

## Betsy

By Edson Burton

Betsy a hang from de stable beam. She sagging belly facing mi like a thick curtain. De coarse hairs a bridle. Mi push mi fingers inna she skin. She skin part soft as petal. Inside de heart and liver, cooked through, a steam like pot waiting pon shelf. Firs' de liver den the heart. Dem taste so tender. De blood sweeter dan cane syrup. Mi chew every piece slow slow. When no taste an' no juice lef' is when mi swallow. Heart and liver done mi pull out one, two, three ribs. Mi mek sure dat de bone shine clean before mi done.

Strength start fire thru mi body. Mi legs straighten mi ches' fill up, de mist in mi head clear. De fog gone is like mi eye come back. I pick up de 'lass an is one piece of cutting mi do. Cane a fall an' fly lef' an' right, de dust choke de air mi nar cough. No stop, mi cut thru de night. Driver whip nuh fall pon anybody. Im voice quiet.

Is de smell break mi out. De pot right in front of mi a burn de smoke thick against the early haze. Is how long mi a dream wid mi eye open? Mi lif' up mi ware from de fire pit, pour out jus' enough water from mi calabash to put out mi fire.

Ever since Massa Wood bring Betsy to Newton is trouble. She come down de path to de yard walkin behin' de Hog Driver slow like a White oman, She tek her time a swish wey fly from she backside. When hog Driver mek mi feed her after im sick wid yaws, mi see how fat she is, how content. Is not right. She full o flesh. She leg too brittle to support she body. She waddle from corner to corner she roun' black

backside a roll like young negar gyal trying fe catch man eye. Since den she jus' a get riper an' riper - eating, resting, sleeping. Is like Betsy a drink all de juice out of Newton. De longer de drought drain mi de bigger she get an' now she mek mi burn mi ware.

De start of de dream come back to me. Mi trace it back, turn it over. It try slip wey, mi grab like it a beast wid tail, an hol' it till it steady. De dream finish mi plan. De plan mi start when mi firs' see Betsy. Dis moon. Mi ave fe do it dis moon. Is just one part missing. Rum. Who ave rum? But mi ave nothin' fe barter.

De low morning come close to mi ear. De gang a pass by de back of mi yard. Work time. Mi mus' put something inna mi belly firs'. Before mi start work mi mus'. Mi dash inna mi hut, scrap de burnt corn off de bottom of mi ware and shovel two handful in mi mout'. Somebody a come a de fron' of mi hut.

'You eat? Is Sam put im head through de hut. De sun catch im sal' and pepper chin as im stan' in de entrance. 'Nuh' mi lie. Im might ave something fa me. Mi smell okras in im pot two days ago im mus a get dem from de huckster 'cause nobody in de village a plant okra. Im mus' ave something fe help im get thru today in im pocket – piece a eddoe, sweet potato, maybe even yam. Im mus'. Sam warn 'Man yu' know yu can't late.' Nothing. Nothing im offer mi. De bastard.

'Mi a fix Maureen roof later fa plantain – come join mi an' mi Mary.' De coarseness gone from im voice, im look concerned. Im big eye a jump round pon de bare floor, pon mi two pot, mi hammock, im eye follow de drop of light falling through de cane thatch pon mi roof. Mi know mi should get it fix fa when rain fall. Mi know.

'You pants' Sam say. Pants? Sam tink im work in de House. What de use of pants. Soon as the work get fierce and the sun cuss cruel as a cart whip we strip off. So what de need? Mi pull mi pants over mi clat. Im look pon mi pants, see de hole a stretch open. 'Tek a woman,' im say. A woman another mout' to feed, another pickney another negar fe worry 'bout. Mi nuh need nuh oman.

Sam still a look roun' . Mi nuh trus' im. Im a look fe see if mi ave anything fe yam. Mi know dese negar. Man, 'oman, pickney soon as yu dead dem will tek what yu ave, even tek de pipe out yu mout'. Mi pick up mi pipe, an' de rest of what mi need fa mi plan.

Sam wait like Watchman. Mi never want im walk wid mi to de fiel'. Mi want fe fix de plan in mi head. Im talk shatter mi tinkin'. 'A wey you dey evening time, ' im ask. 'Mi a save mi strength' mi tell him. Is true an' lie. Seeing negar draw de last piece of corn an' eddoe from dem provision groun' when mine done is torment. De stiffness getting worse is shame. Mi keep wey from dey dese las' days. Betsy in mi head is de only company mi need. Mi sure mi can smell her as we walk pass de yard.

