

**SEQUINS**

**FOR A**

**RAGGED**

**HEM**

**AMRYL**

**JOHNSON**

**AN  
ISLAND**

**JOURNEY**



BLACK BRITAIN



WRITING BACK

SEQUINS FOR A RAGGED HEM

## *About the Author*

Amryl Johnson was a poet, author, teacher and performer born in Trinidad. She was brought up by her grandparents until the age of eleven, when she moved to Britain to join her parents. She attended secondary school in London and went on to study British, African and Caribbean literature at the University of Kent. She taught at the University of Warwick. Johnson's work was included in several anthologies, including *News for Babylon: The Chatto Book of Westindian-British Poetry*, *Let It Be Told: Essays by Black Women in Britain*, *Watchers and Seekers: Creative Writing by Black Women in Britain*, *The New British Poetry* and *Daughters of Africa*.

SEQUINS FOR A  
RAGGED HEM

*Amryl Johnson*

With a new introduction by  
Bernardine Evaristo



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## *Publisher's Note*

In this book are some expressions and depictions of prejudices that were commonplace at the time it was written. We are printing the book as it was originally published because to make changes would be the same as pretending these prejudices never existed.



## *Introduction*

Amryl Johnson (1944–2001) was born in Trinidad, where she was raised by her grandparents before migrating to Britain at the age of eleven to join her parents. She studied English with African Studies at the University of Kent and lectured briefly in Arts Education at the University of Warwick, but mainly had a career as a creative-writing tutor, writer and poet.

Johnson was one of the very few early black women writers publishing books in Britain, all of whom had been born elsewhere, arriving either as children or as adults. This slim list included the South African memoirist Noni Jabavu (1919–2008), the Guyanese poet, novelist and memoirist Beryl Gilroy (1924–2001), the Surinamese picture-book children’s writer Petronella Breinburg (1927–2019), the Guyanese poet and novelist Grace Nichols (born 1950), the Jamaican poet and children’s novelist Valerie Bloom (born 1956) and the Jamaican novelist Joan Riley (born 1958). The prolific Nigerian author Buchi Emecheta (1944–2017), whose novels were first published in the seventies, was for a long time the only woman novelist flying the flag for the continent of Africa.

These women, all pioneers, were writing into historical silences and filling them with our stories, subjectivities and perspectives. It was a start; it is an ongoing project.

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Amryl Johnson was a notable figure in this nascent literary culture, initially establishing herself as a performance poet. She produced a poetry pamphlet, *Shackles* (1983), before publishing a full collection, *Long Road to Nowhere* (1985), which was inspired by a return journey to the Caribbean in 1983, when she spent six months island-hopping to several countries including Trinidad, Barbados, Grenada and Guadeloupe. The trip also inspired her memoir, *Sequins for a Ragged Hem* (1988), which might sound like a travelogue but it wasn't, not really. She was, essentially, returning home, with Trinidad featuring strongly.

Johnson's prose is suffused with a poet's sensibility coupled with a feeling of drama. Her descriptions are lusciously immersive as she infuses her sentences with the full weight of the senses. From the moment she lands in Trinidad, her first port of call, she creates vivid pictures and scenes of her environment – the people and buildings, the landscapes and seascapes – as effectively as if she were recording it all on a video camera for us to see in brilliant technicolour. Her ability to lightly sketch people as characters who fully come alive and her ear for pitch-perfect dialogue are both brilliant. We hear the cadences of different island dialects, and passing comments and exchanges are loaded with context and subtext – so little is said, but so much implied and inferred. One senses a fiction writer struggling to get out.

Landing in Trinidad just before carnival, Johnson plunges herself into it with feverish abandon. She surrenders to the magic of the music and the moment, which, in reality, lasts for the duration of carnival over many days. She is euphoric, on a natural high,

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almost hypnotized, her appetite insatiable. It feels as if she's going through a cleansing ritual – sweating out the toxicity of Babylon and being reborn as herself now that she is back in the Caribbean. In one such passage, after dancing through Port of Spain for hours with strangers, she ends up wandering alone and surprisingly unafraid through the deserted streets in the middle of the night. She gathers up scattered bits of costumes as mementos, no matter how shoddy, before eventually making her way home. She has lost and found herself in the music, the dancing, the camaraderie. The experience has been transcendent; so too is the writing.

