Start-Over:
Possession Rites and Healing Rituals
in the Poetry of Lorna Goodison

HUGH HODGES
University of Toronto

ABSTRACT

For much of the last twenty years, Lorna Goodison's poetry has been concerned with finding or performing ceremonies that will both commemorate the past and engender new possibilities for the future. Drawing on the language and symbolism of Pocomania, Revivalism, Pentecostalism, and Rastafarianism, as well as Jamaican folk songs and stories, these poems explore Goodison's belief in the power of language to actually do things, to cleanse, heal, and strengthen. In I Am Becoming My Mother, Heartease, and To Us All Flowers Are Roses, Goodison takes on the roles of priestess and prophet to explore the public function of poetry as healing rite. They are roles that often entail personal suffering. In her more recent collections, Turn Thanks and Travelling Mercies, she turns her attention to more private rituals—those daily rites and ceremonies that perform “local miracles” and give one the strength to endure and start over. In the process Goodison seems to have found her way to “Heartease.”

Lorna Goodison came to poetic maturity during a period when political violence threatened to destroy Jamaica. At that time, in the early 1980s, she wrote bitterly of “tourist-dream edenism”:

For over all this edenism
hangs the smell of necromancy
and each man eats his brother’s flesh
Lord, so much of the cannibal left
in the jungle on my people’s tongues.

We’ve sacrificed babies
and burnt our mothers
as payment to some viridian-eyed God dread
who works in cocaine under hungry men’s heads.

And mine the task of writing it down
as I ride in shame round this blood-stained town. (”Jamaica 1980” 10)

Frank Birbalsingh told her, “You are not providing solutions to [the] suffering by
writing poetry.” She replied, “No, but I feel that where I can talk about it, I should. I
think that after 1980, we should have some public grieving, some ceremony, or mono-
ment to the fact that over 800 people died. We never really did” (Birbalsingh 154). I am Becoming My Mother and the books that followed became, in a sense, a search for
appropriate ceremonies to commemorate not only those who died without monument
in 1980, but also those who died in slave ships and barracoons, those who endured
and died fighting slavery, oppression, and poverty. Her poems became or sought out
rituals to restore hope—Edward Baugh calls them “Rituals of Redemption”—rituals
to give glimpses of the true “start-over Eden” that is obscured by tourist-dreams and
political necromancy (Goodison, “Never Expect” 10).

These are small rituals. Birbalsingh is right: they are not solutions. But they put
something in the universe using the one tool that neither the slaver, nor the politician,
nor the International Monetary Fund can steal entirely: the human voice. It may be
a soft voice—as Goodison says, Rosa Parks’s was a soft voice too (“For Rosa Parks”
41)—but it is the voice of someone traveling, out of Babylon, back to herself.

In her search for rituals—and for the correct ritual language—Goodison draws
on the wealth of Jamaica’s oral tradition, on mentos, ring tunes, revival hymns, and
work songs, on proverbs and Anancy stories, and on the Jamaican traditions of street
preaching and prophecy. Her poetry reflects a deep belief in the power of language.
“The Living Converter Woman of Green Island,” from her recent collection Travelling
Mercies, speaks of songs that “[s]ound myrhh notes to quell / putrefaction’s smell”
(7), the putrefaction being both the uneatable contents of the unconverted intestines
the singer is turning inside out to clean and the equally indigestible contents of his-
tory. In effect, the converter woman’s song relies on a kind of sympathetic magic to
“[c]leanse the charnel house / of the bloodbath Atlantic” (6). An analogy between
tripe and “coiled and sectioned” history becomes an opportunity to work healing on
history as the converter woman reads animal intestines as a leaved book

recording abominable drama in ship’s maw
tragedy of captured and capturer

scenes that [seem] to be calling
for overdue acts of conversion. (6)

The conversion here is both conversion of the uneatable contents of history into
nourishment and conversion of the listener into a believer, and both are converted
by song, by words that “bring in / as yet unknown revelation” (9). Goodison’s belief
in the power of words is rooted in the belief that all things are mystically connected.
All things are in all things, so healing in a song puts healing into the world, and the
peace within a poem may “stay the devils in our heads” (“Trident” 73). One of the
ways Goodison articulates this sense of unity is through the Rastafarian identification
of the Bible as the nexus of history, the point at which past, present, and future
meet. “Lush,” also from Travelling Mercies, speaks of the poet’s childhood Jamaica as a “slightly cultivated” garden of Eden, where “Cain and Abel / lived in the village”:

