

Kei Miller

BOOK OF SONGS



Ira Sankey's *Gospel Hymns* [was] so influential that,
in Jamaica, hymns are still generically referred to as "sankeys"
—Hugh Hodges

Ira Sankey, ex-soldier and psalmist, wrote twelve hundred songs
by hand. He did not imagine the volume would reach islands
he had never been to—that black people would sing until
the songs had lost their accent; that they would gain unto themselves
a one-toothed harmony such as Brother Norman might raise
from the barstool of The Empire's Rumshop—a song

that was the only thing to keep him safe from ditches,
a straight line in the midst of all wobbling that returned him
onto his wife each night. The kind of song a tie-head woman
might bellow down the mountain, pencil behind her ear,
arriving at the crossroad to spin and write warnings
in gravel. Sankey would not have approved the future

swell of 'Ninety and Nine' in deep bushes without pianos,
where the candlelight lit nothing but itself, and the wind
flickering the flame was the swoosh of wide skirts that made
the night feel like cotton. He would have found it ungodly,
white fowls lifted like new moons, their necks slashed,
their blood thrown against the background of a Sankey chorus.