“This is how, one sunrise, we cut down them canoes.”

Philoctete smiles for the tourists, who try taking
his soul with their cameras. “Once wind bring the news
to the laurier-cannelles, their leaves start shaking
the minute the axe of sunlight hit the cedars,
because they could see the axes in our own eyes.

Wind lift the ferns. They sound like the sea that feed us
fishermen all our life, and the ferns nodded ‘Yes,
the trees have to die.’ So, fists jam in our jacket,

cause the heights was cold and our breath making feathers
like the mist, we pass the rum. When it came back, it
give us the spirit to turn into murderers.

I lift up the axe and pray for strength in my hands
to wound the first cedar. Dew was filling my eyes,
but I fire one more white rum. Then we advance.”

For some extra silver, under a sea-almond,
he shows them a scar made by a rusted anchor,
rolling one trouser-leg up with the rising moon

of a conch. It has puckered like the corolla
of a sea-urchin. He does not explain its cure.
“It have some things”—he smiles—“worth more than a dollar.”

He has left it to a garrulous waterfall
to pour out his secret down La Sorcière, since
the tall laurels tell, for the ground-dove’s mating call
to pass on its note to the blue, tacit mountains
whose talkative brooks, carrying it to the sea,
turn into idle pools where the clear minnows shoot

and an egret stalks the reeds with one rusted cry
as it stabs and stabs the mud with one lifting foot.
Then silence is sawn in half by a dragonfly

as eels sign their names along the clear bottom-sand,
when the sunrise brightens the river's memory
and waves of huge ferns are nodding to the sea's sound.

Although smoke forgets the earth from which it ascends,
and nettles guard the holes where the laurels were killed,
an iguana hears the axes, clouding each lens

over its lost name, when the hunched island was called
"Jounalao," "Where the iguana is found."
But, taking its own time, the iguana will scale

the rigging of vines in a year, its dewlap fanned,
its elbows akimbo, its deliberate tail
moving with the island. The slit pods of its eyes

ripered in a pause that lasted for centuries,
that rose with the Aruacs' smoke till a new race
unknown to the lizard stood measuring the trees.

These were their pillars that fell, leaving a blue space
for a single God where the old gods stood before.
The first god was a gommier. The generator

began with a whine, and a shark, with sidewise jaw,
sent the chips flying like mackerel over water
into trembling weeds. Now they cut off the saw,

still hot and shaking, to examine the wound it
had made. They scraped off its gangrenous moss, then ripped
the wound clear of the net of vines that still bound it
to this earth, and nodded. The generator whipped
back to its work, and the chips flew much faster as
the shark's teeth gnawed evenly. They covered their eyes

from the splintering nest. Now, over the pastures
of bananas, the island lifted its horns. Sunrise
trickled down its valleys, blood splashed on the cedars,

and the grove flooded with the light of sacrifice.
A gommier was cracking. Its leaves an enormous
tarpaulin with the ridgepole gone. The creaking sound

made the fishermen leap back as the angling mast
leant slowly towards the troughs of ferns; then the ground
shuddered under the feet in waves, then the waves passed.

II

Achille looked up at the hole the laurel had left.
He saw the hole silently healing with the foam
of a cloud like a breaker. Then he saw the swift
crossing the cloud-surf, a small thing, far from its home,
confused by the waves of blue hills. A thorn vine gripped
his heel. He tugged it free. Around him, other ships

were shaping from the saw. With his cutlass he made
a swift sign of the cross, his thumb touching his lips
while the height rang with axes. He swayed back the blade,

and hacked the limbs from the dead god, knot after knot,
wrenching the severed veins from the trunk as he prayed:
"Tree! You can be a canoe! Or else you cannot!"
The bearded elders endured the decimation
of their tribe without uttering a syllable
of that language they had uttered as one nation,

the speech taught their saplings: from the towering babble
of the cedar to green vowels of bois-campêche.
The bois-flor held its tongue with the laurier-cannelle,

the red-skinned logwood endured the thorns in its flesh,
while the Aruacs’ patois crackled in the smell
of a resinous bonfire that turned the leaves brown

with curling tongues, then ash, and their language was lost.
Like barbarians striding columns they have brought down,
the fishermen shouted. The gods were down at last.