When Abel was slaughtered  
Miss Jamaica paraded the head on a sceptre  
as she rode in her win-at-all costs motorcade.  
From his blood sprung a sharp reproach bush  
which drops karma fruit upon sleeping policemen  
to remind them of their grease-palm sins of omission. (“Lush” 91–2)

Here the mapping of the present onto the biblical past gives life its lushness: its meaningfulness and its capacity for miracles to counterbalance day-to-day brutality. But Goodison’s mapping of the present onto the past is not always biblical, and does not generally share Rasta’s heavy emphasis on the apocalypse. Partly this is because, as “Jamaica 1980” suggests, Goodison distrusts its promise; Jamaica’s modern history is a litany of failed or betrayed revolutions (and revelations). And partly it is because Goodison knows that, with one’s eyes firmly fixed on the very end of suffering, one risks missing momentary joy. In some of Travelling Mercies’ poems, the kaleidoscopic effect of past and present meeting captures a fleeting blissfulness:

Gypsy man wanders, son of Camargue horse breeders  
tinkers at broken down motor cars, makes them run  
like fiery chariot-wagons over shifting horizon. (“Romany Song” 32)

Without forgetting the hard history of the Romany, “Romany Song” is a celebration of life “that will not settle / into being contained” (32). In part this celebration reflects the fact that Goodison’s mysticism, or at least its articulation, has been informed by Sufism. The uncontained experience comes first. Goodison once said, “What happens to me very often is that I experience these things, or I write them. Then afterwards, I will find a source that will explain them to me” (Birbalsingh 153–54). In Sufism Goodison has found explanations for both her instinctive sense that there is unity in multiplicity and her sense that metaphor and analogy perform a kind of magic. However, the deep source of both instincts is the Jamaica that Goodison grew up with, and grew up within. Sufism has simply been one of the ways she has found of reconnecting with that source.

The purpose of making that connection is always, for Goodison, to heal, and her poetry often becomes the literary equivalent of the Kumina Queen’s balm yard. It is a place where herbal remedies are dispensed, prayers offered, and hymns sung; a place of baptism, cleansing, and possession. Very often, even when it is not consciously working from within the balm yard, Goodison’s poetry speaks from a place where ritual magic shapes the world. “Turn Thanks to Grandmother Hannah,” for example, celebrates the sanctifying vocation of “laundering / the used, soiled vestments of the clergy / into immaculate and unearthly brightness”:

To my grandmother with the cleansing power  
in her hands, my intention here is to give thanks  
on behalf of any who have experienced within  
something like the redemption in her washing. (14)
The discovery of the universal in the most humble domestic activities, indeed uncovering the world-changing potential in any ritual act if it is “correctly and effectively done” (“Angel of Dreamers” 78), is a recurring theme in Goodison’s poetry. Baugh gives an excellent reading of one such domestic ritual in Goodison’s “The Domestic Science of Sunday Dinner,” in which, he argues, “the articulation of a recipe becomes the enactment of a ritual that subsumes the rituals of love and death” (“Goodison’s Rituals” 28). One can also see this kind of metamorphosis in Goodison’s poems about painting. A painter herself, Goodison sees in the act of painting a ritual that puts something into the universe. In “Cézanne after Émile Zola,” she describes how the artist “ painted Mont Saint-Victoire / over and over until [he] drew and coloured / a hard mountain range for a heart” (67). In “Keith Jarrett—Rainmaker” “a painting becomes a / december of sorrel” (33). And in “The Rose Conflagration,” the power of the ritual of painting combines with the power of ritually spoken words, to create a sort of Pentecost:

Last night that gift of roses
just combusted into flames
after I shut the blue door
and recited your names.

