

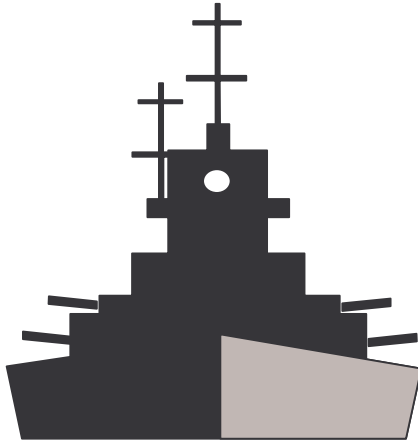


Jamaica Remembered

By George Graham

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*In the afternoon in Jamaica
When the sun stood still
And the sea lay down like a lamb,
When the leaves barely trembled
In the promise of a breeze,
And even the bees hummed in a lower, slower note,
I used to lie under a poinciana tree,
Veiled and dappled by shadow,
Dreaming of big cities and success.
Now, I sit in my office (in my Yves St. Laurent suit),
And look out the window at the skyscrapers...
Dreaming of Jamaica.*



Living Near the Docks

It's the smell of the docks I remember. Fresh-sawed lumber. Marine paint. Gasoline. Tar. But when I put my mind to it, I can bring back the sounds: The chatter of the riveting gun. The rhythmic pounding of hammers. The workers' shouts.

During my fourth and fifth years, my mother, baby brother, and I stayed with Aunt Lucy, half a block away from Belmont Dry Dock in Kingston. My mother was just a girl, and she had narrowly missed death when her second child was born. Suffering from malaria, she was too weak to pass the afterbirth, and a busybody nurse had botched an attempt at removing it. We were living in Portland then, and my father wanted her to be near a good hospital and city doctors, so we went to live with her aunt in Kingston.

I spent much of my time wandering about the docks, ankle deep in wood shavings, picking up giant nails and bolts, and other metal treasures, my hair so hot from the sun that it burned my palm to touch it. Chill-blooded from malaria, I reveled in the intense heat, but at night, when the sea breeze died, it was stifling. Some nights I would strip naked and press my body against the masonry walls to find relief.

In mid-morning the mule-drawn ice cart would come by, and the neighborhood children would run to meet it. The ice man would chip hand-numbing slivers for us and even let us ride a little way on the cart. The women would stand by their gates, holding up their money to signal the ice man. Then they would stagger inside, hugging the heavy blocks of ice against their bosoms. We had ice boxes in those days, with thick, insulated walls and sawdust in the bottom.

The snowball man came by twice a day, pushing his handcart and shouting, "Snowbaaalll!" so that all the children, and some adults, too, came running. His elbow sawed back and forth as his sharp metal shaver scraped layers of "snow" from a shimmering block of ice, insulated by the folds of a dripping burlap sack. Then he heaped the shaved ice in your container and poured gaudy syrup on it... strawberry, orange, lemon, or any one of a dozen flavors.

Remembering, I can feel the cramping-cold, nectar-sweet liquid in my throat and the cool glass against the palms of my hands. But my favorite was the Dixie Doodle man. On the back of his bicycle was a small, square chest filled with frozen treats: strawberry, cherry and orange-flavored icicles and popsicles; creamy brown fudgsicles; creamsicles, which were half icicle and half fudgsicle; and my favorite, Dixie Doodles, vanilla inside, and covered with thick, dark chocolate.

Belmont Road dead-ended at the dry dock. Metal gates and guards blocked the way, but somehow nobody bothered to stop me as I went through those big gates every day to forage among the multitude of towering vessels.

My mother snapped off a length of cotton thread and tied a bent pin to it, so I could fish from the wharf. I would crush a sea snail and stick it on the pin, then drop it a few feet deep in the sea, where I could see shiners milling about it. Then I'd jerk it out of the water. Once I actually caught a shiner. You should've heard me shout when it flew over my head flipping and flapping at the end of the thread. As I pounced on it, a man came running.

"You catch a fish!" he exulted, waving an empty Capstan Cigarettes tin. "Here. Put it in this."

I don't remember pausing to thank the man before pelting home to show off my catch. My mother fried it for my lunch, but it shriveled to almost nothing, and looked really disappointing on my plate.

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