure and a journey. What I felt on leaving my home forever I can't exactly recall and whatever I recount now, I'm aware, is part fiction. Maybe I was only tired or hungry or perhaps I was grateful to the nice hostess (flight attendants were called hostesses then) who brought crayons and cookies and distracted me with her smile. I don't know anymore what's true of that moment, but sometime after my entry into America I began to notice a growing unrest in me. The longer I was in the U.S. the more the pricking feeling began that I'd

never been meant to go, that if I'd just stayed home somehow it would have all been different. *I would have been different.*

That unexpected snowstorm in Baltimore was some force again trying to steer me off the path I'd found myself on. I was sure of it. Yet when the sun rose, as it always does, dissolving fear into dream, I boarded the plane. I assured myself my nerves were just nerves, just me allowing my grandparents—with all their baggage and fear attached to the last years of our lives in Kingston—once more to squat in my head. This was the place they seemed always to reside, no matter that I had by then really and truly left my family behind in Miami. The first one of our reassembled unit in Miami to venture any further into America a year and a half earlier, I'd moved all the way to what I'd imagined I was heading to: the exotic land of Mary, a state whose name I still pronounce *Mary-land*, a state which when you are 21 years old and originally from an island that could fit three times over inside of it, when the only thing you yet know of America is determined by living at the edge of a peninsula whose borders, as you will experience them for nearly a decade, are less than 100 miles in either direction (bound by Jupiter to the North, Key Largo to the south), that state, *Maryland*, is like a foreign country.

My grandparents had, for the months following my decision to go on the trip to Jamaica, expressed their misgivings about this *cock-eyed idea* every time I called home to Miami. Which I did, daily. Voicing the litany of usual warnings, my grandparents had done their very best to try to persuade me to abandon *this foolish notion*, as they had done their very best over the course of fifteen years to make me forget Jamaica altogether, as they had tried to nurture the conditions in me to discard the idea of return ever being possible for someone like me. *You've been gone too long. Jamaica is a rough place. You think you're Jamaican but you won't know how to deal with things there. Besides, you won't understand a word of the Patwa people speak in Hanover. That's bush you going to.*

In contrast to the all-inclusive resorts that sprawl along Negril's nine-mile stretch of beach, Nirvana, the name of the hotel the doctor had chosen for our group's stay, prided itself on being a true Jamaican experience. A small property at the time of my visit in the winter of 1996, it contained three or four cottages and a covered porch that doubled as a dining room, with a kitchen off to the side. Bedrooms were spartan: tile floors, wood blinds, a bed, nightstand, and dresser. Lacking air conditioning, each had a ceiling fan overhead, at night

moving a breeze across my body as I lay atop sheets, by day accomplishing little more than to stir the soup of humid air.

Here we were staying in the real Jamaica, Dr. Rhodes announced upon our arrival, one of many ironies I noted—as we were in Negril, tourist capital of Jamaica, rather than in the small town of Lucea where the infirmary was actually located. Our meals would be taken communally, he continued; and then in front of everyone, he nominated me to put together a daily shopping list with instructions for the cook who worked on the property. If I could handle this small task, it was implied, an “authentic Jamaican meal” would be waiting on our return from the infirmary in Lucea at the end of each day.

At the time of this trip, kitchens had only recently entered my purview, prompted not by love of my culture but by necessity: I was a graduate student subsisting on graduate student wages. I’ve become a cook in the two interceding decades and can now even make patties from scratch, a sign of living in diaspora or a kind of exile if ever there is one, since no Jamaican in Jamaica would ever have need to make a patty, so cheap and ubiquitous are these staples of the nation’s cuisine, found in every corner shop, in every nook and cranny of the island. So, yes, now I know how to make patties, but my culinary skills in my early twenties were basic at best—scrambled eggs, rice and beans, pasta with jar sauce. This is what I could then handle and I was far from any kind of authority on Jamaican cuisine.

