

Frances-Marie Coke

THE VERANDA: A TRIBUTE



In 1999, years after a fire at home had resulted in the onset of what felt like terminal writer's block, I called a telephone number from a newspaper ad, announcing a writer's workshop. On the following Saturday I made my way to Irish Town – a long way to go without conviction. Sometime afterwards, when Irish Town had given way to Stony Hill, I wrote about a few persons I'd been hanging out with including: *a woman who kept herself together with a headband, a man who plucked lines of poetry from his bookshelf on demand, and another woman whom someone described as having become "a serious woman"- in the second half of her life.* That woman later wrote of our shared experience:

a veranda

where an unrepentant traveler, facing the unknown,

Found at last the altar on which to lay down her dreams.

As "unrepentant traveler(s)", we came to the veranda from unconnected social and professional spheres. Away from it we were not traditional friends - never went to the movies; never went shopping; hardly visited one another and gossiped only rarely. Yet, what we shared in our pursuit of disparate dreams that congealed in the desire to write, was a profound and enduring connection. that transcended many aspects of traditional friendship. As we battled with our inner selves and with the often unyielding silence of what Gwyneth called "**that faithless bitch the muse**", we drew discipline and strength from one another; offered consolation for the

pain of having to drop what we thought was the magic line we had finally found at 2:00 a.m., of being told to leave out the violins and let the poem speak. But the most punishing pain of all came after the distribution of the poem when the waiting started...sometimes having to listen to a long silence broken only by the crunching up of paper and the thud of its landing in the bin.

In the early days, each of us struggled in our own way with the transition from the “spontaneous overflow of powerful feeling” to the rigours of craft. We chided ourselves for this self-inflicted agony, looking questioningly at one another when others spoke at poetry readings of writing poems “on the way to the podium”; or citing McNeil’s unforgettable warning “Poetry can kill a man”. We questioned our sanity for allowing ourselves to be hounded by pentameters and trochees buzzing in our ears at all hours of night. While Delores reproduced the mist of her rural country yard and her iconic water tank in unforgettable metaphors, Gwyneth assumed her position first and foremost as the love poet – dusting out the remnants of long ago relationships like tea-leaves from a dried-out mug. The necessity for structure, for orchestration of sounds, and accurate punctuation sometimes drove us to distraction. The younger among us who had not been brought up on grammar and Latin root words, struggled at times to understand some of the editing. But their inability to be awed by anything, freed them from restraint and their we older ones marveled at their growth.

Each of us threatened in our own way to give up, especially after writing a whole page of crap just one week after writing a poem worth a hundred dollars (the ultimate reward from the “Master”). We argued about apparent divisions and intolerance in the world of writing - Creole vs. standard; performance poetry vs. the written word; , metrical order vs. free verse. A motley crew of Jamaicans led by a Trinijamaican man of many parts, we sometimes agonized over this country of ours in which some would deny others the right to speak authentically about the Jamaican experience.

Admonished by Delores to remember Auden’s assertion that “poetry makes nothing happen” we comforted ourselves with the fact that he also said poetry survives, that it is

A way of happening, a mouth

We knew we were finding a way of happening, and of interior settlement, so we lay down irrelevant issues and continued the journey believing there was space for all who would work to

write better.

.....

We shared the secrets of our innermost selves through the words that we dared to put on paper. We shared the work to refine what we did, to make some of it acceptable for the unforgiving public glare; we shared the bin in which the ones that didn't make it, were unceremoniously hurled. Sometimes we just rested from our other lives and from our own efforts, laying our heads on the words of the masters.

By the weaving of just one thread from the fabric of each or our lives, we deepened our understanding of our humanity and the humanity of others.

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