If those without ever imagined
that the artist of Murray Mountain
had painted a hill landscape
that caused a conflagration,

The inflaming of a rose fire
in this small rented space [. . .] (62)

This emphasis on ritual has led some commentators to see in Goodison’s poetry, particularly her poetry of the late 1980s and early 1990s, a struggle to “subdue the body to the mind” (Webhofer 50). Gudrun Webhofer suggests that “Goodison sometimes sees her role as poet/priestess/healer as conflicting with her libidinal instincts” (51). And Denise deCaires Narain sees Goodison choosing increasingly “not to speak of the body and to articulate a poetic identity which transcends [. . .] particular pain in the projection of a disembodied poetic voice.” She adds, “This shift away from the body can be traced in the changing focus of her [first] three collections of poetry [. . .] a shift from a more reproductive / woman-centred delivery of the word to a more asexual/spiritual notion of deliverance via the word” (“Delivering the Word” 432).

There is much to be said for Narain’s argument, especially as she has refined it in her more recent criticism. In Contemporary Caribbean Women’s Poetry: Making Style, Narain suggests that in Heartease, the move away from an embodied woman-centered voice reflects the development of “[a] poetic identity [. . .] which is so strongly allied to ‘the people’ that the individuated poetic voice merges with the collective, so that she becomes the body politic” (161). Narain also argues that Goodison’s more recent collections (To Us All Flowers Are Roses and Turn Thanks) reflect a return to a voice both clearly individuated and embodied (162–63). The trajectory Narain gives Goodison’s poetry—from public to increasingly private rituals and from speaking as the people to speaking “about and on behalf of the people” (163)—is, I think, quite right. But I
would temper the sense that Narain and Webhofer share, that in *Heartease* Goodison’s choice to speak “for and as ‘the people’” obliges her to jettison “her embodied woman’s self” (162). I also think the reconnection with the body that Narain observes in *Turn Thanks* is not quite such a change in direction as it might seem.

The examples Narain uses to examine Goodison’s rejection of an embodied, sexual self are the “Wild Woman” poems in *Heartease*. She argues that they “point to a contradictory pull in Goodison’s work between the private and the public; between the ‘private’ world of female sexuality and her ‘public’ role as Healer/poet” (436). But it seems to me that Goodison’s rejection of the wild woman is not really a rejection of sexuality. The problem with the wild woman is not her sexuality, but her tendency to “succumb to false promise / in the yes of slim dark men” (“Farewell Wild Woman ([II]”) 49). She lacks judgment, lacks the insight that is required if one is to perform life’s affirming rituals correctly and effectively. She is chaotic. And she represents a particular kind of creativity that has become less important to Goodison since she started to become her mother and began traveling towards her creative source. The wild woman is a romantic creation, the artist as tortured, convention-defying outcast. Grand-daughter of Baudelaire, she is a Western creation. Goodison has sympathy for her, keeps a room for her. Indeed, Goodison deeply empathizes with all such artists—she has written poems for Don Drummond and Vincent Van Gogh among others—modern Prometheuses destroyed by an egoistic creativity they could not control. Goodison’s wild woman risks such self-destruction every time she makes poems of her “worst wounds” (“Some of My Worst Wounds” 29), every time she admits the King of Swords “who beckons to you with one hand, while he keeps his other hand hidden” (Birbalsingh 158–59). But in *Heartease*, Goodison wrote a “Ceremony for the Banishment of the King of Swords.” And as she has become increasingly interested in ritual creativity, the wild woman’s tendency to act egoistically, precipitously, and self-destructively has become, if not a liability, then at least an unwanted distraction.

It is important to recognize, however, that Goodison’s new focus in *Heartease* and *To Us All Flowers Are Roses* is no less “woman-centred” for that. That is, the identification of a “shift from a more reproductive / woman-centred delivery of the word to a more asexual / spiritual notion of deliverance via the word” risks a rather reductionist understanding of womanhood, especially in the Jamaican context. Goodison has, as Narain observes, begun to explore the role of priestess and healer, but this exploration does not imply a rejection of womanhood, because the Jamaican concept of womanhood comprises, among other things, the role of priestess and healer. With this in mind, it is worth remarking how body-centered, and specifically female-body centered, many spiritual healing rituals are. In-filling in Pentecostalism, possession in Revivalism and Pocomania—they are all intensely physical (and predominantly female) experiences.

