A Far-Reaching Voice

by ANNE WALMSLEY

‘One good thing about living in Jamaica, in the Caribbean, is that you can’t go for a day without remembering that there are hungry people and people who don’t live anywhere.’ Lorna Goodison made this comment even before Hurricane Gilbert had ravaged her home island in September 1988. ‘This is a hymn’ in her latest collection of poems, Heartease, expresses her sense of awareness of kinship, with the hungry and homeless, with the dispossessed of the world:

This hymn
is for the must-be-blessed
the victims of the world
who know salt best
the world tribe
of the dispossessed
outside the halls of plenty
looking in
this is a benediction
this is a hymn.

It is deliberately ‘a hymn’: ‘may it renew/what passes for your heart’. Her sense of the religious properties of poetry is strong and compelling, especially of poetry when read aloud.

Another poem in this collection, ‘An Airport Waiting Room’, ends with repetition of the name ‘Azania’, which she explains thus: ‘I think that to repeat something has great power. And I want to say that the place is called Azania, not South Africa. The more times more people say “Azania”, the more Azania will come into being eventually. You first envision something, and then you speak it and then it will be, you know.’ Goodison’s poetry combines wide sympathies with a sense of her own specific placing. She speaks always as a Jamaican woman and as a person of the Third World. Such sympathies and self-awareness, and the lyrical, at times incantatory, quality of her writing, combine to make hers one of the most effective new voices in contemporary poetry.

Lorna Goodison trained professionally, and worked first, as a visual artist. ‘I started out painting, and I always said that a lot of my poems were left over from ideas for paintings in that I get possessed or obsessed with an idea and I paint it. And then when it still won’t go away, I turn out writing it.’ Her poems convey the
specifically personal and broader references through sharply remembered or visualised images. Those in ‘Bedspread’, from her second collection, I Am Becoming My Mother, were prompted by a newspaper cutting about the confiscation by the South African authorities of a bedspread woven in the ANC colours for Winnie Mandela:

They wove the bedspread
and knotted notes of hope
in each strand
and selvedged the edges with
ancient blessings
older than any white man’s coming.

She recalls how her first awareness of herself as a person with African ancestry, with a collective memory of Africa, was through painting. ‘I was at primary school, about 7 or 8, and sad to say in those days Jamaican children used to do drawings and paintings of people and they were all white people. I remember doing this painting of a lady sitting down, reading a book or something. I remember mixing red and yellow and black together and I painted this lady a very dark brown. The children laughed and they said, “You’ve painted an African lady.”’ And the teacher said to them, “But you know, that’s really ridiculous, because a lot of you look like that lady.” She put the painting up, and it was up there for a long time. It just affirmed something for me very much in my head.’ Likewise, she claims that her close feeling for Egypt stems from her childhood attraction to its art. ‘The wonder of the symmetry of the friezes, the figures in profile. I’ve always felt this very strong connection with Egypt, Egypt being part of Africa.’

The covers of all three of her books feature her own paintings. Others have been used on books by Jamaican fellow writers: Edward Baugh, Hazel Campbell, Mervyn Morris.

Goodison is generous in acknowledging the help that she has received from these writers in terms of constructive criticism, and equally her debt to Louise Bennett, until recently marginalised as a writer of “dialect verse”, described by Goodison as ‘mother of the Jamaican language’. She never underestimates the long, demanding work involved in crafting her poems. ‘Poetry is very hard work and the effects of hard work show, although sometimes the results can look frighteningly simple. But you can know when somebody has worked at something and it comes out, it’s right, it’s whole. I don’t like sloppiness in poetry.’ She is equally clear about her uppermost criticism of a good poem. ‘My measure for when a poem is a good poem is when it doesn’t sound as if the person was talking as opposed to listening. I don’t know of a good poet who is not a listener. I can’t deal with poetry which sounds as if someone was consciously pontificating.’ In the past, she confesses, ‘I have tried consciously not to write poetry because I find it very burdensome, it can be very consuming. I used to spend a lot of time saying, “I don’t want to write poetry any more.”’ But with more publication, more demands for readings, the response to her work and awards for it, has come acceptance, embrace even, of what she sees as her calling as a poet.

