

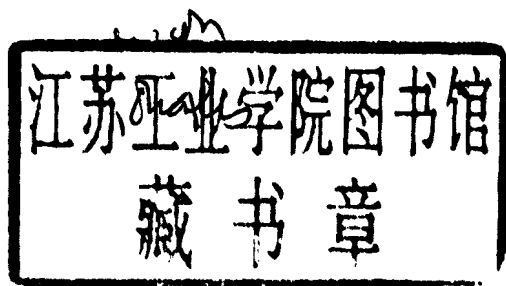


Disappearance

DAVID DABYDEEN

DISAPPEARANCE

David Dehyder



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P E E P A L T R E E

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For Susy Diamond (d. 1991) and
Margaret Niland (d. 1991),
and for Frances, Dinah, Jill and Luke Winch

All at once he leaned down and splashed the liquid
extravagantly on his face to clear away all doubt of
a concrete existence.

Wilson Harris, *The Secret Ladder*

Was it Jack? I didn't take the person in; I was more
concerned with the strangeness of the walk, my own
strangeness, and the absurdity of my enquiry.

V. S. Naipaul, *The Enigma of Arrival*

Mistah Kurtz – he dead.

T. S. Eliot, *The Hollow Men*

What opens meaning and language is writing as the
disappearance of natural presence.

Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*

Rejoice! Rejoice!

Margaret Thatcher

PART I

ONE

Why, Mrs Rutherford wanted to know, did I become an engineer? She sat on her rocking chair overlooking a garden which ran down to the edge of Dunsmere Cliff and a sheer drop of ninety feet. I sat with her each afternoon after work, fielding questions about the state of the cliff – the progress of our efforts to save it tumbling into the sea together with twelve or thirteen houses (including hers), the drift of shingle from Hastings' beach, whether another landslip was imminent and if so what I intended to do about it – and dozens of others. Generalised answers were not sufficient. She wanted details and seemed to have a mind unbearably patient and capable of absorbing the minutest fragments of information. I admired her curiosity and once told her so – after much hesitation, in case she thought I was being patronising. 'It's the way of the desert,' she said plainly, without the faintest hint of mysteriousness in her voice.

She left me alone for the first hour, when I would come home weary of the day's calculations, inspections and mishaps. I went to my room, showered and put on the freshly laundered clothes she had laid out on the bed. I wore whatever she decided to leave out and she in turn was pleased to see me in her choice of shirt. When I took lodgings with her she had offered to do my laundry, taking pity as she saw me bend over the board, ironing only the front and cuffs of my shirts to save time. I gladly handed over my wardrobe to her care, and she quickly discarded the shirts she took a dislike to, because of their coarse sewing or design, and secreted them in my suitcase at the bottom of the bed. She went to the shops and bought more civilised replacements. Although in her sixties, she seemed to have a keen eye for fashion, as the ties she made me wear sometimes drew admiring glances from my

colleagues on the beach. I suppose it made her feel that she was back with her husband, though I was thirty years younger than her, and from a different culture. I could imagine her relishing the gossip of the village, the old folk not having a scandal to exercise their tongues for decades. As it was, she was already the odd one out among the inhabitants, the one who had lived in Africa and whose husband had abandoned her childless. And it was she who, refusing to surrender to fat and the sagging skin of old age, took up running with the Hastings Harriers, an amateur club of mostly middle-aged businessmen for whom squash was now too dangerous. Every Thursday and Sunday she ran four miles with them, through fields or along paths that skirted the cliff-top. Her pace was deliberate, she frequently paused to look at foxgloves or bluebells which she swore were not there the last time she ran that way. And she always came in last, holding up the minibus which took the club back to the various villages dotted around Hastings.

In the second hour I took tea with her. An assortment of cakes and preserves, neatly arranged on the dining-table, greeted me when I came downstairs. A faint afternoon sun lit up part of the African batik covering the table. She sat opposite me eating slowly, a faraway look on her face. Behind her was a row of shelves bearing wooden and clay pots she had brought back from her travels in the 1950s and '60s.

