

## Lavonne Adams

### At the Museum of Childhood, Edinburgh

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AGAINST ONE WALL, a TV plays  
a video of a dusky '50s Edinburgh  
street where cotton dresses flutter  
as a jump rope slaps its cadence:

*"...in came the doctor..."*

Like a yard sale behind glass,  
there's the first version of *Candyland*--  
its gingerbread boy plumper,  
its colors more subdued.

And there, a tin top that once spun  
open to reveal a tiny farm  
with tin cows and pigs.

*"...in came the nurse..."*

Touted as the noisiest  
museum in the world, today  
its five galleries are  
on the cusp of vacant.

*"...in came the lady with  
the alligator purse..."*

But those who are here shuffle  
from case to case, stand and stare  
like a clownish chorus  
of mute Pagliaccios, swallowing  
the sound of their grief.

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## ***From*** IN THE SHADOW OF THE MOUNTAIN

*Across the throat of the Caribbean  
extends a chain of islands, which are  
really smouldering furnaces, with fires  
banked up, ever ready to break forth at  
some unexpected and inopportune  
moment.*

Anonymous  
Geologist, 1902

St. Pierre, 1902

Like feather dusters, coconut palms  
skim the cobweb clouds above  
steep winding streets where  
bougainvilleas unfurl their pink lace.  
Stevedores muscle the weight  
of what must be lifted and carried  
to the bay, a blue tongue rimming  
the harbor. Below red-tiled roofs,  
wooden shutters open into rooms  
cooled by thick stone walls and  
tamarind trees, lush with pods;  
everywhere, mangoes blush like sunsets.  
This scene is a postcard, an entreaty.  
But remember, the mountain  
is always over your shoulder,  
wearing veils of clouds  
that hide its real face.

May 5

*i. The Usine Guerin Sugar Mill*  
First, a wave of centipedes  
and speckled ants that can kill  
a grown man. Trying to hold them back,  
workers moat the yard with oil, douse  
the horses that writhe and buck,  
ants gnawing their eyes. Inside

the mill, insects swarm the machinery,  
dropping into vats, clogging vents.  
Time becomes a syrup. Unlike the fear  
that stoppered their veins for weeks, this is  
a visible enemy that can be quashed,  
flailed with sugarcane clutched in fists.

In a once-dry crater near the mountain's summit,  
a lake steams with silica and sulphur.  
Boiling water cascades from a newly risen cone  
until the earth crumbles like a gun site.  
Water tumbles down a ravine, thrums  
over boulders, prying trees loose by the roots,  
scalding everything that's green.  
Gravity and momentum. Not thick  
lava that hardens to obsidian--black  
and glossy as a mirror--this mass of mud  
churns the delta, consumes the mill until  
all that's left is the smokestack,  
like a guidepost pointing at the sky.

*ii. Fer-de-Lances*

Behind each eye, twin mounds  
rise as if swollen with  
their own venom.  
Perhaps these snakes  
were shocked awake  
where they lay curled  
like cochleas after a night  
of searching for prey.  
As the temperature  
in the twenty rivers that course  
the mountain's sides  
began to rise, snakes  
fled to Saint Pierre,  
where they now strike  
at the heat of a leg or  
a child's soft pulse. Skin  
turns black and blisters  
as if charred; eyes  
weep blood. By day's end,  
two hundred animals and  
fifty humans dead, while  
heaped in the street, carcasses  
of a hundred snakes  
like tarnished brass  
dull in the afternoon light.

Josephine (ii)

Grandmere calls the mountain an old man  
who clears his throat and spits out ash  
before falling back asleep. But his pipe has been lit  
now for weeks.

Mistress Prentiss tells me  
I shouldn't fear the mountain, but  
she has packed her dresses and shoes,  
silver and jewels in three large chests  
to be hefted, one by one, onto the back of the gardener  
who will carry them to the quay, where  
ships fill the harbor like flies.  
I'm like the linen left behind. If she leaves,

I'll walk the dirt road to Fort-de-France,  
everything I need bundled and carried  
on my head— my brush, an extra dress,  
my mother's silver bracelet stamped with  
*fleurs-de-lis* worn so thin they look like feathers.

