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## Tales of Loss and Resilience: Review of *A Permanent Freedom*

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Tales of Loss and Resilience: Review of *A Permanent Freedom*

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Curdella Forbes, *A Permanent Freedom*. (Leeds: Peepal Press, 2008), 210 pp.

Curdella Forbes' 2008 volume *A Permanent Freedom* constitutes a sequence of nine texts which offer varying experiences and perspectives of West Indians, traveling both to and within the United States, choosing to live "in exile" - a term which one should use cautiously, respecting the sense of nuance and contradiction which one would expect of this writer. Richly suggestive of the peregrinations of diasporic peoples moving from country to town, from "small island" to continental city, *A Permanent Freedom* traces both literal and metaphoric complex itineraries with outcomes frequently lacking in finality, though never completely devoid of a sense of possibility. For most of Forbes' voyagers, traveling light - or treading lightly - is hardly an option. Instead, most of the various seekers who wander through northern landscapes carry with them physical tokens of home - a sort of mobile repository of love and longing - as well as memories that both ground and disturb. In several instances, in the stories "For Ishmael," "Nocturne in Blue," and "Requiem," for example, these memories constitute the stubborn traces of a painful past, never to be released.

In one of the longest stories in the collection, "*Macóné, Macóné*, or, "Of Age and Innocence," the displacement experienced by Jamaicans making a new life in North America is memorably evoked from the point of view of different generations, and through a text that seamlessly juxtaposes first and third person narrative, Jamaican Creole and Standard English. Maxine, the young female protagonist, migrates - at familial insistence rather than by choice - in the company of her brother and her beloved grandfather Dado, the patriarch whose teaching, in the years at home, included the imparting of a patriotism imaged as "deep and purple like star-apple" (49). It is for this aging grandfather - and also for herself - that Maxine takes from a final visit to Puerto Seco beach an object specially chosen to capture the undefinable and the inaccessible - the unique quality of home: "For Dado I took a big conch with pink inside markings and, deep in its whorls, the sound of the sea. My things sit on the window sill of the bedroom in Silver Spring, Maryland that I have been given to stay in" (50). This need for tactile evidence of place of origin recurs in two narratives which represent the odyssey of one solitary traveler, "Prologue to an Ending" and "For Ishmael," stories in which a Jamaican priest who has bid farewell to his land and to a woman he loves bears with him in his wanderings a pot of soil carefully transported from the hills above Kingston. This home soil serves, like Maxine's treasured sand and shell, to nurture a plant

which seems to dispel, at least for the moment, the specter of homelessness sometimes present in these narratives.

Forbes is generous in her compassions, in her empathy with the marginalized, and she frequently adopts a narrative voice which is as slow to judge as it is to endorse. The stories all highlight the journeys of individuals who are in some way bereft – and who also manifest a visceral yearning for (re)connection. The narrative technique which underpins the collection recalls that of Haitian-American Edwidge Danticat, whose memorable 2004 volume *The Dew Breaker* consisted of linked stories, tracing the experiences on the North American mainland of displaced Haitians, obsessed by a common nightmare, of a cruel torturer from the past. The angst experienced by Forbes' characters, however, is more elusive, and certainly not as easily attributable to a common suffering: the writer has created in the characters of *A Permanent Freedom* a diverse community of burden-carriers. Thus in “*Macóné, Macóné...*,” the grandfather will experience in the United States the beginning of a dementia which causes him to be reductively titled “old man” as he mistakes a young woman on a bus for his long dead wife Macóné; the protagonist's brother, an albino, already made other in his native Jamaica, is now plunged into a new world of difference. As for Maxine herself, she acknowledges, in her tentative negotiation of a budding relationship with a young African American male, a profound linguistic and affective unease: “I am caught between languages, registers, tongues. I don't know how to talk across this rubbled canyon of words with me and you on different sides” (65). In this as in the title story, complex points of view compel the reader to look beneath the surface of characters whom many might dismiss as marginal or even deeply flawed. In “*A Permanent Freedom*,” a striking example of the writer's non-parochial breadth of vision, Jamaican born Denton is dying of AIDS, but supported in this final act of his life by his Grenadian wife who has had the unorthodox idea of summoning to accompany her at his bedside his gay lover, originally from New Zealand.

