

D a v i d D a b y d e e n



T U R N E R

new and selected poems



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David Dabydeen's 'Turner' is a long narrative poem in response to JMW Turner's celebrated painting *Rain, Steam, and Great Bridges*. 'Turning the Subject' focuses on what is hidden in Turner's painting, the head of the drowning African. In inventing a biography and the drowned man's unspoken desires, including the resisted temptation to fabricate an idyllic past, the poem brings into confrontation the wish for renewal and the inescapable stains of history, including the meaning of Turner's painting. 'Turner' was first published in 1994.

In addition to 'Turner', this collection includes selections from two earlier books: *Slave Song* (1984) and *Coolie Odyssey* (1988).

'Magnificent, vivid and original. The best long poem I've read in years. David Dabydeen is one of our finest poets.'

Hanif Kureishi

'A major poem, full of lyricism and compassion, which gracefully shoulders the burden of history and introduces us to voices from the past whose voices we have all inherited'

Caryl Phillips



David Dabydeen was born in Guyana and read English at Cambridge. He has published six acclaimed novels and three collections of poetry. He is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature and Professor of Literary Studies at the University of Warwick. In 2008 he was awarded the prestigious Anthony N Sabga Caribbean Award for Excellence.

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TURNER
NEW AND SELECTED POEMS

DAVID DABYDEEN



P E E P A L T R E E

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Sections from 'Turner' have appeared in *Callaloo* and *Poetry Review*.

The painting by J. M. W. Turner is reproduced by permission:

Cover and frontispiece: *Slave Ship (Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and Dying, Typhoon Coming On, 1840, oil on canvas, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Henry Lillie Pierce Fund.)*

PREFACE

I

In 1840 J. M. W. Turner exhibited at the Royal Academy his finest painting in the sublime style, 'Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and Dying' (commonly known as 'Slave Ship'). It was not unusual for ship captains to order the drowning of sick slaves (who would fetch a low price on landing in the Caribbean), and to claim their insurance value on the basis of goods lost at sea.

Ruskin thought that 'Slave Ship' represented 'the noblest sea that Turner ever painted . . . the noblest certainly ever painted by man'. He wrote a detailed account of the composition of the painting, dwelling on the genius with which Turner illuminated sea and sky in an intense and lurid splendour of colours. 'If I were to rest Turner's immortality upon any single work, I should choose this.' (He did, by buying the painting.) Its subject, the shackling and drowning of Africans, was relegated to a brief footnote in Ruskin's essay. The footnote reads like an afterthought, something tossed overboard.

II

My poem focuses on the submerged head of the African in the foreground of Turner's painting. It has been drowned in Turner's (and other artists') sea for centuries. When it awakens it can only partially recall the sources of its life, so it invents a body, a biography, and peoples an imagined landscape. Most of the names of birds, animals and fruit are made up. Ultimately, however, the African rejects the fabrication of an idyllic past. His real desire is to begin anew in the sea but he is too trapped by grievous memory to escape history. Although the sea has transformed him – bleached him of colour and complicated his sense of gender – he still recognises himself as 'nigger'. The desire for transfiguration or newness or creative amnesia is frustrated. The agent of self-recognition is a stillborn child tossed overboard from a future

ship. The child floats towards him. He wants to give it life, to mother it, but the child – his unconscious and his origin – cannot bear the future and its inventions, drowned as it is in memory of ancient cruelty. Neither can escape Turner's representation of them as exotic and sublime victims. Neither can describe themselves anew but are indelibly stained by Turner's language and imagery.

The intensity of Turner's painting is such that I believe the artist in private must have savoured the sadism he publicly denounced. I make Turner the captain of the slave ship (the stillborn child is also named Turner). Turner's well-chronicled love of children is seen in another light, as is his extreme prudence with money.

The rest of the poems in this collection are taken from my previous volumes, *Slave Song* (1984) and *Coolie Odyssey* (1988).

