

History's Posse

by Honor Ford-Smith

Pour tenter de saisir l'ambiguïté de ses expériences, la narratrice analyse les conséquences de la violence causée par la colonisation du point de vue simultané d'observatrice et de survivante. Pour ce faire, l'auteure fusionne symboles, images poétiques, rythme et narration.

The first I knew myself was in a white house on a hill. It looked out on a bright aqua sea and a smooth palm-lined road below. Orchids bloomed and there were rare birds in the yard. One day I saw a man chopped to death outside the gate. The killers were uniformed. From every finger on their hands a knife blade bloomed. Silver bullets and shark's teeth lined their throats. There were diamond knuckledusters on their fingers.

"Who's that?" I asked my mother as the body twitched to silence in the dirt.

"Shhh," she said. "That's History's posse come back again. What a crosses come down on me! Don't ask no more. Do, me baby keep quiet. Get inside and close the door."

Some children were playing in the mud walking barefoot, eating guinep and singing "What canya do PUNCHINELLA little fellah. What canya do PUNCHINELLA little gal."

"Let me go and play," I said to Mama. "Hmmp," she said "Not today. History's posse might be passing by."

"Who is this History?" I asked. "I want to see his face."

"Sshh! Child, nobody looks in History's face. His people are everywhere like spies. He's all around like the air," she whispered. "Do me baby, keep quiet. Let's go inside."

"No," I stamped. "If I can't play at least I can watch."

"Come away from there. It's not safe.

***"Since you so fast
and so womanish I
will tell you. Your
mother is dead for
defying History."***

There are rules, you know. Try to make things different and you'll lose everything. That's rule number one."

"Are you my real mother?" I asked her the next day.

"What a crosses this," she said. I asked again, but she shut her mouth and looked far away.

"Where's my real mother then?" and I jooked her hard in her side.

"Alright. Since you so fast and so womanish I will tell you. Your mother is dead for defying History. Come. Close the door and stay inside."

"Where's my father?"

"Don't ask me no more question child. He left you this big house to live in. He sends money every month. What more you want than that? What a trial, what a cross this child is to bear."

"Where's my father?"

"Alright. Since you so inquisitive, since you so forceripe, I will tell you. Your father is History, himself."

A woman was passing on the road below. She sang:

*"Peel head John crow sit up a tree top
Pick off di blossom.*

Let me hold you hand gal.

Let me hold you hand."

I thought if I could sing like that, the

world would be safe and Mama would laugh and everything would be alright.

Well, I stayed in that house for a time. Every day I practiced till I could sing my songs with a voice clear like river water. Mama would smile and rock to the beat. People passing would hear and stand still as ghosts on the road below. But my mind had already gone from that house. Its emptiness cramped me then like a cell. It pressed on my throat like a chain. Only the gardens felt safe to me. I prowled the paths like a cat, tearing out the weeds and chopping back the vines. Night blooming jasmine scented the air. There was desert flower and there was a cactus that bloomed at midnight. There were bohinia and surprise bougainvillea.

One night in the rainy season I ran away from the yard, dressed up just like a boy. I hid out my first night in a bus shell, near to a tourist town. My teeth chattered from fear, but I was proud to hell of myself. All night I perched up watching, but in the morning I was fine. I must have got a little too boastful though, for the next night some men stopped me on the road.

"Where you going?" they said. "This road not yours to walk. Go home to you big yard. That's where you belong."

"Tell History from me," I said, "I not playing his game."

They pulled off my disguise then, laughing so hard they could hardly stand up. But they only scratched my throat with the ratchet blade. Blood dulled the knife's silver edged glint.

"History say you can take you chances, but you can't hide," one said, "your skin glitters bright in the dark. We can sight you anywhere you go."

"I'll zip out of it." I said. "There's an opening between my legs." They only laughed more.

Well I did. Unzipped I rose up flapping, high and cool as a kite. But I had no form. Unnamed, nameless, invisible, I floated over the landscape of burnt cane, over the all-inclusives and their swimming pools, over the markets and the stalls of jerk chicken. I looked down on everything. I was hungry but I couldn't eat. I was tired but I couldn't sleep. I was vulgar abstract. No context at all. It was like being trapped in a dream. "History," I thought, "you win this first round."