Like pygmies they hacked the trunks of wrinkled giants
for paddles and oars. They were working with the same
concentration as an army of fire-ants.

But vexed by the smoke for defaming their forest,
blow-darts of mosquitoes kept needling Achille’s trunk.
He frotted white rum on both forearms that, at least,

those that he flattened to asterisks would die drunk.
They went for his eyes. They circled them with attacks
that made him weep blindly. Then the host retreated
to high bamboo like the archers of Aruacs
running from the muskets of cracking logs, routed
by the fire’s banner and the remorseless axe

hacking the branches. The men bound the big logs first
with new hemp and, like ants, trundled them to a cliff
to plunge through tall nettles. The logs gathered that thirst

for the sea which their own vined bodies were born with.
Now the trunks in eagerness to become canoes
ploughed into breakers of bushes, making raw holes

of boulders, feeling not death inside them, but use—
to roof the sea, to be hulls. Then, on the beach, coals
were set in their hollows that were chipped with an adze.

A flat-bed truck had carried their rope-bound bodies.
The charcoals, smouldering, cored the dugouts for days
till heat widened the wood enough for ribbed gunwales.

Under his tapping chisel Achille felt their hollows
exhaling to touch the sea, lunging towards the haze
of bird-printed islets, the beaks of their parted bows.

Then everything fit. The pirogues crouched on the sand
like hounds with sprigs in their teeth. The priest
sprinkled them with a bell, then he made the swift’s sign.

When he smiled at Achille’s canoe, In God We Trust,
Achille said: “Leave it! Is God spelling and mine.”
After Mass one sunrise the canoes entered the troughs
of the surpriced shallows, and their nodding prows
agreed with the waves to forget their lives as trees;
one would serve Hector and another, Achilles.

III

Achille peed in the dark, then bolted the half-door shut.
It was rusted from sea-blast. He hoisted the fishpot
with the crab of one hand; in the hole under the hut

he hid the cinder-block step. As he neared the depot,
the dawn breeze salted him coming up the grey street
past sleep-tight houses, under the sodium bars
of street-lamps, to the dry asphalt scraped by his feet; he
counted the small blue sparks of separate stars.
Banana fronds nodded to the undulating
anger of roosters, their cries screeching like red chalk
drawing hills on a board. Like his teacher, waiting,
the surf kept chafing at his deliberate walk.

By the time they met at the wall of the concrete shed
the morning star had stepped back, hating the odour
of nets and fish-guts; the light was hard overhead

and there was a horizon. He put the net by the door
of the depot, then washed his hands in its basin.
The surf did not raise its voice, even the ribbed hounds
around the canoes were quiet; a flask of l'absinthe
was passed by the fishermen, who made smacking sounds
and shook at the bitter bark from which it was brewed.

This was the light that Achille was happiest in.
When, before their hands gripped the gunwales, they stood
for the sea-width to enter them, feeling their day begin.

CHAPTER III

"Touchez-i, encore: N'ai fendre choux-ous-ou, salope!"
"Touch it again, and I'll split your arse, you bitch!"
"Moi j'a dire—'ous pas prêter un rien. 'Ous ni shallope,"

'ous ni seine, 'ous croire 'ous ni chœur campêche?"
"I told you, borrow nothing of mine. You have a canoe,
and a net. Who you think you arc? Logwood Heart?"

"'Ous croire 'ous c' est roi Gros Islet? Voleur homme!"
"You think you're king of Gros Islet, you tin-stealer?"
Then in English: "I go show you who is king! Come!"

Hector came out from the shade. And Achille, the
moment he saw him carrying the cutlass, un homme
fou, a madman eaten with envy, replaced the tin

he had borrowed from Hector's canoe neatly back in the prow
of Hector's boat. Then Achille, who had had enough
of this madman, wiped and hefted his own blade.

And now the villagers emerged from the green shade
of the almonds and wax-leaved machinccels, for the face-off
that Hector wanted. Achille walked off and waited

at the warm shallows' edge. Hector strode towards him.
The villagers followed, as the surf abated
its sound, its fear cowering at the beach's rim.

