

Where I am From

I am from kinsfolk who trained my mind and shaped my world with proverbs, prayers, and tamarind twigs plaited in three, which they plied with the belief that *to spare de rod, is to spoil de child*. I am from having to leave any room where adults gathered, for *small pitchers got wide ear holes*. But, their talk was safe with me, for though *mout ain't nuh fridge to keep tings fuh long*, I knew from an early age that *yuh can' stop ears from hearing or de nosey from asking, but yuh cud stop tongue from wagging*.

I am from cane cutters, hairdressers, needleworkers, teachers – Jacks and Jills of all trades – who multi-tasked all day because they believed *de devil does find work fuh idle hands to do*. Still, they often slowed down and made time to play because *tekking yuh time ain't laziness*, and *Sam Couchie and de duppy* knew that *if a bucket gine up and down in a well ev'ry day, de bottom boun' to drop out*. Folks still worked, knowing without a doubt that *idlers does rust out long before laborers cud ever wuk out*.

I am from elders who relaxed reins to let me explore interests. They knew *de more yuh peep, de less yuh see*, so they did not check up too much on me but warned me umpteen times about being misled by pals since *follow-pattern kill Cadogan and blackbirds who fly wid pigeons does be sure to get shoot down*. They knew I had learned that *wuh sweeten goat mout does bu'n he bum* and that I would never do anything to lose my liberty since *loose goat don' know de trouble that tie goat does see*.

I am from a father who swore blind that his life was an open book since *yuh cud hide and buy groun' but yuh can' hide and wuk it*. Still, he never served his business tricks on a platter to friends because he learned *yuh don' tell friends what yuh don' want yuh foes to know since yuh best friend could be yuh worse enemy*. I am from *Hold yuh head up high and mind yuh manners but don' be stuck up and powful foolish 'cause Mr. Crow does fly high, but when he hit de groun', ants does be waiting to eat out 'e eye*.

I am from doors left unlocked even when no one was at home, so that neighbours could go in to “borrow” an onion, a potato or a little sugar. Since *do fuh do ain't nuh obeah*, we also knew where to go in a neighbour's house to find a hammer, ice pick or a few frictions. I am from a stepmother who agreed to mind neighbours' children for an hour or two but ended up having to keep them overnight because parents knew she never lived up to her motto: *Yuh should never discommode yuh self to sideboard a neighbuh*.

I am from kin and neighbours who flashed wit, feeling proud that *head ain't brain*. They belly-laughed about outsmarting others, despite knowing that *one-smart drop dead at two-smart door*. They flaunted home-sewn clothes and dressed to kill, not always aware that *it's a waste of money to put gold teet in hog mout*'. They fed a *champagne taste from a mauby pocket* and held on to the beliefs that *when yuh ain't' got horse, yuh does ride cow*, and *if yuh know 'what' and 'why', God wud tek care o' de 'how'*.

I am from *happiness does come out o' de kitchen*. So, at twilight time, I knew my floral enamel cup would be filled with greasy chocolate balls boiled with nutmeg, bay leaf, sweet milk, and tiny sugar dumplings. I am from mornings of fried plantain, scrambled eggs and crisp salt breads with soft insides where butter melted on contact; from cassava bakes coupled with strips of roasted cod fish that filled up my senses, burned my fingers and triggered drool, prompting Ma to say every time, "*If greedy wait, hot wud cool.*"

I am from cerasee bush for coughs; shark oil to fight the flu; aloe for purging and pasting on burns to soothe and prevent scarring. I am from a dose of castor oil with orange slices once a month; from *when yuh see people flying, don' be jealous 'cause yuh ain't know whe' duh get duh wings from*. So, while friends bought candy with shady money, I pigged out on golden apples and salt, tamarinds in syrup, sour dunks with bicarbonate of soda to make them sweet; hog plums, sugar apples, soursop in punch, and bunches of ackees.

I am from skipping games that captured the essence of village living and gave a glimpse of life beyond, so I jumped to the beat of *De times so very hard; I don't know what to do; I buy a fish, a pound o' meal and stir me mellow coucou*. I am from when that dish was stirred for our family of four but was served to feed three more. I am from Aunty's "*But by God's grace, one o' dem cudda be me,*" and from Gran's retort, "*Wuh ain't pass yuh ain't meet yuh yet.*" Now, sharing is central to my life; I give without expecting to get.

I am from fingers slapped when comb teeth tugged tight curls with waves of scalp pain; from stove-heated iron combs that stretched closed curls into shiny strands with a grease-laced sizzle and the aroma of scorched ears, for *beauty does come at a price even doh yuh can' carry it to de shop*. I am from mixed messages, for Ma said there was no bad or good hair, so ironing my thick hair was not to make it better but to make it easier to comb and save time. *As mout open fuh words to jump out*, I knew my hair was not fine.

I am from flat clothes-irons and a heater with a belly-full of coals that I pressed my uniform with when I was eight; from rubbing clothes on a jukking board with blue soap, and tubs filled from a public standpipe or a neighbour's yard. I am from clothes laid on bleaching stones for the sun to whiten; from washing that lasted many days since *hurry-hurry never done*; from water barrels kept full for stocks, cooking and cleaning, so that I had no time to rest, for *no matter wuh work yuh have to do, you gotta give it yuh best*.

I am from Sunday mornings with Baptist Bible stories, Open Brethren evening Bible quizzes and Methodist sermons at night. Anglican school hymns stirred me to birth poems from trials and to find ways to affirm my link to others. Pentecostal refrains lent my soul wings, stirred my conscience and kept me on a straight path, so I never had to say, *If ah did know does come too late*. I am from *don' worry; wuh God don' hinder, he does allow; don' fret 'bout wuh pas' or wuh ain't come; focus pon de 'now'*.

I am from *don' trouble trouble till it trouble you; from de way to beat de enemy is to not be like de enemy*. But at times, there had to be tit for tat, so *if you kick my dog, I cud kill you cat*. I am from *tek de good wid de bad 'cause trials ain't personal*, yet I noticed that *ev'ry high wind does find where de old houses live*. I am from *have no fear of bullies 'cause a small axe can cut down a big tree*; and from *do to others what you'd want them to do to you*, but then I learned *wuh yuh don' want people to do to you, don' do to them*.

I am from *ev'ry stale biscuit got its musty cheese and ev'ry piece o' clot' got its owner*, so a girl child was expected to wait for that special one since *men don' buy cow when dey can get milk free*. I am from *don' court Robin fuh he rags*, but be mindful that *ev'ry man in a shirt and pants mightn't be a man*. I am from take time to know each other since *de higher a monkey climb de more he does show he tail*. So, when a couple split up, it was clear to see that *dere was better fish in de sea dan wuh' get ketch a'ready*.

I am from truisms: *two poor cow does mek good dung and plums don' fall far from de mudder tree*, yet youths were expected to do much better than their folks even after collisions with life. I am from *tongue and teet does got words*, but clashing kin knew that *blood thicker than water*, so they'd move earth to aid each other. I am from *yuh can choose yuh frenz, but not yuh family*, so in the carnival of life, sometimes for better and most times for worse, even though *honesty is de best policy*, I *let home drum beat first*.