They are all also experiences that require a temporary suspension of the ego to allow the Holy Spirit, the Saints, or the ancestors to enter and speak through the body of the celebrant. The prayer-like opening poems of *Heartease* reference these rituals in a number of ways. “Because I Have Been Everything” announces, “My heart life is open, transparency / my soul’s life in otherworlds” (8); “My Father Always Promised Me” speaks of the receptive being as “wired for sound,” “[of] all worlds and a healer / source of mystery” (9); and “A Forgiveness” draws on the language of the Pentecostal eudemonic, witnessing:
All changing [. . .]
is light from within

...and that light will draw
more light to itself
and that will be light
enough for a start
to a new life and a self
forgiven heart (10–11)

The rite being prepared for in these poems bears fruit in “Song of Release.” Having temporarily given up control of her self, the poet becomes oracle:

I stand with palms open, salute the sun
the old ways over. I newborn one.

...You sent a message written in
amharic on the horizon
I had to read quickly as the sky
was impatient to be going
even reading from this distance
with just opening eyes
was enough for me, the message
spelt “free.” (13)

Being open to the promptings (and demands) of the spiritual world does not bring about a jettisoning of the body. In fact it is centered in the body and manifests itself in the body sometimes quite painfully. To emphasize this, the poem that follows “Song of Release” likens the experience of being ridden by poetry to the pain of delivery. Sometimes the spirit world treats its messengers brutally, and the prophet says, “I don’t want to live like this anymore” (14). It is a sentiment echoed by the prophet Jeremiah in To Us All Flowers Are Roses. “Today,” he says, “I will not prophesy,” but admits:

If I do not prophesy
God contends with me,

Turns up a high-marrow deep
Flame, sealed fire then
Shut up burning in my bones. (43)

“I did not choose prophecy,” he laments, “prophecy chose me.” Jeremiah does not want to be the bearer of messages no one wants to hear; he wants to “marry, / Father children and feed them,” but he is “used hard” by God. The problem Goodison wrestles with in Heartease and To Us All Flowers Are Roses is how to remain obedient to her poetic calling as “sojourner poet [. . .] / calling lost souls” without becoming a Jeremiah scorched by his vision. And she seems to have wrestled successfully (“Heartease New England 1985” 40). As Narain remarks, in recent years “[Goodison’s] images of poetry—and the poetic ‘calling’—are more often presented in confidently sensual terms, than as a painful wounding” (164). This is not because Goodison has found a way to reconnect with the body—she never really disconnected—but because
she has found ways of “delivering the word” that are physically less traumatic than either the possession rites of Heartease or the wild woman antics of her earlier poetry. Her love poems, for example, have come increasingly to resemble hymns. Consider “Close to You Now” from the collection Turn Thanks, for example; even the title recalls a hymn, “Closer to You My Lord”:

I lie in my bed and cry out to you.
I cover myself with a humming tune spread
which says as it weaves itself
you, you and only you.

I want to walk across this green island

singing like the Guinea woman
showers, showers of blessing
until you cover my lips
and I go silent and still
and I will see your face
and want then for nothing. (94–95)

Given Goodison’s engagement with Jamaica’s oral traditions, this development should not be surprising—love songs have been an important part of Jamaican religious music since the Great Revival of the 1860s. Ira Sankey’s Gospel Hymns (a volume so influential that, in Jamaica, hymns are still generically referred to as “sankeys”) devotes more hymns to the idea of Jesus as loving and beloved than to any other theme (Sizer 39). What the metaphor of Jesus as lover gives sankeys is a fresh way to speak about salvation. Conversely, for Goodison, the ritualized language of hymn and prayer has become a way of speaking about what is true, upfull, and enlightening in human sexuality.

Significantly, the wild woman has recently begun to reappear in Goodison’s poetry, not now as aimless wanton, but as exuberant Revivalist “summoning the freed soul / [...] to testify and pray / [t]o wear brimstone red ... and to move seamlessly/ up and down between the worlds of spirit and sense” (“Revival Song of the Wild Woman” 92). She has become a figure for many intersecting ways of being a Jamaican woman. Not just the “exuberant Revivalist,” she is also “the wild heart, the crazy woman, the Accompong Nanny warrior” (“Bringing the Wild Woman Indoors” 90). But most of all she has become a figure for the capacity to endure or, to use a metaphor Goodison explores in “About the Tamarin,” the capacity to bear. The tamarin tree becomes an emblem for Jamaican women because, as the tree says of itself,

I bear. Not even the salt of the ocean can stunt me.
Plant me on abiding rock or foaming restless waters.
Set me in burying grounds, I grow shade for ancestors.