Then, far out at sea, in a sparkling shower
arrows of rain arched from the emerald breakwater
of the reef, the shafts travelling with clear power
in the sun, and behind them, ranged for the slaughter, stood villagers, shouting, with a sound like the shoal, and hoisting arms to the light. Hector ran, splashing in shallows mixed with the drizzle, towards Achille, his cutlass lifted. The surf, in anger, gnashing its tail like a foaming dogfight. Men can kill their own brothers in rage, but the madman who tore Achille’s undershirt from one shoulder also tore at his heart. The rage that he felt against Hector was shame. To go crazy for an old bailing tin crusted with rust! The duel of these fishermen was over a shadow and its name was Helen.

CHAPTER IV

III

I sat on the white terrace waiting for the cheque. Our waiter, in a black bow tie, plunged through the sand between the full deck-chairs, bouncing to discotheque music from the speakers, a tray sailed in one hand. The tourists revolved, grilling their backs in their noon barbecue. The waiter was having a hard time with his leather soles. They kept sliding down a dune, but his tray teetered without spilling gin-and-lime on a scorched back. He was determined to meet the beach’s demands, like a Lawrence of St. Lucia, except that he was trudging towards a litre of self-conscious champagne. Like any born loser he soon kicked the bucket. He rested his tray down, wiped the sand from the ice-cubes, then plunked the cubes in the bucket, then the bottle; after this was done, he seemed ready to help the wife stuff her boobs in her halter, while her husband sat boiling with rage like a towelled sheik. Then Lawrence frowned at a mirage.

That was when I turned with him towards the village, and saw, through the caging wires of the noon sky, a beach with its padding panther; now the mirage dissolved to a woman with a madras head-tie, but the head proud, although it was looking for work. I felt like standing in homage to a beauty.
that left, like a ship, widening eyes in its wake.
"Who the hell is that?" a tourist near my table
asked a waitress. The waitress said, "She? She too proud!"

As the carved lids of the unimaginable
ebony mask unwrapped from its cotton-wool cloud,
the waitress sneered, "Helen." And all the rest followed.

CHAPTER V

III

How fast it fades! Maud thought; the enameled sky,
the gilded palms, the bars like altars of raffia,
even for that Madonna bathing her baby

with his little shrimp thing! One day the Mafia
will spin these islands round like roulette. What use is
Dennis's devotion when their own ministers
cash in on casinos with their old excuses
of more jobs? Their future felt as sinister as
that of that ebony girl in her yellow dress.

"There's our trouble," Maud muttered into her glass. In
a gust that leant the triangular sails of the
surfers, Plunkett saw the pride of Helen passing

in the same yellow frock Maud had altered for her.
"She looks better in it"—Maud smiled—"but the girl lies
so much, and she stole. What'll happen to her life?"

"God knows," said Plunkett, following the butterfly's
yellow-panelled wings that once belonged to his wife,
the black V of the velvet back, near the shallows.

Her head was lowered; she seemed to drift like a waif;
not like the arrogant servant that ruled their house.
It was at that moment that he felt a duty
towards her hopelessness, something to redress
(he punned relentlessly) that desolate beauty
so like her island's. He drained the foaming Guinness.
Seychelles. Seashells. One more. In the olive saucer, 
the dry stones were piling up, their green pith sucked dry. 
Got what we took from them, yes sir! Quick, because the

Empire was ebbing. He watched the silhouette 
of his wife, her fine profile set in an oval 
ivory cloud, like a Victorian locket,

as when, under crossed swords, she lifted the lace veil. 
The flag then was sliding down from the hill-stations 
of the Upper Punjab, like a collapsing sail;

an elephant folded its knees, its striaions 
wrinkling like the tea-pavilions after the Raj, 
whose ebbing surf lifted the coastlines of nations

as lacy as Helen's shift. In the noon's mirage 
the golden palms shook their tassels, Eden's Egypt 
sank in the tinted sand. The Giza pyramids

darkened with the sharpening Pitons, as Achille shipped 
both oars like rifles. Clouds of delivered Muslims 
foamed into the caves of mosques, and honour and glory

faded like crested brandies. Then remorseful hymns 
soared in the stone-webbed Abbey. Memento mori 
in the drumbeat of Remembrance Day. Pigeons whirr

over Trafalgar. Helen needed a history, 
that was the pity that Plunkett felt towards her. 
Not his, but her story. Not theirs, but Helen's war.

