

*Bob Stewart*

## SHANTIMEE



Can you remember how it was,  
how it must still be?  
The pat, pat of the morning's rain  
still leaks through Avocat roofs  
when from the tops of the hills  
the sage light spills  
starching the day  
to its evening routine.  
Miss McLean catches the moment  
to air her sheets,  
Mother Christy shakes her flour  
to see if it still dry  
or turn half to dumpling dough already,  
and the Lafitte boys  
run across the bridge to fetch  
two piece of jackass corn from the shop  
and have to turn back  
because tap, tap,  
down the shoot of the valley  
pours the grain of the next storm,  
drum hailing, thickening, thickening.  
Other sounds drown —  
tree frog's chirp, woodpecker's tattoo,  
boys' laughter, all done,  
except the Shantimee's roar,  
pounding, plunging, rolling rocks along  
grinding janga, mullet, and eel,  
making the river maid groan.

I know you remember  
how all the day's light  
seems to burn after the adamant dawn

just long enough to launder  
your week worn trousers and two khaki shirts  
and yourself under the falls  
three or four chains up from the bridge,  
long enough for old Mas' Harold  
to stir and fetch  
a pint of johncrow batty rum  
from the shop at Silver Hill,  
long enough for Brownman  
to squat and crack more rockstone  
to pave a road that could lead  
nowhere but to heaven.  
You did lay your youth  
with your drying clothes  
on the biggest rock  
to catch the sun  
and breathe the cedar air.  
You remember how you have to run  
as the hills turn quickly to cloud  
and the first rain pierces the morning  
and the Shantimee leaps  
to reap otahiti and rose apple  
from low hanging branches  
of trees that drink bravely  
at its banks.

Remember how the man named Shine  
would stand on the bridge  
and stare skyward in the night  
awaiting a reprieve of stars  
and never say a word of greeting  
till him see one,  
and how we could never see  
if him feet quite touch the ground  
on those darkest nights  
and how you did swear  
that the light of his kerosene bottle  
did split one time  
into the fiery eyes of the diabolic calf.  
We did flee the sight  
and climbed the night  
to the safety of the chapel on Avocat hill  
but did stop dead when we hear  
the pale priest from Kingston  
cry out from the sanctuary,  
"Nil violentum durable!"  
For him did hear before we  
in the hush of him prayers  
the down, down thunder

pressing out the molasses storm,  
thickening, thickening,  
as the Shantimee rolls  
tossing stones, oppressing sleep,  
pounding, rocking, plundering.

Yes, memory like the Shantimee  
in the dry season  
seems to stop dead  
until I sit down with you  
and in our minds the lightning cracks  
the wind blows back  
and the tongue rolls with names  
like rocks torn loose in the riverbed —  
Dimples, Uton, John the Nyahman,  
Santa, Goldie, and Bonny J.  
You wonder if the bamboo church  
downstream at Mullet Hall  
still dances with defiant spirits  
and I dream that the chalkboard  
in the schoolroom at Avocat  
still sings with Brother Mais's summons  
to come back to the hills.  
But is no wonder and is no dream  
that down with the dark  
this very night  
still pours a Portland storm  
like the sea claiming the hills back  
and Shantimee uncoils, quickens,  
calls.

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