The Lost World of the Past

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Tabula rasa

I was born at home in a chattel house—a movable wooden dwelling, built on a foundation of loose stones, in St. Mary, the fifth smallest of the fourteen parishes in Jamaica, with a population of 115,000.

My earliest memory of my mother is looking into her dark brown almond-shaped eyes as she laid me down on her lap to wash my short curly hair. Her fingers were gentle against my scalp as she massaged in the shampoo. After she dried my hair, she sat me down between her legs and plaited my hair in two big cornrows. Sometimes when I fell asleep in the midst of her combing my hair, I tilted my head to the side and rested it on her thigh. I would wake up a few hours later if not the following morning, wondering how I made it to my bed.

When my mother went to work at the craft market—selling dolly babies, maracas, beet necklaces, straw hats and handbags, I stayed at Mrs. Ruby’s house. After my birth, my mother’s neighbor, Mrs. Ruby, clamped and cut my umbilical cord. Mrs. Ruby had four daughters and I followed them wherever they went. I was particularly fond of Tiny. She was the youngest, and two years older than me. We used to make mud pies and tea, using green leaves. We never ate or drank any of these. One time when we were playing, Tiny accidently picked green leaves from the wrong bush. She picked poison ivy. Her arms were covered with blisters that were ready to pop. When she started to bawl, I bawled too. I thought she was going to die. She itched and itched and itched. Out of fear of catching her disease, I pulled away and ran to call Mrs. Ruby as tears trailed down my cheeks, leaving behind salt on my lips.

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My mom brought me to work with her once when I was four years old. We took a crowded bus to Portmore, two hours away from St. Mary. I sat on my mother’s lap as people squeezed between the gap of others to get on and off the bus. When we arrived at the craft market, stalls were spread out, and people were walking back and forth in crowds. I grabbed onto my mother’s long tie-dye skirt as she carried bags in her hands and I walked alongside her. We found a spot next to a group of people she knew and they helped her unload her bags and set up a stall. One of my mother’s female friends picked me up, and began to talk to me.
“Yuh hav sum chubbi cheeks?” she said as she pinched my cheeks. I began to cry as I struggled to get out of her arms. Finally, when I became too unbearable to hold she gave me back to my mom as she asked “Weh wrong wid yuh pickney?”, like she had no idea why I was crying. My mom curled me into her arms as she patted my back soothingly. After I stopped crying, she placed me on the ground so that she could finish unpacking. I held onto her colorful skirt as I stared up at wooden sculptures, paintings, maracas, clothes, fruits and vegetables, and people eating ackee and saltfish, Jamaica's national dish. Ackee grows on small, evergreen trees. It is slightly pear-shaped and bright red when ripe. When picked from the tree and taken out of its red pod, it looks like a cluster of yellow beetle-like bugs with big black heads.

Experiences

I.

Down by the river we went—me, Tiny, and two of her sisters. I must have been around four or five years old because I had not started Basic School yet. Tiny and I walked in the middle of her two sisters, who were in their late teens, down the rugged dirty path with long strands of grass bending over in the road. Tiny and I used sticks to keep the grass from touching us. As we marched down the path like troops, we crossed a narrow creek with tadpoles and goldfishes swimming above new-fallen leaves that had sunk to the bottom. Tiny’s sister that led the way tested each rock before she leaped across the creek. Tiny and I, on the other hand, decided to create our own path—we took off our slippers and carried them in our hands, and walked through the water. It reached up to our knees. We laughed as the warm water swallowed up our feet. Our feet looked big and weird under water.

“Keep moving,” said Tiny’s sister, behind us. She was not mad, just eager to go swimming.

“But it’s fun,” we replied, kicking the water. As we stepped out of the water, a crispy mosaic of colored leaves clasped onto the soles of our feet while the breeze blew grains of dirt onto our damp skin. We proceeded to the river. We walked through a grove of tall grass as ticks clung onto our exposed arms and legs. When we arrived at the river, we spread one of Mrs. Ruby’s fitted sheets over a rock. As Tiny’s sisters unpacked snacks and extra clothes from their knapsacks, Tiny and I picked ticks off each other. We popped them between our fingers as splotches of blood escaped from their now squashed bodies. Afterward, we undressed, and then leaped from rocks until we made it to the water. We swam in our panties in the shallow part of the river as the older sisters jumped off branches into the deeper end. To make the shallow water deeper, we dug up the waterbed with our
small feet. We collected sand from the waterbed in our buckets and emptied them out on the riverbank. I remember when Tiny lifted up a stone in the river and I placed my bucket in front of it, and a janga swam into it. Its eyes were on movable stalks. It had a dark red color, two sensory antennas, four pairs of walking legs, two large claws, and broad muscular tail like a hand fan.

