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Poems

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Poems

Abstract

AS SEEDS BETWEEN TEETH SPLIT

FROM YOU

LOU SMITH

AS SEEDS BETWEEN TEETH SPLIT

‘The Witness’, ‘The Naming’, ‘Memories and Talismans’ and ‘This Silent Place’ trace the life story of my maternal Grandmother, Doris (formerly Dorris) Eloise Butcher nee Benjamin. Her story begins in Jamaica, where she was born in 1900, and lived until the age of thirty. After meeting and marrying my English Grandfather, Charles Horace Butcher, she migrated to London, and then in 1971, following my mother’s marriage, migrated once again, to Australia.

The poems explore notions of belonging, dislocation, migration, and familial and Colonial silences. From my perspective, in the sub-tropical, suburban Newcastle landscape where I grew up, and where she lived until she died in 1989, I re-imagine my Grandmother, re-trace her footsteps.

My Grandmother was born ‘illegitimate’ and ‘The Witness’ looks at the silences that exist surrounding her birth. However, there is difficulty witnessing a silent story, one that, like the Australian landscape, has many layers of erasure including the dual lack of the witness to the birth and my witnessing of the account, or lack of testimony. Whilst it is essential to remain sensitive to these personal silences, so many women’s stories remain untold. ‘The Naming’, as its title suggests, further investigates the issue of ‘naming’, focusing on the signing of the name Benjamin on my Grandmother’s marriage certificate. Whilst ‘Memories and Talismans’ and ‘This Silent Place’ seek connections, unearthing my Grandmother’s thoughts and desires for ‘home’.



Doris Eloise Butcher, Kingston, Jamaica. (Photographer and date unknown.)

THE WITNESS

in metastasis
 the cells divide
 as seeds between teeth split
 it spreads
 'as the disease progresses
 they
 become increasingly abnormal
 in behaviour and appearance'¹

next to your Christian names
 was a line _____
 leading nowhere
 a line bereft of ...

in the box marked Witness was the name

you can tell a lot about a person by their name

with his eyes glued upon you
 from the start, your Father,
 You who were cast
 (like those before)
 cast half
 and half
 between this and that
 when Mother sent you away
 with your grandmother
 you stayed
 the salty harbour breeze
 calming the Jamaican heat

and underneath tight-lipped,
 your tongue curled back
 not a word was uttered
 not a word spoken

of the facts:
Augustus Miller Benjamin
watched you slip from your
watery sack

memory
stored
to fight off attack
from that line that leads nowhere
between this
 and that

from what you said and what we know

in case it all came leaching out
in a

whisper

¹ Furtado, Peter (ed.) 1989, *Medical Science: The World of Science*, Equinox , Oxford.

THE NAMING

Although the term metastasis may describe such disparate processes as the shifting of symptoms or local manifestations in mumps or the transportation of bacteria from one part of the body to another, it is used particularly to indicate the spread of malignant tumours to distant sites.¹

Silence salted the air thick
when with the cursive curl of wrist
you signed nee Benjamin
on the dotted line.

And there it sat
a seed lodged in tooth
a thought
caught at the back of the mind
never to be spoken of again

your name was Butcher now.

Mechanisms of transfer include direct extension or seeding of body cavities and surfaces...

Years later, sunk in your chair
your stockings rolled below the knee,
the view a canopy of trees
and 'the bank' of blackberry vines we played in

had the mid-morning sun bleached
the memory of your in-laws' fears,
a whitened spot where thought once existed
of arriving in England, you from the Colonies,

your baby heavy in your belly

What would the neighbours think of the colour of her skin?

On the mantelpiece
in floral porcelain frames
sat the photos of your half-brothers
fading to shades.

¹ 'Metastasis', <http://www.amershamhealth.com/medcyclopaedia/Volume%20III%20I/METASTASIS.asp>. (April 2004)

MEMORIES AND TALISMANS

Did here remind you of the smell of heat
the sweat moist and pungent under arms
forming yellow patches on your blouse?
Like on the one from Panama you wore as a child
and I've worn (to comments of *isn't that exotic!*) after you.
Did it remind you of those days eating breakfast
of grapefruit sweet with sugar,
of frying saltfish or rice with peas?
Jasmine hedge suburban fences here,
their smell thickening the hot air sweet
in this place so far from your home, but all I know.
When you walked the quiet cul-de-sac breathing
in their intoxication
did you conjure the noisy streets of Kingston,
cart sellers' calls, strange creaks and dockland horns?
When you felt the bush track beneath your feet,
the crunch of bark and smell of gum,
did the sky overgrow with rainforest vines
from the mountains you left behind?
What talisman did you hold to keep those memories close?
I hold your photo between forefingers,
I keep your wedding ring wrapped in velvet,
and I wear your blouse from Panama
embroidered thick with flowers.



Doris Eloise Butcher, Karina Smith, Louise Smith, Westcourt Road, New Lambton, Newcastle, NSW, Australia. Mid-1970s.

THIS SILENT PLACE

So many paths you have walked,
shantytown streets hovering in mirage
London lanes wet with sleet.
And then here, this place
this silent place
where Awabakal stories are hidden
under California bungalows on suburban streets.

In the stillness of late summer days,
when Jacaranda petals carpeted the bitumen road mauve
you strolled,
the smell of soaked lawn seeping clay soil
wetting your parched tongue
with the thirst for home

and your petticoat was static on stocking.

As a detective I've traced your journey
my thoughts recording events,
qualitative data of
heres and theres,
but there is so much space,
so many blanks
filled with poetic licence.