For Goodison combines an unfamiliarly old-fashioned respect for such a calling with an unashamed recognition of what she calls her ‘mystic side’. In one of the ‘Heartease’ series of poems:

For my mission this last life is certainly this
to be the sojourner poet carolling for peace
calling lost souls to the way of Heartease.

Her first collection, Tamarind Season, was, she says, ‘a sort of Tagore. Rabindranath Tagore speaks about a soul trying to strive for wholeness and there’s a process where it’s almost like a crying out which takes place within you.’ Of her latest, Heartease, ‘It’s a sort of continuing. I think it’s my personal, internal journey.’ She lists some of her recent reading: Chasm of Fire by a woman who studied under a Sufi master in India; Abandonment to Divine Providence, a very small book written by a French monk in the 18th century, books which have, she explains, developed her interest in mysticism. ‘I think a lot of it comes out in the third collection.’ There is certainly more of the mystic, more references to her search for light, for change and renewal. ‘I think I’m concerned more with re-unification than anything else. I really feel that is the paramount task of humanity: things have to be re-unified.’ The mysticism, the religious awareness, is firmly anchored in the here and now. ‘I love the literal meaning of the word “religious” which is realignment, being re-bound to the source, being connected again. Whatever is going to reconnect me to the source is fine, so, yes, I’m a religious person in a very big sense.’

She is a wide but selective reader, deliberately following her interests and sympathies. ‘I read a lot of Ngugi wa Thiong’o and Chinua Achebe, and I loved that Buchi Emecheta, The Bride Price, a terrific book... I re-read books by Toni Morrison, and I like Toni Cade Bambara – The Salt Eaters, and her short stories. Very often I find that I will read through a book and sometimes I’m
wondering why am I ploughing through this book? But it’s usually because there’s something in there which is very important to me: just one passage which becomes the nucleus of a poem. She is consciously a ‘book person’. ‘My Will’, from her second collection, is addressed to her son:

May you like me earn good friends but just to be sure love books, When bindings fall apart they can be fixed you will find that is not always so with friendships.

Goodison is amazed that poems about herself, a Jamaican woman – as granddaughter, daughter and mother, as lover and friend – are identified with by audiences not only in Jamaica, but also in the United States and Britain. ‘I started off thinking that a lot of the things I write about are personal and original. And they’re not: they tend to transcend all sorts of barriers which I’d no idea they would.’ She tells how, after reading the poem, ‘For My Mother (May I Inherit Half Her Strength)’, a young man in the audience came up to her and said, ‘But that is my parents’ story, how did you know it?’ Her poems especially speak for and strengthen other women: from the realism of ‘We are the women’ and other poems in I Am Becoming My Mother:

We are the women who ban our bellies with strips from the full moon our nerves made keen from hard grieving worn thin like silver sixpences to the similarly rooted but transcended reality of poems in Heartcase, like this from one of the title series:

If we mix a solution from some wild bees honey and some search-mi-heart extract better than red conscience money and we boil it in a bun-pan over a sweet wood fire make the soft smell of healing melt hard hearts and bare wire.

The voice is unmistakably Jamaican, but reaches far.

For My Mother
(May I Inherit Half Her Strength)

My mother loved my father
I write this as an absolute
in this my thirtieth year
the year to discard absolutes

he appeared, her fate disguised,
as a sunday player in a cricket match,
had ridden from a country
one hundred miles south of hers.

She tells he dressed the part,
visiting dandy, maroon blazer
cream serge pants, seam like razor,
and the beret and the two-tone shoes.

My father stopped to speak to her sister,
till he looked and saw her by the oleander,
sure in the kingdom of my blue-eyed grandmother.
He never played the cricket match that day.