Johnson does not dwell or even reflect on her childhood in the book, either in Trinidad or in Britain, but instead turns her attention to the people and societies in her vicinity. Interestingly, her relationship with her mother, by then living back in Trinidad and with whom she stays, seems to be congenial, possibly even loving, but the writing around it is oblique; not a lot is divulged beyond the surface of their interactions, nor is there much mention of the grandparents who raised her. One of the challenges in writing memoir is that you are never writing only about yourself. Permissions might be sought and denied. Regardless, a writer has to drive with due care when writing about themselves and others. Sometimes this leaves the reader with more questions than answers.

Very little has been written about Amryl Johnson but I found an illuminating interview with Jana Gohrisch in the journal *Matatu* (1997), in which she was asked about her relationship with other black women writers. She replied:

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I keep a low profile. I do not necessarily socialize with other female writers. I don't live in London but I know that there is this wonderful gathering of them there, and they get together, and they celebrate each other. I'm not into that. And I like it that way. However, it isolates me. Because I don't necessarily know what's going on. I don't keep my ear to the ground. And so, my lifestyle works for me in as much as it gives me what I need more than anything in the world: privacy.

My path crossed with Amryl Johnson's in the early nineties when I was on the poetry scene, but I never got to know her. Discovering her words in this interview helped me to understand why.

She never felt fully at home, either in Britain, where she spent most of her life, or in the Caribbean when she visited. She was the ultimate insider-outsider. In the same interview she said, 'Now, this question of place, or where do I belong. I don't know.' She inhabited the liminal space familiar to those who migrate from one country to another as children, but at an age when they are old enough to be already fully steeped in one culture, only to have to adjust to living in a new society, especially one that is hostile to immigrants, particularly brown ones. Such people might grow up feeling torn between both places, not quite belonging to either. There isn't an overt implication that Johnson is on a pilgrimage to find herself in *Sequins for a Ragged Hem*, although it lurks beneath the surface. There is also a palpable sixth sense at work, another layer of experience that is quite mystical, almost spiritual and definitely ancestral – the spectre of slavery, its traumas and

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legacy quietly shadowing her on her travels. She is acutely aware that there is more to life on the islands than what is material, visible, obvious, although she can't quite articulate what that might be.

When I first read this memoir as a young woman, I dreamt of undertaking a Caribbean island-hop myself one day. Sorry to say, it hasn't happened yet, but I think I missed the point somewhat. Johnson wasn't on some kind of thrill-seeking tourist jaunt. Her journey was so much more than that.

*Bernardine Evaristo*

*September 2021*



## *Author's Note*

*Sequins for a Ragged Hem* came in response to experiences which begged for posterity. The ghosts would not leave me alone. They kept coming back to tease. An expression here, a gesture there. Something someone said.

Had I gone to the Caribbean with the intention of writing this book, I do not think I would have been as receptive to spiritual influences or as sensitive to vibrations as I was. I now believe the presence I sometimes sensed to be an ancestral figure – I do not know how many times removed. It seemed as if I was being drawn towards some greater understanding, forced to reassess my values. Again and again, these seven words stabbed at my brain: ‘Where do you stand in all this?’ Every incident was of importance. None was isolated. Pieces of a jigsaw. They would come together in the end, drawing me to a conclusion.

In 1982, I returned to Trinidad for four weeks. It had been many years since I previously visited the island of my birth. I had been postponing the trip. I had been putting it off because I was afraid. Had I been away too long? My mother had returned several years earlier but I had not thought of Trinidad as being anything more than the place where I was born.

During those four weeks, I felt very much an outsider, almost

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'foreign' to my own culture. Stilted and inhibited, too many things gave me away. They betrayed me as someone who had, indeed, been away for too long. The question of identity was a very powerful and disturbing one. Every day became part of a complex learning process. Yet every day left me with a deeper hunger. I would return. At the earliest opportunity I would go back and this time I would be better prepared.

*Sequins for a Ragged Hem* tells of my return visit the following year. Still an outsider but I was no longer afraid. I had never seen any of the other islands. I visited them because I wanted to know what life was like there. But *Sequins for a Ragged Hem* is not a travelogue nor is it a guide for those who wish to visit. I am writing about my own experiences on the islands.

The 'ragged hem' of the book's title refers to the rape of slavery and all this had done to my people. 'Sequins' are the colour and sparkle they have woven into the state of being in exile.

