

FARRELL

“...he said is my imagination / but I know I hearing the
bassman.”

– The Mighty Shadow

4 am Ash Wednesday, 1974

A panyard in an outlying neighbourhood of Port of Spain. Sunrise two hours away, the lights of the previous night gone. A nearby lamppost stands lonely. Gone the sounds of the last day, gone the raucous brass and steel, the flights of melody and harmony, rebel rhythms and blended revelry. Gone the off-key notes made beautiful by the crowd. Yet, after the sound there is not absence of sound. Listen close for lingering echoes, tiny, easy-to-miss shadows in mutable light.

From deep in the panyard, a figure speaks, the voice soft, deliberate –

First, to begin, I not from Hell. Don't focking listen to Winston. I ain' from hell. I not no blasted hellion. That man have everybody believing I is his enemy. The whole flickin' country taking lie for truth, friend for enemy, taking help for harm. I eh taking that. I fed up and I eh taking no more.

Winston, man. Let me tell you something about Winston eh? If wasn't for me, you wouldn't know who he is. You wouldn't know, and nobody wouldn't care. If wasn't for me, Winston would be pulling fisherman seine in Castara, or joining wood somewhere down in Mamoral. Don' feel is

gallery I gallerying. I just stating facts. I don't boast. I don't rhyme. I don't use ten-dollar word, like a Midnight Robber. I is a plain talk man.

The figure climbs from between steelpans at the rear of the panyard. The pans are not carefully stacked; there is no order here as there was two nights ago. The pans mirror masqueraders at last lap, and the word that comes to mind is "deshabille".

So plain talk, bad manners. I working with Winston since he was a pissin'-tail boy in Les Coteaux' bush. Work, simple as that. Doing a job just like any preacher, teacher or gravedigger. But is a thankless work. After all, who you know does be glad to see the gravedigger?

First time I find Winston, I see this gangly-leg li'l boy in a merino and a short pants, daydreaming in the bush. Not standing, not walking, just shifting 'round li'l bit, home-made sapats dragging loose on his foot. The boy chin tilt up like he looking for something. To see this boy so, you would say he don' have nothing to do, he just skylarking. But this boy leave a bucket by the standpipe. This boy supposed to be drawing water for his grandmother and finding his way straight home. He have no business skylarking. I watch his face, follow his eyes up to a breadfruit tree, trace a path along one branch till my eyes land on a blue wing and a gray head, a tanager singing busy-busy. I could see it now like is right in front my face – Winston' eyes focused and alive, that tanager looking as though he and Winston carrying on a big-time conversation, speaking the same language. The boy Winston was in a *tete-a-tete* with a bird, yes. Well when I see that, I decide me and Winston go be good, you know? Good.

What I see that day is that the boy know where to find music. Any-and-everybody could listen to music, yes. And everybody like music – I mean, I could never trust a man who don' have no kind of music he real-real like. But Winston different, he

don' just hear and enjoy music, the boy have talent to find music. That day Winston wasn't just studying the notes the tanager chirping, it had a whole background section for Winston too: li'l breeze rustling leaves, a' old branch creaking, a pot-hound barking now and then in the distance. That is what he was doing the first day I see him, he and the blue-and-grey tanager. In music conversation. In concert.

I watch Winston grow up in Les Coteaux from that day. He find music in the usual places – the voices in his grandfather choir, the strings of a fiddle and a bow, a shango drum – but he know how to find music in the branches of a breadfruit tree and on the slimy rocks down by the river too. Music in a beat-up water bucket, in the breeze and the waves. So as far as that go, getting Winston and the music together, keeping them together – that was easy. In truth, I would be lying to say that I ain' enjoy the work I have to do. And Winston didn't have no complaints about me in them days. We was good.

The figure climbs up over the metal rods of one gayelle, crosses forward, stepping over pan-racks, walking between upended and kilkitay pans. His footfall, soft on well-trod earth. His shirttail brushes a guitar pan and a gentle softness rings large in the stillness.

