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Matura Days - A Memoir For Earl

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It was at the end of 1977, or just at the beginning of 1978 that Jenny, my wife (Jenny Green/Jenny Scott) and I met Earl for the first time. It was after a reading of Leroy Clarke's poetry performed by The Trinidad Theatre Workshop in the Anglican Cathedral in Port-of-Spain. Jenny and I were taken there by Roy Achong, the journalist and photographer, and Phyllis Holder, then the librarian at Holy Name Convent, recently back from London, on whose verandah overlooking Lapeyrouse Cemetery, we used to lime. After this event, at which I remember Eunice Alleyne and Errol Jones reading from the pulpit of the cathedral from Leroy Clarke's "Douens," as I remember it, we were introduced in the churchyard to Earl Lovelace, the novelist, Jean Lovelace, his wife, Raoul Pantin, the journalist, and Wilbert Holder, the actor. We all moved off to lime at The Pelican.

You begin to talk about a life and you talk about a time, about an era. It was in the lower, dark, air-conditioned bar, amidst smoke and clink of many Caribs and shots of rum, that the first years of talk and friendship began and were to continue at The Pelican, or up at Matura, and at our apartment on Pomme Rose Avenue in the Cascade Hills.

What I felt immediately were presence, charm and excitement. There is always a great deal of laughter with Earl, liberating laughter. The talk was Trinidad: the love, joy and pain of Trinidad, the history of Trinidad, not the one in books but the one in the daily struggles along the village road. Trinidad's revolution! 1970 and the trade union struggles of 1973-1974 were still near. Cuba and Castro were up the road! How to get rid of Williams and the People's National Movement (PNM) was the question. The talk was politics, art, theater, music, writing, and language. It was talk about ideas, about power. The Carib beers and the rum helped, and the under currents were strong attractions. Jenny and I were being lifted into a Trinidad we had not encountered before.

That first evening, we later moved on to Raoul Pantin's apartment in upper Cascade. And with other local intoxicants—one photograph of me is clear evidence of the pleasure—the talk loosened up even more. That must have been why I either gained my courage, or lost my inhibitions, and so received my first advice from Earl about writing. Earl was a novelist and I wanted to be one.

Jenny and I were teachers at the time. Our involvements in the coming years were to be with the theater, Teachers of English Association, teachers' politics, and eventually the making of Trinidad & Tobago Unified Teachers' Association (TTUTA). Writing was the big idea in my head, but bedevilled by procrastination. Hesitancy, I later learnt, is essential to the writing process.

I eventually said I wanted to write. I didn't dare even say to myself what I was doing at the time could be called writing. "I want to write, you know," I gauchely, hesitantly stated after a big inhale. It was as if magically I might just then, suddenly, be a writer. Earl's brief reply was, "Good, well, carry on." I was later to learn that talk with Earl needed time for elaboration and it

was not going to come in direct ways. Things had to warm up. What was much more important than talk was feeling and, tentatively, slowly established trust.

We did not know it then, but this was the beginning of a long and deep friendship, which would take us on a journey of discovering the heart of Trinidad in the embrace of the Lovelace family. In conversation with Jenny, Jean invited us that night to come up to Matura some time in the near future. Within the next few weeks, we took up that invitation calling in at Francis Trace after going on a hike to the Salybia Waterfall with Roy and Phyllis. A series of photographs memorialize that day, sitting in Earl's study, a smaller ajoupa next to the old cocoa house alongside the larger one, which was the Lovelace home. In the study was the immortalized fridge where Earl kept his manuscripts—no better use for the domestic appliance at the time, as the government had not yet reached Matura with electricity, which would be conducted from the main road into Francis Trace.

Light, we later learnt, was from the hurricane lantern and the gas lamp. An enduring memory of this time was of the lanterns being lit and pumped by Earl on the dining table when we stayed well beyond dark, it getting more and more difficult to pull ourselves away from the talk which went on for hours. Take another nip of rum, try another glass of yet another of Jean's wines: cashew, sorrel, pommerac, and grapefruit. We quickly learnt that what ever we brought with us we had to bring ice.

