

Bob Stewart

SHANTIMEE



Can you remember how it was,
how it must still be?
The pat, pat of the morning's rain
still leaks through Avocat roofs
when from the tops of the hills
the sage light spills
starching the day
to its evening routine.
Miss McLean catches the moment
to air her sheets,
Mother Christy shakes her flour
to see if it still dry
or turn half to dumpling dough already,
and the Lafitte boys
run across the bridge to fetch
two piece of jackass corn from the shop
and have to turn back
because tap, tap,
down the shoot of the valley
pours the grain of the next storm,
drum hailing, thickening, thickening.
Other sounds drown —
tree frog's chirp, woodpecker's tattoo,
boys' laughter, all done,
except the Shantimee's roar,
pounding, plunging, rolling rocks along
grinding janga, mullet, and eel,
making the river maid groan.

I know you remember
how all the day's light
seems to burn after the adamant dawn

just long enough to launder
your week worn trousers and two khaki shirts
and yourself under the falls
three or four chains up from the bridge,
long enough for old Mas' Harold
to stir and fetch
a pint of johncrow batty rum
from the shop at Silver Hill,
long enough for Brownman
to squat and crack more rockstone
to pave a road that could lead
nowhere but to heaven.
You did lay your youth
with your drying clothes
on the biggest rock
to catch the sun
and breathe the cedar air.
You remember how you have to run
as the hills turn quickly to cloud
and the first rain pierces the morning
and the Shantimee leaps
to reap otahiti and rose apple
from low hanging branches
of trees that drink bravely
at its banks.

Remember how the man named Shine
would stand on the bridge
and stare skyward in the night
awaiting a reprieve of stars
and never say a word of greeting
till him see one,
and how we could never see
if him feet quite touch the ground
on those darkest nights
and how you did swear
that the light of his kerosene bottle
did split one time
into the fiery eyes of the diabolic calf.
We did flee the sight
and climbed the night
to the safety of the chapel on Avocat hill
but did stop dead when we hear
the pale priest from Kingston
cry out from the sanctuary,
"Nil violentum durable!"
For him did hear before we
in the hush of him prayers
the down, down thunder

pressing out the molasses storm,
thickening, thickening,
as the Shantimee rolls
tossing stones, oppressing sleep,
pounding, rocking, plundering.

Yes, memory like the Shantimee
in the dry season
seems to stop dead
until I sit down with you
and in our minds the lightning cracks
the wind blows back
and the tongue rolls with names
like rocks torn loose in the riverbed —
Dimples, Uton, John the Nyahman,
Santa, Goldie, and Bonny J.
You wonder if the bamboo church
downstream at Mullet Hall
still dances with defiant spirits
and I dream that the chalkboard
in the schoolroom at Avocat
still sings with Brother Mais's summons
to come back to the hills.
But is no wonder and is no dream
that down with the dark
this very night
still pours a Portland storm
like the sea claiming the hills back
and Shantimee uncoils, quickens,
calls.