Memories demanded that I complete this book. If what I experienced was, in effect, a haunting, I believe I have now laid these ghosts to rest in a style which I hope will satisfy even the most determined ones.

Amryl Johnson  
Oxford, August 1987



‘Girl, when you get off the plane, run!’

I stepped off the plane into Carnival fever. Even before my feet had touched the ground, I could feel the hot, pulsating beat of calypso music shoot like a bolt up the well which enthusiasm had pierced in my right leg. I was standing on the tarmac almost dancing on one foot. We were two weeks away from Carnival. Only two weeks before it exploded on the streets of Port of Spain.

The pilot had told us to keep our safety belts fastened until we were advised to the contrary. When the plane stopped, we would be towed the rest of the way. Regulations, he assured us. But we didn’t remain seated until advised to the contrary.

‘Girl, when you get off the plane, run!’

Word had got around that the immigration officers at Piarco airport were very thorough, a highly efficient group of employees who do not cut corners. If you found yourself near the end of the queue – more fool you. You could be there for hours. Ours was a full flight. Revellers would be flying in from all over the world in their thousands to enjoy the celebrations which have been dubbed the greatest show on earth. Unless you were holding a Trinidadian passport the officials wanted to know all about you.

It could be a very long and drawn-out affair. The word had got around. So despite the pleas of the flight captain and crew, we were on our feet, hand luggage and coats over our arms before the caution light had gone out. I heard afterwards that the sight of passengers rushing down the steps and running towards immigration was really something to behold. I was one of the first off the plane but somehow the minute my feet touched Trinidadian soil, I forgot the warning.

‘Girl, when you get off the plane, run!’

I mean, what do you expect? Well, what I expected was something more than cramp and backache when the initial reaction subsided. When the initial reaction had subsided, I almost hobbled to immigration. While I was doing my dance on the tarmac, the other passengers swept past.

An hour later I seemed to have made little progress. There were two officials dealing with passports. But since our queue was at least three times the length of the nationals’, we wanted to believe help would be coming. At the very least, when all the holders of Trinidadian passports had been dealt with, he would come over to give us a hand. The air conditioning was not working, so the hall was like a torture chamber. We are talking of an island where the temperature is invariably in the eighties. The thought that they may have been attempting psychology on us passed like a slow train. Some sort of appetizer for the interrogation to follow. Beads of perspiration were running down my face and body. I felt as if I was going to faint. I wasn’t sure I could take much more. Some relief came when thoughts suddenly took me back to much cooler times.

\*

*Sequins for a Ragged Hem*

That Sunday marked the first day of snow. I took it as an omen. Good for me. Bad for them. While struggling with the lock on a suitcase I heard whimpering coming from a corner of the room. It synchronized with two sets of groans being emitted from somewhere near the window. The friends taking me to the airport didn't much relish a journey from Oxford to Heathrow in weather like that. I offered a few words of sympathy. Genuine sympathy. They are good friends. It wasn't going to be any joke. There was I flying off to soak in the Caribbean sunshine for six months, leaving them behind to battle with the elements. Tough. Really tough. But, well, that's the way things are. So we moved carefully through the snow. We had hoped for better that Sunday. It had been bright up to the previous day. They were glum and silent. I was silent also but my thoughts were naturally on other things. A carload of people wrapped in thoughts which could not keep us warm. I should have been cosy, snug and smug but I really could not believe it was going to be so easy. Was it really that easy? You tick off the days on a calendar, pack your things and leave. The gods may yet demand to be appeased. So how come my passport was in order, ticket in order, baggage allowance inside the limit and flight scheduled to leave on time? Too easy. I still would not believe it was happening until I was strapped into my seat, watching Heathrow getting smaller and smaller as I moved swiftly and sweetly but not too discreetly towards a brighter sun. I rose slowly but unsteadily as a voice over the loudspeaker asked passengers on my flight to make their way to the final departure lounge. Standing there about to step forward, I was in the right attitude to have an arm flung around my neck. The gesture almost knocked me off balance. Two

more friends had made their way through the white drift to see me off. I stayed until the final call became imperative.

‘We wish we were going with you.’

I believed them. I knew they meant it. I waved a last goodbye, wishing I could leave enough affection behind to warm them through the rest of the winter. They huddled together, shivering inside the same brave smile. I turned quickly, trying to take little more than my overcoat with me. It would be another six months before I saw them again.