Visits to Francis Trace, Matura, very soon became a pattern of our lives. We were often invited, or invited ourselves, on weekends which would often include a visit to the sea at River Mouth, or bathing in the river behind Moxie's house, or making a hike through the Mora forest to the Salybia Waterfall to which I think we introduced the Lovelace family, and became a favorite spot of Walt's, Che's and Asha's (Lu Lu's), and where we were joined sometimes by the Ramchands. There is a photograph of the children there at the time. Getting our cars to start, the yellow Cortina or Avenger and our little blue Mini, was always part of the expedition. There were also visits to the beach houses at Rampanalgas and along the road to Cumana at Pio Villa and Breakfast River where we would stay, and Earl and Jean and the children would come up the road from Francis Trace.

We always ended up back at the house where meals, wonderful meals, came from Jean's kitchen: buljol, dhal and rice, river conch, melongene, rice and peas, coconut pudding. We relaxed in the hammocks and the old time morris chairs. The evening closed in, the lamps and candles were lit. The children slinked away and then reappeared with a play or a song to entertain us.

But there were times when we did end up sleeping at Francis Trace, on those nights when it was too late to drive back into town, tucked away in the eaves, it seemed, of the small house, putting Walt out of his bed and having him resort to one of the hammocks.

We slept close to the bush, the breadfruit and guava trees at the window, the mango trees on the track up from Francis Trace to the house in whose shade Jean's anthuriums grew with fern baskets hanging from the branches. We slept close to the pineapples on the ridge at the back where Earl planted garden. We tripped across the yard to the latrine in what now is remembered as moonlight or starlight with the hoot of the jumbie bird and the sound of the river running over the stones under the bridge in the gully.

We journeyed back into town with Che's songs—he wanted to be singer then, Asha's plays and Walt's productions. See where they have reached with their films, paintings, and TV productions.

I paint it nostalgically for a moment. But this life was no fantasy, nor some easy thing to live; it was a real struggle with a real life in village Trinidad, getting the children to school in Sangre Grande. Jean worked as a librarian there. It was out of this yard that the novels and stories came that we celebrate today in celebrating Earl's life. We came to meet people in the village who had entered the novels and stories as characters.

There were many memorable visits. Once, to River Mouth, I remember Funso Aiyejina clutching a folder of poems with the hope of meeting Derek Walcott who was up that weekend. It was the beginning of a long friendship with the then young student from Nigeria. Another time, Raffique Shah was on the beach giving us the history of 1970. There was a Sunday gathering for one of Earl's birthdays at which there was cricket in the yard. Photographs of that period bring back Merle Hodge, Norline Metivier, Wilbert Holder and Raoul Pantin among many others, including Derek Walcott, Averil and Ken Ramchand, Marjorie Thorpe, Joan Goody, Pam Modesai, and of course Mr. Charles, Charlo, who had invited Earl and Jean to come and live on the land at Francis Trace.

Another of the special moments of the time we are calling Matura Days was when C. L. R. James came to stay with us at Breakfast River and then we all moved down to Francis Trace where Earl had invited a Parang band to play for C. L. R. The house was full; the yard was full. We pressed in through the Demerara windows and the half doors moving with the paranderos, their cuatros, and the singing and the bottle and spoon. This music I would find threaded into the writing, feeding the rhythms of the writing—I was learning how sentences could be altered by these rhythms. "Tone," Earl had already said, "get the tone and you are almost there." It wasn't till I had written "King Sailor One J'ouvert Morning" some years later, inspired by Earl's visit to London one time—I sat him down and read it to him—that I had understood that piece of advice. I was absorbing and living a Trinidad I had missed, or had never met and which now embraced us.

There was always intense and incessant talk. It seems now that everything triggered a philosophical, political or literary question. What fired these and what made these kinds of discussion different and unique was that they were never about dropping names and being clever

in some kind of academic way. We did not show off, though we talked of Césaire and Fanon, C. L. R. James, Carpentier, Márquez and Genet. It was more a real and engaged thinking about what we could do about the place, about the world, and the world was Trinidad, and how the world could be changed from Trinidad. If sitting on the beach, Earl illustrated points with cocoyea in the sand, or moving shells, pebbles and stones on the shore. “We had to get back to the beginning of things.” It was inventing, inventing ourselves, beginning our history, describing ourselves to ourselves, in painting, writing, sculpture, music, language, dance and theater. Reclaiming ourselves was a key idea of Earl’s at the time—the reclamation of self. Hurray for those who invented nothing was the ironic exclamation from Césaire’s *Return to my Native Land*. If we had to light a fire, pick fruit, cross a river, repair the house, hang a hammock, it became an opportunity to say something about how we did things, about how the village did things. The house was built gayap.