I am still here, still bearing after five hundred years. (16)

“Bearing,” of course, means both “enduring” and “reproducing,” and the two senses of the word are connected. Furthermore, the ability of Jamaican culture to “flourish even in rocky terrain with little or no cultural attention” (14) can be attributed to
those who “bear” it. Nourisher, “dwelling place of the spirit of rain,” healer, keeper of
memory who has “not come to rule over, overpower, / vanquish, conquer or constrain
anyone” (16), the tamarind provides a powerful metaphor for the interconnected-
ness of woman’s roles as bearer of children, bearer of culture, and source of strength
and healing. Indeed, they are so intimately connected that the distinction between
delivery and deliverance becomes almost meaningless. Every delivery—of a baby or
a poem—is a sacred act that creates a local miracle, creates possibilities, gives a
glimpse of the promise of deliverance. That is, what rituals do (the delivery of a baby
is a particularly dramatic example, but they can take the most mundane domestic
form) is perform in the same way that songs in Anancy stories perform. They initiate
a trick; they announce a possibility that, in the face of all contradiction, becomes a
miraculous reality.

Small rituals, but powerful. This was already the message of “For Rosa Parks”
in I Am Becoming My Mother:

And how was this soft-voiced woman to know
that this ‘No’
in answer to the command to rise
would signal the beginning
of the time of walking?
Soft the word
like the closing of some awful book—
a too-long story
with no pauses for reason
but yes, an ending
and the signal to begin the walking.
. . .

[saw] a man with no forty acres
just a mule
riding towards Jerusalem
And the children small somnambulists
moving in the before day morning
And the woman who never raised her voice
never lowered her eyes
just kept walking
leading toward sunrise. (41)

The use of biblical imagery here is rooted in Rastafarianism and Revivalism: the
marches that characterized the black liberation movement are imagined as being
both figuratively and literally the biblical exodus (“the time of walking”), and the
biblical apocalypse (“the closing of some awful book”). And that exodus leads “the
children” towards a sunrise that is not just Jerusalem, but also Africa. But the core of
the poem comes from further back in Jamaican culture, from Anancy stories. Rosa
Parks’s “No” is a short but enormously powerful “sing,” and it initiates a trick that
topples Babylon: by not rising, Rosa Parks rises; by refusing to move, she begins
walking. In the Melodians’ Rastafarian hymn “Rivers of Babylon,” it is Babylon’s
requirement that the captive children of Israel “sing King Alpha song / In a strange
land” that becomes its downfall: the song becomes a chant for freedom. In “For Rosa
In both cases the oppressed embark on what Goodison, in another early poem, calls “the road of the Dread.” There is no sudden deliverance on this road, no apocalypse, no Zion Train. What makes it tolerable is not the promise of the road’s imminent end—but the small miracles on the way that assure one that there is an end no matter how distant:

[When yu meet another traveller
 who have flour and yu have water and man and man
 make bread together.
 And dem time dey the road run straight and sure
 like a young horse that cant tire
 And yu catch a glimpse of the end
 through the water in yu eye
 I won’t tell yu what I spy
 but is fi dat alone I tread this road. (“The Road of the Dread” 22)

These small victories against poverty and oppression become an increasingly important focus for Goodison. In “For Rosa Parks,” she achieves this focus by framing the grand gesture, the mass marches, with images of the “soft-voiced woman” who began it all. In the end what the poem celebrates most is not the great exodus, but the small personal victory contained in the fact that Rosa Parks “never raised her voice / never lowered her eyes.” Such small personal victories are the subject of many of Goodison’s poems, particularly those in To Us All Flowers Are Roses. “October in the Kingdom of the Poor,” “Coir,” “Nayga Bikkle,” and “Bun Down Cross Roads” all celebrate largely symbolic victories over oppression that somehow suggest “a glimpse of the end.” The last of them, “Bun Down Cross Roads,” recounts the “[l]egend of Bun Down, bad word merchant” who, arrested and fined for “using decent language indecently,” pulls a ten pound note from his pocket:

It crackles in the courtroom air and Bun Down
rolls his baritone providing rich timbre, under.
“I have on my person these ten pounds, I wish
 to curse, until I have reached this sum.”