There is some reassurance to be gained after you have manoeuvred your way through security and overspent at the duty-free shop. Only then did I feel able to remove my overcoat. I was stepping out of one garment which would eventually be replaced by some other layer. But for the time being, I was freeing up. Freeing up under the loss of restriction and getting freer yet with a spring in my step as I lightly tripped the long journey from the final departure lounge to gate whatever-it-is. When I stepped inside the plane, I was walking on a cloud of air. By the time I fastened my safety belt, little remained of my recent past. I had been selective without realizing it. Despite myself, I had taken this and that. The odd smile. A gesture. They clung for a while. It wasn't easy to shrug off the cloak of close friendships without some shivers of regret if only because I wished I could have taken at least one or two of them with me. The smiles and gestures remained for a while. They disappeared when a voice broke into my reverie. The spectres slid away to lose themselves among the melting white being reduced under the retracting wheels of the aeroplane. The voice at my side did not belong to the stewardess.

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I should be so lucky! It would take all my powers of persuasion to attract her attention when needed. There was no way she was going to volunteer her assistance.

The pleasant middle-aged Englishwoman sitting next to me was attempting to draw my attention to something or other. You would need to be of a particularly anti-social breed or a very fixed determination not to strike up some sort of acquaintance with the person at your elbow until the plane landed. We got into light conversation. That, the movie and lunch helped to while away the time. In what seemed a good deal less than eight hours, we were fastening our safety belts again. An hour earlier, we started peeling off sweaters as the tropical sun invaded. Time was on our side. I put my watch back five hours to synchronize with Caribbean time. Rays of sunlight filtered through the windows. We came down from the skies hesitantly, falling from level to level until the turquoise, sometimes blue-grey, sometimes bright blue Caribbean sea lay below us. Waves like tiny sails left even white trails in their wake. A shadow on the surface of the water followed us. This transparent black bird mimicked our every manoeuvre as it skimmed across the sea. Could the shadow the plane cast really be that minuscule? A land mass appeared below us. We were gliding down to meet lush vegetation. No longer minimized against the vast Caribbean or sandwiched between it and the sun, the gigantic iron bird swooped down on Barbados. There was a strong wind coming in also. It combed the coconut palms. It was so unreal yet I had to believe it. I was almost there. Everything was happening so quickly. We were unbuckling our safety belts. Passengers were disembarking.

This was as far as my companion was going. She had come to Barbados on holiday to visit her son who lived and worked there. Some of the passengers going on to Trinidad did not bother getting off. It was a brief stop. I needed to sample Caribbean sunshine again. The Barbadian air was exquisite. It was like being stroked by a warm, gold, silken glove of benevolence. I was in a daze, a state of euphoria. In my mind I kissed the ground several times. Perhaps that was my undoing. It put me in good stead for my arrival at Piarco. The people milling around the airport were out of a colourful play. I saw them in reds and pinks. I saw them in blue jeans drawn tight across ample bottoms. I saw them through a haze. I am not sure what I saw and what I imagined I saw. I wandered through the airport taking in everything. The easy, nonchalant movements of the Barbadians in civilian clothes, the khaki abruptness of the officials.

A voice told us it was time to board. There were a number of new faces. My new companion was a Trinidadian. Very friendly, very chatty. He began talking about this and that as soon as he sat down. When he wasn't chatting, he turned his head to exchange a few words with three other men who had boarded at the same time. He told me a gang of them were doing some construction work in Barbados and were returning home for a few days.

I watched Grantley Adams airport ebbing in the background. The runway was still plainly visible below us. It lay stretched out at my feet. Planes dotted at random were no bigger than toy models. I kept them in view until we were too high and there was nothing to see. I watched until the clouds we harnessed were too thick and dense to see the ground below. We were less than an hour from Trinidad.

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I am not sure how it happened but my companion and I found ourselves exchanging recipes. He informed me he was an excellent cook and gave me a few hints on the use of herbs. He also gave me his address, assuring me he lived on his own. Would I like to drop in sometime to sample a little something? I was about to request a more specific definition when the pilot's voice came over the intercom.

'If the passengers sitting on the left of the aircraft would care to look out of the window, they will see Tobago below.'

Unfortunately, my seat was on the right. I had to wait another ten minutes or so before I could see land. Trinidad was in sight. We were told to fasten our safety belts. The descent commenced. We were going through grey clouds and approaching Trinidad from the south, coming in over lush green hills. We went down over the ominous rivulets of the Caroni swamp. A strange foreboding crept over me at the thought of having to crash-land there.