Sam go on bout how de Papa Negar show everybody de Whydah dances, how mason buil' Head Driver a stone house, how im oman a walk roun' like she a Massa cause of it, how we is all fe get stone house. Sam forget im a fiel' negar cause im brother is Head Boiler. It nuh mean nothin' . Im will dead in de field just like mi. Good tink mi walk wid im. Im talk bout how rum mek im lick Mary in she head-side two moon gone. Mi ears open. Mi talk to im good good as we come to de field.

De groun' harder dan de day before. It nar yield when mi bring down mi hoe. Mi 'ave fe bruk it. De sun still low in de sky and de trench for de new cane is half

dug. De Head driver cross. Him whip snap back and forth like lightening across storm sky. De gang sing louder but no whip nor song can break dis earth. Water better fall soon cause even Guinea corn will dead from dis dryness? Mi keep mi voice low, mi work mi brain fa mi plan. If dem ketch mi will sey spirit sen' mi wid a message fa dem from dem ancestor.

De second gang driver call fa Head driver. From mi eye corner mi see Pearl in de second gang a cough an a spit. Mi tek mi chance fe straighten up an' tek in de yard – cooper an' blacksmith shed, stables, de boiling house, de store, de House. What Betsy taste like? What she belly taste like? She skin? De Head Driver a whip Pearl cross her back an' she still a cough. De beating gimme mi time fe res' and plan. Pearl bawling stop. Mi turn fe see she ches' red wid she blood, she eye a roll in she head. She pas' crying now. A girl pickney tek her to de sick house.

Mi ben' back to de groun. In a line we move up de fiel' a dig out de trench.

Driver crack de whip fe increase we tempo. Sun a climb now, lizard a scramble fa shelter, de sweat a pour out a mi. Mi han' an' foot grow heavy like dem swell up. Mi ave fe use all mi will fe keep de hoe moving up an down. Mi cyant tek a lashing. Up and down mi go. Gripping on to mi self. De strength a drain fas'. Me need something in mi belly. Not even Betsy even cane rat or wing. Mi need something. Mi fall behin' de line. Sam look back im ketch mi eye. Mi nod to im but mi nuh ave de power fe fix mi face so im nuh worry. Im look back again. Mi about to fall pon de earth when Driver call break.

Mi stan' up an' wait till de stiffness pass. It a get worse. Mi join de gang we sit down by the track between de fields. A naked Black Black pickney come in front a

we with a stick fe light we pipe. Im belly big like calabash. Mary gang stop work an' she call after Sam im but im come sit by me. Im a whisper bout 'ow mi should let Driver know if mi nuh well. 'Chigger keep mi up all night' mi tell im. Mi not letting im know mi sick. No sah. Some negar will tell Driver yu sick so dat dem get yu corn. Massa nuh want waste corn on a dead-sick field negar especially in drought. Is only one cure for mi - Betsy.

How Sam so strong still? 'lass scar, whip scar, fight scar, two finger gone, im teet gone. Im should be dead not less in de firs' gang. Im must a work obeah. Maybe im know 'ow fe mek mi invisible. Mi hear some obeah man an' oman can walk bout unseen. If im could do dat then mi could get pass de watchman? Mi would 'ave fe barter something fa dat power. Mi spirit. Im will use mi, drain mi body, den control mi spirit for ever. At least mi would have Betsy. Rum. Sam have rum mi sure im ave it. Is dat mi mus' tink bout before bartering mi spirit.

Driver foot in mi back get mi up. Sam was already in front a mi when mi was thinking. De line already a start move. Driver a stan' over mi wid im lash. It come back to me mi, Sam an' Jack was shaking me. Mi mus' a drop asleep.

'Morning thru night yu will collect shit in yu mout' if yu carry on so' driver eye is a furnace but im voice seem far away like im under water. Mi get up slow in case de stiffness linger. It dey but slip back enough fa mi fe join de line.

Driver a watch mi but im tired like we. Too tired an' dry fe cuss more than im need. After tonight im will ave nothing fe cuss 'bout. Nothing.

De res' of day is torment. Is jus' mi plan dat get mi through. Driver mek we dig de hol' acre. We cyant done till it done. Up and down up and down wid jus' enough

water fe wet mi throat. Mi body stubborn like mule not even two bull can pull. Mi arm, mi leg dem tired like it a harvest time. Is not for de salt from mi body stinging dem mi would drop asleep.

