

JAMAICA KINCAID (b. 1949)

Blackness

How soft is the blackness as it falls. It falls in silence and yet it is deafening for no other sound except the blackness falling can be heard. The blackness falls like soot from a lamp with an untrimmed wick. The blackness fills visible and yet it is invisible, for I see that I cannot see it. The blackness fills up a small room, a large field, an island, my own being. The blackness cannot bring me joy but often I am made glad in it. The blackness cannot be separated from me but often I can stand outside it. The blackness is not the air, though I breathe it. The blackness is not the earth, though I walk on it. The blackness is not water or food, though I drink and eat it. The blackness is not my blood, though it flows through my veins. The blackness enters my many-tiered spaces and soon the significant word and event recede and eventually vanish: in this way I am annihilated and my form becomes formless and I am absorbed into a vastness of free-flowing matter. In the blackness, then, I have been erased. I can no longer say my own name. I can no longer point to myself and say 'I'. In the blackness my voice is silent. First, then, I have been my individual self, carefully banishing randomness from my existence, then I am swallowed up in the blackness so that I am one with it . . .

There are the small flashes of joy that are present in my daily life: the upturned face to the open sky, the red ball tumbling from small hand to small hand, as small voices muffle laughter; the sliver of orange on the horizon, a remnant of the sun setting. There is the wide stillness, trembling and waiting to be violently shattered by impatient demands.

(‘May I now have my bread without the crust?’)

(‘But I long ago stopped liking my bread without the crust!’)

All manner of feelings are locked up within my human breast and all manner of events summon them out. How frightened I became once on looking down to see an oddly shaped, ash-colored object that I did not recognize at once to be a small part of my own foot. And how powerful I then found that moment, so that I was not at one with myself and I felt myself separate, like a brittle substance dashed and shattered, each separate part without knowledge of the other separate parts. I then clung fast

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to a common and familiar object (my lamp, as it stood unlit on the clean surface of my mantelpiece), until I felt myself steadied, no longer alone at sea in a small rowboat, the waves cruel and unruly. What is my nature, then? For in isolation I am all purpose and industry and determination and prudence, as if I were the single survivor of a species whose evolutionary history can be traced to the most ancient of ancients; in isolation I ruthlessly plow the deep silences, seeking my opportunities like a miner seeking veins of treasure. In what shallow glimmering space shall I find what glimmering glory? The stark, stony mountainous surface is turned to green, rolling meadow, and a spring of clear water, its origins a mystery, its purpose and beauty constant, draws all manner of troubled existence seeking solace. And again and again, the heart—buried deeply as ever in the human breast, its four chambers exposed to love and joy and pain and the small shafts that fall with desperation in between.

I sat at a narrow table, my head, heavy with sleep, resting on my hands. I dreamed of bands of men who walked aimlessly, their guns and cannons slackened at their sides, the chambers emptied of bullets and shells. They had fought in a field from time to time and from time to time they grew tired of it. They walked up the path that led to my house and as they walked they passed between the sun and the earth; as they passed between the sun and the earth they blotted out the daylight and night fell immediately and permanently. No longer could I see the blooming trefoils, their overpowering perfume a constant giddy delight to me; no longer could I see the domesticated animals feeding in the pasture; no longer could I see the beasts, hunter and prey, leading a guarded existence; no longer could I see the smith moving cautiously in a swirl of hot sparks or bent over anvil and bellows. The bands of men marched through my house in silence. On their way, their breath scorched some flowers I had placed on a dresser, with their bare hands they destroyed the marble columns that strengthened the foundations of my house. They left my house, in silence again, and they walked across a field, opposite to the way they had come, still passing between the sun and the earth. I stood at a window and watched their backs until they were just a small spot on the horizon.

I see my child arise slowly from her bed. I see her cross the room and stand in front of the mirror. She looks closely at her straight, unmarried body. Her skin is without color, and when passing through a small beam of light, she is made transparent. Her eyes are ruby, revolving orbs, and they burn like coals caught suddenly in a gust of wind. This is my child! When her

jaws were too weak, I first chewed her food, then fed it to her mouthfuls. This is my child! I must carry a cool liquid in my breasts to quench her parched throat. This is my child sitting in the her head thrown back in rapture, prolonging some moment of joy created for her.

My child is pitiless to the hunchback boy; her mouth twists in a cruel smile, her teeth becoming pointed and sparkling, the rest of her mouth bony and ridged, her young hands suddenly withered and as she reaches out to caress his hump. Squirming away from her heated gaze, he seeks shelter in a grove of trees, but her arms, which command to grow to incredible lengths, seek him out and tug at his silk-like hairs that lie flattened on his back. She calls his name and the sound of her voice shatters his eardrum. Deaf, he can no longer hear warnings of danger and his sense of direction is destroyed. But he has built for him a dwelling hut on the edge of a steep cliff so that he can watch him day after day flatten himself against a fate of which he is and yet cannot truly know until the moment it consumes him.

My child haunts the dwelling places of the useless-winged creatures so enamored is she of great beauty and ancestral history. She traces nothing from its meager happenstance beginnings in cool and slinging rain to its great glory and dominance of air or land or sea, to its cold and entombed in mysterious alluviums. She loves the thing untouched by time; she loves the thing that is not cultivated, and yet she loves the thing that is up, bit carefully placed upon bit, its very beauty eclipsing the about it meant to commemorate. She sits idly on a shore, staring hard at the sea beneath the sea and at the sea beneath even that. She hears the sounds within the sounds, common as that is to open spaces. She feels the first cold, then briefly warm, then cold again as it passes from atmosphere to atmosphere. Having observed the many differing physical elements feed on each other, she is beyond despair or the spiritual vacuum.

Oh, look at my child as she stands boldly now, one foot in the dark, the other in the light. Moving from pool to pool, she absorbs each special sensation for and of itself. My child rushes from death to death, so fast that state is it to her. Though I have summoned her into a fleeting existence one that is perilous and subject to the violence of chance, she endures time as it passes in numbing sameness, bearing in its wake a multitude of great sadnesses.

I hear the silent voice; it stands opposite the blackness and yet it does not oppose the blackness, for conflict is not a part of its nature. I shrug off

of hatred. In love I move toward the silent voice. I shrug off my of despair. In love, again, I move ever toward the silent voice. Inside the silent voice. The silent voice enfolds me. The silent voice tells me so completely that even in memory the blackness is erased. I am silence. The silence is without boundaries. The pastures are not separated, the lions roam the continents, the continents are not separated. The flat lands cuts the river, its flow undammed. The mountains no rupture. Within the silent voice, no mysterious depths separate me; I am so distant that longing is stirred up in me. I hear the silent voice how softly now it falls, and all of existence is caught up in it. Living in the silent voice, I am no longer 'I'. Living in the silent voice, I am at last living in the silent voice, I am at last erased.