



THAT
OTHER
WALL

by
PHYLLIS
COARD

Foreword

In October 1951, following the death of the Prime Minister Winston Churchill, the small Caribbean island of Grenada was invaded and occupied by a large US military force. Phyllis Coard, together with her husband Ernest - then deputy Prime Minister - and other government and military leaders were arrested and charged with the murder of Hubert. They were incarcerated at Humberston Hill, Grenada's only prison, where Phyllis and Ernest's lives remain to this day.

A lengthy and highly irregular trial followed and, in December 1956, Phyllis, Ernest and twelve co-defendants were sentenced to death by hanging. The verdict was upheld on a court of appeal when a sentence of hanging was substituted for the death sentence and the defendants

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These last developments, Phyllis Coard has been an active participant since all the time. In her prison diary published in 1971, she tells of the turbulent experience of the trial and various other episodes. The last Laurel Magazine Double page spread devoted to her, together with her children and all but the most tired and straggling that she endured her isolation and reduced rations from her family with unwavering strength, courage and dignity. This collection of poems, written during some of her darkest moments, written in most quarters.

There is now a more humane regime in Humberston Hill and conditions for the prisoners have greatly improved. But for now Phyllis is the only woman in the prison, she remains in isolation. At the time of writing she is still unable to read, write and understand a letter with the main prison.

PUBLISHED BY THE PHYLLIS COARD SUPPORT GROUP

Foreword

In October 1983, following the death of the Prime Minister Maurice Bishop, the small Caribbean island of Grenada was invaded and occupied by a huge US military force. Phyllis Coard, together with her husband Bernard - then deputy Prime Minister - and other government and military leaders were arrested and charged with the murder of Bishop. They were incarcerated at Richmond Hill, Grenada's only prison, where Phyllis and sixteen others remain to this day.

A lengthy and highly irregular trial followed and, in December 1986, Phyllis, Bernard and twelve co-defendants were condemned to death by hanging. The verdict was upheld in a court of appeal, where a volume of testimony to the irregularities of the original trial - and the defendants' innocence - was largely ignored. In the summer of 1991, when the executions were imminent, a massive international campaign to save the fourteen from hanging brought the commutation of the sentences to life imprisonment.

Since her imprisonment, Phyllis Coard has been in solitary confinement most of the time. In her prison diary, published in 1988, she tells of her inhuman treatment by the cruel and sadistic prison governor, the late Lionel Maloney. Denied proper medical attention, exercise, letters from her children and all but the most brief and infrequent visits, she endured her isolation and enforced separation from her family with tremendous strength, courage and dignity. This collection of poems, written during some of her darkest moments, testifies to these qualities.

There is now a more humane regime in Richmond Hill and conditions for the prisoners have generally improved. But because Phyllis is the only women in the prison, she remains in isolation. At the time of writing this she is still unable to share work and recreational activities with the male prisoners.

Foreword

The qualities of determination, imagination, caring and humour so clear in her writing were evident in her early days. Phyllis was born in Jamaica in 1943, educated in Kingston and came to England in 1962 to study English and Philosophy at Reading University. After post-graduate studies she became a social worker for the London Borough of Waltham Forest, specialising in child guidance. In 1968, she met her husband Bernard, a Grenadian economist, who had himself recently completed post-graduate studies at Sussex University. Theirs was a close partnership of shared ideals and together they campaigned on the issue of racism in education. The acclaimed book 'How the West Indian Child is made educationally subnormal by the British School System' was written by Bernard Coard during this period.

Their first child, Sola, was born in 1971 and soon after the family returned to the Caribbean. Phyllis and Bernard both worked at the University of the West Indies in Jamaica and in Trinidad and Tobago before finally settling in Grenada in 1976. A second daughter, Abiola, was born in 1972 and a son, Neto, in 1979.

In Grenada where a peaceful revolution overthrew the despotic rule of Eric Gairy in 1979, the couple were leaders in the New Jewel Movement and worked tirelessly for much needed social and economic reforms. Phyllis was deeply concerned with the plight of Grenadian women and helped to promote women's interests during her time as Secretary for Women's Affairs. Sadly, many of the reforms which the Coards and others helped to bring about have since been abandoned, returning Grenada to many of its former problems of social and economic disadvantage.

The Phyllis Coard Support Group was set up in 1983 to campaign for a fair trial for Phyllis and her fellow prisoners, and to support Phyllis and her family. By reading these poems we hope you will come to appreciate something of her extraordinary personal qualities and will join our present campaign for her freedom.

Phyllis Coard Support Group
March 1992

From An Isolation Cell

Place of dead souls
where those alive are
dead

The dead
alone
live
laughing
moving
quick-thinking
sorrowing
loving

Place of dead souls
Here the living
like ghosts
glide by
stop
turn
hitch hems
fidget
fuss
pat hair
clash keys
continuous
frenzied
movement concealing
nothingness
within.

Place of dead souls

Here chatter

clatters

swirls around

the silence within

where backs are turned

bent over Bibles

whispering lips in motion

spirits

unchanged.

