No Back Door

Also by Mervyn Taylor

An Island of His Own (1992)
The Goat (1999)
Gone Away (2006)

all published by Junction Press, New York

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Shearsman Books
Exeter

Published in the United Kingdom in 2010 by
Shearsman Books Ltd
58 Velwell Road
Exeter EX4 4LD

www.shearsman.com

ISBN 978-1-84861-141-2
First Edition

Acknowledgements

'Going Blind' appeared in *Big City Lit.*, Spring 2008.
'The Stowaway' and 'Stutterstep' were published in the journal *The Same*, Vol. 8, 2009.
'Refugees' first appeared in *Steppingstones*, premier issue.
'The Center of the World' appears in the anthology *The American Voice in Poetry: The Legacy of Whitman, Williams and Ginsberg*, 2010.
'Traveling Song' and 'The Danger of Leaves' are in the Spring 2010 issue of *The St. Ann's Review*.
'Study the World' is in the journal *Rattapallax* 13.

Contents

for Joan, who tried

Going Blind

My cousin's going blind. Most of the day
he spends in the space between the edge
of the bed and the dresser, listening to
music, while his mother sways, one hand
stretched out, the other holding
an imaginary partner.

Each time she turns, the hem of her dress
brushes his knees. Such nice music, she says,
and no one to dance with. When it's
a song she really loves, he can almost see
the man she is clinging to, as they dip
and glide across the floor.

My Sister the Seamstress

for Emeris

After she died,
I passed by her house
late one afternoon.

From the side where
her sewing room used to be
I thought I heard a machine,

and I imagined her making
a gown for Rhona,
a shirt for me.

When last I was there
we talked about our father,
how we had no pictures of him.

I have one of her at his
funeral, a lace handkerchief
up to her lips. It is a picture

of grief, how best to handle it:
in a well-fitting, tailored outfit.
With, or without, gloves.

Good Friends

My father, retired from the train,
sits in his pajamas in the middle
of the day, blue enamel cup in hand.

Telemaque, his friend in khaki,
has brought us cane. Sweating he
stacks the stalks in the kitchen.

My mother cleans shrimp curled
like her arthritic fingers. My father's
thumb was severed between cars.

Telemaque laughs at every little thing:
the way my father gulps his tea, how
my mother removes the veins, grimacing.

Onward, Christian

In one dark chorus the male voices
sweep over the gravestones and
down the lane, causing the palings
to vibrate. It is as if the soldiers

are coming through, and we can't
help but feel we are the enemy,
heading for cinema on a Sunday,
that they've been sent to kill us.

We imagine Ramkissoon up there
in the pulpit, chastising those who
dared put coins in the collection:
"Let them fall like leaves!",

their poor fingers having to dig
deeper, while his black robe
billowed upon his entrance and
at his leaving. It is an image

forever stamped upon the mind of
some teacher exiled to the farthest
reaches of the island for forgetting
to wear a tie, or for being caught

wining in the Carnival.

Buckra

We come to the house that is
always closed up, sun or rain.
The lady with skin like parchment
peeks out. What do you want?

A branch of that bird of paradise
that grows so well in her yard,
and some of those palm fronds,
for costumes. She calls Carnival

devil business, and abruptly
lowers the curtain. Her fence
has fallen in, exposing the roots
of the gri-gri. Her brother

(some say her son!) is listening
to one of those religious stations.
His hair is long, like Jesus'.
He walks the city in boxers, barefoot.

Culture Lesson

It was the week before Carnival.
No work was being done.
In class we were telling Carnival stories
and Mr. Hosein, our teacher, joined in.

"I only experienced Carnival once,"
he said, in that nasal whine of his.
"I took my boys to the savannah,
and a big fight broke out.

"I had to hold their hands and run,"
he declared, showing us how they ran.
We fell out of our seats, laughing.
"It was the first, and last time," he said.

Mr. Hosein was not smiling.
I remember glancing back
as we filed out after
the bell had rung,

and he looked sad,
as any teacher would,
when the class hadn't understood
the lesson at all.

