

Blessed Is The Fruit

We are two and we are one. But then, there is nothing really strange in dreams.
--JorgeLouisBorges

The duality of dreams, acknowledged by Borges and Freud, is integral to my novel-in-progress. I had been thinking about this novel for several years; what I could not come up with was the form, which is always my starting point. I knew that there were two voices, two stories. One belonged to my great aunt, the other to the Barbadian maid who had raised me since infancy (she had actually worked for my aunt before she came to live with us). I also knew that these two stories had to be told together, at least during the dream sequence. I thought of alternating chapters, of alternating sections, even of alternating pages. Nothing seemed quite right. Then I had my own dream.

I dreamt that I was reading the book I wanted to write. I held it in my hands (I dreamt it in hard cover), opened to somewhere near the middle. What I saw on the page was this: two lines of type and a space, two lines and a space, two lines and a space . . . and so on down the page. Each line told a different story, in a different voice. They were the two voices I knew, but it was up to me to choose which story I wanted to follow, skipping alternate lines. Sometimes my eye slipped, and I read the line below; sometimes I'd catch a glimpse of a few words written on the line above, and my attention would be drawn to the other story. No matter how hard I tried, I could not keep the two stories separate, and I was always somehow conscious of the other story being told. I remember saying to myself: That's exactly what you've been looking for! But by the time you wake up you'll have forgotten the whole thing! Which was exactly what happened.

A few days later a composer friend invited me to a recital. He and two other composers were presenting new pieces. Sometime during the performance one of the composers wheeled in two sets of speakers, two sets of hi-fi equipment, and he set them up on either side of the stage. He announced the title of his piece as something or other recorded on two tracks, and he turned on both sets of equipment. It was street sounds--car horns and brakes and footsteps on the sidewalk--and it was pretty awful. But in the middle of all the noise my dream came back to me. When I got home I went straight to my desk. After a couple minutes I'd come up with this: L(V) L L/V:V/L V V(L)

My novel-in-progress is called Blessed is the Fruit, and it is set on the West Indian island of Corpus Christi. It is told in the voices of two island women, both in their mid-fifties: one is a black maid, Velma, and the other is her white mistress, Lila. Velma comes from dire poverty, near starvation, and Lila is the descendant of the once wealthy British plantocracy. Not long after Lila's husband leaves, Velma comes to work for her. The two women have lived alone for thirty years in a large old colonial house, which is rotting and falling down around them. They have become dependent upon one another, though they do not quite realize the extent of their dependency when the book opens. For several months Velma has kept secret from her mistress the fact that she is pregnant, even at her advanced age. Velma knows that should Lila discover her pregnancy, she will send her home, back to poverty and starvation. Velma "binds her belly" every morning to hide the pregnancy, and she makes several unsuccessful attempts to abort the child--from the

pharmacist's drugs to bush-medicine to spells of "obeah" magic. Finally Velma makes a desperate, brutal attempt to abort the child with a wire coat-hanger. Lila discovers her wounded, near dead from loss of blood; she carries Velma upstairs into her own bedroom (Lila's private sanctuary, where Velma has never been allowed entrance in all the years she has lived in the house). Lila brings a doctor who treats Velma's wounds.

The story is about these two women's acceptance of the child as their own; their acceptance of responsibility for the child as its figurative parents. When the novel opens (and when it closes) the two women are lying together in the big bed in Lila's room. Velma is sleeping peacefully after the doctor's sedative. Lila is awake, and the first third of the novel is told in her voice, her monologue. She tells of her life with Velma, of her life with her husband, and of her childless, failed marriage. Finally Lila tells of her childhood as the daughter of a sugar plantation owner, including the failure of the sugar industry in the Caribbean. (Lila's portion of the novel proceeds backward chronologically.)

For the middle third of the book Lila falls asleep, and the narrative is subsumed by the simultaneous dream of Velma and Lila: the voices merge, cross over. This dream, however, is really the fetus' dream--the fetus' dream of its figurative parents who are these two women. (This fictional device actually has a medical precedent: physicians report that they have identified REM movements in unborn infants, so fetuses do in fact dream.)

Velma awakens, and the final third of the novel is told in her voice. Velma's story begins with the poor village where she was raised by her grandmother and several aunts (not knowing her father, and scarcely knowing her mother). She tells of her brutal treatment by various men and, one by one, of the deaths of her four children (the excerpt that follows comes from this time in her life). It is only after Velma reaches utmost despair and attempts suicide that she is given the servant's job with Lila, and she leaves her village to work for this wealthy white woman. Velma's narrative proceeds chronologically toward the present--the scene with which the novel opens--with these two women lying together for the first time in Lila's large bed, and the baby still alive in Velma's womb.