The name, with its historic hallucination, 
brightened the beach; the butterfly, to Plunkett's joy, 
twinkling from myrmidon to myrmidon, from one 
sprawled tourist to another. Her village was Troy, 
its smoke obscuring soldiers fallen in battle. 
Then her unclouding face, her breasts were its Pitons,

the palms' rusted lances swirled in the death-rattle 
of the gargling shoal; for her Gaul and Briton 
had mounted fort and redoubt, the ruined barracks 
with its bushy tunnel and its penile cannon; 
for her cedars fell in green sunrise to the axe. 
His mind drifted with the smoke of his reverie

out to the channel. Lawrence arrived. He said: 
"I changing shift, Major. Major?" Maud tapped his knee. 
"Dennis. The bill." But the bill had never been paid.

Not to that housemaid swinging a plastic sandal 
by the noon sea, in a dress that she had to steal. 
Wars. Wars thin like sea-smoke, but their dead were real.

He smiled at the mythical hallucination 
that went with the name's shadow; the island was once 
named Helen; its Homeric association

rose like smoke from a siege; the Battle of the Saints 
was launched with that sound, from what was the "Gibraltor 
of the Caribbean," after thirteen treaties

while she changed prayers often as knees at an altar, 
till between French and British her final peace 
was signed at Versailles. All of this came to his mind

as Lawrence came staggering up the terrace 
with the cheque finally, and that treaty was signed; 
the paper was crossed by the shadow of her face
as it was at Versailles, two centuries before,
by the shade of Admiral Rodney's gathering force;
a lion-headed island remembering war,

its crouched flanks tawny with drought, and on its ridge, grass
stirred like its mane. For a while he watched the waiter
move through the white iron shields of the white terrace.

In the village Olympiad, on St. Peter's Day,
he served as official starter with a flare-gun
borrowed from the manager of the marina.

It wasn't Aegean. They climbed no Parthenon
to be laurreled. The depot faced their arena,
the sea's amphitheatre. When one wore a crown—

victor ludorum—no one knew what it meant, or
cared to be told. The Latin syllables would drown
in the clapping dialect of the crowd. Hector

would win, or Achille by a hair; but everyone
knew as the crossing ovals of their thighs would soar
in jumps down the cheering aisle, or their marathon

six times round the village, that the true bounty was
Helen, not a shield nor the ham saved for Christmas;
as one slid down the greased pole to factional roars.

CHAPTER XXIV

1

From his heart's depth he knew she was never coming
back, as he followed the skipping of a sea-swift
over the waves' changing hills, as if the humming

horizon-bow had made Africa the target
of its tiny arrow. When he saw the swift flail
and vanish in a trough he knew he'd lost Helen.

The mate was cleaning the bilge with the rusted pail
when the swift reappeared like a sunlit omen,
widening the joy that had vanished from his work.

Sunlight entered his hands, they gave that skillful twist
that angled the blade for the next stroke. Half-awake
from last night's blocko, the mate waveringly pissed
over the side, keeping his staggering balance.
"Fish go get drunk," Achille grinned. The mate cupped his hands
in the sea and lathered his head. "All right. Work start!"

He fitted the trawling rods. Achille felt the rim
of the brimming morning being brought like a gift
by the handles of the headland. He was at home.

This was his garden. God bless the speed of the swift,
God bless the wet head of the mate sparkling with foam,
and his heart trembled with enormous tenderness

for the purple-blue water and the wilting shore
tight and thin as a fishline, and the hill's blue smoke,
his muscles bulging like porpoises from each oar,
but the wrists wrenched deftly after the lifted stroke, mesmerizing him with their incantatory metre. The swift made a semicircular turn over the hills, then, like a feathery lure, she bobbed over the wake, the same distance from the stern. He felt she was guiding and not following them eve: since she'd leapt from the blossoms of the froth hooked to his heart, as if her one, arrowing aim was his happiness and that was blessing enough.