On the La Basse

On the La Basse I stood with the men who
had come with the truck, and supervised the
burning of thousands of old receipt books,
one of the duties of the Revenues Clerk when
the dusty room at the Treasury became too
full, overflowing with papers and long crates
of bicycle license plates.

And as the bonfire rose higher and higher
among the piles of the city's garbage, I saw
men, women and children clamber with bags,
saving whatever they could, eggs and half-rotten
onions to keep or sell to the Charlotte St. stores
like Louie Gilman Thomas that made a business
of catering to the poor.

Late into evening I stayed, making sure
every number on every page was charred,
poking with a stick and circling the mound,
while the men smoked in the tray of the truck
and the driver climbed impatiently in and out
of the cab. The law was clear about these things,
Mr. Chen the assistant AG had instructed.

In the growing dark I read, by the glow of the
embers, the numbers 001 to 100, as they curled
inward, like black florets. And all around
the windows of Shanty Town let out soft lights,
as if poverty had its tender moments, laughter,
and sighs, not unlike the last of the sparks dying,
the ashes settling, the whine of the truck, reversing.

The Market

I never could stand the smell of the market,
the fish and chive and other heady
seasonings, fresh blood sluicing through
the sieves between the meat stalls and circling
over the open mouth of the drains, never
could look the live head of the chicken in the eye,
knowing its fate, its comb nervous and drained
of color, the neck as thin as a finger under
the restless feathers, the watercress like
green plumage coming over the top of the bag.
Never could take the crowd, every pair of shoulders
hunched to accommodate another's, the fish scales
flying, the guts dropped in a bucket, the flies, oh
the flies swimming in the warm and fetid air and
landing silently on the pudding, the soft slices
moving back from the blade, the butcher's apron
six shades of red, the provisions brown and rutted
in their piles. And the skirts and the sweaters in
their stained and mismatched raggedness, the slippers,
the crocus bags with the dirt of the land and the stems
and peelings, they follow me down the aisles of
haggling hands exchanging the green and blue dollars,
the pigtails pink and pungent in brine, the aloe slimy
and bitter without tasting, into the light of the journey
home, never liked being next to the housewife
in the backseat of the taxi, the bird's heart beating
down in the brown paper bag, under the yellow
pumpkin like a sun in the rearview mirror, or listening
to the five-way conversation full of innuendos about
simmering, and gravy, and the groaning table.

Honeycomb

That was the name of the place
famous for the best
fried chicken in town.

The waitress stood beneath
a dim bulb, behind a wire mesh.
She wore a wide, studded belt,
a moustache and a goatee.

I don't remember her ever smiling,
as she took your order. The recipe,
they say, died with the owner.

Ode to Belmont

No town planner laid you out.
Some crafty slaves, turning and twisting
their way to freedom, came to crouch
in the shadow of the foothills.

And there they stayed, looking up
at the ridge where they would climb
if anyone followed. And the zigzag
trail of their footprints became the lanes

and alleys you are famous for, where
policemen lost their way and were given
wrong information so they went back to
their stations tired and disoriented.

Your goats and chickens roamed freely
from yard to yard, and neighbors observed
each other without straining their eyes,
so close were the houses.

Up the Valley Road, your burial grounds
are laid out in the Rada tradition, paths
snaking between the graves so the ancestors
could return when they were called,

and often they were, on Friday nights
by the drums in the Shango yard,
answered by others across the hills
asking, What was the trouble now?

And Saturday nights the Baptists
gathered at the top of Cadiz, sprinkling

puncheon and ringing the bell, ka-lang.
No sooner their white flowers withered,

the Anglican and the Catholic priests
competed for our souls. But Belmont, you
remained true to the ancient, the women
in the gayelle ripping petticoats to tie

a bleeding head. And the savannah,
that open plain where enemies might
easily be spotted in all directions,
where the moon kissed the grass

before returning to the sky, belonged
to you, land you could claim simply
because you saw it first, every morning,
a green mat at your front door, and at

your back those hills that protect you.
May they always return to that duty, and
house by house, your people to theirs.