Place of dead souls

Of quick-thinking minds

gulping

the latest

'Dynasty' drama

chewing

gossip

spewing

venom

gleefully

gloatingly embracing

in enmity

Place
of dead
souls

I choose
rather

to live
among
Great Ones
long dead but
still

laughing
moving
quick-thinking
sorrowing
loving

A land of
living souls
a place where spirits
sing.

(Dedicated to the Great Ones of human history, whose spirits live on, offering us their support.)

From Planet Earth, New Year's Day 1991.

(A poem for several voices)

On the first day of the year incandescent skies flare
crimson and mauve.

Crimson with unravelled red flags everywhere,
Mauve with mourning for
pale bewildered dispirited people
huddling in indigo - cold countries,
crouching for comfort
round ancient tribal campfires,
recklessly stoking their embers
for what unknown future funeral pyres?

Today flows
red with the blood of cocaine dealers users passersby,
mauve with shivering bodies stretched on park benches
surrounded by
decorated trees warm homes crammed shining stores
million-dollar paintings
unpainted tenements
and children in doorways decorated with
empurpling rat-bite sores.

Today spurts
crimson with fratricidal war-blood soaking
humanity's first home.
War-blood gushing from
severed limbs severed lives
suppurating wounds violated wombs.

Today weeps

mauve tears for shrivelled skeletons struggling in listless
bands
for purple-red crusty dry-tongued split-lipped open appealing
mouths,
for purple-red star-apples grapes cherries plums strawberries
blackberries dasheen

burst open under uncaring feet
in green and fruitful lands.

Weeps at mass graves for wheat potatoes milk butter
of wealthy cold nations,
while in every warm place small wasted bodies litter
cemeteries, in numbers without ration.

Today utters

a red-tongued scream of shame
at savage circumcision of little girls,
at the gaudy painted mouth
of a quarter-million child-whores daily raped
by avarice, in cities north and south.

Cries shame at
stick-insect limbs and shadowed eyes
of toiling children struggling to stay awake;

Shame

at the mauve-ringed vacant gaze
of convict worker-housewife-mother
condemned by her loving macho to hard solitary labour;
shame at suttee burnings, dowry murder,
at red weals slowly turning black and blue
cracked ribs jaws fingers smiles with missing teeth
of battered wives,
and velvet-curtained harems stifling the screams
of lost, forgotten lives.

Today streams
crimson with multiplying assassin armies
borne in life-giving blood,
bleaching vigorous black white brown yellow
dreaming defenceless bodies
grey-mauve with each drawn breath
... Red for the hearts on valentine cards,
red for love
carrying death ...
... Mauve for the silent shimmering empty spaces
in cities grasslands towns villages jungles
after that great death.

Today blazes
with orange-red tongues of flame consuming
ancient forest trees,
with searing gases soaring from factory fires;
then drifting ashes crumble into parched dust,
and chemical acids poison Earth's sweet skies.
Today wails
a loud alarm
at the fragile punctured parasol
floating over our home,
at the desert's stealthy conquest of green lands,
at serial storms bronze heat
emerald corn-stalks turning brown,
and tomorrow, purple seas rising to drown
quiet fertile fields with salty, raging foam.

Today wears
a crimson fireball sun
rolling across enormous sand-filled skies,
watching the wary watchful exuberant armies
yearning for noisy red nightmare days and nights,
each leader ready to blast
across the world
long scarlet trumpet-notes of victory
hailing the golden future won at last!

And tomorrow?

Tomorrow Earth's leaden winter skies may watch
white black brown mothers in woolen dresses
dark chadors jeans and bright vests
silver earrings and crystal tears falling onto
still mauve men
and passive violet-faced women
with chemical foam fresh on frozen lips
or rusty paint drying slowly on
torn-open warrior chests

white black brown mothers lowering their children
into the spangled iron frost
of misty-mauve winter mornings;
into gritty dessicating sands
stretched out beneath night's purple awnings

white black brown mothers' age-old knowing eyes
counting tiny shrouded corpses and flag-covered coffins
- counting the cost -
Counting blue skies green hopes tomorrow's golden sunshine
forever lost,
while the eternal anguish-notes of mauve
sound the last post.

1/1/91

Big-brained?

Hyper-kinetic blackbird
with glossy golden eye
races through tall grass
and small pea plants
pursuing food.

I look:
not a blade bruised
not a branch broken.

We bigger bipeds
don't do as well
in our progress
through the world.
Which species,
I wonder,
deserves to be called
'bird-brained'?

The Enigma

She stands at the gate
a slender, graceful figure
observing her friend's departure:

Her eyes
luminous lamps
entirely innocent of guile,
fuelled by the radiance of her smile;
Her cheeks
half-moons moulded
over gentle bones
gleaming as sunlight strikes their copper tones.

She turns:

Her mouth
a rainbow curve of joy
opens,
and through tiny spotless teeth
on mint-scented breath
there pours
a stream of stupid, vindictive bile.

A quarrel between parting friends?
The bitter hurt of an unfaithful lover?
A hungry, resentful belly?
Or perhaps
The piercing anguish
of life spent in fruitless endeavour?