Watching that boy in them days, I never know I would be standing up here today, in this panyard, not sure if to laugh or cry. Celebrating and trying to clear my name, all at the same time. But what you want from me? I not clairvoyant, not no see-er-man. But see or don't see, this is me this Ash Wednesday morning. Standing here in this panyard, what else to expect from Ash Wednesday though: how you should feel on a morning when you shift, when the nation, the whole world shift sudden-sudden, from decadence to sacrifice, from kaiso to canticle? That must bring some disruption, right? Some discomfort. So this Ash Wednesday morning I ain' sure how I feel, but maybe I ain' supposed to know.

We come a long way from Winston as a boy. When he was a boy, my job was to make l'il space for that boy-child in that village.

Les Coteaux like any village in Tobago. And one thing Tobago people know about is ceremony, about ritual and celebration. Tobago people have their own special set of protocol: protocol for a proper wedding, a funeral, a baptism, not to mention for a church holiday like Easter or Corpus Christi and so on. I talking about food, about crab and dumpling, cou cou, pigeon peas. I talking 'bout dance, about Tobago reel, heel-and-toe, jig, bélé. And I talking about music most of all. I mean is a panyard I standing up in, and is Winston I talking about, so I must be talking about music. Tobago music – the tambrin band, with boom, cutter and roller tambrin drums, with fiddle and triangle. A tambrin drum, is a simple instrument, but you would get fool if you believe simple is easy, or simple is not important. Simple as it look, the tambrin drum well important in Tobago, it link to important events in people life, in village life.

Well, about a year after Winston come to live by he grandparents, the men from the village tambrin band was getting ready for a thanksgiving feast. By the time Winston see them, the process for making the drums did already start long time. Weeks before, Mr. Jarvis choose the right latan tree to chop, and he and Boysie and Berkley chop and carve and bend and tie the wood. What look like three simple rings the day Winston see it was craft, man. Weeks and weeks of craft. And don' talk about the skin and them. About Berkley getting the ram goat skin and the ewe skin, about the curing – the barrel of fetid ash water, the nasty stinkin' smell, the flies-them. Nah, all that did done happen before Winston was seeing the process. But to give jack he jacket, Winston approach the thing – the drum making – with a kind of respect, a reverence for all that went on before, even though he ain' see it, even though he not sure what that is. Respect.

Well boy, watch Winston standing up, admiring Mr. Jarvis, Berkley and Boysie stretching the skins and mounting them on the rims. As usual Winston not where he supposed to be, as usual Winston caught up and have no regard for time. Winston sit down on a big stone watching the men from outside the circle.

By this time, people in the village used to seeing Winston drifting and daydreaming. People was used to Winston grandmother and grandfather asking after the boy, and reporting back that he was in such and such a place – nowhere he was supposed to be. So Winston watching Jarvis and the rest of the men tuning the tambrin drums with fire.

The bonfire stack like a totem tower, flames dancing bright even in the bright of a morning sun, sinewy arms of smoke reaching up to high heaven, and the wood crackling and hissing to beat the band. Winston watching the men holding the skins to the heat, drawing them back and tapping, testing for the right pitch. Everything moving as if it planned, as if is a dance that practice. Wood, flame, smoke, goatskin, drummer, drumbeat. Heat the goatskin, beat the drum, test the pitch, heat the drum. Winston wrapped up in the rhythm. To be sure he catch on the true-true beat of the rhythm, he listening for the pitch of each tambrin drum same as the big men doing. And is catch-up he catch-up. Winston walk right up to the fire, in the circle of the tambrin men. Berkley stoking the flames. Jarvis tap-tap-tap the warm cutter. Winston tap-tap-tap his hands together, palm against palm flattened out and adjusting so the pitch match the drum. Boysie knock-knock-knock the boom. Winston knock-knock too, this time fist against palm. Boysie lean in then to give the boom more heat – it almost there but it don' have the exact pitch he want yet. Winston lean in to the fire with the palm of his hand.