It was only in the third hour, after she had cleared the table, directing me to the sitting-room, that she would talk in earnest. She brought glasses of damson wine and encouraged me to light up. 'Of course I don't mind,' she said the first time I asked permission to smoke, rifling through drawers to find an ashtray. 'I like the smell of tobacco.' At the first hint of smoke she twitched her nose pleurably but then coughed. 'I've forgotten how long it's been since a man breathed smoke in this room... twenty years ago perhaps... around 1972... August, yes August.' It was always thus with her – an initial fuzziness, as if she didn't want to remember, then, the process of recollection begun, a startling exactitude. 'It was Jack, my husband. He fumbled in his pouch and refused to look me in the eye. He lit a cigarette and hid behind a cloud of smoke while mumbling something about how he'd

leave me money. You know how magicians disappear in a puff of smoke? He must have been planning some equally mysterious exit because he blew a puff in my direction thinking I'd be blinded and he could make for the door quickly, leaving me all perplexed. But I knew all along he'd be leaving, the foolish man.'

'Where did he go to?' I asked hesitantly, not wishing to sound too inquisitive.

'Oh, somewhere or other, I never bothered to enquire.' Her voice trailed off for a moment before recovering to confront me with an unfathomable question. 'Where do men go to when they leave their wives?'

'To other women,' I answered automatically, recalling the infidelity of my own father.

'Not Jack. As soon as the door closed behind him I knew he was going to his grave. There was too much longing and guilt in him for a proper life.'

'Have you never been intrigued about what became of him?' I persisted.

'I banked the cheque, that's all, and forgot him,' she replied, in such a decisive tone that I knew she intended to end my enquiries abruptly. 'August 6th – that's the last I saw of him. Late afternoon I'd say, about this time of the day. He sat exactly where you're sitting now.' I shifted uncomfortably in the chair. 'He cried. I forgave him, as he knew I would.'

It was with the same precision of timing that she would begin our early-evening sessions. Satisfied that I was bathed and refreshed, and waiting until I was half-way into the cigarette, she would open with a technical question relating to the cliff before nudging the conversation around to the personal. Once, as she sat rocking, staring out of the window as if formulating the evening's dialogue, I startled her with a pre-emptive question.

'How old are all these pots?' I asked innocently, pointing to the shelves by the dining-table.

She fumbled for speech, then quickly recomposed her mind. 'It's impossible to tell. The Pende and Yaka tribes have been making such pots for hundreds of years. I bought them in a market in Dakar though, so it's difficult to identify them precisely in terms of age or tribal style.'

I looked sheepish, unable to follow up with a comment or gesture, not even a nod signifying vague knowledge of the geography. 'Dakar is the capital of Senegal, in West Africa. It's thousands of miles from where the Pende and Yaka live, in the Congo, so the pots are unlikely to have travelled that far west.' She got up, walked heavily over to the shelves (by evening, the strength drained from her limbs and she grew visibly frail and elderly) and brought back two wooden pots. 'This one looks like a Yaka carving,' she said, holding it up to the light so that I could get a clearer view. I leant forward and looked hard and ignorantly at it. The pot was shaped as a female figure, and a particularly crude one at that, with stiff protruding breasts like the tips of fearsome spears. That much I noticed, but Mrs Rutherford focused on the obscure detail of the nose. 'I've seen a lot of triangular snub noses on Yaka carvings, but how Senegal comes into it I don't know. Perhaps the Yaka once migrated that way and left their traces with Senegalese tribes before returning to the Congo. Who knows? That's the mystery of Africa.' She grew pale as if stilled by some reminiscence of the past, before being reawakened by the weight of the pots in her hands. 'This other one is more like a bowl,' she resumed, handing it to me; 'it has all the marks of the Pende style.' It was shaped as a human face and she traced its features with a withered finger, pointing to the way its forehead bulged like the sides of an English pear, its half-closed eyes, its pointed chin and eyebrows that ran like ritual scars from ear to ear. 'The Yaka and Pende are matrilinear tribes. Everything originates from your mother. And yet they're still such a fierce people. Just look at the aggression in these carvings, I can't understand it!'