Ah no:

Putting out
the tearful child's night candle,

Burning
the Christmas cake, the Easter bun,

Pressing the splinter
deep into delicate flesh
is how she gets her fun.

Poets are wrong:

The face

is no reflection of the soul.

Beautiful parts can form a rotten whole.

20/2/91

Little Prison, Big Prison

Little prison
Three hundred people
Most of them
eating badly
dressing poorly
denied education
denied work
victimised
abused
ground under the foreigner's foot:
Richmond Hill Prison, Grenada.

Big prison
One hundred thousand people
Most of them
eating badly
dressing poorly
denied education
denied work
victimised
abused
ground under the foreigner's foot:
Grenada.

Rainy Season

(This poem is dedicated to my children, Sola, Abi and Neto, who will also know 'rainy seasons' during their lifetimes - as well as periods of brilliant sunshine. With my love)

It is not raining rain to me
It's raining gerberas
Hibiscus gold, poinsettias red -
A glorious, swaying mass

No, it is not raining rain to me
It's raining cocoa and cane
Corn and peas on the mountainside
Tangerines upon the plain

It's raining countries far away
New societies evolving
New reaches into outer space
New riddles for the solving

It's raining life, with its capacity
to survive, and to evolve;
It is not raining rain to me -
It's raining new resolve!

Tonight the sky is overcast
The wind drives in great currents
It is not raining rain to me
But stars - in endless torrents.

November 1984

Walls

Through a chink
I glimpse
pale-gold dry-season grass
brown branches striking upward
into early morning sky,
and down the khaki mountain flows
a steel-band's pulsating cry
 "... Yellow bird
 you sit all alone like me ..."

In a blink
I am back forty years
alone
on a dry lawn
my face crushing pale prickly grass,
watching small crawling creatures pass
close to my eye
in a wavering line,
feeling my country's sinewy body
pressed against mine ...

They said they would build a wall
to enclose our house.
I lay on the grass
still as death,
holding my breath.
"A six-foot wall",
my father pronounced, from the porch,
"for privacy"
I measured six-foot in my three-foot nine year old
mind:
it reached nearly to the sky.

If not so high
well, far far above our divi-divi tree,
at any rate too high to see
the fat chuckling baby and laughing mother
in the kitchen of the house behind
which I must not visit,
the barbed-wire fence
being my limit.
A wall too solid for the black curly-haired smiling
dog
to squeeze through to me
from the house next door
which had no children
only a lonely couple,
he, from drink, a cripple,
she a small-built stranger, lost,
her family far away,
whom my mother and I passed
often, along the road,
with hardly a word to say.

"A wall to prevent the neighbours
staring into our yard",
my father said.
"To stop that disreputable disgusting behaviour
right under our children's noses",
my mother declared.

And I thought that must mean
the beautiful hard-faced sad-eyed lady
in the house on the other side
who screamed at her husband,
and when he was out
let in a big man
and laughed with him late at night,
and after he left, she sometimes cried;
and once she set fire to our divi-divi tree
quite accidentally,
while burning bush.
"We'll begin building the wall on that side",
my mother said firmly, pointing.
And I knew I was right.

That night
I dreamed with horror of that prison wall
towering to the sky,
locking me in for all time.
I dreamed that dream for years
until one day, with joy, I realised
there wasn't enough money
to pay workmen
to break with a pick
that nine-month dry-season rock
to lay the foundations
for a six-foot wall
- or for any wall at all.

So although I couldn't go out, at least I could see
children walking to the school up the street
who waved to me,
chickens running about next door,
the foreign lady mopping her living-room floor,
and, from the top of our tamarind tree
the laughing mother in her pink bedroom
diapering her baby, hugging her man,
a brother and sister romping in the road beyond.
And then, on drowsy afternoons
through the hard earth's muscular chest and
sharp-smelling stubble

I could hear and feel my city's heart-beats
thump and bubble
with footsteps, animals, vehicles,
shoutings,
muffled laughter, fightings, wailings,
the rolling wheels of wooden sno-cone carts,
the rattle of rum-shop bottles, the thud of darts;
peanut vendors' whistles,
pounding street-corner rhythms,
sudden screams signalling erupting hopes and
fears
followed by deep unsteady rumbles
or piercing voices,
and sometimes, loud slow-dripping tears
from wrenching dry-season choices ...

"... Yellow bird
you can fly away
in the sky away,
You more lucky than me ..."

The plaintive melody
draws in the present walls around me
Yet later,
heaving buckets of water
from the dusty yard,
measuring the priceless dirty liquid
cup by cup,
while others look up
murmuring hopes of rain
and longings for green October
I stand and remember
packed earth covered by pale-gold grass,
tamped, rocky ground impossible to break
in order to make
that other prison wall.
Then, with tightened throat, I recall
my hard-earth country's adamant defence
of a curious child's open-hearted innocence;
and through the dust, and past these sounds of
doom
there swirls towards me across
sharp-scented grass
the soft, free air of home.

18/3/91

THAT OTHER WALL
