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1981 From Lara

Abstract

I began to dip into my skin like a wet suit, toes first, warily, wriggled about, then legs all in, by summer 81 I'd zipped up and dived head first, that year I started art school, Landscape of the Souls I called my anarchic blood and black vortexes, I loved exploding the energy of colours, being bold. Summer heat choked my city's horizon, sluggish clouds of fumes were mountains of dirt way up in the ether. Tourists homed in on Piccadilly like brain damaged fish, I barged, my large portfolio an aggressive advance guard, boarded the bus to Camden Town, my squat room, all purple walls, pampas-grass and Mexican mats. Nights steamed my pores in the 100 Club where pupil-swimming arousal came in the countenance of Josh. Under his pillar-propping gaze, I tried to dance cool, slyly studied the Dreads in corners with towels round necks, trainers, shiny track-suits- red, gold and green striped, confidently shuffling, moving just off the beat. 'Go slower, syncopate, less movement, more weight,' we exchanged numbers like French kisses, at 2am my creamed knickers rode the night bus home.

Bernardine Evaristo

1981

From *Lara*

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NOTES

1. *Black and White Britain: Women in the Twentieth Century* (London: Virago, 1987), p. 101.
2. Paul Gilroy, *Black Atlantic: Fragments of Black Culture from London to the Americas* (London: Verso, 1993), p. 101.
3. Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (London: Verso, 1993), p. 101.
4. Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (London: Verso, 1993), p. 101.
5. Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (London: Verso, 1993), p. 101.
6. Ian Martin, *Black Atlantic: A Journey and the Poetics of Cultural Difference* (London: Verso, 1994), p. 101.

Josh, your limbs were waves. I swam.
Your myriad hands smooth licked me. The sea.
Flesh. Breath. Flesh. Your tongue swelled in me.
Juiced, me. You, carefully, entered, sensing your
way in, alert to my every whimper, responding.
Kiss. Kissed my hips, like water, every secreted crevice,
seduced, and only when I cried out first, did you go
for the shoot, the spawn game, tadpoles into the pond.
At last, on safe ground, at last, I was, on safe ground.
'Hey Princess, let's take the tube-train into darkness.'
Your public school tones joked, open Ibo vowels
squeezed into nasal tubes, staccato consonants.
Years before I'd made my teenage foray into Brixton,
awed by the vivacious tableaux of Atlantic faces. I was
born into whiteness, this was the moon, I was elated.
'Ssssss!' The Atlantic pub, Coldharbour Lane 'Ssssss!
Yuh look nice, gyal.' Red eyes and Tennants extra.
I wore my grandmother's stiff back, her deaf ear.
'Tcha! She favour pork!' I panicked to the station.
With you I merged into Tottenham, the Bush, the Grove,
jostled in markets, pubs under arches, basement clubs.
You squeezed my hand, I was six years old, Daddy?
I poached your easy slope, excited, I was, exalted.
Summer 81 I was touched by the sun.

Bernardine Evaristo

1981

From *Law*

I was jelly, you were my mould, yet
I could not set, would freeze or throw a wobbly,
criticised your arrogance, your African-at-Eton act.
'You can talk!' you retaliated, easing your motorway legs
onto my cul-de-sac. 'You're as rooty as the driven snow.'
You rolled onto me, into me, my anger drifted
downriver like a log while I became an unplugged dam.
You loved your skin, polished with cocoa butter,
advised I do the same or I'd 'flake to dust like a relief
in an Egyptian tomb.' You'd coo over my complexion.
'Do you like me or my lightskinned factor?' I challenged.
'Both, and at least I'm honest before you throw one.
You know, I suggest you pursue an academic career.
Paint as a hobby. You have a trunkful of O's and A's.
I only ever had three choices: law, medicine, finance.
Well, you know how we Nigerians are.' 'Yes,' I lied,
then flared up. 'So why are you trying to change me?'
Because I want to lick your chocolate button nippies.'
You twirled and stroked yourself, I laughed, coalesced,
but felt my summer of passion waning.

'You'll not marry a Nigerian if you can't obey me'
I shook my head slowly. 'You are such a wanker!'
'Ditto, Lara, ditto!' G & T in hand he rolled off
the mattress, loped his gorgeousness to the bookshelf,
leaned provocatively, crisp sinews, a little pot belly.
'Marriage! Hah!' I flung my head back. 'Marriage?
I love the F-word too much, you know... freedom!
'Just as well, because you don't even know what
Jollof rice is, let alone how to cook it. You're strictly
a fish fingers and mash girl. You'll make a sorry wife.'
He sniffed, smugly sipped his drink, crossed his legs.
'Why don't you put me down, Bertie Wooster, you know
for a change, and who says I only like Nigerian men?'
'It's obvious, you hope some of it will rub off on you.'
'Oh fuck off you idiot! Shithead! Tampon dick!'
Then he melted, vulnerable in his contrived pose,
the sweet Josh, two years old and thumb sucking,
it was so easy to oust the monster, to get at his ego.
I softened, 'Sorry, Josh. Cuddle?' 'Yes,' he pouted,
'A treatie for Wole the Wonder will do the trick.'
I crawled towards him, took his pitiful dejection
in my mouth, chomped, left a shiny oozing Bounty Bar.
Such a failsafe method of resuscitation.

Lautrec posters, blue lamps, Portobello pub,
candlewax bubbles over baroque holders, hedgehog
barmaids have stapled noses, safety-pinned flesh.
I hover in a dungeon alcove, nurse my port, insecure,
wish I'd been born a Holland Park babe, was a funky
half-caste dahling, a Cleo Laine jazztress with a voice
that sails, seducing the crowd. My kohl-eyed cohorts –
Hampstead, Chelsea and Fulham have tunnelled
salt up their nostrils. 'Is that not your Josh?'
Emma exclaims, glimmering. Hickory, dickory, dock.
Stop. Time clocks. Incongruous in blazer and loafers,
he confidently guides a young Shirley Bassey in sassy
zippy leather to the bar, all kissy-kissy, gooey-gooey.
Yuk! I kamikaze my port, emerge bloodened, dazed,
confront him outside. O to serrate beer bottles!
Scarify his cologned cheeks! Kung Fu his dim sums!
'You like the F-word, remember. We're not wed, Lara.'
My alphabet tumbles, jumbles into a three year old's bawl.
'You... you...,' I barely whimper, a dissolving aspirin.
Verbals! I need verbals! Please! I want my verbals!
'A hungry gerbil up your hairy arse!' I muster, he snaps,
'Oh do grow up, Lara! Welcome to the real world.'

Fury rode me. A wild buckjumper,
I scalped myself, sacked Josh, speared my nose,
my little Afro ears coiled a C of silver earrings,
I barricaded myself into an army surplus trench coat
and fronted a permanent Desperate Dan scowl,
nuggets of disease erupted on my surface, squidgy
pus-filled hillocks splattered my bathroom mirror,
I denounced my patriarchal father, deconstructed
my childhood, regurgitated appropriated ideas
like closing-time vomit, I flirted with sensi, swooped
on trendy markets for cowries, batiks and sculptures,
I was a walking irradiated automated diatribe, saw
the rapist in every homme, worms in every phallus,
the bigot in all whites, the victim in every black
woman, London was my war zone, I sautéed
my speech with expletives, detonated explosives
under the custard arses of those who dared detour
from my arty political dictates, I divorced my honky
mother, rubbished the globe for its self-destruct sins,
and then flung open the Hammer House gates
of my Rocky Horror Hades,
and tossed the key.