And so said, so it was done. (11)

This is Caliban telling Prospero, “You taught me language; and my profit on’t is, I know how to curse.” Bun Down very neatly turns the tables on her majesty’s court, undermining its authority by turning it into a “bad word merchant,” and establishing himself, however briefly, as effectively above the law, able to buy it with pocket money. If the victory seems largely symbolic, the last line of the poem suggests that, on some level, it may be more. It recalls the fiat lux of Genesis. The very act of speaking has done something, and the line allows the interpretation that what has been said, and so done, is Bun Down’s cursing of the court. That is, for ten pounds, her majesty’s court has sold Bun Down the right to chant it down, burn it down with words.

The poem “From the Book of Local Miracles, Largely Unrecorded,” also in To Us All Flowers Are Roses, celebrates another small victory. It recalls how a woman with no food, in an act of “simple laith,” set a pot of water to boil with nothing but a stone in it:
Just as the water
began to break
over the stone

enter one neighbour
with an abundance
of coconuts and ground provisions.

Then another
fresh from slaughter
offering a portion of goat's flesh. (48)

The poem is a variation on the common folk story in which the trickster hero promises to make “stone soup.” In that story, the hero tricks his victim into giving him various “additional” ingredients he needs to complete the dish, including meat and vegetables. In Goodison's version, although the same trick is played, there is no trickster and no victim. This is the Anancy trick re-imagined as a “local miracle.” For a time it ushers in a state of grace, but it is in the nature of local miracles that they do not last. They must be repeated like the most domestic rituals—the laundering of vestments, the preparation of meals, or the beating of coir used in bedding—but they give one the courage to go on. Small victories are followed by defeats and long battles against oppression, made bearable only by moments of extraordinary grace. Sometimes, indeed, the only victory is enduring.

What prevents Goodison's vision from becoming pessimistic is that double sense of the word “bear” at work in “About the Tamarind.” Jamaican people don't just “bear” their situation; they “bear” fruit. Enduring is more than mere survival; it is the creation of possibilities. And local miracles are the realization of those possibilities, the perpetual rekindling of hope. That is, hope comes not from the promise of an ending, but from the promise of being able to continue. In “Never Expect”—which appears with “About the Tamarind in Travelling Mercies—Goodison writes:

[. . .] you call
the name of your place
into the responding wind

by doing so recreating
your ancestral ceremony
of naming. "Never Expect"
you name your place,
your own spot to cultivate
a small start-over Eden. (10)

Eden is not the place to which we finally return; it is the place from which we are always beginning. It is the “new garden / of fresh start over” that Goodison gives thanks for in “From the Garden of Women Once Fallen.” And for Goodison, it is in Jamaica.

So Jamaica is the land to which Jamaican people must literally and metaphorically return. Redemption means reclaiming Jamaica's history—both its history of
pain and its history of healing. It is a process Goodison began for herself in *To Us All Flowers Are Roses*, trying to tell the stories of Jamaican people, “the half that has never been told” (“Mother, the Great Stones Got to Move” 4–5): the story of Bag-a-Wire, who betrayed Marcus Garvey, and of Papacita “who always favored a clean merino / over any shirt with collar and sleeves” (“Papacita” 12); of tenement dwellers who plant “paint pan gardens in the paved yards” (“In City Gardens” 14); of the sweet vendor Miss Gladys, “the queen of Ptomaine Palace / her flat fritters laying drowsy / with sleeping overnight oil (“Outside the Gates” 24); and of Anne Pengelly “maidservant, late of the San Fleming Estate” (“Annie Pengelly” 27).

This process of taking possession of the past is also a process of being possessed by it. In “Annie Pengelly” particularly, poetry is imagined as a process of being possessed by an ancestor who wishes to address the living. It is not quite the same ego-suspending process that the poet seems to undergo in *Heartease*; the poet has learned to remain herself even as she delivers the ancestor’s message:

[T]his is the first thing she asked me to say,  
that Annie is not even her real name.  
A name is the first thing we own in this world.  
We lay claim to a group of sounds  
which rise up and down and mark out our space  
in the air around us.  
We become owners of a harmony of vowels and consonants  
singing a specific meaning.