Steadily she kept her distance. He said the name that he knew her by—_l'hirondelle des Antilles_, the tag on Maud's quilt. The mate jigged the bamboo rods from which the baits trawled. Then it frightened Achille that this was no swallow but the bait of the gods, that she had seen the god's body torn from its hill.

And these were the noble and lugubrious names under the rocking shadow of _In God We Trust_: Habal, swept in a gale overboard; Winston James, commonly known as "*Toujours Sou" or "Always Soused," whose body disappeared, some claimed in a vapour of white rum or l'absinthe; Herald Chastenet, plaiter of lobster-pots, whose alias was "*Fourmi Rouge,*" i.e., "Red Ant," who was terrified of water but launched a skiff one sunrise with white-rum courage to conquer his fear. Some fishermen could not swim. Dorcas Henry could not, but they learnt this later searching the pronged rocks for whelks, where they found him, for some reason clutching a starfish. There were others whom Achille had heard of, mainly through Philoctete, and, of course, the nameless bones of all his brothers drowned in the crossing, plus a Midshipman Plunkett. He stood like a mast amidships, remembering them, in the lace wreaths of the Caribbean anthem.

Achille looked up at the sun, it was vertical as an anchor-rope. Its ring ironed his hot skull like a flat iron, singeing his cap with its smell.
No action but stasis. He is riding the swell of the line now. He lets the angling oars idle in their wooden oarlocks. He sprinkles the scorched sail stitched from old flour sacks and tied round the middle with seawater from the calabash to keep it supple, scooping with one hand over the rocking gunwale with the beat of habit, a hand soaked in its skill, or the stitches could split the seams, and the ply of its knots rot from this heat. Then, as Achille sprinkles the flour sack, he watches it dry rapidly in a sun like a hot iron flattening his skull, and staggers with the calabash. The tied bundle huddles like a corpse. Oui, Bon Dieu! I go hurl it overside. Out of the depths of his ritual baptism something was rising, some white memory of a midshipman coming up close to the hull, a white turning body, and this water go fill with them, turning tied canvases, not sharks, but all corpses wrapped like the sail, and ice-sweating Achille in the stasis of his sunstroke looked as each swell disgorged them, in tens, in hundreds, and his soul sickened and was ill. His jaw slackened. A gull screeched whirling backwards, and it was the tribal sorrow that Philoctete could not drown in alcohol.

It was not forgetful as the sea-mist or the crash of breakers on the crisp beaches of Senegal or the Guinea coast. He reached for the calabash and poured it streaming over his boiling skull, then sat back and tried to settle the wash of bilge in his stomach. Then he began to pull at the knots in the sail. Meanwhile, that fool his mate went on quietly setting the fishpot. Time is the metre, memory the only plot.

His shoulders are knobs of ebony. The back muscles can bulge like porpoises leaping out of this line from the gorge of our memory. His hard fists enclose its mossed rope as bearded as a love-vine or a blind old man, tight as a shark’s jaws, wrenching the weight, then loosening it again as the line saws his palms’ sealed calluses, the logwood thighs anchor against the fast drain of the trough, and here is my tamer of horses, our only inheritance that elemental noise of the windward, unbroken breakers, Ithaca’s or Africa’s, all joining the ocean’s voice, because this is the Atlantic now, this great design of the triangular trade. Achille saw the ghost of his father’s face shoot up at the end of the line.

Achille stared in pious horror at the bound canvas and could not look away, or loosen its burial knots. Then, for the first time, he asked himself who he was. He was lured by the swift the way trolling water mesmerizes a fisherman who stares at the fake metal fish as the troughs widen and close.
Outrigger of flying fish, under the geometry
of the hidden stars, her wire flashed and faded
tau: as a catch, this mite of the sky-touching sea
towing a pirogue a thousand times her own weight
with a hummingbird’s electric wings, this engine
that shot ahead of each question like an answer,

once Achille had questioned his name and its origin.
She touched both worlds with her rainbow, this frail dancer
leaping the breakers, this dart of the meridian.