The men-them will tell you – the men-them had was to tell

Winston grandparents the same thing too – up until that moment, with the boy reaching out his hand right to the flame, they didn't realise he was standing there with them. They will tell you that and they wouldn't be lying. But is also the truth that in hindsight each of them could tell you what Winston was doing before he reach out; they could tell you he was right there inside the circle, right there mimicking their actions. Yet they not lying to say they didn't know it when it was happening.

Berkley act the fastest. All the men react, but Berkley was the fastest and the closest to Winston. Berkley drop the drum, pivot he body with his right arm forming a arc, scoop up the boy around his chest, keep turning in a single motion and fling 'way the boy from the fire. One motion with a smoothness like a piqué dancer.

When the story told, everybody say how they never could believe Berkley of all people could be so quick and so graceful. After all, is Berkley who does walk down the road like he will never reach where he going, like time is not he friend and like he bandy legs is he enemy. Everybody say, too, how after Berkley fling Winston away, the boy get up off the dusty ground and start tap-tap-tapping his hands like nothing happen at-all, at-all.

People talk about Winston plenty after that. Big man and woman not sure what to make of the whole episode. The village children-them pointing. In truth, you can't blame a child for pointing out a next child who talking to birds, a boy changing the maths assignment into melody, a skinny feller drifting away into the river and whistling. So it have nobody to blame in that case, but the boy have to be protected from too much of that pointing and staring, and laughing and questions like *What wrong with he at all?* People not easy. Not even the people who look like you, the people who living like you in a small village on a small piece of land in a big salty sea. Maybe

them is the worst kind. They so used to things being the same way, to a boy doing what a boy do, a fisherman fishing, a washerwoman washing, they don' want to see nothing different, or nobody different. So maybe they not the worst, because is not bad they bad – but the most dangerous, because they have the most hold on you.

But I do my job. I save Winston from following birdsong too deep into the bush. I save Winston from his classmates, neighbours, the whole village, who at any moment might see the Winston I see, see how much he really different, see that Winston – without understanding what I understand. See that Winston and react. I saved him from their reactions. Reactions does trip people up, alter paths.

The figure sets right a pair of tenor pans. Takes his time, arranges them carefully. Brushes off the surface with his sleeve.

We come a long way from Winston as a boy. We past Winston leaving the village, saying he want to sing kaiso. Past Winston trying to join this calypso tent and the next. Past the ketch-ass days and the almost-but-not quite there yet music. Past standing on the outside of this circle and that circle, standing outside too much o' circle to count. I was there with him, doing a work. Whatever it take to protect him, help him. But I ain' really trying to tell you all about Winston life. I come a long way with Winston, man and is here we are. Here and now. Ash Wednesday morning. The whole country talking about Winston, the whole of Trinidad and Tobago have the tune ringing in they head. Every last body in this place singing that *I is the Bassman From Hell*.

The figure removes slim pan-sticks from his pants pocket. Slowly, deliberately, he plays a few notes. Scales, carefully. Then a melody, less slowly. "Mary Had a Little Lamb". He adjusts the pans, he adjusts his body, the distance between his feet, the distance between his torso and the tenor pans. Then he begins the melody of the calypso that on

Ash Wednesday 1974 everyone in this twin-island nation knows by heart. He plays the melody of the verse, once through, simple and straight. And then he plays the melody again, improvising, riffing on it – “Mary Had a Little Lamb” seeping through like singing in rounds. His wrists flash strong and flexible, his pan-sticks occupy multiple spaces at the same time. The playing is beautiful.

All yuh hear that? You hear me play them tenor pan? Winston say I is a bassman. What you think? How it sound? It sound good, right? Of course it sound good. And this ain’ no bass drum, right?

Yeah man, I could stand up here and talk all morning long. I could focking talk all day, talk for forty days and forty nights – because is Lent now after all. I could talk, but the best way to prove what I saying is to show you, right? Winston lie. Yuh see for yourself I is not a bassman – not *just* a bassman. And if you see that with your own eyes, you hear it with your own ears, then I don’t have to say nothing else.