A woman was there sweeping the street. She had a cast eye, but her body was wiry and hard. I knew she had courage if that means nothing to lose. "Catch me in a bottle and I'll come down." I entered her vision. "What you going gimme?" she said hissing her teeth like snake. "I'll give you my dreams."

"Dream?" she steuptsed again. "Dream can build house?"

I said "Yes."

"You too lie," she laughed "but you funny and I like to laugh."

She brought me down and hid me and I lived in her board house near the train tracks. On her dresser she kept the bible, a big pink comb and a leaf of aloes. We didn't eat much. I taught her my songs and she showed me tricks I could use in a fight. At night we slept in a bed of rags scented with khus khus. Her arm around me like a shield. I called her Vida for she was the first life I knew.

One day, there was money on the counter and fancy linen on the bed. She said "You mean all this time you have you big house and you don't say not one word. Imagine. I never know is so, you stay and I struggling to keep body and soul together."

I thought "Time to go."

"You can't just walk out like that," she said. I figured she was History's woman now and we would have to fight. I slipped her through the back, but History's posse was in the yard.

"Dutty gal. Sodomite gal," a red eye one said. "You notten more than a mule. Get back inside. I'm the Don Gorgan, here. This is my territory. You can't negotiate."

"Slip him like I showed you, idiot," Vida shouted.

"Shut up you two mouthed bitch," I screamed, but I was scared to rass. I froze to the spot and the pi-pi ran down my legs.

The red-eye one laughed. He pulled out his teeth and scattered them on the ground. They bloomed like the sweet jasmine I'd left behind. I wanted my old house and Mama. I wanted to close the door. I longed for a glimpse of the sea and the white road below.

"You can't even go back to your risto yard....you too soiled with the sex of ole neager. You can't do nothing. You don't have no use to us, wandering like a crazy red cockroach." I wanted to clothe myself in my songs, wrap myself in a sheath of pure sound. I opened my mouth, but not a

"Which history you want me to call?"

"The one that put me here."

"What you want with him again. You don't learn nothing yet?"

"He stole my songs," I muttered hoarse.

"I want them back."

She whispered: "If you want to get out of here, make the sounds like how you feel. It won't sound lovely but it will ease your heart." And then she left and closed the heavy door.

I cried then, softly at first and then loud and horrible, tearing the night in half. I bawled for my mother who had left me,

"History say you can take you chances, but you can't hide. Your skin glitters bright in the dark. We can sight you anywhere you go."



single note came out. Not a sound. Silence.

Then a man who they said was History himself came in. He was a grayish man in a grayish suit, but I couldn't get a look at his face. I wouldn't know him if I saw him again. The thing is: I couldn't make myself struggle at all. My spirit was nearly gone, you hear?

I remember that he said: a lesson is a lesson and if I'd learn mine and do mine I'd be alright. He said "you pass your place, gal."

When I came to I was somewhere dark and stink like a jail. My body was twisted and swollen and it felt hot and cold, hot and cold. "I'll die now," I supposed, "for I'm all alone and I don't even know how to fight. Mama was right. I shouldn't have tried to escape."

I lay there at the curve of a white darkness—in the middle of that hot and cold bleeding. A woman like someone in a dream came in. Maybe I made her up; maybe she was real. I have no memory of how she looked, I only remember the swish of her skirts and that she brought sinkel bible and a cup of something cool to drink.

I said "Tell History I'll do whatever he wants."

for my father trapped in his cruelty. I bawled for my fraidy puss Mama. I bawled for the garden swallowed up with bush and weeds. I cried for the blood and the death I had seen. I bawled for my lost songs and for Vida. But most of all I cried for myself. I drank eyewater for breakfast lunch and dinner. I cussed everything and hit myself against the wall. Sometimes I just stared into the darkness and let the water run down my face. Day followed night while I cried. My tongue stuck to my mouth, and my eyes were swollen shut. My heart was locked in an iron grid but it beat slow and stubborn like a repeater drum.

Then one day I saw the sky grow bright, like a pastel pallet outside the bars on the window. It was magenta and grey and blue over the mountains. The crescent moon was watching in the pale sunrise. Mawga dogs barked at the daylight. Between some old newspaper and a rusty tin can, two grass quits did little dances on the ground. There were women selling at the corner and people going up and down. Minibuses were at the bus stop and the ductors in the doorways fought over the fares. The jail door seemed to open then and a thin bright ledge stretched out. "Go on quick," said the woman's voice. I

stepped outside then and stood up straight in the morning dew. I brushed off my old dirty clothes, wiped my face and headed out for the open road.