She could loop the stars with a fishline, she tired
porpoises, she circled epochs with her outstretched span;
she gave a straight answer when one was required,

she skipped the dolphin’s question, she stirred every spine
of a sea-egg tickling your palm rank with the sea;
she shut the ducts of a starfish, she was the mind-
messenger, and her speed outdarted Memory.
She was the swift that he had seen in the cedars
in the foam of clouds, when she had shot across

the blue ridges of the waves, to a god’s orders,
and he, at the beck of her beak, watched the bird hum
the whipping Atlantic, and felt he was headed home.

Where whales burst into flower and sails turn back
from a tiring horizon, she shot with curled feet
close to her wet belly, round-eyed, her ruddering beak
towing In God We Trust so fast that he felt his feet
drumming on the ridged keel-board, its shearing motion
whirred by the swift’s flywheel into open ocean.

CHAPTER XXV

1

Mangroves, their ankles in water, walked with the canoe.
The swift, racing its browner shadow, screeched, then veered
into a dark inlet. It was the last sound Achille knew

from the other world. He feathered the paddle, steered
away from the groping mangroves, whose muddy shelves
slipped warded crocodiles, slitting the pods of their eyes;

then the horned river-horses rolling over themselves
could capsize the keel. It was like the African movies
he had yelped at in childhood. The endless river unreeled

those images that flickered into real mirages:
naked mangroves walking beside him, knotted logs
wriggling into the water, the wet, yawning boulders

of oven-mouthed hippopotami. A skeletal warrior
stood up straight in the stern and guided his shoulders,
clamped his neck in cold iron, and altered the oar.

Achille wanted to scream, he wanted the brown water
to harden into a road, but the river widened ahead
and closed behind him. He heard screeching laughter

in a swaying tree, as monkeys swung from the rafter
of their tree-house, and the bared sound rotted the sky
like their teeth. For hours the river gave the same show

for nothing, the canoe’s mouth muttered its lie.
The deepest terror was the mud. The mud with no shadow
like the clear sand. Then the river coiled into a bend.
He saw the first signs of men, tall sapling fishing-stakes; he came into his own beginning and his end, for the swiftness of a second is all that memory takes.

Now the strange, inimical river surrenders its stealth to the sunlight. And a light inside him wakes, skipping centuries, ocean and river, and Time itself.

And God said to Achille, “Look, I giving you permission to come home. Is I send the sea-swift as a pilot, the swift whose wings is the sign of my crucifixion.

And thou shalt have no God should in case you forgot my commandments.” And Achille felt the homesick shame and pain of his Africa. His heart and his bare head

were bursting as he tried to remember the name of the river and the tree-god in which he steered, whose hollow body carried him to the settlement ahead.

II

He remembered this sunburnt river with its spindly stakes and the peaked huts platformed above the spindles where thin, naked figures as he rowed past looked unkindly

or kindly in their silence. The silence an old fence kindles in a boy’s heart. They walked with his homecoming canoe past bonfires in a scorched clearing near the edge

of the soft-lipped shallows whose noise hurt his drumming heart as the pirogue slid its raw, painted wedge towards the crazed sticks of a vine-fastened pier.

The river was sloughing its old skin like a snake in wrinkling sunshine; the sun resumed its empire over this branch of the Congo; the prow found its stake

in the river and nuzzled it the way that a piglet finds its favourite dug in the sweet-grunting sow, and now each cheek ran with its own clear rivulet of tears, as Achille, weeping, fastened the bow of the dugout, wiped his eyes with one dry palm, and felt a hard hand help him up the shaking pier.

Half of me was with him. One half with the midshipman by a Dutch canal. But now, neither was happier or unhappier than the other. An old man put an arm

around Achille, and the crowd, chattering, followed both. They touched his trousers, his undershirt, their hands scrabbling the texture, as a kitten does with cloth,

till they stood before an open hut. The sun stands with expectant silence. The river stops talking, the way silence sometimes suddenly turns off a market.

The wind squatted low in the grass. A man kept walking steadily towards him, and he knew by that walk it was himself in his father, the white teeth, the widening hands.

III

He sought his own features in those of their life-giver, and saw two worlds mirrored there: the hair was surf curling round a sea-rock, the forehead a frowning river,
as they swirled in the estuary of a bewildered love, and Time stood between them. The only interpreter of their lips’ joined babble, the river with the foam,

and the chuckles of water under the sticks of the pier, where the tribe stood like sticks themselves, reversed by reflection. Then they walked up to the settlement,
and it seemed, as they chattered, everything was rehearsed for ages before this. He could predict the intent of his father’s gestures; he was moving with the dead.

