

Tregenza Roach

FACING MOUNT LIAMUIGA: A ST. KITTS ODYSSEY



I was born in my grandmother's house on Pedra Street in the village of Sandy Point, St. Kitts, which was once the heart of the British West Indies. The village sits in the shadow of 3,792-foot high Mount Liamuiga. The mountain dominated my imagination as a child when the British called it Mount Misery. The name was rejected eventually when the people of St. Kitts claimed their independence and renamed the mountain Liamuiga, using the name the indigenous Caribs had given our island to reflect its fertile volcanic heritage. A large group of the remaining Caribs, who claim their own Territory in Dominica, have also now claimed a name for themselves as the Kalinago people, to reflect their own linguistic tradition and not that of the European invaders who descended upon this place in the sixteenth century.

In the modern era, it is a tremendous difficulty to imagine this island in the sixteenth century, with the exception, perhaps, of Mount Liamuiga, which sits up high, virtually unchanged.

It is difficult even to imagine the island in 1915, the year approximate when my great-grandmother, Annie Mason Garvey, left my grandmother, Elzeva Mason Garvey a girl of about 18, to move to St. Croix in the then Danish West Indies. The house on Pedra Street still stands, though sad, and lonely, and almost broken, making it easier to imagine a time more recent, the 1960s, when my mother wrestled with her own decision to leave the island of her birth and to settle in St. Thomas, where she still lives.

This is our own house of spirits, a wooden house, with shingle siding, small but beautiful, built in three parts in a year that no one remembers. And it did not always stand

on Pedra Street, for it was born in Fahie's Estate and brought to Pedra Street by truck in the 1940s when my mother, Iona Bethel Roach was a girl, learning how to skip rope, to pick cotton, to plant pigeon peas.

She was born to a cane field laborer, my grandmother Elzeva, also known as Mam, and a baker/farmer/ shopkeeper, my grandfather, George Austin Joseph Bethel, who was still planting on the slopes of the mountain when I came to join their family. A mountain ground, he called his plot, and I was pleased as a boy of five to be extensions of his hands when he harvested watermelons, peanuts, corn, cucumbers, which he planted, and guavas, mangoes, avocados, mamey apples, and mocka, which grew wild there.

That was when he was old. When Papa Bethel was young and had just arrived from Dominica, he lived with my grandmother Elzeva on an estate called Sir Gillies in an estate house which was built originally for slaves and later inhabited by the children of slaves who continued in the tradition of their forebears, the harvesting of sugar.

The sugar fields were vast, and wages were low and lower still for cotton, which they picked when sugar was out of season and dampened it in secret to give it weight. But my grandmother still saved her pennies and ha-pennies--imagine a currency which split its smallest member into two-- until she had enough to buy the Pedra Street house and to bring it down upon the plot of land which belonged to her brother, Thomas Guishard.

It was not long before the word was out that she had bought a house while still living in the estate house and worse that she was now a landlord, collecting rent. The family was then forced out of the Sir Gilles quarters and commanded to the halls of their own habitation, about three miles away.

My grandmother was no stranger to movement, because her mother had moved them with the estates, wherever there was work, until she could take it no longer and fixed her eyes on St. Croix where it had been rumored that the Danish dollar was easier to come by and went so much further than the shilling. So she had lived on Bourke's estate, and Fig Tree and Low Valley, until she was left to her own way, when her mother, my great-grandmother Annie, left St. Kitts.

From my mother, I had long been told my grandmother's story, and my great grandmother's story. It had all the makings of a poem, although I wrote then only about

the sky and the trees and the things I did not understand about my body, which was young and eager. But my grandmother was a poem, waiting to be written.

When she was a young woman of 18 years of age, Mam chose to stay at the bed of her sick father while her mother, Annie, left the natal province, St. Kitts, and moved to a estate, possibly LaGrange on the outskirts of the town of Frederiksted, St. Croix, which together with St. Thomas and St. John comprised the then Danish West Indies. It was the year 1915. This is recorded in the census of the Danish West Indies taken somewhere before the transfer of the islands to the United States in 1917.