'See over there?'

My companion gave me an eagle's-eye lesson in the geography of the island of my birth.

'... And that's Port of Spain.'

We were coming in quickly.

'Over there is —'

Less than ten hours' flying time held a bubble, intact, untarnished, safe. The island was always somewhere out there. Largely oblivious to my presence, untouched by my absence. I wanted to puncture the bubble and yet hold it intact. I was none the wiser for my dilemma.

We were being towed. Nose pressed close to the glass, I searched faces in the crowd. Their faces were pressed against the wire fence which separated the runway from the outside world. It would be some time before I was on their side of the wall.

And what miracle was this, my Lord? Another immigration officer joined the section for holders of non-Trinidadian passports. He seated himself comfortably in the centre booth but there was no space for a third queue so he would deal with passengers from the other queue as well as ours. Under the gruelling conditions of the immigration hall, the inmates soon got the hang of things. And it had nothing to do with the everyday, run-of-the-mill concept of who was next in line. Under normal circumstances, one might suppose the person at the head of the queue to be next. But it was how quickly you could shove or elbow your way from six places behind. People came through like torpedoes. Never mind about him! He only *thinks* he's next in line! The idea was to get there before he did. All done with a great deal of exquisite timing, no one actually came to blows. I decided to chance my luck. There was a space I could manoeuvre through. I plotted my route. Just as the person at the third immigration desk was about to walk away, I moved in, beating someone else to it by a whisker.

He read my immigration card then went through my passport, carefully. Trinidad was the richest island in the Caribbean. Oil had seen to that. Its wealth, naturally, made it an attraction to the people from the poorer islands, not to mention the European who saw himself as a modern-day buccaneer.

He glanced up at me.

'You born here but you hold a British passport?'

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I ignored the accusation in his voice.

‘The address on my immigration card? That’s my mother’s. That’s right, I’ll be staying with my mother.’

I told him I wanted to stay for six months, making Trinidad my base as I came and went among the islands. He stamped my passport with a permit which allowed me to stay for two months. If I wanted to remain after that date I would have to go to the immigration office in Port of Spain to have it renewed.

‘And don’t forget you go have to get a tax exemption certificate if you want to start travelling round the place.’

The reminder was just as sharp as the crease on the sleeves of his freshly laundered khaki jacket, impenetrable with starch. I thanked him because I did not know what else I was supposed to do. I was now free to go and collect my luggage.

There was a strange apparatus at Piarco airport which fascinated and stupefied even the most seasoned of travellers. In the baggage hall you came face to face with it. It was a conveyor belt which moved as if in the throes of a nervous breakdown. The luggage was going round at a pace which would make any snail look like a sprinter. A highly nervous, careful piece of apparatus, the advance moves were as careful as if it was a game of chess. Its energy level rose. A quick spurt. It stopped. Two quick spurts before resting for five minutes. I was in for another long wait. We were all in for another long wait. A number of people had formed a semi-circle, watching as if hypnotized. No gently swaying reptile movements lulling you into complacency here. This one didn’t even have a brain. You stood rigid, fists clenched in disgust. Only your eyes moved as you followed the line of luggage

going round. Every now and then, someone sprang into action, jerked forward as if worked by a puppeteer. The traveller then turned like an automaton to head towards customs at full speed. Another person and then another in the crowd came to life. Soon, mercifully, it was my turn. I saw my cases coming in at the sort of speed which for a moment had me wondering if they were going backwards.

The customs officer looked weary and fed-up. He asked all the expected questions, went through the motions of flicking through the contents of my cases then slapped labels on them to let the officer guarding the exit know he had completed his part. This gentleman was showing enough aggression to make up for his colleague's lethargy.

'Put them down so I can mark them!'

The cross he made with his enthusiastic marker extended beyond the bounds of duty. It slipped off the customs label on to the fabric of my brand-new canvas bag. I suspected the mark would not wash out. I tried to tell myself it could be worse but my eyes stayed riveted on the broad black ink lines soaking into the beige fabric. I opened my mouth to tell him about it but thought better of it. The fact remained I was finally free to leave.

I stepped out into the clean, sweet air towards a throng of happy, anxious people bathed in sunshine. I was scanning the faces when I heard my name. A woman strangely familiar. A stranger yet not a stranger. Familiar. Totally. Yes. One hundred per cent familiar. A woman is showering me with affection. All layers of recognition were peeled away in the space of two seconds when I saw my mother. Two other relatives were present.