Women paused at their work, then smiled at the warrior returning from his battle with smoke, from the kingdom where he had been captured, they cried and were happy.

Then the fishermen sat near a large tree under whose dome stones sat in a circle. His father said: "Afo-la-be,"
touching his own heart.

"In the place you have come from what do they call you?"

Time translates.

Tapping his chest,

the son answers:

"Achille." The tribe rustles, "Achille."

Then, like cedars at sunrise, the mutterings settle.

AFOLABE

Achille. What does the name mean? I have forgotten the one that I gave you. But it was, it seems, many years ago. What does it mean?

ACHILLE

Well, I too have forgotten.

Everything was forgotten. You also. I do not know.
The deaf sea has changed around every name that you gave us; trees, men, we yearn for a sound that is missing.

AFOLABE

A name means something. The qualities desired in a son, and even a girl-child; so even the shadows who called you expected one virtue, since every name is a blessing,
since I am remembering the hope I had for you as a child. Unless the sound means nothing. Then you would be nothing. Did they think you were nothing in that other kingdom?

AFOLABE

I do not know what the name means. It means something, maybe. What’s the difference? In the world I come from we accept the sounds we were given. Men, trees, water.

AFOLABE

And therefore, Achille, if I pointed and I said, There is the name of that man, that tree, and this father, would every sound be a shadow that crossed your ear, without the shape of a man or a tree? What would it be? (And just as branches sway in the dusk from their fear of amnesia, of oblivion, the tribe began to grieve.)

ACHILLE

What would it be? I can only tell you what I believe, or had to believe. It was prediction, and memory, to bear myself back, to be carried here by a swift, or the shadow of a swift making its cross on water, with the same sign I was blessed with, with the gift of this sound whose meaning I still do not care to know.

AFOLABE

No man loses his shadow except it is in the night, and even then his shadow is hidden, not lost. At the glow of sunrise, he stands on his own name in that light.

When he walks down to the river with the other fishermen his shadow stretches in the morning, and yawns, but you, if you’re content with not knowing what our names mean,
then I am not Afolabe, your father, and you look through
my body as the light looks through a leaf. I am not here
or a shadow. And you, nameless son, are only the ghost
of a name. Why did I never miss you until you returned?
Why haven't I missed you, my son, until you were lost?
Are you the smoke from a fire that never burned?

There was no answer to this, as in life. Achille nodded,
the tears glazing his eyes, where the past was reflected
as well as the future. The white foam lowered its head.

CHAPTER LXIV

I

I sang of quiet Achille, Afolabe's son,
who never ascended in an elevator,
who had no passport, since the horizon needs none,

never begged nor borrowed, was nobody's waiter,
whose end, when it comes, will be a death by water
(which is not for this book, which will remain unknown

and unread by him). I sang the only slaughter
that brought him delight, and that from necessity—
of fish, sang the channels of his back in the sun.

I sang our wide country, the Caribbean Sea.
Who hated shoes, whose soles were as cracked as a stone,
who was gentle with ropes, who had one suit alone,

whom no man dared insult and who insulted no one,
whose grin was a white breaker cresting, but whose frown
was a growing thunderhead, whose fist of iron

would do me a greater honour if it held on
to my casket's oarlocks than mine lifting his own
when both anchors are lowered in the one island,

but now the idyll dies, the goblet is broken,
and rainwater trickles down the brown cheek of a jar
from the clay of Choiseul. So much left unspoken

by my chirping nib! And my earth-door lies ajar.
I lie wrapped in a flour-sack sail. The clods thud
on my rope-lowered canoe. Rasping shovels scrape
a dry rain of dirt on its hold, but turn your head
when the sea-almond rattles or the rust-leaved grape
from the shells of my unpharaonic pyramid

towards paper shredded by the wind and scattered
like white gulls that separate their names from the foam
and nod to a fisherman with his khaki dog

that skitters from the wave-crash, then frown at his form
for one swift second. In its earth-trough, my pirogue
with its brass-handled oarlocks is sailing. Not from

but with them, with Hector, with Maud in the rhythm
of her beds trowelled over, with a swirling log
lifting its mossed head from the swell; let the deep hymn

of the Caribbean continue my epilogue;
may waves remove their shawls as my mourners walk home
to their rusted villages, good shoes in one hand,

passing a boy who walked through the ignorant foam,
and saw a sail going out or else coming in,
and watched asterisks of rain puckering the sand.