Mi tink it was mi eye closing when colour come from de sky. Mi look back pon de field. Mi do it. Mi finish de field. Driver call time. Mi come over to Sam. Im look pon mi good good like im a look trut' mi. Mi follow im eye. De flesh pon mi ribs thin like wind. Im mus' know mi sick. Mi mus' hide it. 'Mi nuh forget. Come' im sey.

De song of de gangs through de field, through de yard, up de hill to de village echo melancholy. All de gangs, man oman pickney spirit a droop. Mi nuh join in. Song like dat stain mi spirit. It would tek me off mi plan, mek mi jus want fe drop mi head an' sleep. Sam walk slow wid mi. Mi try walk faster but im keep de same pace. It like im a try draw mi out.

Sam refuse fa mi fe help im wid Maureen roof. Mary sit with mi when im gone. She sit in im chair outside de hut. Mi just look pon her. Chigger mek she scratch she foot bottom all de time she a talk. An she can talk. Bout ow she mudder teach she how to pull water from de driest earth and clearest sky but she nuh 'ave de right herbs fa complete de spell. She was fat like Betsy when Massa Woods first put her in de second gang. She breast was full like she a carry pickney now is just two thorns pon she flat ches' a push through she shirt. Mi would run she but mi ave fe keep close to Sam. Why im leave mi wid her? Im no trust me? Im a guard im rum mi sure. Must be so. Mi will ave fe be careful wid mi plan.

Sam come back wid a face look like raccoon trap. Maureen never clear wid im. She 'ave one plantain and two rotten piece a fly fish head she barter from a huckster.

'Good enough fa Massa Woods' me jest. 'Yu damn right' im laugh.

We all put together we corn allowance, de fish head and plantain. We eat slow, an tek in de coming of de night. Mi see torch go up in de village below. Watchman mus' a soon start im shift. Sam like im oman- full a strange talk. Im tink sey yu can follow de stars back to Coromantee land all yu need is a boat. Mi jus' listen while mi suck an' roll de mush round me mout', wash it over mi tongue an' gum. It don't fill de emptiness but mi feel a bit of peace. It will help mi get through. Mary offer mi piece of ol' sugar cane but mi sey no. Mi teet too sore fa cane. De amount a fighting she do to crush out lickle juice sey it bone dry anyway. Sam bring out im pipe. Mi reach fa mi tobacco but im wave im han' . We sit an' smoke. A lickle baby a cry high, loud, and long de mother a shout den a bawl. De pickney mus' a sick. Somebody a beat drum. Night come black and soft. De moon dance in front an' behin' cloud. Hi hear horse on de road leading to de yard. Mi look down and see a carriage a come to de House. 'Massa Woods mus' be keeping party' Sam say yawning. Good dat will keep de House negar dem occupy.

Sam start shift in im chair. Mi follow im an' shift same wey and stretch out mi mout' in de biggest yawn. Mary look pon im like she hungry. She and Sam love lie down. De whole village hear dem. 'Tanks fa you provision' mi tell dem. Dem nod as mi get up.

In mi hut mi heart a beat like a big drum. Mi count cane falling to push back slumber. When mi done clear two acre mi get up. Nuttin' a stir in de village even de crying pickney stop. Mi wait outside Sam hut. Not a soun' in de dark. Mi see im an' Mary still, twist up togeder, lying in de corner. Sam ches' a rise an' fall. Mi crawl like

snake pon grass cross dem floor an search aroun'. Mi fin' im pot. Nothin' in dem. Mi crawl close to dem body. In de dark mi can mek out a flask next to Sam reach. Mi stretch out over dem and reach fa it. Mary shake an' scratch she' backside. Mi freeze in an arch over dem. She stop scratch an' she pass one big piece of wind. Mi reach down an' tek de flask. Is not empty. Outside mi sniff de flask. Rum. Mi did know it de bastard.

Mi fin' de blackest patch of night, where de moon barely search to walk down de path. Is when mi close to de yard mi foot start seize up worse than before. Mi want cry. Mi can smell Betsy but she could as well be acres away. I try drag mi body forward but every time mi move mi foot mi power drain wey. Mi stop. Mi breath. Is dead a night, mi ave time. Only de cattle a move in de yard. Watchman could even be sleeping. Mi wait. Lickle power come back. Mi step inna de yard. De moment is like de first time mi see de pale red under rip up flesh when mi did wan' fe turn wey but mi cyant. Dere is no turning back. Betsy.