TURNER

I

Stillborn from all the signs. First a woman sobs
Above the creak of timbers and the cleaving
Of the sea, sobs from the depths of true
Hurt and grief, as you will never hear
But from woman giving birth, belly
Blown and flapping loose and torn like sails,
Rough sailors' hands jerking and tugging
At ropes of veins, to no avail. Blood vessels
Burst asunder, all below – deck are drowned.
Afterwards, stillness, but for the murmuring
Of women. The ship, anchored in compassion
And for profit's sake (what well-bred captain
Can resist the call of his helpless
Concubine, or the prospect of a natural
Increase in cargo?), sets sail again,
The part – born, sometimes with its mother,
Tossed overboard. Such was my bounty
Delivered so unexpectedly that at first
I could not believe this miracle of fate,
This longed-for gift of motherhood.
What was deemed mere food for sharks will become
My fable. I named it Turner
As I have given fresh names to birds and fish
And humankind, all things living but unknown,
Dimly recalled, or dead.

II

It plopped into the water and soon swelled
 Like a brumplak seed that bursts buckshot
 From its pod, falling into the pond
 In the backdam of my mother's house, and fattening,
 Where small boys like I was hold sticks to the water
 For fish; branches stripped and shaped from the impala
 Tree, no other, for we know – only the gods
 Can tell how – that they bend so supple,
 Almost a circle without snapping, yet strong
 Enough to pull in a baby alligator.
 Maybe by instinct, maybe the wisdom
 Of our village elders passed down forever
 (Until Turner came) which we suck in from birth
 Like wood-smoke in my mother's kitchen,
 Coconut shells stoking up a fire,
 And I squat with my two sisters, small we are,
 I don't know exactly how much in age –
 Though since Turner's days I have learnt to count,
 Weigh, measure, abstract, rationalise –
 But we are small enough nearly to pass
 Upright under the belly of the cow
 Whilst our father pulls the teats and wheezes
 Milk into a pakreet shell, swoosh, swoosh
 Swoosh, the sound still haunts, survives the roar
 And crash and endless wash and lap
 Of waves, and we stoop under the belly
 Of the cow and I can see I am just
 Taller than its haunches, and when my sisters
 Kneel their heads reach its knees. We play
 Games as our father milks, crawling under
 The belly like warriors, then springing up
 At the other side to hurl spears at enemies
 Hiding behind the chalte tree in the cow-pen,
 From which we pick twigs each morning, chew the ends,

Brush our teeth clean. The cow moves its head
To one side, watches us with covetous eyes
As if it wants to play, but my father
Will forbid it, for even when the milking is done,
He will not let us jump on the cow's back,
Nor decorate its heels with the blue and yellow
Bark of hemlik, nor put a chaktee straw
Into its nostrils until it sneezes
And snorts with laughter, but will lead it
Straight to pasture, and send us off to school,
To Manu, the magician, who will teach
Us how to squeeze, drain, blend, boil the juices
Of herbs for medicines, or bandage the sprained
Foot of a chicken. So the cow stands still,
But looks at us with a harlot's eye and winks,
And we can see the mischief in its face
Which our father can't because he's so far
Behind, concentrating on his fingers as if
Worshipping the gods, and it flicks its tail,
Beating off flies, but really to join in,
To lash and surprise us as we wait in ambush
Under its belly for the English
To come from another village, who will plunder
The crops, burn the huts, stampede the goats,
Drag girls away by ropes.

