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The Dragon Can Dance

Pearl Eintou Springer
anthuriumcaribjournal@gmail.com

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Earl has been a part of almost all of my adult life. There, hovering, flitting, in and out, flexing intellectual muscles against mine. I have memories of his warmth and generosity to me, and the children. Of him packing his suitcase with my bake and pone, to take for my daughter, Attilah, a student in Jamaica; of coming to the house with an armful of his various tills as a birthday gift; of him sharing his conference per diem with me when I had been given none. My house is richer for the memories of him and Lamming smoking, drinking, liming, and arguing, the rum liberating the ideas, liberally.

Earl gave me my first opportunity to read my work at the hallowed halls of the University of the West Indies (UWI) campus—inaccessible to a rabble-rousing poet of the streets. This was when he had his first short-lived stint as a part time lecturer. I remember his haunted preoccupation with *Salt*, emerging briefly from intense sessions of writing to share his ideas on how we should organize Carifesta 1992, and then disappearing, to vent the pent up frustrations of trying to live off his work on the tennis courts. I remember my anger at UWI when he no longer had that part time job, and how I turned off my TV in disgust when the UWI literary gurus came on to praise him when he won the Commonwealth Prize.

Earl is forever grappling with ideas, and over the years he has birthed several succinct, incisive one-liners. These days, as we witness the murderous implosion amongst our African youth, I go back to some of his words during the 70's when I was busy making revolution as part of the NJAC. We were at an National Joint Action Committee (NJAC) rally at the Belmont Community Centre. The atmosphere is heady, electric with drummers, calypsonians, charismatic speakers, and, of course, the poets. Earl, as usual, is questioning, how we are doing what we are doing; what of the longevity of our efforts; we are standing looking at the ebullience of the young, “What they have to defend, eh Eintou; what they have to defend?”

Of course, in those times, the statement was liberally spliced with expletives. That night, he seemed to suggest, that he alone, with the unstoppable power of the word, could provide the alternatives we were seeking for our people. Out of that conversation came a poem to him, in which I tried, I am not sure how successfully, to capture a sense of his confidence, his warriorhood, his clear vision of his chosen path. It is Grenada, well Carriacou, more precisely. It is my birthday November 24th. It is the time of revolution, of Maurice and Jackie. Tim Hector is there; Barry Chevannes, David Abdullah, Merle Hodge, Syl Louhar, Errol Jones, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Lovelace, Lamming, Andiaeye.

These are some of the minds I can remember gathered in the place of revolution. Barry is speaking about our songs. He does a crazy thing. Almost all his workers' songs are European Socialist. We are all incredulous. Earl is sitting as Barry continues speaking. His anger begins to be palpable. As Barry finishes, Earl rises, his usual. “Ahm, well,” cautious, tentative attempt to be polite and reasoned. Then the modulated voice suddenly becomes high pitched; now the words are liberally seasoned with expletives. Earl sits. There is quiet. Then George Lamming rises to speak to this vexed question of class among the artists/activists. He leans forward in

characteristic pose, his grey mane gleaming. “When I was a boy,” Lamming begins, “I won a scholarship to a prestigious boy’s school. I mixed with the sons of doctors and lawyers. My mother, if she would see me walking with these sons of lawyers and doctors would cross the street to avoid embarrassing me. So, don’t speak to me of class. I have class.”

And now for a closing recollection. At that same conference, a fierce, female activist, one of the most feared and respected in the region, knocks on my door early one morning. Her face is suffused with the afterglow of satisfaction. A smile dances around her mouth as she stretches languorously. “Eintou,” she announces, “the dragon can dance!”