II.

The countryside of my childhood was a sun-drenched open space with its boundless blue skies adorned by wondrous white clouds—heaven’s pillows—and its winding roads. I admired the countryside’s undulating hills of vast trees, and its rivers, meandering like snakes in grass. The countryside was a playground for me. Though these activities were considered taboo for females, I used to climb trees, and jump over walls or wooden fences when the gates were too far of a walk. People used to believe that if a female climbed a tree, the tree would stop bearing fruits. I used to believe it was true until I grew tired of always being the one under the tree. I recall one time when I went apple picking with one of my brothers. I was responsible for catching the otaheite apples in my shirt since I was a bad catcher. They were shaped like pears with bright red skin, white flesh, and a single large brown seed. The first few apples he threw went directly into my shirt and then I placed them into a black scandal bag. The next few apples he threw attacked me like a sudden rainstorm. I walked home with pieces of apple skins stuck in my hair, and clothes stained in red juice. My brother walked behind me, laughing wholeheartedly, like we were playing a game, and he had won. Since that day, I told myself I would never be at the bottom of a tree again—and I proved the taboo wrong. After mastering tree climbing, I noticed the production of more fruits on the trees I climbed and they even tasted better. All the trees blossomed forth at the same time, revealing yellow cherry, red apples, green guavas, and bright yellow June plums—swinging from their trees in the tropical breeze.

III.

I fear reptiles. Lizards. Snakes. Crocodiles. Alligators. Fake, dead or alive. When I was seven years old, I spent my summer in King Weston, a district nearby St. Mary, with Shereen, my older sister. She had lived in King Weston with her father and his family before I was conceived. She is ten years older than me. I used to fill plastic cups with water and freeze them in her grandmother’s fridge. When they were frozen, I would sit and eat ice on the veranda while the sun stood high in the afternoon sky. One day while I sat on the veranda eating ice, my sister’s troublesome cousin, Shereka, killed a green lizard with a twig as it mounted a breadfruit tree.
She picked up its lifeless body with the same twig she killed it with, and because she knew how frightened I was of reptiles, she crept up behind me and threw the lizard down my shirt. I felt a sharp, yet soft, long slippery thing slithering down my back. I jumped up from my seat and wiggled my body. I shook my shirt as tears began to develop in my eyes. When I looked down and saw the pale dead lizard on the cold linoleum tile, I screeched, and ran outside. My heart began to skip more than a beat. It thumped like a horse’s hoofs on a paved road. As I cried, I screamed for my sister’s grandmother, “Granny, Granny, Granny.” With each scream, my voice broke. When I saw that Shereka was heading to pick up the lizard, I screamed again, “Grannnnnyyyyy” —snot running down my upper lip and salty tears settling at the corner of my mouth. Shereka looked at me and let out an evil cackle like Cruella de Vil from 101 Dalmatians. I stormed through the gate, and ran down the dirt road as I screamed and sniveled. When I looked behind me, she was only few feet away, chasing me, carrying the dead lizard on a stick.

IV.

Our curious eyes and body that almost got us caught. I spent the day with my best friend, Natoya, at her aunt’s—half a mile down the road from my father’s house. We were playing hide and seek outside. I was the seeker. I pretended to close my eyes while covering my face with my hands. I peeked through the slits of my fingers and saw that she went behind the house. I counted to ten, and then went seeking after her. When I got to the back of the house, I found her, not hiding, but peeping at her older cousin and her boyfriend through the open backdoor. They were lying down on a box spring bed, which made creaky noises. When Natoya saw me, she placed her index finger on her lips and signaled me to come where she sat. Her cousin and her boyfriend were fully dressed. His hands fondled her legs as they kissed. His hands slowly slid under her miniskirt as the breeze blew the door nearly shut, leaving barely any space to see what they were doing. Natoya had an idea. I stayed where I was and watched out for her while she crept through the small opening between the door’s edge and the frame.