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And someone else. Her presence came to overwhelm me. Only I could feel her kiss. The roughness of her eager embrace. For the time being I shrugged her aside. I left her there as we drove away from the airport. Or so I thought. Coherent, yet in a dream-state. My lips formed words of joy and excitement. They were responded to with happiness and affection. The road took us through Tunapuna. Tunapuna where I was born, to Curepe, the town some short distance away where my mother now lives.

A year earlier I had made tentative steps along the stepping stones to my formative years only to find myself marooned on unfamiliar territory. Only three days earlier, they had demolished the house where I was born. They had stripped the flesh. Only its shell remained. Nothing but time would bring me home from that despair. Heel to toe within every footprint, matching the outlines until I was back on that one road. The same I had travelled. The only road I really knew. When I moved onward in time, this time, I would be better prepared. No longer looking through rose-tinted glasses, I would see the ruts and gradients quite clearly.

The scenery was one of palms and fruit trees. Coconut, banana and mango among others. Shacks, exotic houses, cars, bicycles, half-naked children playing in the road, sophisticated ladies walking along the streets in what looked like designer clothes. And the smells. The odours wafting in through the window were of food, fruit and the island's own fertility. Colours rose out of the steamy heat to mingle with the languid sights and sounds. They came with intensity. They filled my senses, making them alive to the

touch and smell of everything I saw. Conversation was as relaxed and easy as the life outside. My eyes were closed in acknowledgement of the sightless images still piling into the car, begging for recognition. I accepted, welcoming them all. I rejected none.

No longer floundering, every forward step had me feeling the ground beneath my feet for subsidence. Potholes may come in pairs. Eyes which stare back from the asphalt where it has been sucked into the funnels of irregularities bear witness to the shifting nature of pitch in the midday sun. It can barely resist the feet which have trampled in the hysteria of centuries. But never mind – I was back now! And as confident as a tightrope walker.

I opened my eyes, again, to the housing complex with its neatly manicured lawns. The shacks and simple houses of the poor had given way to the more substantial dwellings of the well off. Past industrial estates until we were once again driving towards shacks and simple houses of the poor. I shut my eyes to try and check the sight and sightless image which came to play under my nose. The image of need. The car swung to the right, and the odour of want gradually ebbed, receding once again to the smell of fruit trees when we stopped outside my mother's neat bungalow. There were more relatives waiting. The greetings and conversation went on until my eyes were like slits and my lips merely moving to form the right words.

Evening comes quickly and dramatically in the Caribbean. I have likened it to a bird of prey which descends out of the sky, wings outstretched, covering the land. I slipped away to walk through my mother's garden among her avocado, mango, banana,

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cane and corn stalks. I wanted to watch the sun go down. It set slowly. Someone came to call me at the very instant it was out of sight. I took with me an impression of embers which rose to scatter a fine, grey dust over the island.

I closed the gate still waving goodbye. We had taken our relatives home. The moon hung bright and full. It and a cloudless ink-blue sky were the background. In the foreground, a coconut tree which almost leaned on the front gate reached up, branches like arms extended in supplication. Perfectly still. There was hardly a breeze. The moon, the sky, the palm. I took them all.

*'Killing me  
Killing me softly  
Killing me  
Killing me softly'*

The words and the driving bass which motivates the calypso beat were like a red-hot pin stabbing at my brain. The throbbing was causing some discomfort but the insistence of the calypsonian's plight had me listening intently.

*'My friend who loves me  
wants my record free  
But he already have a cassette  
which he brought from a pirate —'*

After a while, Shadow, the calypsonian singing about the illegal taping of his music, the loss of royalties through it and what

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he thinks of the people recording and selling these tapes, comes back with the refrain.

*'These big time bandits  
Just ripping off my music  
Killing me  
Killing me softly  
Killing me  
Killing me softly—'*

I sympathized. I felt I knew what it would be like to have someone killing you softly. My first morning in Trinidad. Was I suffering from jet lag? Was I suffering from culture shock? Or what? I came to the conclusion it was a combination of both plus a little of the 'or what' brought on by the frantic two weeks before leaving England. Hot calypso favourites being belted out from radios, record players and what I suspected was a ghetto blaster from the street gradually got louder to boom at me.

