

BEING RENDERED VISIBLE IN THE GEORGIAN HOUSE by Ros Martin

1798, Valet to Mr Pinney, Pero/William Jones has just died, a distressed maidservant to Mrs Pinney, Fanny Coker, is visited by an ancestral spirit, 'the Old slave' .

'Like the wind on the ocean, violent, then eerily absent.

Gone.'

Events dot,

an ever moving timeline

Here, now, time stands still,

a Georgian time,

This room, this house, this city, globally

Eighteenth century gentility

merchandise extracted like cane juice

the sinews of sugar cultivation

in field, in house,

Invisible woman.

Objects,

These *(holds out palm of hand)*

Memories.....,

clay pipes,

Smooth, meditative, comforting,

distracts from rumblings in an ever hungry belly.....

Ancestral spirits come.

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.....'Shall I tell you what it is like, life in a mulatto skin? In this household, I am tragedy, a lie! I am to be eternally grateful. I am to say nothing, think nothing, feel nothing, be nothing, but answerable to endless whims. Be grateful for what?'

'To the gods not them,' the Old Slave says.

She, Fanny, can see nothing to be grateful for.

The Old Sage motions to the open window. He holds out the palm of an emaciated hand; releases a feather. It floats before it descends.

'A symbol of our ability as humans to rise above problems, pains, heartbreaks, illness to travel to another world, to be reborn, to grow spiritually is our freedom'.

'Please...don't say that word!

I am so free,' she says. 'I have freedom papers issued me aged eleven, yet my mother remains in captivity. With this new 'freedom', my owners draw me close to them. I am raped aged 14.

Nothing of my will can contradict theirs.

Escape? Where would I go? Who do I trust? I must stay with Mrs Pinney, when Mr Pinney dies, he says, or my annuity goes.

I know nobody. What would be my fate?! I have seen and heard all I need to know about England, her freedoms the coterie of Baillies, Tobins, Gills and their ilk, uphold.

In and out, in and out, like ships in yonder harbour, the claret red faced coterie, go in and out the house, apoplectic with rage. They lobby Parliament to counter the abolitionists' petitions. Jubilations from Church bells and firecrackers resound, long into the night the slave trade bill is defeated. Hoorah!

What is there for me to do, but dress up in fine petticoats, take tea in bone china cups with Mrs Pinney! So my sisters believe,....'Fanny will never wield a cutlass to sugar cane grass!'

'Enough! No more Fanny Coking!

I am defeated by all this madness like Pero.....

Ah! At least he's free...

And I am.... ?'

'Who are any of us?' the Old Slave remarks,' why are we here, if but to add or take away from the sum of humanity of our own free will? Don't let their demands imprison your soul. Be free in your spirit or your heart will sink'.

'Like William?'

Fanny laughs.

'So selfish of him!'

Pero, the barber, bought on an auction block aged 12, alongside her mother Igbo Polly, also 12 and countless other frightened children.

The Old Slave draws on his pipe.

'Maybe, just maybe, William didn't mean to.....'

'Drink and kill himself? Just wanted to be rendered useless?

Who would ever believe that of Pero?' She says.

'Precisely.'

Pero the tooth extractor, Pero the trader, Pero the money lender, Pero the loyal valet who serves Mr Pinney nigh on 32 years, now ungratefully and wantonly gives up. Why?'

'....Maybe, just maybe, he wished to be returned to Nevis, to comfort, to raise his motherless daughter, be reunited with his beloved sisters.'

'Only, how would that ever happen?!' retorts Fanny.

'Your mother?'

'Don't'.

Igbo Polly: the seamstress, the trader, a midwife, in possession of a shingle and board house on the plantation...

'Quite remarkable!' says the Old Slave, 'to retain one's African identity in a name, is no small achievement.'

'Yet she'll go nowhere.' Fanny says bitterly. 'Igbo Polly who survives the transatlantic passage, a motherless girl child, separated from loved ones, can't even purchase her own freedom, or prevent her younger daughter and son, from cutting sugar cane!'

'What is it?'

'My mother, my brothers, my sisters, will I....., ever..... see them again?'

Fanny knows what the silence means.

'How will she or I bear it?'

'With all that your mother has experienced, do you not think she sees and knows and worries for you; how her 15 year oldest daughter, could leave all behind, make that tumultuous journey, traversing an ocean full of ghosts and unrested spirits, to a land full of strangers; praying the while, that you may yet meet kindly people.'

'There is no-one, nothing comforts me but my Baptist church. I am known as Frances.'

'O Frances! Motherless child of a motherless child, is your mother not doing the same as you, choking back tears, finding good cheer to lift you and keep you going, in 3 monthly exchange of letters & gifts; keeping under wraps, all the heaviness in her heart?'

'I miss them so much, and here, my life is one of madness!'

'Let the madness stay where it belongs with them. When you push people down to elevate yourself and are dependent on those you despise, what can this yield for

posterity but more lies and deceit. So pity them, they who cannot love another like themselves, they who know the price of everything but the value of nothing.'

'They are my family. I hate them! I'm supposed to pretend everything is fine. I am favoured.' She laughs.

'Be a witness to your own truths, have faith in humanity. There are those who struggle and are seeking truth here, find them. Let go of hate.

The moon, the stars, the skies and trees see everything and are there to watch over you; wherever you are, take heart.'

The bell for the breakfast room rings.

'Go forward daughter of Igbo woman'.

Fanny picks up the feather from the floor. She straightens her back.

'William didn't mean to kill himself. I am in captivity but will my spirit to be free. I will provide for my family as long as I breathe.'

That's right Fanny Coker.

Gone is the Old Slave spirit.

Gone in 1820, is Fanny/ Frances Coker, aged 52.

Survived by her sisters,

a 95 year old mother, who survives the end of slavery; to witness her emancipation.

Pipes

A Baptist memorial stone,

Bones

Greenbank cemetery,

Bristol.....

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Gone.