The room was very small. It had only a bed, a dresser with a large mirror, and one nightstand. The bed was directly in front of the door, but their heads were toward the opposite end. Natoya slithered like a snake under the box spring bed. Finally, she turned her body around, facing me. I looked at her and began to giggle as she placed her index finger on her lips again. From where she lay, she could see her cousin and her boyfriend clearly through the mirror. The dresser was in front of the bed. As they moved around on the bed, caressing each other, their body weight lowered
the bedspring, which grabbed onto Natoya's hair. At first, she wanted to
scream. I saw it in her eyes. Her curious eyes transformed to death-like
eyes, widened in terror, as she gasped for air in silence. Her eyes begged
for mercy. She struggled as she managed to unhook her hair. I signaled to
her when it was safe to crawl from under the bed. When she got outside,
we tiptoed to the corner of the house before we scurried to the front as if
someone was chasing after us. I gazed at her dirt brown hair and laughed;
some parts lay flat as some strands stood up.

V.

I remember dancing naked in the rain as I dug my feet in the deep
chocolate mud—pebbles brushing against the sole of my feet. The rain
kissed my skin with every droplet as it created a soothing rhythm. I ran
around in circles and sometimes around the house. I danced beneath the
eave of the roof as rainwater fell from its sides. The rain drenched my hair
as it hugged my neck and shoulders. I tilted my face to the sky as the rain
ran over my forehead and my eyelids fluttered to deflect the water. Then, I
heard my father's voice:

"Likkle gurl, com inside di house before yuh ketch feva?"

"Mi soon com Papa. Mi nah guh get sick,“ I whined as the rain fell
into my mouth.

"Mi nah guh waarn yuh again nuh?"

It felt good to be out in the mellowing rain. The lukewarm water
fell as droplets bounced off sprouting grass and leaves. I continued to play
in the rain—dragging out my enjoyment for another five minutes. With
my father's command lingering in my ears, I dispiritedly dragged my feet
across the muddy ground—small puddles forming with each step.

The Pursuit of Knowledge

I started school at the age of five. I went to Mrs. Pearl's Basic School. Mrs.
Pearl was a corpulent woman. She had chubby cheeks with warts on her
neck and face, and short gray hair. For a religious woman, she found a lot
of pleasure in beating some students while favoring others. I will never
forget my first beating. I could not spell cup. She walked over to my brown
sloping-top desk, and leaned her body toward my face—her saggy breasts
jiggled slightly beneath her blouse, and she asked me to respell the word.
Again, I spelt the word wrong. She pulled me out of my seat and brought
me in front of the blackboard. Everyone eyed me as my body began to
tremble and sweat formed on top of my nose. I watched her every move
with my curious yet horrified eyes as she lifted a leather belt from her
shabby desk. She came before me and asked me to open my hands. I looked
at my palm then back at her, and began to cry.
“Please, don't beat me,” I sniffled.
“Open your hands Sophia,” she said.
“No!” I wailed, tears streaming faster down my cheeks. “I'm sorry,” I continued, my body shaking like a leaf. Before I made out another plea, she grabbed me by the arm and started flogging my delicate body like a madwoman. The first lash caught me by surprise and I began to twist in every direction until I broke from her grip and fell to the floor.
“Get up Sophia,” she yelled.
“You're going to beat me,” I sobbed.
“Go back to your seat,” she commanded.
I hauled my body toward my desk. Everyone stared at me—frightened that they could be next. I leaned my head forward and began to sob silently in my folded arms on the desk. My arms had raised welts—long red swollen lines embedded in my skin.
When my mother came to pick me up, I grabbed my lunchbox from under my desk and ran into her arms. As we began to walk home, she reached for my hand and noticed my welts. She looked at my tear-stained face, and asked:
“What happened?”
“I spelt a word wrong,” I said, lowering my eyes.
“Hush,” she soothed me as she reached out with both of her long arms and picked me up, under the armpits, until I was at eye level with her. I wrapped my legs around her waist and my arms around her neck. Her arms circled my waist as she held me tightly. She smiled at me and I smiled back as I lay my head against her heart.

1Meaning blank slate in Latin, is the epistemological theory that individuals are born without built-in mental content and that their knowledge comes from experience and perception.
2You have some chubby cheeks.
3What is wrong with your child?
4A small freshwater crawfish resembling lobsters.
5Indigenous fruit to the Pacific Islands.
6Jamaicans refer to grocery/plastic bags as scandal bags.
7Little girl, come inside the house before you catch fever.
8I'm coming Papa. I won't get sick.
9I'm not going to warn you again.