*'Ah come out tuh party'*

The sound faded to mingle with everything else, crashing into my bedroom. The door creaked open. My mother stood in the doorway, bathed in smiling daylight.

'I woke you?'

I shook my head, returning her smile. She answered mine. My mother and I exchanged miles upon miles of smiles. She was the first to break the spell.

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‘I am going out. I have to go into town. If anyone comes tell them –’

I glanced at my watch. Seven-thirty. Buses into Port of Spain would be packed. She left me lying there, still smiling. The smile faded to a grimace extending from ear to ear. Calypso music was still going full blast. The throbbing wasn’t only in my head. I could feel it right through my body. Each throb was like a cut. Spaced out, it soon felt as if I had been dissected by an army of knives. I did not dare move. If I did, I would leave backbone, midriff, hands and thighs behind.

A force once again came to overwhelm me. I could sense a presence in the room. Was it this which took me down beneath the surface? I could understand and recognize the purpose and form of the initiation. Lying at the bottom of the well, sounds came like pendants of water. The knives kept their pale grey hue but softened before melting to drops of water. Forced to retract and retrace, I found myself once again in harmony with the rhythm of acceptance.

I could be blind and still function normally. Guided by my aural sense, I closed my eyes and turned over in the peace and tranquillity of a single bed.

The woman next door was doing her laundry. She was washing her clothes in the large concrete sink at the side of the house. The muffled monotony of her labour as she forced the clothes against a washing board made a dull irregular thud. A loud animated conversation was punctuated by peals of laughter. Once heard, never forgotten. Raucous and uninhibited, it was also warm and vibrant. Above all, the woman’s laughter contained a tinge of

maliciousness. It left you feeling you had just missed out on a really juicy piece of gossip. My vision of recall entered the space where a woman stood, hands on hips, head thrown back in laughter. The woman slowly turned, her chuckles now more subdued. Her smile faded. The eyes darkened as iris and pupil became one, huge and deep. Features were melting like pitch with the eyes getting deeper and larger like holes in the road.

I started. What the hell —? I was on my own again, breathing clear above the surface of the water. My eyes were open and staring long before I heard the klaxoning. It has been said that Trinidadians drive on their car horns. Plenty of Trinidadian impatience had been reaching me from the road for some time. This one, however, was coming from no further than our front gate. Mothers should know or at least remember to remind you. I had to leap out of bed as the day's agenda came back to me.

For the rest of the week, I as good as lived on the beach. Any and every invitation for any time of day or evening was gratefully accepted. Carenage, Maracas, Blanchisseuse, Toco, Manzanilla. Any of the other bays, and there were many, would do just fine. To feel the sand between my toes just before I hit that wonderful, wonderful cool water and lie cradled in the arms of the rippling sea was, basically, all I wanted from life. 'Pots' and iceboxes were the next stage. You eat, drink, then fall slowly backwards, supine against one of a row of coconut palms. At twenty feet or more above the sands with their branches fanning downwards in a gentle breeze, it always felt as if they were on my side.

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*Sequins for a Ragged Hem*

‘I come because I have a dream ’bout all you. I know the child here.’

The voice had come, unannounced. A tall, mysterious figure stood in the living room. My thoughts did somersaults when I saw the woman. Elderly and erect, she was as black as coal.

‘Child, I know you before you was born.’

But I did not know the voice.

‘Aunt Ruby!’

My mother’s recognition of the woman caught me completely off balance. I had never met her before but my mother had talked of her. Crouched among the misshapen shadows spawned by those derelict walls is the history of a woman who, though not a blood relative, had insinuated herself into the family so long ago that no one could remember where she came from. She simply arrived on the doorstep from time to time, bringing gifts of mangoes, avocados, oranges, guavas, tamarinds or whatever happened to be in season. She would walk straight into the house without knocking and announce her presence with the words, ‘I come because I had a dream ’bout all you.’ She would spend the rest of the day domineering, disrupting, interfering, before disappearing – until the next time. My mother told me later that prior to her visit that morning she had not seen her in five years. Aunt Ruby proceeded to put me through the third degree. I was obliged to answer a barrage of questions.

‘No, you can’t spend all your time on the beach. It have other things you must do. And tomorrow you going to town. You get up early, you dress and you try and get yourself into town before ten o’clock. Now listen to what I telling you. It real, real simple. When you leave the bus station, you cross the street and –’