II

You can see Helen at the Halcyon. She is dressed
in the national costume: white, low-cut bodice,
with frilled lace at the collar, just a cleft of a breast

for the customers when she places their orders
on the shields of the tables. They can guess the rest
under the madras skirt with its golden borders

and the flirtatious knot of the madras head-tie.
She pauses between the tables, holding a tray
over her stomach to hide the wave-rounded sigh

of her pregnancy. There is something too remote
about her stillness. Women study her beauty,
but turn their faces away if their eyes should meet,

like an ebony carving. But if she should swerve
that silhouette hammered out of the sea's metal
like a profile on a shield, its sinuous neck

longing like a palm's, you might recall that battle
for which they named an island or the heaving wreck
of the Ville de Paris in her foam-frilled bodice,

or just think, "What a fine local woman!" and her
head will turn when you snap your fingers, the slow eyes
approaching you with the leisure of a panther

through white tables with palm-green iron umbrellas,
past children wading with water-wings in the pool;
and Africa strides, not alabaster Hellas,

and half the world lies open to show its black pearl.
She waits for your order and you lower your eyes
away from hers that have never carried the spoil

of Troy, that never betrayed horned Menelaus
or netted Agamemnon in their irises.
But the name Helen had gripped my wrist in its vise

to plunge it into the foaming page. For three years,
phantom hearer, I kept wandering to a voice
hoarse as winter's echo in the throat of a vase!

Like Philoctete's wound, this language carries its cure,
its radiant affliction; reluctantly now,
like Achille's, my craft slips the chain of its anchor,
moored to its cross as I leave it; its nodding prow lettered as simply, ribbed in our native timber, riding these last worried lines; its rhythm agrees

that all it forgot a swift made it remember since that green sunrise of axes and laurel-trees, till the sunset chars it, slowly, to an ember.

And Achille himself had been one of those children whose voices are surf under a galvanized roof; sheep bleating in the schoolyard; a Caribbean

whose woolly crests were the backs of the Cyclops's flock, with the smart man under one's belly. Blue stories we recited as children lifted with the rock

of Polyphemus. From a plaster Omeros
the smoke and the scarves of mares' tails, continually chalked associate phantoms across our own sky.

III

Out of their element, the thrashing mackerel thudded, silver, then leaden. The vermilion scales of snappers faded like sunset. The wet, mossed coral

sea-fans that winnowed weeds in the wiry water stiffened to bony lace, and the dripping tendrils of an octopus wrung its hands at the slaughter

from the gutting knives. Achille unstitched the entrails and hurled them on the sand for the palm-ribbed mongrels and the sawing flies. As skittish as hyenas

the dogs trotted, then paused, angling their muzzles sideways to gnaw on trembling legs, then lift a nose at more scavengers. A triumphant Achille,

his hands gloved in blood, moved to the other canoes whose hulls were thumping with fishes. In the spread seine the silvery mackerel multiplied the noise

of coins in a basin. The copper scales, swaying, were balanced by one iron tear; then there was peace. They washed their short knives, they wrapped the flour-bag sails,

then they helped him haul In God We Trust back in place, jamming logs under its keel. He felt his muscles unknotting like rope. The nets were closing their eyes,

sagging on bamboo poles near the concrete depot. In the standpipe's sandy trough achille washed sand from his heels, then tightened the brass spigot
to its last drop. An immense lilac emptiness settled the sea. He sniffed his name in one armpit. He scraped dry scales off his hands. He liked the odours

of the sea in him. Night was fanning its coalpot from one catching star. The No Pain lit its doors in the village. Achille put the wedge of dolphin

that he'd saved for Helen in Hector's rusty tin. A full moon shone like a slice of raw onion. When he left the beach the sea was still going on.
Selected Poems

DEREK WALCOTT

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