History's Posse is one of a series of experimental fragments generated as part of the project Redemption Ground. The author would like to thank the Canada Council, the Women and Development Unit of the University of the West Indies and the Bunting Institute at Radcliffe for their support for Redemption Ground.

Honor Ford-Smith is a writer, teacher, and theatre worker. She was the founding Artistic Director of the Sistren Theatre Collective, a Jamaican feminist organization known for its work in drama and popular education. She co-authored and edited *Lionheart Gal: Life Stories of Jamaican Women* (Sister Vision Press, 1987) and has had poetry included in *The Heinemann Book of Caribbean Poetry and Creation Fire: A Cafta Anthology of Caribbean Women's Poetry*.

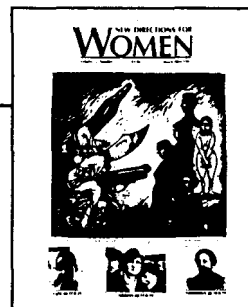


Want to be heard?

Pay Equity. Violence in the Workplace. Homophobia. Sexual Harrassment. Retraining. Free Trade.

In **OUR TIMES**, Canada's Independent Labour Magazine, you'll read about economic and social justice issues that concern women and men, from the perspective of union and community activists.

Want to hear more? Subscribe to **OUR TIMES now** (six issues for only \$20). Write to Our Times, Dept. CW5, 390 Dufferin Street, Toronto, Ontario M6K 2A3 or call (416) 531-5762 to place your order.



The News They Need!

Don't let your students miss one issue of the leading feminist newspaper. Political & progressive, our six issues a year cover the women's beat: politics, health, sexual harassment and grassroots activism. And there's more. We critique pop culture—movies, theater, books, art and music—all from a "blissfully biased" feminist perspective. Each issue of NDFW is living history, an up-to-the-minute, inexpensive textbook for women's studies. Order today.

YES, I WANT TO SUBSCRIBE

_____ \$28 (1 year institutional)

_____ \$44 (2 year institutional)

So that you may order in bulk for your class, we offer a special bulk price (5 or more subscriptions MINIMUM, sent to the same address ONLY).

_____ \$3.00 per student per semester. _____ \$6.00 per student per year.

Remember, at these low prices, issues must be sent to the SAME ADDRESS.

NAME _____

ADDRESS _____

ENCLOSED IS _____ FOR _____ SUBSCRIPTIONS TO BEGIN _____

Or, we will bill your institution.

NEW DIRECTIONS FOR WOMEN
108 W. PALISADE AVE, ENGLEWOOD, NJ 07631
PHONE: (201) 568-0226 FAX: (201) 568-6532

CWS

HECATE

A WOMEN'S INTERDISCIPLINARY JOURNAL

Hecate, now in its nineteenth year of publication, is read by all those interested in feminist and socialist interpretations of history, politics, literature and culture in relation to women in Australia. It publishes articles, reviews and creative writing.

In recent issues:

Vol. XVII, No. 2: Political Activities of Barnard and Eldershaw; Visual Semiotics of Book Reviews; Black Identity; Caribbean Fiction; 'Category Politics' Debate; Politics of 'the Popular'; Olive Schreiner. Plus Creative Writing Supplement, *They're Black and White Issues*. **Vol. XVIII, No.1:** Betty Roland; Leonski Murders; Women in the Armed Services in World War II; Aboriginal Women's Narratives; Recent Lesbian Cultural Production.

Vol. XVIII, No.2: Women in Australian Monuments; Rosie Scott Interview; First Wave Journalism and 'The Australian Girl'; Richard Rorty; Feminism in Latvia; Letters and Diaries; Migrant Women's Writing; Women and the New German Cinema. **Vol. XIX, No.1:** Women and the Queensland State Government; Feminist History; Aboriginal and White Women in the NT, 1870-1940; Australian Feminist Literary History; Mudrooroo Interview; South African Women's writing.

Subscriptions: \$40 p.a. (Institutions)

\$15 p.a. (Individuals)

HECATE, PO Box 99, St Lucia, Brisbane 4067, Australia