What saved me when I found myself thrust into the role of “native expert” was the imprint of my grandmother in the kitchen of our Miami townhouse: the hours she spent each night standing over a stove, her weekend-long readying of our family’s traditional Sunday lunch, a lengthy process she continued to undertake each week for at least a decade after we’d left the island. Conjuring the vision of her tending a pot of rice and peas or opening and closing the oven to check on a roast with potatoes and plantain, I was able, just barely, to pass one of the many identity tests I felt I’d implicitly given everyone permission to subject me to by coming on the trip.

During that visit in ’96, the first of three I’d make over a five-year period to interview residents at the infirmary in Lucea, I quickly came to see that the best decision I’d made was to pack a tape recorder. It turned out my grandparents were wrong: I could quite easily understand the Patwa the residents spoke and even speak it passably. The problem I dealt with then, as I have with every return since, was with the interposing ghosts of memory.

Impressions from my past kept coming unbridled from their holds in my mind and tangled with the sensory details of a present I could neither corral nor seem to stay upright inside of.

As I moved through my days in Jamaica, all of a sudden I would feel years fall away. The rise and fall of voices of children in school uniforms crowding the patty shop in downtown Lucea at lunchtime, the call of women hawking wares in the marketplace, the sight of fishermen leaning against the harbor wall holding strings of freshly-caught snapper were all so curiously familiar that this sense of being outside of time was not altogether unpleasant. I could even briefly sustain the belief that this moment I lingered inside of, this here, this now, was where I'd always been standing, defining who I'd always been, without interruption. But inevitably something in the corner of my eye would shift. I could never glimpse clearly what exactly would break the spell, but I came to understand that thing I could not see but knew was there, that thing had always and would forever be with me, because I carried it inside of me. Time and memory were stones I kept losing in the waters of myself.

In other moments, who I was in relation to what I was experiencing felt like a coat put on backwards or a hat placed askew atop your head. Time might be advancing with its proper forward momentum, scenes around me unfolding apace, but I was spatially at a remove. When such dislocation occurred, temporary dysphasia augmented it. Words would abandon me.

On the hotel's grounds, bougainvillea, hibiscus, allamanda, and angel trumpet grew in profusion, but I could locate names for only half the flowers I recognized by sight. Small birds called out at dusk and dawn in languages that began to sound both familiar and foreign. Within Nirvana's compound, someone had strung a hammock between two coconut trees, to which I would go early mornings and evenings. Through the scrim of plants and trees, the sea was barely visible but plainly audible. Was its *shhhhh* the start of a word, a visceral sound I once had known as if it were my own breathing? I could not tell anymore if the sea's hush was meant to be consoling or keening.

On the stretch of highway tracing Jamaica's north coast, the sea is at times a stone's throw away. Here, the Caribbean shifts from green to blue to grey, flickering between various moods as the sun sifts through the clouds. My sister Renee had come that morning to Nirvana to collect me, as I would be spending my last weekend with her in Mobay before flying back to the states.

“Do you remember us playing Dandy Shandy in the yard?” Renee asked as soon after we pulled out of the hotel’s driveway to begin the hour-long ride.

No. I’m not sure I remember what Dandy Shandy is or which yard you mean, I almost answered. But not wanting to pull on the frayed threads of the past, I redirected: “I found a snapshot of us a few years ago in one of Mummy’s scrapbooks. You are catching my legs in mid-air. I’m upside-down, attempting a handstand.”

In that photograph, the sun is bright, the image almost overexposed. Ixora bushes, with their tiny, pointillist-like red flowers, outline a quadrant of light in which Renee and I are inverted and suspended.

The child of my father and a different mother, Renee lived with my parents, our younger sisters, and me for a part of my childhood in Jamaica, though that arrangement was to be short-lived. Renee’s mother was out of the picture at the time, and her grandmother, her primary guardian, disapproved of my parents’ lives. My parents were Rastas and devout members of the Twelve Tribes of Israel, part of a group of disaffected Jamaicans searching for footing in the world that slavery, colonialism, racism, capitalism, and many other “isms” had left in their wake. Once I came to the U.S., I would be surprised to learn that Rastas were idealized as revolutionaries. My experience growing up Rasta in the ’70s in Kingston was often, instead, as a pariah—at school, on the streets of Kingston, and within my extended family. Renee’s grandmother took Renee back to live with her long before I migrated, and when I departed in 1981, my contact with her went away entirely.

