

Bioluminescence

Jacqueline Bishop

I have followed you to this place of pink and lilac crepe myrtles,
 Spanish moss, and green and gold beads bleeding from trees
 along St. Charles Avenue. The man beside me on the tram
 is heading towards the Creole Tomato Festival, but me,
 I am heading towards you, Mr. John James Audubon,
 whose name is now like bioluminescence lighting the way
 all over this town. It is mid-June and hotter than I expected.
 What must July or August be like, I wonder?
 Truthfully, Mr. Audubon, I am tired of following you around.
 Or is it the other way around, you are the one following me around?
 For surely you were there with me in London, last March,
 you remember, I introduced you to my grandfather?
 All three of us, you, me and my grandfather, we took a walk together
 around Piccadilly and we stopped and had fish and chips
 in some dive place that my grandfather recommended ---
 he who knows this City better than the country where he was born.
 It was difficult, all three of us trying to talk to one another.
 My grandfather wanted me to know that he was never Jamaican,
 always British --- He came to this country before there was any such thing
 as a black green and gold Jamaican flag. I smile, for despite his harsh denials
 I can hear Jamaica coating his words. I can hear her too in his laughter.
 I can see her too, this gal Jamaica, biding her time
 and just looking at him, as all good Jamaican girls are wont to do.
 I see this gal Jamaica, this gal from Nonsuch district really,
 chocolate brown skin with hair down to her back,
 on a bicycle that my grandmother told me about once, a red postman's bicycle
 a young and earnest lover rode miles and miles to pick her up on,
 in Port Antonio Bay where she was going to school to learn sewing.
 A bicycle my grandfather now claims to know nothing about.
 That long and exhausting ride through all those mountains.
 But tell the truth, can't you see it too dear reader?
 Can't you see the two young lovers on an old rickety
 postman's bicycle and my grandmother's
 slender frame fitting nicely between the bicycle's handles ---
 my grandmother laughter, years and years later, carrying in the wind,
 one of the few times she ever talked about my mother's father ---
how was a young woman supposed to resist a man like that?
You tell me my granddaughter? He had ridden
that old jalopy thing across all those mountains?
 You were an old man then, Mr. Audubon, last March in London.
 I had pulled up out from the grave.

All you wanted to do was to relive your glory days
in a time and a place where everyone knew your name.
You wanted to walk these streets and reminisce
about bringing your painted birds here,
how they were immediately applauded.
This was before you grew old and lost your mind
and reverted to the Kreyol and French songs of childhood.
This was before no one knew what you were saying.
It was here in London that people could see what you had given up
years and years of your life to creating. Europeans
have so much better taste than those people across the Atlantic.
Never mind the wife and children you had left back in America.
Never mind the wife and children who for years you had abandoned.
Never mind your cracked and broken English.
You are and were a Frenchman first and foremost.
For his part, my mother's father was having none of it.
He was tired, he said, of hearing pompous
white men yell their story. In any case, he was anxious,
my mother's father was, to set the record straight
as to why he left my mother and her brothers to fend-for-themselves
as children on the island of Jamaica.
Why he chose one woman over another.
He wanted me to know my great grandmother Celeste threatened lawsuit
against him and his mother for child support and to strip herself naked
before them in Port Antonio Bay --- *such indecent people!*
And what was I doing? I was doing what I am always doing ---
I was in search of my grandmother and a place called Nonesuch
that was simultaneously hidden away in the folds
of the dark blue mountains of Jamaica, and to be found right outside London
in majestic splendor. When things got tense between my grandfather and I,
especially when he brought up anything having to do with that-woman-Emma, it was you Mr.
Audubon and your love of birds
that saved the day, all the conflicting stories that we tell ourselves
and each other, these grand narratives of migration.