He wooed her with words and he won her.
He had nothing but words to woo her,
On a visit to distant Kingston he wrote,

‘I stood on the corner of King Street and looked,
and not one woman in that town was lovely as you’.

My mother was a child of the petite bourgeois,
studying to be a teacher, she oiled her hands
to hold pens.
My father barely knew his father, his mother died young,
he was a boy who grew with his granny.

My mother’s trousseau came by steamer through the snows
of Montreal
where her sisters Albertha of the checkbones and the perennial Rose, combed Jewhit backstreets with French-
turned names for Doris’ wedding things.
Such a wedding Harvey River, Hanover, had never seen
Who anywhere had seen a veil fifteen chantilly yards long?
and a crepe de chine dress with inlets of silk godettes
and a neck-line clasped with jewelled pins!

And on her wedding day she wept. For it was a brazen bride in those
days
who smiled.
and her bouquet looked for the world like a sheaf of wheat
against the unknown of her belly,
a sheaf of wheat backed by maidenhair fern, representing Harvey
River
her face washed by something other than river water.

My father made one assertive move, he took the imported cherub
down
from the heights of the cake and dropped it in the soft territory
between her breasts…and she cried.

When I came to know my mother many years later, I knew her as the
figure
who sat at the first thing I learned to read: 'SINGER', and she
breast-fed
my brother while she sewed; and she taught us to read while she
sewed and
she sat in judgement over all our disputes as she sewed.

She could work miracles, she would make a garment from a square
of cloth
in a span that defied time. Or feed twenty people on a stew made from
fallen-from-the-head cabbage leaves and a carrot and a cho-cho and
a palmful
of meat.

And she rose early and sent us clean into the world and she went to
bed in
the dark, for my father came in always last.

There is a place somewhere where my mother never took the younger
ones
a country where my father with the always smile
my father whom all women loved, who had the perpetual quality of
wonder
given only to a child…and hurt his bride.

Even at his death there was this 'Friend' who stood at her side,
but my mother is adamant that that has no place in the memory of
my father.

When he died, she sewed dark dresses for the women amongst us
and she summoned that walk, straight-backed, that she gave to us
and buried him dry-eyed.

Just that morning, weeks after
she stood delivering bananas from their skin
singing in that flat hill country voice

she fell down a note to the realisation that she did
not have to be brave, just this once
and she cried.

For her hands grown coarse with raising nine children
for her body for twenty years permanently fat
for the time she pawned her machine for my sister's
Senior Cambridge fees
and for the pain she bore with the eyes of a queen

and she cried also because she loved him.
On Becoming a Mermaid

Watching the underwater idle by
you think drowning must be easy death
just let go and let the water carry you
away and under
the current pulls your bathing-plaits loose
your hair floats out straightened by the water
your legs close together fuse all the length down
your feet now one broad foot
the toes spread into
a fish-tail, fan-like
your sex locked under
mother-of-pearl scales

you're a nixie now, a mermaid
a green tinge fish / flesched woman / thing
who swims with thrashing movements
and stands upended on the sea floor
breasts full and floating buoyed by the salt
and the space between your arms now always
filled and your sex sealed forever under
mother-of-pearl scale / locks closes finally
on itself like some close-mouthed oyster.

Keith Jarrett — Rainmaker

Piano man
my roots are african
I dwell in the centre of the sun.
I am used to its warmth
I am used to its heat
I am seared by its vengeance
(it has a vengeful streak)

So my prayers are usually
for rain.
My people are farmers
and artists
and sometimes the lines
blur
so a painting becomes a
december of sorrel
a carving heaps like a yam hill
or a song of redemption wings
like the petals of resurrection
lilies - all these require rain.

So this sunday
when my walk misses
my son's balance on my hips
I'll be all right if you pull down
for me
waterfalls of rain.
I never thought a piano
could divine
but I'm hearing you this morning
and right on time
its drizzling now.
I'll open the curtains and
watch the lightning conduct
your hands.