This was the time of Earl’s play “My Name is Village” written for Best Village, Matura’s entry for the competition. Earl says in an essay of his, “Liberation and the Reclamation of Self:” “The heroism that concerns me is the heroism of my grandfather to be a man and to work, and of my grandmother to sell gingerbread and to take a number of her daughters’ and sons’ children and bring us up as hers. The love of these people who I had to deny is what I want to reclaim.” I am quoting from Earl, as quoted by Jenny in her MA thesis. Jenny was one of the first students, probably the very first, to do research on Lovelace in the new MA by Course Work, which Ken Ramchand had started at UWI. “Self and Role in Earl Lovelace’s Three Published Novels” is in the library at UWI, a testament of that time, a record of the talk which filled the ajoupa in Francis Trace, or the verandah of our apartment in Pomme Rose Avenue, when Earl came to lime in town. The epigraph was more of Earl’s words from Jestina’s Calypso: “If we have to begin at all to be able to grow at all, to have a self at all we must begin with the truth.” Jenny had interviewed Earl and was able to read many of the essays, which have now appeared in *Growing in the Dark* edited by Funso Aiyejina. The philosophy in many of these essays was the talk of Matura days, moving around the salt and pepperpots on the table, reinventing ourselves. Jenny also quotes Ken Ramchand commenting on Earl’s essay “What is Indianness?:” “The rush into middle-manning and middle or half-baked technology in our time has only served to emphasize the absence of a philosophical or speculative tradition in our society—so it has fallen to our writers to show moral courage and preserve the capacity to think.” Earl is the philosopher.

The challenge to me to be a writer grew more and more frightening, but exciting and urgent. We were encouraged to participate; you could not be in Trinidad and not be doing. Jenny acted in the Petit Valley Best Village with Felix and Judy Edinborough at the time. I was working at the Little Carib. Often we were being introduced and invited to explore ideas, which Earl was working on in the novel being written at the time.

Earl had already written and published *While Gods are Falling* and *The Schoolmaster*, the first book I read, so it holds a special place for me in the Lovelace collection. We used to pass the sign to Cumaca on the way up to Matura. We never made it to Cumaca. Maybe this year

we will go. Very quickly we read the books and were able to talk about the ideas and the writing. This was another first lesson in writing: the focus on ideas, on philosophy, and the moral imperatives of justice and the use of power in our investigation into colonialism and its effects. But then the talk about the writing itself, and how the two were not possible to separate. So, how could you have good writing if the ideas were poor, if the vision was narrow? Debate on Naipaul often came down to this. *Biswas* and *Miguel Street* were exceptions, and for me *The Loss of El Dorado*. I remember CLR James around this time describing *Guerillas* as a “nasty book.” Not to have Naipaul as the dominating sense of what it was to be a writer here was an enormous shift in how I began to look at writing and what writing was about. Ideas were not explored in any kind of dogmatic or competitive way. They were not explored cynically, but always in a sharing way, a hopeful way. Earl often talked of rescuing, rescuing people from their worse selves. The humanness, the compassion for the fundamental humanity of people was the grounding of this philosophy.

Earl loved to get down a manuscript and read. Very often they were comic scenes—always a lot of laughter. He was generous in his sharing of the writing process. But I see now, that sought after audience, that need for readership, and that need for reaction in the process of composition. It showed me what the loneliness of the writer could be.

The Dragon Can't Dance was the book in the making, though there was already a version of *The Wine of Astonishment* in the fridge, and I remember a novel called *Natives in Full Costume* which became, I believe, *Salt* or part of *Salt* which, at one time, also had its beginnings in the short story, “A Brief Conversion.” All of this was a lesson, some might think, in how not to write—but I began to see that one did not sit down to write a book right through. The process of simultaneities, the explorations as the stories were discovered, were an invaluable lesson in getting started.

But what grounded all of this was passion, passion for Trinidad, for people in their strivings. These were my first lessons in what has come to be called the “bacchanal aesthetics,” the writing of the “novelypso,” though I don't remember those terms then. Music, dance, laughter, the indigenous survivals of Africa, Carnival, Shango, Steelband, Baptists and Parang fed this philosophy. Calypsonians, stickfighters, steelband men were the protagonists. How to find the form and create the language, the literary gayelle, as it were, for these characters to live and perform was the challenge of the writer.