By the time she and I reconnected in Miami about five years later, Renee was virtually unrecognizable to me. I was early in my teens, self-conscious about myself in every way, and she was nearly a woman who had grown toward the fullness of our father’s height, inheriting his seemingly endless limbs. With her dark eyes, facial structure, fully drawn mouth, she’d delivered on her genetic promise from birth: she was our father’s spitting image. I remember registering a vague feeling of disappointment upon our reunion that this Renee did not match the picture I’d hung onto of a gangly girl with scabbed knees and hair, like mine, always in two plaits. But my grandmother’s reaction was starkly different. Watching Renee step across the threshold of her Miami townhouse, she said, “was like seeing Alastair’s ghost walk through the front door.”

Halfway through our drive from Negril to Mobay, Renee inserted a tape cassette into the car stereo and in a voice I could hear was trying too hard to be casual asked, “Do you know who this is singing?”

The lure of the sensory world is a strong one for me everywhere I am but perhaps no more so than when I am in Jamaica. Sunlight filtering into the car, greenery all around, I had to pull my attention from the colors and textures outside the car’s window and train it on the music to try to answer her question. After several minutes of concentrated listening, all I could tell was the song was nearing its end.

“No, I don’t know who it is,” I replied.

Given the way Renee had carefully arranged the moment, the inflection in her voice when she’d posed the question, I knew this was another test, and I was annoyed at my inability to identify the singer. After a week of sitting these kinds of exams (some imposed by others, most just by circumstance, or perceived through the lens of my own insecurities), I was deflated at having failed again. My inability to read the subtext of the exchange, which felt freighted but elusive, prickled me. What was the secret message this time I could not decode?

“Are you certain?” she pressed.

“Yes. I’ve never heard this singer before,” I said, irritation, I’m sure, creeping into my voice by then.

She sighed and after a slight hesitation responded: “You have. It’s Daddy.”

Wandering off to faraway lands, searching for golden sands, the voice on the tape was trailing off with the song’s refrain, the words of which I’d given little heed to before. But in the moment of Renee’s revelation, they became all I could hear, and I knew, going forward, I would forever be in pursuit of their meaning. With my sister’s utterance, the music, the words, and the voice that carried it all—my father’s voice—had undergone abrupt metamorphosis. It was as if particles of sound were matter not waves, as if something that exists as a function of time and space had assumed mass and form and was now lodged inside my chest.

“Does the song sound familiar at least? He used to sing it to us all the while when we were children.”

“No. I’m sorry,” I managed.

“Oh,” she said.

“I thought of all the sisters, you would have been the one to remember.”

Renee acting as a medium for my father’s voice fifteen years after his death seems to me now all of a piece with the role she has often played as one of the primary keepers and conveyers of his memory. A couple years before this moment in her car, Renee—not my mother or grandparents—was the one who revealed to me how our father had actually died.

“Daddy committed suicide,” she’d said one night as we were sitting on my dorm room bed. I was nineteen and a student at university in Miami, where she was visiting for perhaps the second or third time since our reunion a few years prior.

“He didn’t die in a car accident. I know that’s what they told you. I’m sorry, but I just think you should know the truth by now.”

“He had schizophrenia. You know that, right?” she continued.

No, I didn’t, quickly took shape in my mind, but as quickly, I revised it before I spoke. Of course I had known something wasn’t right. From time to time my grandfather would lament that my father’s life had been a waste. “It was so sad what happened to him. He was such an intelligent man, Alastair was.” Occasionally one of the adults would say he had been “mad” but stop short of explaining what they meant. While my grandparents and mother parted ways where my sisters and I were concerned, there was one thing on which they’d seemingly made a pact. *Schizophrenia. Suicide.* These were unspeakable words.