'I know nothing about art,' I said, when what I meant to say was that I knew nothing about Africa. She looked at me as I returned the carving, seeing a Negro, his large black hands carefully holding up a sacred bowl almost in an attitude of worship, as a servant to some tribal goddess would have done dark centuries ago. I was no African though, and my fetishes and talismans were spirit-levels, bulldozers, rivets. I was a black West-Indian of African ancestry, but I was an engineer, trained in the science and technology of Great Britain. As she took the bowl she could have

seized upon the irony of our situation, but Mrs Rutherford was typically sincere and down-to-earth. She assumed no prior knowledge in me, no ancestral treasure buried for centuries in the darkness of my mind which would suddenly reveal itself in the presence of an ancient artefact. She was neither puzzled by, nor scornful of, my ignorance but was glad to explain things to me.

The fourth hour was spent in an unexpected tour of the other African objects in her house. Normally the fourth hour would see the winding-down of our conversation, Mrs Rutherford gathering in her harvest of information about the cliffs, Guyana, my family, my politics and dozens of other subjects, offering me a last glass of her home-made wine with a generosity that was more a thanksgiving, before retiring to bed. This time, however, our pleasant evening ritual was disrupted. Instead, I stood before three ancient masks that were nailed to various obscure corners of her house like gargoyles. They were from the Bambara and Dogon tribes. She described the continent with an almost instinctive feel for the place, drawing my attention to the subtleties of form that distinguished one tribe from the other. She ran her aged hand tenderly over the smooth and polished surface of the masks as if over the faces of children. Most of them terrified me. Braids of straw or raffia hung from their scalps, a wilderness of bush entwined with feathers, fibres, strips of rattan and the dried skin of animals. Their ugliness was increased considerably by their prominence on the whitewashed walls of this English cottage. As soon as you caught sight of it you thought you were in the presence of a venerable England. Its exterior was cloaked in crinkled elm, which gave it a natural dignity. The hallway opened up into a large drawing-room, and you were drawn immediately to the fireplace. At the sides of the fireplace curious English instruments stood on guard as though they were keepers of the ritual of lighting up the darkness and giving warmth and life to the human body. Each had a different function – one fed the coal or pieces of wood into the fire; another poked around, turning over the flames to create an even heat; another raked the embers at the close of day. Standing before the fireplace and looking into the room you saw shelves bearing porcelain ornaments and decorated plates; walls hung with black and white photographs of

ancestry; and, everywhere, books. Books which when opened creaked at the spine and gave off a pleurably damp smell and the fine dust of another age. Books with raised holes made by insects in their pages, resembling Braille, as if even the blind could have access to the knowledge contained therein. Books that bore curious inscriptions in faded ink, in handwriting shaped by quill or ancient nib. *Ex Libris Joseph Countryman Esq. Dominus Illuminatio Mea*. Others were more personal, making me feel intrusive and uncomfortable when I read them because I was from the future they could not envisage, a future which could well have brought terrors and disappointments to their evolving lives, a future which ruptured the innocence of the moment. *For Albert, on being sixteen. May God keep you steadfast in your studies and may you prosper in His Grace and Wisdom. Your Loving Father; Dearest Annie, each word in this book tells your life and mine. Love John*. How was the father to know that Albert would indeed go on to become Professor of Classics at Oxford, Jack the Ripper's pimp or a leader of the Cato Street Conspiracy? And Annie, Dearest Annie, with apple-juice breasts that men gurgled and choked on, marble thighs that made men slip and break their necks; Annie who may have married John, lived in a farmhouse and produced six healthy children (brown and speckled like farmhouse eggs) who worked on the land and cared for their parents in their old age; Annie who, burdened with John's molestations and fetishes, perhaps absconded with an early feminist and wrote treatises against Royalty, Episcopacy, the Judiciary and other phallogentric institutions. I held the book guiltily and excitedly, as though I were a peeping Tom spinning fantasies from the partially glimpsed fragments of Albert's and Annie's lives, creating their past and their future, until I awoke to the pathos of their death, the pathos of the leather-bound volume drained of original colour and badly chipped. I felt then that I *was* a West-Indian, someone born in a new age for a new world. I was unlike Albert and Annie, whose futures were cause for eagerness or dread, whose futures were bound to the past like pages in a book following each other in sequence and ending in the hard board of a coffin. As a West-Indian I had no cause to anticipate the future nor to fear death because I had cultivated no sense of the past. I was always present,