In “*Say*,” the young St. Lucian/Jamaican student is a victim of abuse, initially beyond the reach of the distressed grandmother who “dreams” her and wishes she would return to the embrace of a home where various healing remedies await: ““See I wash you in the river...Drink the peas soup.”” (123). It is this story which offers the most remarkable example of Forbes' prodigious talent for literary code-switching and code mixing, as the old Jamaican woman in imaginary conversations and letters to her granddaughter speaks the rich evocative vernacular which shone in the earlier collection *Songs of Silence* (2002). While it is striking that less Jamaican Creole is heard in *A Permanent Freedom*, this linguistic choice is consonant with the changed landscape, as migrants must accept a new sort of bilingualism, like Maxine who sometimes speaks “high English” to Americans while castigating her brother, the survivor, for speaking “down-South now like a native” (42).

The prospect of return to the “rock” is faintly perceptible on the horizon throughout the volume, though it is important to note that there is no prediction of certain reconciliation or successful arrival at journey’s end. In “Say,” the writer blurs the boundaries between dream and reality as both characters conjure up the moment of glad reunion, but at the end of the text it becomes clear that the return home has been imaginary - and nevertheless potent and therapeutic. Thus the granddaughter affirms that “she hanging on to the navel string that connecting her ‘cross the rainbow to Gan Gan, Mammy, Miss Mimma Barclay letter dem,” and then goes on to pledge that “she will write to her grandmother in the morning” (128). Here the juxtaposition of one of the recurring tropes of the volume, that of the rainbow which offers a promise of renewal after catastrophe, and of the image of the navel string that affirms deep roots despite apparent nomadism, is striking and powerful.

In counterpoint to the hopeful dénouement of “Say” is the somber landscape delineated in the penultimate story “Requiem”, which begins by focusing on a solitary figure, throwing soil on a fresh grave on a family plot: a stranger to the little boy who scrutinizes her, she proves to be none other than “Miss Sybil’s topanaris<sup>1</sup> dress-up sister who visits from foreign all the time” (170). But her return to the piece of land bought by her father after a stay in America occasioned by dire financial hardship is fraught with remembered pain, pain at the betrayal of the uncle who molested her; and this homecoming is also compromised by the protagonist’s fear for the future, fear that the parental legacy of attachment to this soil will soon be lost forever, that the now affluent children dispersed across diasporas will never really reconnect with “*the home to which year after year we all pretend that we’ll return for a bang-up pick-up lick-dung grand reunion but nobody except me has come, and me not since Da died, for what is the point, if Ma and Da aren’t there any more*” (188).

In the title story “A Permanent Freedom,” a physical return home is excluded, as the main character awaits death in the anonymity of New England: in the final pages of the narrative, however, the solitude of that final journey is tempered by the ritual accompaniment of a choir reminiscent of the Pentecostal faith of his Jamaican childhood. Here as elsewhere in *A Permanent Freedom* one is reminded of the spiritual conviction that underpins a collection of texts which privilege African influences as well as a Judeo-Christian tradition. Forbes’ religious framework is marvelously syncretic: over several of these unsettled migrants hovers an angelic presence named Aliun, an Afro-Caribbean figure of semi-benevolence, sometimes appearing as a strange apparition in the sky (as in the short narrative “Stele,” in which Aliun is identified as the very giver of the gift of creativity, of the power of story). It is hardly insignificant that the wanderer of “For

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<sup>1</sup> In Jamaican Creole, elegant in a pretentious way.

Ishmael,” in whose palms remarkably appear the surreal traces of many of those with whom he has had contact, is a man of God, and that it is his two journeys which frame the collection. The first is “Prologue to an Ending”, while much more ambiguously, with subtle brush strokes, Forbes adumbrates a cautious optimism in the brief “Epilogue,” as a “rumped man, slightly askew, walking now with a limp because of the experience of feet in the cold” climbs up a hill, perhaps to regain the woman who “startled, will shade her eyes from the sun, watching him come. Aliun, watching, smiles, grimaces” (195). Although here the traveler is a weary foot soldier, this final arrival would seem to confirm the understated message of fidelity formulated by the departing Jeremy in the first story: “...plane cross water, you know” (14). In this ending of sorts is no certainty, then, but the reassurance that all journeys may not lead home, but that the wanderer is not abandoned, nor unprotected.

Written in prose which reveals an exuberant sense of the creative possibilities of language, Curdella Forbes’ *A Permanent Freedom* offers the reader a moving, multilayered tale of loss and resilience. The reader will remember the characters who people these stories, flawed and at times even cruel, human in their hopes and their terrors, sometimes lonely, sometimes stumbling, who nevertheless keep alive and are nourished by communities of culture and affiliations of the heart. Like the priest of “For Ishmael,” holding on to “the faces of his longing, of people who lived in the place to which he was anchored at the root, though he had traveled paths like rhizomes” (168), or like Gysette, “hanging on to the navel string that connecting her ‘cross the rainbow...’” (128), these travelers/settlers dream dreams of past and future which defy geographical distance and unfulfilled desire.