If I run too fast,
ask too many questions
will my ankle buckle on
the slippery edge of
uneven bluestone?
The leg disjoint,
the periosteum peel away
from the bone like paperbark?

Fact: Dorris Eloise Benjamin
Born: Kingston, Jamaica 1900.

Stratified white.
Poor, uneducated.

She was able to embrace an internal milieu of Colonial rule.

1930 you married an Englishman,
Charles Horace Butcher, my grandfather.

1931 headed for the 'mother country'.

1971 arrived in Australia.

As a tree
I stand upright,
my bones holding me in place,
my neural sensory branches reaching.
As a detective, I trace the sole of your foot
with my fingertip.



Doris Eloise Butcher. (Photographer and date unknown.)

JOHN HAYNES

from YOU
for Afinki Kyari

When we consider a case like Dante's we are powerfully reminded of the reasons which have supported a view of love quite contrary to that advocated by evolutionary psychology. Love, it is suggested, is a cultural construct; and the way it is constructed depends upon various features of a given society. For example, in a society such as ours in which adults very often live alone until they fall in love, love is closely connected to overcoming loneliness. But this could hardly be a major feature of the experience of life in a society in which — until marriage — the individual would normally live in the closest proximity to an extended family.

John Armstrong, *Conditions of Love: The Philosophy of Intimacy*

XXV

I'm reading about certainty, the odd
mad sense the word 'know' takes on if I say
'I know you're on the sofa, now'. It's not
how hard I've gazed at you, how carefully
I've checked the room, but the insanity
of doubting it. And then I thought of tales
of Africk, eyes set in men's pectorals.

And this to do with stern Miss Browne, and *West*
chalked on the blackboard with a compass arrow
pointing at the Shrewsbury Arms, and East
towards the conker tree, to do with Andrew
when she hustles him with, 'Come on now,
Andrew, a noun of place?' — then with her anger
when he stubbornly repeats: 'That corner!'

Nothing more certain than my shoes down there,
or that the bell would go, Mum be at home,
the fields, the garden fence, sun on the car —
although we left and all that proof is gone,
as that of prepschool has, now Number Ten.
What's certain's certain just in retrospect?
Which tick-boxes, when I'm dead, will you check?

XXVI

But you're not certain, are you? Things I've said,
when hurt, when slightly drunk, words years ago,
that lodged — no time, no past — inside your head.
And no use now to show how then, how you,
how I, swirlings of air you didn't know
out of a fear, and still have not quite heard.
I say I love you but it's only words.

They're not the same as love, of course not, words,
and still less English words, still less Bature
tunes and pulses that you never learned
at school, and don't quite fit reality,
not even now, not even here, where they,
like yours, contain a different kind of earth.
I say I love you but it's only words.

As if the rocks and loam create a tongue,
as though the meaning were geography,
another kind of rain, another sun.
But that's only a metaphor, the way
that love alas prompts us so readily
to plant the desert full of magic herbs.
I say I love you but it's only words.

XXVII

Home as the setting, as the narrative,
the starting point, the past? The soul, maybe,
before the longing came? The tale you live
as it comes back to you or as somebody
tells it, re-tells it, as you tell me?
A *dawa* fence? A swaying scarlet bird?
I say I love you, but it's only words.

The frog hangs downward by its eyes
from surface tension on a pond, the sun,
as red as a tomato, drawing lines
of shade along the furrows — and so on,
so I imagine, as I've always done,
exploring as the White Man always would.
I say I love you but it's only words.

The Reith Lectures are on the theme of trust,
without which, as I read, I realise,
nothing coheres at all, and that's not just
Have I spoken with truth to you? Did I
mean what I said? Or what I meant to try
to say or what you thought I had inferred?
I say I love you but it's only words.

XXVIII

I touch you. I imagine you. I change
you into words, my cells, my chemicals,
my sparks, my dancing spine. I make you strange.
I conjure you from common syllables,
from Kano market, Billingsgate, Arrivals.
I wait holding your biro name on cardboard.
I say I love you but it's only words.

The orphan you still are must justify,
must justify, must not (the phrase is just)
be found wanting, can't help it, nor can I,
the daughter's loss that drives out every trust,
my trust in doubt as well, the way of love
that you should understand, since you're a nurse.
I say I love you but it's only words.

I'll be your malam and bring magani.
I'll mix up something that'll staunch your fear
of needing me, some *mai bakin gashi*.
I'll squeeze the droplets gently in your ears
until your eyes are bright, and onion tears
will seem to stand in them, but nothing worse.
I say I love you but it's only words.

Magani: medicine in the sense of traditional remedy.

Mai gashin baki: literally, the one with the moustache, name of patent medicine for all ailments. The label has a picture of a White Man with a moustache like Lugard's.

XXIX

Your glossy pages slosh over and come to it, the human heart, the ventricles, a section of the pericardium or outer wall, and then the visceral, the veins, the valves, the systole diastole of human metre with a sound like *lub* and *dub* inside the stethoscope. Like *love*.

Safe on the page with little arrows, captions, insets, it's not like the Holby City shots of that thing jumping in the surgeon's reddened plastic gloves, so carefully squared off with cloth, or electronically monitored, suspended still as death on by-pass where no pain or feeling's left.

Look down then, nurse, and set your ECG, place the electrodes, switch on. All your hard homework will come in now. Examine me. Note what you see there, or what you've inferred from that pen with no hand filling my card with peaks and troughs of helpless *lub* and *dub* that I can't hide, or alter, or make up.