

# **No Back Door**

*Also by Merwyn Taylor*

An Island of His Own (1992)

The Goat (1999)

Gone Away (2006)

*all published by Junction Press, New York*

# No Back Door

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*for Joan, who tried*



## Going Blind

My cousin's going blind. Most of the day  
he spends in the space between the edge  
of the bed and the dresser, listening to  
music, while his mother sways, one hand  
stretched out, the other holding  
an imaginary partner.

Each time she turns, the hem of her dress  
brushes his knees. Such nice music, she says,  
and no one to dance with. When it's  
a song she really loves, he can almost see  
the man she is clinging to, as they  
glide across the floor.

## **My Sister the Seamstress**

*for Emeris*

After she died,  
I passed by her house  
late one afternoon.

From the side where  
her sewing room used to be  
I thought I heard a machine,

and I imagined her making  
a gown for Rhona,  
a shirt for me.

When last I was there  
we talked about our father,  
how we had no pictures of him.

I have one of her at his  
funeral, a lace handkerchief  
up to her lips. It is a picture

of grief, how best to handle it:  
in a well-fitting, tailored outfit.  
With, or without, gloves.

## Good Friends

My father, retired from the train,  
sits in his pajamas in the middle  
of the day, blue enamel cup in hand.

Telemaque, his friend in khaki,  
has brought us cane. Sweating he  
stacks the stalks in the kitchen.

My mother cleans shrimp curled  
like her arthritic fingers. My father's  
thumb was severed between cars.

Telemaque laughs at every little thing:  
the way my father gulps his tea, how  
my mother removes the veins, grimacing.

## Onward, Christian

In one dark chorus the male voices  
sweep over the gravestones and  
down the lane, causing the palings  
to vibrate. It is as if the soldiers

are coming through, and we can't  
help but feel we are the enemy,  
heading for cinema on a Sunday,  
that they've been sent to kill us.

We imagine Ramkissoon up there  
in the pulpit, chastising those who  
dared put coins in the collection:  
"Let them fall like leaves!",

their poor fingers having to dig  
deeper, while his black robe  
billowed upon his entrance and  
at his leaving. It is an image

forever stamped upon the mind of  
some teacher exiled to the farthest  
reaches of the island for forgetting  
to wear a tie, or for being caught

wining in the Carnival.

## Buckra

We come to the house that is  
always closed up, sun or rain.  
The lady with skin like parchment  
peeks out. What do you want?

A branch of that bird of paradise  
that grows so well in her yard,  
and some of those palm fronds,  
for costumes. She calls Carnival

devil business, and abruptly  
lowers the curtain. Her fence  
has fallen in, exposing the roots  
of the gri-gri. Her brother

(some say her son!) is listening  
to one of those religious stations.  
His hair is long, like Jesus'.  
He walks the city in boxers, barefoot.

## Culture Lesson

It was the week before Carnival.  
No work was being done.  
In class we were telling Carnival stories  
and Mr. Hosein, our teacher, joined in.

“I only experienced Carnival once,”  
he said, in that nasal whine of his.  
“I took my boys to the savannah,  
and a big fight broke out.

“I had to hold their hands and run,”  
he declared, showing us how they ran.  
We fell out of our seats, laughing.  
“It was the first, and last time,” he said.

Mr. Hosein was not smiling.  
I remember glancing back  
as we filed out after  
the bell had rung,

and he looked sad,  
as any teacher would,  
when the class hadn't understood  
the lesson at all.

## On the La Basse

On the La Basse I stood with the men who had come with the truck, and supervised the burning of thousands of old receipt books, one of the duties of the Revenues Clerk when the dusty room at the Treasury became too full, overflowing with papers and long crates of bicycle license plates.

And as the bonfire rose higher and higher among the piles of the city's garbage, I saw men, women and children clamber with bags, saving whatever they could, eggs and half-rotten onions to keep or sell to the Charlotte St. stores like Louie Gilman Thomas that made a business of catering to the poor.

Late into evening I stayed, making sure every number on every page was charred, poking with a stick and circling the mound, while the men smoked in the tray of the truck and the driver climbed impatiently in and out of the cab. The law was clear about these things, Mr. Chen the assistant AG had instructed.

In the growing dark I read, by the glow of the embers, the numbers 001 to 100, as they curled inward, like black florets. And all around the windows of Shanty Town let out soft lights, as if poverty had its tender moments, laughter, and sighs, not unlike the last of the sparks dying, the ashes settling, the whine of the truck, reversing.

## The Market

I never could stand the smell of the market,  
the fish and chive and other heady  
seasonings, fresh blood sluicing through  
the sieves between the meat stalls and circling  
over the open mouth of the drains, never  
could look the live head of the chicken in the eye,  
knowing its fate, its comb nervous and drained  
of color, the neck as thin as a finger under  
the restless feathers, the watercress like  
green plumage coming over the top of the bag.  
Never could take the crowd, every pair of shoulders  
hunched to accommodate another's, the fish scales  
flying, the guts dropped in a bucket, the flies, oh  
the flies swimming in the warm and fetid air and  
landing silently on the pudding, the soft slices  
moving back from the blade, the butcher's apron  
six shades of red, the provisions brown and rutted  
in their piles. And the skirts and the sweaters in  
their stained and mismatched raggedness, the slippers,  
the crocus bags with the dirt of the land and the stems  
and peelings, they follow me down the aisles of  
haggling hands exchanging the green and blue dollars,  
the pigtailed pink and pungent in brine, the aloe slimy  
and bitter without tasting, into the light of the journey  
home, never liked being next to the housewife  
in the backseat of the taxi, the bird's heart beating  
down in the brown paper bag, under the yellow  
pumpkin like a sun in the rearview mirror, or listening  
to the five-way conversation full of innuendos about  
simmering, and gravy, and the groaning table.