Fernand Clerc

Hummingbirds, like strange fruit, drop into the streets  
as my horse snorts sulphur fumes from his nose.  
My inclination is to flee,

but with wealth comes a certain responsibility  
to maintain control, to adhere to routine though  
hummingbirds, like strange fruit, drop into the streets.

Scoffing at those who cower, the editor of *Les Colonies*  
acts as if this is only a storm, the ash falling a mirage.  
I am disinclined for him to see me flee.

And I laughed over sherry at shopgirls who, at the first rumble,  
streamed  
from their stores, corsets and mismatched boots clutched to  
breasts.  
Still, hummingbirds, like strange fruit, drop into the streets.

Then, this morning, the barometer's needle swung wildly  
as lightning ripped incessantly through Pelee's churning cloud.  
My inclination is to flee,

but at what point is it acceptable to leave?  
In every quarter of town, shutters are latched

and blackbirds, like decaying fruit, drop into the streets.  
My inclination is to flee.

### Landscape, May 8

At 100 miles per hour, Pelee's cloud  
churns down the mountain, bares  
trees of their leaves and branches, blackens

every trunk. Within moments, what was  
flesh is not; iridescent dust  
chars throats; superheated steam sears lungs.

In every gutter along the quay, rum burns blue.  
What was commerce is now rubble;  
with each breeze, ash lifts and resettles.

Even the statue of the Virgin,  
thrown forty feet from her pedestal,  
presses her face to the ground.

### Member of the Rescue Party

This is not what I expected—  
the room is a husk:  
three walls of stone, no roof,  
children's bodies tossed aside  
like rinds, the mother bloated as if  
ripening with her own death.  
I can't bear their faces,  
their mottled skin.  
On the table, two jugs, a bottle,  
a pitcher, three bowls.  
Each piece of pottery  
flawless, the jug  
still cool and heavy with water.

### Mid-August Landscape

More than a month  
since the last eruption,

carts trundle the Rue Victor Hugo,  
lapilli and ash pushed to the side

like snowdrifts. Birds  
have not yet returned,

though here and there,

a new banana shoot,

a foot or two of cane  
like green ribbons

in the distance. Along  
the Place Bertin, bits

of skulls, like crescent moons,  
glimmer. Those who scavenge

say they are not looters,  
not grave robbers,

but inheritors of what was left  
behind. One carries

a tray of clay pipes,  
another a harp still strung.

#### “The Most Marvelous Man on Earth”

The poster isn't true. My name  
is Auguste Ciparis, not Ludger Sylbaris.  
There was no lava; it was not night.  
I wasn't anchored to a beam  
beneath a window, unconscious  
on a bed of straw. I wasn't  
*the only living object that survived  
in the “Silent City of Death.”*  
There was one other. The truth,  
they said, won't sell tickets.

So each night, I wait for the crowd  
that will fill the sideshow,  
that will stare first at The Human Skeleton,  
The Leopard Girl, and finally at me.  
They don't believe I survived St. Pierre,  
assume a circus hoax until  
I shed my shirt, showed them  
my melted back like congealed wax.  
Women faint, some scream.  
They avert their eyes as if the evidence  
of my body is something indecent,  
then look back again, as if  
there is something to be learned  
from the contours of my skin.  
In my back pocket, I carry  
a postcard of the island

folded in half, which I open  
like a small book, like a prayer.  
Each building is intact.  
See the lighthouse in the corner?  
I wanted to live  
at its top, the world spread out  
like a field in front of me. But  
now I know there's little to see.  
Yet why return to St. Pierre?  
A black and white imprint  
of what was once alive,  
even this card is a ghost.

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## The Way Nature Works

FOR MORE THAN TEN MILES, waves  
of birds rose from the scrub-edged highway  
as if the sound of my Civic's engine was a signal  
scraping the flat fields, runneling  
the lush tobacco leaves that would soon dry  
to paper-bag brown. It felt like  
magic though it was just nature,  
one movement triggering another  
the way we thumb from day to day.  
It was dusk, the sky darkening from honey to teal,  
lending each bird the anonymity  
of silhouette. But individuality  
wasn't an issue, rather that thrust into air,  
the last scrape of talons against the earth,  
the conclusive shrug into something lighter.

