

*Shara McCallum*



## Writing the Self, the Self that Writes

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I HAVE NEVER DESIRED NOR SOUGHT TRAGEDY. I HAVE NEVER WANTED THE ending to my story, my life, to be one in which I was consumed by all that I had left unsaid. While I had been writing all of my life, I began to write poetry seriously in my early twenties, impelled initially by the need to change or at least to cohere the story of the life I had been given, ostensibly by my parents.

In 1972, I was born in Jamaica to a Venezuelan mother who had immigrated with her family to the island when she was eight years old. Her mother was a British-Trinidadian woman who divorced my mother's father, a Venezuelan man, shortly after the family moved to Jamaica. Staying in Jamaica to raise my mother and aunt without their father, my grandmother stopped speaking to them in Spanish. As a result, through the absence of language and cultural connection, my mother largely lost access to the Venezuelan side of her heritage.

My father's story was different from but in some ways parallel to my mother's. He was the son of a British mother and Jamaican father of African and Indian descent, both of whom met by corresponding as pen-pals before my father's mother moved to Jamaica. The product of their union, my father, was what was known in that time as "coloured" and, by birth, was a member of the middle-class minority on the island. As a young adult and up to his death, my father suffered from schizophrenia, which I think more than any other factor accounted for his feelings of isolation and alienation from others, feelings that the disease continued to exacerbate and/or that exacerbated the disease. With schizophrenia, as with much mental illness, it is difficult to separate cause from effect.

Having been born and raised in Jamaica as a child and in a different time period than my parents, it is impossible for me to know how they felt about themselves or about their relationship to Jamaican society. The fact that they both became Rastafarians raises even more interesting questions. Here were two individuals, light-skinned or "white" in the case of my mother, both from middle-class Jamaican homes, who joined a religion which also served as a black empowerment movement and which was led primarily by members of the darker-skinned, economically disenfranchised majority in Jamaica. What was their motivation?

Depending on whose version of the story I've heard, I come away with answers at odds with each other. My grandparents contend that my mother, in particular, was mistaken and even foolish to

think she could go against the colour of her skin and be accepted as a Rasta. My mother, when she speaks of that time in her life at all, describes it as having given her a sense of fortitude and purpose. To this day, she practices as a Rastafarian despite living in the United States away from that community.

At the time, my parents' religious beliefs were at the height of controversy within my family, I was too young to understand the full nature of what was happening. While I remember being called a *dutty Rasta* often on the streets of Kingston, my memories of my early life in Jamaica are fragmented. It is difficult for me to try to reconstruct this period with absolute veracity now, from the perspective of an adult. My father died when I was nine, shortly after my sisters, mother, and I moved with our grandparents to the States. So it is impossible to ask him, either, any of the questions that for me still need answering.

Many of my attempts to come to terms with identity are fed by my desire to understand precisely what I cannot ever truly know: who my parents and grandparents were, and in turn who I am as an extension of them. Often, the writing of poems that begin in an autobiographical space is for me an act of not only, or even truly, recreating the past but of *rewriting* it.

Countless writers have spoken of revision as the basis of all writing. For me, the moment I *became* a writer is the moment I realised the power of poetry to lie. I understood then that I needed to separate the "truth" I was searching for, the facts and details of something that had happened or that I had witnessed, with the emotional "truth" of the experience. And I began to make it up.

In making a poem art and going beyond its cathartic function, the interests of my own self are frequently submerged. If I need to change details of the story upon which a poem is based in order to have the poem succeed in its own right, I do it. My allegiance, from the moment I became a writer, shifted to the poem, which is artifice but is also greater than the life or the individual.

Yet, the individual — what we call "voice" perhaps — is clearly still present in the poem. The negotiation of the self with aesthetic concerns, in fact, has always struck me as responsible for the tension that makes poetry such a compelling and visceral experience. As a Jamaican-American, I am aware of my desire at times to label myself solely a Jamaican writer, due to my attachment to Jamaica as "home" and my conflicted feelings regarding being an American. But this would be partly false given the totality of my life and experiences. In a related vein, I see no discrepancy, as do some others, with saying that I am black "politically" and mixed "genealogically."