III

I dream to be small again, even though
My mother caught me with my fingers
In a panoose jar, and whilst I licked them clean
And reached for more, she came upon me,
Put one load of licks with a tamarind
Stick on my back, boxed my ears; the jar fell,
Broke, panoose dripped thickly to the floor.
Ants appeared cautiously, marched with tongues
Hanging out, like a gang of slavers;
Even though I cut myself on a sharp stone
Plunging headlong into the pond, feet splayed,
Hands folded at my chest like a straplee monkey
Diving from a branch into water, swimming
About, climbing again for another go.
I sit in the savannah minding cows,
Watching it climb and plunge all day. When I strip,
Mount the tree and dive I hit my head
On a stone waiting at the bottom of the pond.
I come up dazed, I float half-dead, I bleed
For days afterwards, for even Manu cannot
Stem the flow with his poultices soaked
In goat-dung mixed with the skin of abara fruit,
The smell of which makes me retch. My mother
Watches over me, eyes big like our cow's
But full of sadness. My sisters laugh at me,
They steal my toys and play with them, knowing
I am too weak to complain. When I awake
The house I built from barak shells, painted
With the green juice of a siddam, is in shambles,
Stilts fallen off, big holes in the roof
Where they poked their clumsy fingers in.
Girls are stupid, they know only how to wash
And cook, my father will marry them off
Soon, two goats each for bride-price. That will teach
Them not to tamper with my things and thief.

IV

It plopped into the water from a passing ship
Like a lime-seed spat from the scurried mouth
Of a sailor, shooting out between
A gap in his teeth, a cannonball
From the square hole at the side of the ship
That makes me duck below the water in fright
As it booms and breaks against another's mast.
All day they spit fire to each other
Like lovers, like Senu courting Zain
Rolling out her long red tongue whilst he
Sits sternly and cross-legged, refusing
To surrender (clay statues in the hearth
In the front-room of my father's house where
Dawntime he prayed earnestly, fed them,
Washed his fingers in a sacred bowl
Repeatedly, his tongue, his face; smeared
His forehead with green dye. When he departed
To the savannah, my sisters and me,
Awakened, hungry, our mother still lighting
The fireside and peeling yams, stole
Some of the food, nibbling sinfully
At the sweetballs of ocho and sarabell)
For if the fire of her tongue should play
Upon his body and he should melt,
The earth would tumble uncontrollably,
People spew off the edges, clutching roots
Like they do now at each other, as one ship sinks.
For days afterwards the sea is strewn with companions:
The gods have taken revenge on all of us.
We float together for days before the waves
Divide us. I have known them all, briefly,
I have always known them, year after year
From different sunken ships. Turner are the ones
With golden hair. His blue eyes smile at children

As he gives us sweets and a ladle from a barrel
Of shada juice. Five of us hold his hand,
Each takes a finger, like jenti cubs
Clinging to their mother's teats, as he leads us
To the ship. Why is my mother screaming
Like a harch, and where is my father?
Why does Turner forbid her to touch us
Before we board? Why are all the elders in chains?
All the fair men are Turner, I can tell
Even when sea-quats have swallowed their eyes,
Dug holes in their faces to lay their eggs.
I can tell from the silver buckles
On the black leather boots which he lets us
Polish, till we can see our faces.
Each day boys scramble at his feet, fighting
To clean them first. He promises that the most
Faithful will be given them when we land.
Only the silver survives the sea and all
Its creatures, his most faithful possession.
Even the sharks crack their teeth against it.

V

The women are less familiar
But I name them Adra, Zentu, Danjera,
The names of my mother and my father's wives.
They are not so ample as our women
Though the sea bloats them, the salt hardens
On their skin, a crust of white that hides
Lines of neglect, indelicacies. The sea prepares
Their festive masks, salt crystals like a myriad
Of sequins hemmed into their flesh through golden
Threads of hair. The sea decorates, violates.
Limbs break off, crabs roost between their breasts
Feeding. The sea strips them clean. I am ashamed
To look upon the nakedness of my mothers.

VI

When Turner came he brought none of his women.
I have only known them abroad, startled
At their first appearance, after a storm, ship
Toppled in an instant, spilling creatures
With long hair and slender waists. I gazed
Upon the fineness of their lips which the sea
Soon puffed and burst. Paler than their men,
Miniature, their hands barely the size
Of a chintoo leaf, just as softly creased.
These were not hands to rattle padlock and chain,
They would sooner beguile knots, melt iron
With a touch, loosen the greed anchored
In men's hearts.