My history is the legacy of the Pedra Street house and of these matriarchs who trampled the ground beneath them and moved about the dust as long they could in any one place. My grandmother, Mam, commanded the house and the yard and everything near it, except for Papa Bethel who played it safe and moved a yard away where he could avoid her tongue.

She would gather up her skirt while surveying her property and set her eyes on a fowl running free, and issue an indirect directive. “A da fowl dey we a go eat come Sunday”. Loosely translated, that meant that a marked fowl which believed itself a free being was simply our Sunday meal still standing on its own legs.

With Mam’s pronouncement, someone would have to chase that fowl, and catch it, and break its neck, and bleed it on a clothesline, and pluck its feathers, and rip out its entrails, so that she could take over with garlic and onion and cloves and thyme. This was the world I was born into and loved. Although we had an outside toilet, no running water, no electricity, we relied on a dignified past and a hopeful future, even if it required a passage by sea or by air.

When I was eight, the world changed. My sister and I left my grandparents to live with our parents who had followed in Annie’s footsteps, but this time to St. Thomas in the United States Virgin Islands, several years earlier. It was complicated the decision to move, although we had been in a tide of movement all along, we, who had been torn from Africa, could never stay forever in St. Kitts, or in any single place again. My aunts had gone to Curaçao and Santo Domingo and Statia and England, any place with any rumor of gold. My uncles and great uncles worked the sea, and created their lives from that

harvest. It was hard to leave, but harder still to stay on an island whose economy was resting on a single crop, and one which appeared to thrive only on slave labor.

After we left St. Kitts, I did not see my grandmother, Mam, again until I was about 14 when she took to the air for the first time to come and visit us on this new island St. Thomas which was awash in tourism and development and whose hallmark was the United States dollar. It was the height of the 1960s and Mam was now almost eighty years old.

Mam and Papa Bethel never ceased to be the center of my world, even with the passing time and even though we now lived on separate islands with so much of the sea between us. They dominated my memory, and I still believed in their vision of the world.

It was so that I listened intently one day of her visit when I was 14 and she and I were speaking. "Ah wish me mudda min ya," she said, looking out to the sea and to the south by coincidence to St. Croix where my great grandmother is buried. Translated, her remark, "I wish my mother was here."

I was but a child when she spoke of her longing for her mother, but the sentiment never left me. The women had parted when she was 18, and Mam never saw Annie again.

There were neither telephones nor writing between them, two women, one born in 1897 and the other around 1867, and so I believe it safe to say that they had no words other than those exchanged on that sad day when they parted and the water made its course.

I imagined one day when I was contemplating her strength that I would use this memory of my grandmother's sentiment to speak to my great grandmother on her behalf, and so the poem *Annie Mason 1915* came to life.

Writing of ancestors takes the writer on a journey to spirit, and after I had written *Annie Mason*, I agonized over what Annie would say to her daughter Elzeva, my grandmother Mam, about her decision to leave the place of their birth.

I imagined how difficult Annie's life, and that of others like her, in these lands as they struggled to live on the remains of fading sugar empires. Then I asked her permission to speak in her voice, and *What to Tell a Child About the Surrender* came to life.

In each poem, I tried not to dwell on regret, but instead, in every way I could, I tried to reflect the bravery of these women who had no choice but to confront and master the lives which they had been given—to pick up the pieces when necessary and to move anywhere which seemed to offer a life they could love.

My mother, Iona, is the third in the line, and she, too, took up her life, with us in tow, and moved it. She inspired *The Kingdom of Cloth*. She was a seamstress by the time I was born, and cloth of every kind dominated each room where we lived in the house in Pedra Street and everywhere we moved as nomads in St. Thomas until the house in the Tutu valley became the settling place. I inherited from my mother Iona her love of both cloth and color.

These three poems celebrate the three women, Annie Mason Garvey, Elzeva Mason Garvey and Iona Roach Bethel who took the little that they were given and made a way for a large and varied clan which stretches now across Europe and the United States and the beautiful Caribbean. In truth, I owe them my life and the great substance of my imagination.