

John Thieme

A Barber's Tale

In his breezy shop beside the Demerara River,
with the shutters open,
keen to catch the wind,

Massiah talks of long forgotten moments,
while shaving stubble with a cut-throat razor
and cutting hair in styles he's made his own.
His words are counterpointed by his clippers,
percussive instruments that beat a steady time.

His captive clients enjoy his wheezing chatter,
a short vacation from the world of work.

He is an agile man
of unknown age and background.
Belonging nowhere, he sees everywhere as home.
His droning voice entrances streetwise spiders
in the cobwebbed angles of his rafters,
self-ruling worlds they've made *their* own.

Blessed by the blistered contours of their teller's lips,
his stories speak of many false beginnings:
locked gates, aborted fantasies, a people's stolen hopes.

But there is one account above all others,
he will return to every breathless day:
a fragile vision from the pre-dawn days
of history, when the world was hatching
and restive seamen ventured on the oceans
in search of wealth and hemispheres of faith.

This tale, he says, has come from mouth to mouth,
gossip made myth through telling and retelling.
But now, amid the loss of ancient knowledge,
he is its only archive,
a one-man register of shrivelled dreams.

Massiah tells how, on an unrecorded fifth voyage,
Columbus once set foot upon this coast.
Resisting claims he'd hurt the fractured earth again,
he'd stayed ashore for four, or maybe five, days.
He'd bartered with a family of Arawaks
exchanging trinkets for provisions,
root vegetables he'd never seen before.

There, on a mound eight metres above sea level,
the highest eminence he could find
on that wind-flattened, sea-brown shoreline,
he'd lodged a Spanish flag
to claim this forlorn outpost for Castile,
but left the soil untouched in other ways.

History, Massiah says, has favoured islands,
with suntanned beaches and seductive seas
that minister to Old World expectations
of Asian spice and women mild as milk.
Here, though, the raging ocean and the muddy lowland
rehearsed a narrative of primal struggle
the Genoese had never heard at home.
Amid his surfeit of bestowing saints' names,
he chose, Massiah says, to leave this place unchristened,
a vacant space, unmapped, no El Dorado here.

Two of his crew, one version of the legend has it,
went several miles along the tree-lined river
on a longboat borrowed from his ship.
They came back two days later, empty-handed,
but bearing tales of sun-bronzed Amazonians,
and cascading waters tinged with sparkling gold.
Unmoved, Columbus loaded more provisions.
Determined not to linger in this way-station,
he told his crew to raise the anchor,
and set a course for islands to the north.

But this, Massiah says, is only half the story.
When Cristóbal was gone, the puzzled Arawaks
invented their own legend,
of an insane man who'd crossed the sea
to beg for their cassava
and mount a shabby rag upon a stick.

They danced around that stick,
describing laughing circles in the mud,
but this amusement only lasted minutes,
now the mirage of the madman had passed on.
Deciding that his rag was really worthless,
they tore it down and emptied bladders on it,
still dancing in a carnival of glee.
Then they burnt it in a void of giggling riot,
and threw fresh dirt upon the scorched remains.
Their spectral visitor had left no other relics,
no traces of his days spent on that coast,
though the story of his having been there
survived to be retold for several seasons,
by smiling Amerindian mouths.

But now Massiah is its sole custodian,
a man whose tales attest to unknown pasts.
The spiders weave their webs of present wisdom,
ensnaring flies in flags of new-spun cloth.