Poetry has allowed me to live these and other hybridised spaces, these identities in conflict, and to move away from the sentimental "tragedy of the mulatta" or of any figure of "exile." Poetry has taught me how to write myself into being and counter fragmentation through the lie of wholeness a poem constructs.

Am I then alive only within the poem? Yes and no. The poem is pretense, and the flesh and blood person I am cannot ever be identical to the poem and is not even, as Borges said, sometimes the same

person who writes. But we are all constructs, beings in the end, like poems, of our own making. And I know that as much as I am the writer, in the act of composition I also become that self I bring into existence on the page. I am the line break of desire. I am the rhythm and cadence of my speech.

Questions of ontology, of being, have been the basis of poetry and philosophy since the first humans walked out onto the Savannah of Africa and looked up at the sky in wonder. Whether definitions of my life are grounded in my experience making mud pies in the yard with my sisters or yours are centred on eating a knish for the first time at a deli in New York, we are asking the same questions. Why am I here and why am I, I? Why am I me and not you? Where do we meet and merge identities and where do we separate and become ourselves, individuals?

Lately I have begun to ask these questions not only in relation to events that have happened to me or to my family members but also in relation to those issues and occurrences I witness in the larger world. Many of the poems I now write move more consciously between the persona of an “I” as individual and the reality of he/she/we/them, which is our inheritance as members of a broader community.

Even so, I am aware that the individual communities from which we come shape the ways in which we each view and interpret the world. I am not from a line of writers or literate people in an academic sense. In my family, I was the first person to graduate from college and the first to take up the pen as a profession. Yet, I am from a line of individuals who taught me from a young age how to create life through the imagination.

My grandfather told me Anancy stories and jokes and riddles as a child, instructing me in the darkness of star-filled nights on a verandah in Kingston in how to see and name the constellations, how to use the stars to find your way home. My father would take me with him down to the gully in his mother’s backyard to listen as he played his guitar and sang the trees and light of dawn washing over the sea into existence.

As much as she complained about the flowers that filled her home in Jamaica, causing it to look like a *funeral parlour* as she was prone to say, my grandmother’s gardening was how she found order. It was her way of asking the world to reveal to her something of beauty and structure, something she has sought in her own life to replicate. My mother is also an artist, perhaps more than any other manner in that she believed her life was truly hers for the making. She encouraged the same in her children, prodding us, my sisters and I, to sing, dance, write poems, make up stories, act out plays, create collages and drawings, in short to experience the world through art and the process of creation.

To these four people, I owe the story of my life thus far and the poems of my past and present. Through their rootedness in and shifting identification with the Caribbean, Latin American, Europe, Africa, and Asia, my own work has come into being and simultaneously my own self.

In any writing class, one of the first “rules” you learn is to “write what you know,” which often

presupposes that the self is known. The converse of this is also true and is a main impetus for me in writing. That is to say that I write what I don't already know but what I *hope* to learn. If I have the answer, there is no discovery, no sense of wonder, for me in the poem. And I can barely ask that response of a reader if the same is not true first and foremost for myself as the writer.

Some years ago I came across a poem I wrote in one of the various scrapbooks of my sisters and my childhood artistic endeavours my mother has compiled and saved. I would have been about six at the time it was written and the poem's structure and content reveal the workings of most children's minds. Nevertheless it reminds me of the reason, now twenty-odd years later, that I continue to write. Searching through speaking, the process of understanding the self and world through writing, is what I find most vital and sustaining. And in the end, the answers, if they come, are nice, but an unexpected bonus:

*I wonder how high heaven is.  
I try to fly up to the sky  
but down I fall again,  
Plop. Plop.*