In the aftermath of Renee’s disclosure, formerly blurred images of my father came into relief. Daddy freezing mid-step while walking, staring off into the distance and not responding to my tug on his sleeve or to my voice imploring him to wake up. Daddy in the garden talking to no one I could see, shouting, gesticulating, and spitting into the air. Daddy referring to himself alternately as God and the devil. These versions of who he was had been with me all along. These fathers were ones I’d been unable to square with the singular father I’d fashioned out of snippets of memory, story, and dream.

By the time we pulled into my sister’s driveway, the tape had long since finished. The thousand birds that had taken flight inside my rib cage had resumed their perches. The car had filled with the kind of silence that can settle over

a conversation like dust in an abandoned room, coating every surface with a film difficult to remove.

“I’m sorry. I just thought you would have recognized his voice,” Renee finally said. “Are you okay?”

When I remained quiet, she added, “I’ll send you a copy of the tape. It’s old so I have to be very careful with it, but I’ll find a way to make a copy for you.”

I knew our father was a musician, so why hadn’t I guessed it was him? My strongest memory of my dad is a composite image in which he is always singing and strumming his guitar—one pressed into me from my mother’s narratives, which plucked this moment out of the messier life of the man. When my mother talked of my father, infrequent as it was, she resurrected one version: the struggling artist. One of her favorite anecdotes is of me as a baby and toddler sleeping on studio floors while my father rehearsed. She was sure to remind me he knew Brother Bob (a.k.a. Marley), not only through Twelve Tribes but also through the 1970s music scene in Kingston. Hers were tales, I now think, told so I could retain a vision of my father made greater by his proximity to greatness. So I could see him, I suppose, as someone who had been that close to making it, in every sense of that phrase.

The nearest she tip-toed toward what felt like a more unvarnished truth was when she’d admit, “Your dad missed the boat. When everyone else was getting into reggae, he wanted to be a rock star. Mick Jagger was his idol. Shortly before he died, he took the raw tracks he’d made of some of the songs he’d written and recorded to Chris Blackwell. He’d tried and failed before to get a contract from Blackwell, but he really believed he’d succeed that last time. I still wonder how things would have turned out for all of us if he’d gotten that deal.”

“Where are the recordings of those songs? Can we find them?” I remember asking her at one point.

“I don’t know what happened to them, Sara May. When we came to the U.S., we had to leave a lot behind.”

As a child and throughout my adolescence I was caught inside the metronome of grief—for a lost father, a lost country, a lost sense of myself. My ear became, and perhaps remains, too attuned to the ticking of what in the present is already going, going, gone. Knowing my father was dead, whenever I would catch a glimpse of almost any tall, thin, light-skinned black man in a crowd, for

years my mind would irrationally leap to *Daddy*. Sometimes I'd realize I was following this man. This happened more times than I care to admit. With no photographs of him around the house or pasted into my mother's scrapbooks that trailed us from Jamaica to Miami, perhaps it was inevitable I would so often find myself searching for my father's face.

In my sister's car on that coastal road, on my first trip back to the country of my birth, it felt both fitting and strange that I would again meet my father, or at least some part of him, spilling out of the past in defiance of death's erasure. Maybe in that moment of encounter, I should have rejoiced at the gift I'd been handed. The tape. His voice. Some part of him had been brought back to me. But faced with a rift in time I could not traverse, I was struck silent.

At 23, I had returned to Jamaica thinking I was ready to face any truth at all of who I was and who I'd been. Instead, I was humbled by all I did not know to know: how memory, once fractured, cannot, despite our greatest longing for it to be otherwise, be fully reassembled. How the past, even when we wish to rescue it from oblivion, has a way of dissolving, becoming a story we keep telling ourselves to find ourselves in the present. Hearing my father's voice after fifteen years and not knowing it was him—it was not his presence but his absence I felt most keenly. It was the recognition that my father had become a distant music. Not sound, but the memory of sound.