Her real name was given to her  
at the pastoral ceremony of her outdooring.  
Its outer meaning was, “she who is precious to us.” (27–28)

The narrator, representing Annie, recounts the sale of “she who is precious to us” into slavery, and her suffering at the hands of her mistress (28). She concludes:

So I say history owe Annie  
thousands of nights  
of sleep upon a feather bed.  
Soft feathers from the breast of  
a free, soaring bird,  
one bright blanket,  
and her name returned. (31)

Gordon Rohlehr once observed that “the most important feature of [the literary] use of possession is the dialogue between the living and the dead, between the present and the past over their neglect of the dead: the present must settle with the past by performing the rituals of reverence through which the past is laid to rest” (67). This is what Goodison is doing in “Annie Pengelly.” Indeed much of Goodison’s poetry, in the last ten years, has been about performing those “rituals of reverence”; about recalling the true-true names of things; about releasing “the harmony of vowels and consonants” that give things their meaning.

In “What We Carried That Carried Us,” she calls the songs and stories that contain the names of things the “remaining remnant”:
Remaining remnant tasting of life, blood, salt, bitter wet sugar. Ball of light, balance power, pel lucid spirit wafer without weight, ingested, taken as nourishment, leaven within the system.

Remnant remaining rise now. (4)

The poem recalls an earlier poem, “Survivor,” which likens that “remnant remaining” to a seed carried under the tongue:

That survivor over there
with bare feet and bound hair
has some seeds stored under her tongue
and one remaining barrel
of rain
She will go indoors
when her planting is done
loosen her hair
and tend to her son
and over the bone flute music
and the dead story it tells,
listen for grace songs
from her ankle bells. (“Survivor” 16)

As Webhofer observes, this is the poet as survivor called upon “to spread the word of redemption, to restore the hope of the present and future generations” (64). The planting of a seed, saved despite the nearly total destruction of the place from which it came, is connected to the nurturing of the next generation, and to the release of “grace songs.” It is a potent metaphor for several reasons. The growth of dormant seed into fruitful life is a natural metaphor for the way the word contains within it the possibility of the thing. It is also a metaphor for the circular exchange between death and life, failure and success, despair and new hope. The growth of a seed is that miraculous trick that releases “grace songs,” and planting seed the act of simple faith that makes the miracle possible. Finally, the planting of seed is also a metaphor for the rooting of culture. The seed may have come from Africa, but once it is planted in Jamaican soil, that soil too becomes home, the guardian of the true-true name of things and resting place of the ancestors. For Goodison this makes the land the source of healing—literally, inasmuch as the land is the source of cerasee, mint, tamarind, chamomile, aloes, and all the other herbs used in folk medicine. But it also makes the land the source of healing in a broader spiritual sense. In “After the Green Gown of My Mother Gone Down,” the poem that opens Turn Thanks, Goodison recalls the funeral of her mother:

We laid her down, full of days,
chant griot from the book of life,
summon her kin from the long-lived line of David and Margaret.
Come Cleodine, Albertha,
Flavius, Edmund, Howard and Rose,
Marcus her husband gone before
come and walk Dear Doris home. (4)

This is the final chapter of life as a journey to meet the ancestors, a return to source. And this journey to the source of self is the final affirmation of the connectedness of all things, the completion of the cycle and entry into the start-over Eden:

Mama, Aunt Ann says
that she saw Aunt Rose
come out of an orchard
red with ripe fruit
and called out laughing to you.
And that you scaled the wall
like two young girls
scampering barefoot among
the lush fruit groves. (5)

Here, perhaps, Goodison has finally found the remedy (part bush tea, part song of conversion) for the “tourist-dream edenism” that “Jamaica 1980” lamented. And the promise of Goodison’s poetry in Travelling Mercies is that there will always be this start-over—for those traveling; for wild women turned Revivalists; for Jamaica itself. Jamaica will need its healers and shepherds: people who can perform a Nine Night ceremony for those gone down, who can come representing the ancestors, and who know the properties of aloe and peppermint; people who can perform the small rituals that will bring Jamaica back to itself. It will need its griots to sound myrrh notes, shape new psalms and new praise songs; and storytellers, scholars, and bad word merchants to tell the untold half. But it will survive, as long as there are Jamaicans ready to undertake the planting of ever-living healing trees and lush fruit groves, soon come Heartease, “and it reach till / it purge evil from this place / till we start again clean” (“Heartease III” 38).

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