

Letter to Anthony McNeill, poet

9/22/2016

Dear Tony,

As I approach my 75<sup>th</sup> birthday, I'm thinking of how you would have been traveling alongside, right up to the moment, cosmic twins that we are. How many more poems you would have written-- 25 years worth!--if you hadn't left at 50. How many more letters you would have signed, 'more light'. I see you now, changing my numerals to words, or at least questioning which would have been better, as you pondered every usage, every utterance as to correctness, effectiveness, aptness, in service of the thing that mattered most in your universe--poetry.

I'm not sure if I ever answered Carol's letter, the one informing me of your unexpected passing, of your going in for one thing and succumbing to another. She sent no picture, but somehow the image of you on a cold surface has haunted me, your eyes closed, your shoulders bare against what looks to be marble, a white sheet covering the rest of you, some doctor's hands suspended forever in a shaded room showing bright sunlight outside.

In that last year, she said, you'd given teaching another try, but that had ended as your other attempts had, with children making fun of your odd approach, your muse always sitting at the desk beside you (of course, no one else saw her), your voice droning through the lessons the school insisted upon while in your head verse after verse fell into place, poem after poem questioning themselves, in the hot afternoon outside Kingston teeming with answers, none satisfying your appetite.

In the *Gleaner*, you kept up your punters' column, figuring the chances of this horse against the field, the hopes of the track piled in torn-up tickets below the sellers' windows, the aimless movement of everyone but the winners after a race, your wonderful poem telling the whole story in just a few lines-

How could the horse  
with a name like Golden Slipper  
pull up short?

Amazing, as always. You always found the wire that was dangerous to touch, that we never knew beforehand which was which. The one about a suicide leap you ended, "At last, pure weapon!" The title of the one about a mentally-ill aunt-- "The Lady Accepts the Needle Again". And having found these, you kept looking, and asking, often folks who couldn't possibly know, on the off-chance they might. Your dear mother, Hope, for example. "Ma, which is better, Lisa, look, or Lisa see?" Her answer: Who is the poet, Tony, me or you?"

I learned the word 'penultimate' from you. None of my professors had ever used it. I taught you, when you came to New York, the art of proofreading efficiently, without agonizing over every syllable and syntax, so a novel wouldn't take more than a few days, and we could convince the publisher to keep us freelancing. In Jamaica, you introduced me to Mervyn Morris and Dennis Scott and Fragano Ledgister and Fernanda Steele, patient with you as she was with her own son. Hope fixed us a meal of birds caught by some boys. They were slightly bitter.

We drove, you and I, down to Runaway Bay, everyone warning me about how you never paid attention to the road. It was true. We zigzagged slowly, while you showed seven pages (I spelled it out, this time!) of a new poem to a pretty girl you gave a ride. After she left, you asked your then-current question- "Where is my Tess?" There was pain, over your ex-wife and absent son. But you wrote...through it, around it, over it. I wished I could swim like you, the way you went far out, to a rock where you seemed small. I wished I could be all poetry like you, the way you came in and dripping leaned over your old typewriter, the one without ribbon and fell to typing right away, between quick puffs on the sensi stems you had trouble rolling, so I did for you, in brown paper. I wished we could

understand that the quest for Tess is never ending, as Derek discovered in *Another Life*, in his confession to Anna.

Your words, dear friend, console me now. Your death tricked me, as a kind of passing that wasn't supposed to happen, that happened so strangely we doubt it, as we question our own hand in each other's lives. I'm still writing my farewell poem to you, still trying to follow your advice on how to deal with enemies. "Shit on their porch," you said, as I believe you actually did one time. The world has grown even harsher than when you were here. But it still seems as effective a way to deal with trouble, as any. Maybe I'll learn to swim, too. While there's still time.

More light, Mervyn