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## Energy Forms

THERE'S SOMETHING ABOUT the way snow swirls,  
a thick constellation in the streetlight's corona.  
Something about the way your hands flurry  
above ivory as a nocturne pours from  
the keyboard, as if it's creating snow

while being created by snow. Is this  
a form of kinetic energy? I've never understood  
laws of physics or how electricity manages its hot  
pursuit through every wire of every house,  
kept in check by such flimsy outlets and switches.  
And two weeks ago, when a Dodge truck slammed into  
the Nissan I was driving—white against white—  
I wondered if that was the definition of  
momentum. No way for me to halt  
what had been set in motion: the Big Bang  
of metal against metal when,  
for just an instant, watching  
glass fly felt like liberation.

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## Sand Dollar

YOUR MOTHER IS now so far down  
the beach that she looks lean and sallow

as a popsicle stick; your little brother  
buzzes her heel.

It is August,  
three months since your father packed

his battered brown suitcase  
and drove twelve hours to Atlantic City,

feverish for the quick fix  
of the roulette wheel;

you tell your friends he died  
in a fiery crash.

You are fourteen;  
you can take care of yourself. All around

you are fragments  
of shells not good enough

for the rolled-down bread bag dangling  
by your side; you only want things whole.

And then you find that perfect shell:  
a sand dollar

that lies light  
against your skin. The sound of the ocean

becomes like the hum of your mind--  
there but not.

There is a part of you  
that would like to snap

a crescent from the edge of this shell,  
to revel in that crisp breaking.

You know what is inside: calcium  
has spun stalactites in the cave where bits

of skeleton, like bone doves, rustle.  
The shell once held life, moved

along drifts on the ocean's floor;  
yet it is hard not to see

it as man-made--a splash  
of plaster dried to graininess.

Imagine some artist  
hunched over a workbench, needling

that pattern--like a fine sketch  
in pen and ink--onto its back.

What are the words you would choose

to describe this work?

A flower blooming on a mound of sand?  
Or an imprint of yourself, arms flung wide

as if floating  
in your own peculiar freefall?

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## Fortune Cookie

THE ROOM IS LACQUERED in Chinese  
red and black, the music a weave  
of pipa and qin. I focus  
on my plate--its skein of noodles;  
I try to ignore that cookie.

I know what I want...an old-fashioned  
fortune, something predictable.  
But when I snap the cookie's wings  
I read, "Someone will invite you  
to a Karaoke party."  
What kind of future is that?

I fragment the brittle shell; bits  
sift like fish food on white porcelain.  
Dry as a communion wafer,  
it's hard to swallow. I consider  
telling the waiter, "I want more."  
He'll charge me extra, but return  
with a bread plate heaping with second  
chances. While other diners drift  
into tepid night, one by one  
I'll crack each cookie open.  
"More!"

The waiters will lock the doors  
then replace embroidered music  
with Emo and Punk. They'll call out  
in a language I can't comprehend--

its punctuation the clinking  
utensils, the clattering plates.  
I'll slip into the kitchen's glare,  
drag cans, yank cartons from stocked shelves  
until I discover that case  
of cookies. If anyone dares  
interfere, I'll flash my table knife.

As lights dim, I'll sit like Midas,  
surrounded by mounds of golden  
cookies, still searching...unfulfilled.

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## Everyday Still Life

THIS ROOM IS a study of white  
on white: the vivid drape  
of sheets bleached to the softness

of pulp; the white walls grayed  
by gloves of shadow; in the corner  
on a white wicker stand, a frieze

of fresh white chrysanthemums.  
The perfect subject for a still life,  
nothing here is truly inanimate.

The sheet's selvage is souged by a breeze  
as plaster draws away from itself, creating  
delicate veins. After the climax

of bloom, the flowers relax  
in their own sweet descent.  
Beyond the window, live oak boughs

crenulate with moss. And on the brush  
of lawn not yet lush enough to mow,  
five dandelions halo to radiant white.  
(for S.F.)



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