The figure runs through the verse once more, virtuosity evident. This time he sings the lyrics of the song. “... planning to give up calypso and go plant peas in Tobago...” He slows his playing to match the pace of his singing. He sings, almost tuneless, in stark contrast to the pretty pan notes he plays. He sings the verse again. The second time his voice rings sardonic, his features shift and his face speaks louder and louder of anger. His voice sharpens and rises until the last words. His voice drops, then, to a near-whisper. A controlled pitch layered with so much emotion as to frighten. “... a bassman in meh head... a man in meh head, I want him to dead.” He stops playing. He drops the sticks.

The figure stands still – stock still. He listens to the sound of his voice, the traces of the sound of his voice in the panyard, the traces of the words in his head. His posture changes, he seems to wilt, to cave in on himself.

When finally he moves again, he shifts the tenor pan, sets up

another pair of tenors beside it. He moves, pace quickening, through the panyard, righting toppled instruments, shifting steel pans into sections, the tenors in pride of place, the cellos, the guitars. Finally, he gets to the bass drums, the largest, the heaviest. He is careful, focused. He is silent as he moves, his features rearranged by concentration.

When he is done, he enters into the circle of one set-up of basses, the gayelle, steps up on the small wooden platform within the circle.

Listen. I don' know what comes next. I don' have no idea what Winston going to do now. I don' know what I going to do. All this time I working to get to a place right? Working with Winston to get to a place. I working with Winston when he working with me, working when he running from me too. And well, is not me he was running from. Is never the work he was running from either. It ain' easy to be a calypsonian, a pan man, a bassman. It ain' easy. Half the time you chasing after something – the right tune, the right words, the audience, the performance – wanting to be seen, to be heard. Chasing and working and battling, man. It ain' easy to fight-up so. But what even harder than that is the other half of the time you running away from the same thing you was chasing. Running just as hard in the opposite direction.

Calyponian, panman, bassman – same thing. Must be same thing for sculptor, dancer, poet too, I don' know. But I know about pan. I know calypso. I know Winston and I know myself.

Listen man. Listen. Winston and me is almost the same eh? I know what it take to reach this place, I know the chasing and running away. The difference between me and Winston is he is a better man than I was. He better. He braver. Winston ain' no coward. He chase more than he run. And when he think about running, I was there to make sure he don't run too far. Yes, I taking my credit. Yes man. I was there to make sure he don' run too far. Because I damn well know what that look like.

That is hell. That is fucking hell. Run too far from the music, run too far from what is yours and that is fucking hell in truth. I could never let that happen to Winston, I know too good what that look like.

The bassman looks out over the gayelle; from the wooden platform he surveys the entire panyard, the scene he has staged carefully, the instruments he has righted and arranged.

Listen, it was the boomer tambrin drum that Winston almost walk into the fire for. The boomer tambrin does play the bass yuh know? I know from that day, Winston connected to the bass. I mean all of we connected to the bass, connected like a pulse linking mother and child, continent and island. So Winston connected, but is a specific kind of connection to the bass. A bass is a special thing to Winston, to me too.

So is I who lie. Is I-self lie this big Ash Wednesday morning. I lie when I say I angry with Winston. I lie. I ain' vex. Nah, I might be frighten because I don't know what come next. I might feel a-how about how Winston tell the story. But is his story to tell. I waste my chance when I had a story to tell. And now is Winston who have to tell he-own story. And I can't vex, because he know what he know, and I know what I know.

The figure takes two pan sticks from his back pocket, the rubber mallets large. The figure, the Bassman, hums the chorus to the-now-famous calypso, plays the bass parts of the arrangement. The Bassman plays with his entire body; each joint pivots in complex balance with the next, each muscle flexes and softens, an intricate choreography. It is a dance, this playing, a dance that inhabits the entire gayelle. He inhabits the entire gayelle, his features span time, his body and the music a reckless circular creation – impossible to distinguish which generates which. The Bassman plays and the entire steel orchestra comes alive. The notes to Winston's calypso ring large. The bass notes dominate.