Close to de buildings mi move like shadow along de yard. Mi no wan' Watchman see mi before mi ready. Candle a light up de House at de top of de yard, faintly quadrille a echo from fiddle. Dem mus' be dancing. Door open an close but nobody come in de yard.

Standing in front de stable Watchman wrap up in im cloak. It warm but im wan' every negar fe know Massa Wood fin' im new clothes. Mi come side a him so mi right dey beside im before im hear mi.

'Watchman' mi whisper. Him turn quick and reach fa im 'lass. 'A wha' de rass you a do boy. Speak before mi kill you.' Im nuh see mi face in de dark. 'Mi 'ave something fa



yu.' mi sey an' bring out de flask. Im ketch mi voice. 'Jack is what yu want?' im ask.

'Rum for corn.' Mi show im de flask.

'Cousin nuh mean nothin. Mi nuh need barter wid yu. Mi can tek yu rum an' still chop yu clat 'im sey. But from im a hiss an' nar shout mi know im a bluff.

Im curse every part of mi. Ow mi is lower dan de salt water negar, cane toad, snake, redleg, frog, any creature dat come to im tongue. Mi tek it cause mi know is jus' show. When im done cuss im tek de flask an' pour it in im one, den turn walk roun' to a barrel a corn Massa keep fa cattle. Im pass mi a scoop.

Mi nod mi head an' turn back out de yard den mi turn back, creep back in de yard an' watch im from de shadow of de building. Im drink, den stop. Im drink again. Den stop. Mi a beg im come on. Come on. Im drink again. Im mus' wan' piss. Im a wait: a draw it out. De bird a start sing. Come on. Mi will ave fe cut im throat. Cut him throat if mi want Betsy. Mi start move along de building slowly. Mi will come roun de side of him like before an' stab im in im neck. One two three time fast fast so im nuh mek noise.

Is jus' when mi ready dat im turn an' walk to one corner of de yard over by de mill. Soon as im back turn mi dash to de stable an' climb over de low gate. De firs' pen mi come to is full of wet hay. Watchman pass water like horse so mi use de to climb over de nex' pen climb over de nex' full of de sheep, den pass de feathered fowl. Im stop pass water. Mi hear im walking back to im spot. Mi wait. Watchman stop move.

The last pen is Betsy. Mi draw mi knife ready fa she. She already in mi mout'. I climb over. No Betsy. I search fa she shape. Nuttin' at all. No Betsy. Pon mi han' an'

foot in she filth mi search fa her like mi could a miss her. She nuh dere. She nuh dere.  
I open mi mout' to cry out but nothing come out. Mi head bubble like sugar water  
boiling. My foot, mi han' stiffen, up, a black trash cloud, cloud mi eyes, tek all de  
space in mi head. Mi fight. Mi give up. Mi let mi body slip away. Rest.

Early morning light peel me back to de world. Mi reach out an' mi han' an' foot  
obey but mi nuh wan' get up. Mi nuh care. De Hog Driver will fin' mi. Dem will tell  
Massa. Mi see what come nex' an mi feel fear. Dungeon Whip. Salt and pepper in mi  
wound. It nuh matter mi done.

De door of the stable open. Mi cyant see properly but mek out a mulatta colour.  
A house servant. She breath sharp. Den just stop. De door close again. Mi wait right  
dey so. Let dem come an' fin' mi. Mi nuh care. 'Get up' is de same mulatta woman.  
She word have power. Mi follow wha she say. She put down a wood bucket nex' to  
mi. 'Go quick' she say and close de stable door.

A smell come from de bucket. Mi search mi head fa what it is but cyant remember.  
Mi pull mi self up. Looking down mi see Betsy. She eyes close, a mango in she mout'  
she pink snout like de res' a she skin honey brown. Mi stan' up steady miself, mi tek  
Betsy head from de bucket and bite.

## **Glossary**

Coromantee land – Derived from the slave fort of Koramantine on the Gold Coast.

As with Whydah Coromantee was a catch all description for slaves sold from this port rather than a description of actual ethnicities.

Colonware – unglazed clay pots used by slaves

Driver – Each slave gang was supervised by a Driver. The Head Driver supervised the first gang but also the work of the other gang leaders.

Huckster – Whites who sold provisions to slaves

House – The Great House on the Plantation.

Lass – cutlass

Papa Negroes – This term was used to describe Coromantee slaves in Barbados.

Whydah – Africans departing from the coastal slave fortress of Whydah were often associated with the ports from which they were sold. However this did not reflect the actual ethnicities contained within a cohort of slaves.