I think of Earl, then and now, as Shoemaker Arnold caught between obsession and responsibility, the tension between the attention to craft and the work, and in Norbert the alter ego of Arnold, experience how you could get up just so and go, seduced. Years later, Earl once said to me, “Boy, how to be a novelist and a lover?” I think he has managed both with panache. I think of him as Aldrick struggling with his responsibility in the yard to Sylvia, the promise of the yard at the standpipe.

Earl and Jean would come into town to fetes, to the theater. This was the time of Beryl McBurnie's Little Carib revival under Helen Camps' direction. Walcott would be in town at least once a year with a new play; Nobel Douglas and Carol la Chapelle were dancing. Astor Johnson took us to the heights with his dances choreographed to drumming. The beauty of the bele and the bongo. Trinidad had not hit the oil boom. 1970, 1973 were not far away. Banyan was forging ahead. Panday was certainly one of my heroes then, as was the OWTU. What has happened? Eh? Earl was more discerning then, having come through New World, New Beginning and was constantly going back to the basics, to ordinary people with their extraordinary struggles. If the politics left them behind we were nowhere. We had to begin.

The Dragon Can't Dance hit town in 1979. Not exactly a genteel but moving launch occurred in The Abercromby Book Store in Abercromby Street owned by Mr Smith. Cliff Sealey's Book Shop was up the road on The Savannah, another liming spot. We were excited to be there. Think how things have changed when you think how *Salt* was launched. That is how Earl's reputation has grown. But *Dragon* really hit town in the sense of a dramatic performance in Deperadoes Panyard with Ralph Maraj as Pariag. I remember CLR remarking on the extraordinariness of this novel and the uniqueness of this writer for many reasons, but I remember his mention that to imaginatively enter the Indian imagination in Pariag—the Christmas scene still has the power to reduce me to tears, Pariag and Dolly waiting for the visit from Alice Street—was the great achievement of the novel.

Earl reached town too with *Jestina's Calypso*, first done by UWI players here at JFK auditorium and then by Rawle Gibbons at Tapia House in Cipriani Boulevard with masks.

Trinidad was rich then, not oil rich, but rich in plays, poetry and novels. I am sure it was. It certainly filled us to overflowing. I remember Carnival fetes by Errol Jones, J'ouvert mornings coming down from Cascade to meet Invaders, Parang in Santa Cruz, Hosay in St James. It was an extraordinary living education in a place.

When we left in 1980 to return to England, already planning the return to Trinidad, Earl drove down as far as Valencia to have a farewell drink. We used to stop in Valencia, he used to drive down with us sometimes on our way back to town from Matura, sit and carry on talking and then head back up the road, while we continued into town. I remember he wrote, one of the few letters he ever wrote, that our presence was missed which must mean that we had filled the space significantly. I longed to return. I am always longing and returning.

In 1981 Earl came up to London to the first International Book Fair of Black, Radical and Third World Books organized by John La Rose's New Beacon Books to launch *The Wine of Astonishment*. It was the time we first met Margaret Busby. Our home in Trinder Road was packed one day for a reading of *The Dragon Can't Dance* organized by Pearl Connor, Earl's agent at the time. Almost every black actor in London was there, eager for this new writing. Earl was to visit London many more times for the book fair and for his theater productions of *The*

New Hardware Store and *The Dragon Can't Dance*, and, of course, more recently to collect his Commonwealth Writers Prize for *Salt*. We had come a long way. I had two books and a third on the way. Matura had come to London.

In conclusion, I would like to say, that in talking about Earl and the days at Matura what I am talking about is a time in Trinidad, a time of writing novels. We are celebrating a writer of novels and stories in the first place. Plays yes, and the ones based on the novels came later. But what we are celebrating essentially and particularly for me is the novelist, and that peculiar relationship with his reader who has to decide to read a book, to stay quietly with themselves for a week or two, and give themselves to the end of the novel. You can't get it at a glance, on a browse. You have to read it right through. You are on an intimate journey of discovery and translation. This is why I think that what we celebrate today is something quite special, quite different to say celebrating a painter, sculptor, musician or dancer—a novelist is asking you for a lot of your time. Can we hold on to this in our society, can we hold on to the reading of novels?

London, July 2005