

Tarik Garvey

And What Will You Do?

And what is History to me? And what is History to you? And what is History to two boys who lay under a mango tree peeling mangoes with their teeth, the juices staining the corners of their mouth, the strands of hair getting stuck between those teeth?

And what is History to me? And what is History to you? And what is History to the town of X? A town filled with scruffy bearded men nursing beers, and playing dominoes, and regaling tales of their profligate youth. A town filled with scrawny barefooted boys fetching beers and stealing sips while dodging tables, and dogs, and more tables. A town filled with women making cornrows,

and plaits, and cornrowed plaits in their daughters' hair. A town filled with daughters complaining about the tightness of those cornrows, and plaits, and cornrowed plaits being made in their hair. And what is History to me? And what is History to you? And what is History to the town of X? A town known for its abundance of sugarcane fields and rum-filled beer-bellied men stumbling around with machetes in those fields. A town known for producing the most sugarcane of all the parishes on this island. A town known for being the agricultural backbone of this island.

And what is History to me? And what is History to you? And what is History to the town of X? A town on an island caught in the midst of a war. A war that can be described as not hot, but as the opposite of hot. A war in which the two quarreling factions never face each other,

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but use small countries with towns like that of X to cause trouble in other small countries with other towns like that of X. And what these quarrelling factions were fighting about the people of the town of X would never know. For they were not concerned with grand ideologies and manifest destinies and world domination. They were not concerned with notions of “democratic diplomacy” and “hemispheric control” and “spheres of influence.” They were not concerned with social systems and economic systems and social-economic systems aimed at reinforcing their dependency on some foreign nation. The town of X was concerned with the strange men with the strange accents and the strange clothes showing up in their sugarcane fields. The town of X was concerned with these strange men not knowing the local tongue, not knowing the right way to peel the local fruits, not knowing

the lyrics to the local songs. The town of X was concerned with these men, who sometimes had blonde hair and blue or green or gray eyes, always asking questions about things they could not possibly know the answers to. Questions they could not possibly want to know the answers to.

The town of X was concerned with the flames that seemed to come from nowhere. Flames that seemed to come from everywhere. Flames that seemed to dance endlessly and haphazardly in the humid Caribbean night. Flames that seemed to swallow up all the sugarcane stalks in the fields not one by one, but as a group. Flames that seemed to be made up of hordes of people doing the tango and the merengue and the bachata as bushels of sugarcane blackened and burned and blackened some more. This was not a burning done like

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the burnings necessary when harvesting; rather, this was a razing. This was arson. This was murder. This was dancing flames consuming zinc houses and thatched roofs and wooden fences and makeshift verandas. This was dancing flames roasting goats and chickens and sheep and calves. This was dancing flames doing the tango and the merengue and the bachata as black skin turned to burnt skin turned to charred skin turned to no skin.

And all this was part of a plan. A plan that some paper from some place that is not here said was necessary for the hemisphere's security. And by "hemisphere's security" this paper meant Uncle Sam's security. And by Uncle Sam's security this paper meant

that these people, and this town, and this island, which is smaller than Rhode Island and has a name like Cuba but is not Cuba, was becoming red. A red that talked about pooling resources. A red that talked about rations. A red that used words like "proletariat" and "rise up!" and "bourgeois" and "comrade." A red that stunk of names like Che Guevara and Fidel Castro and Maurice Bishop. A red that invaded Uncle Sam's sphere of influence. A red that was antithetical to Uncle Sam's democratic ideals. A red that relied on sugar to keep this island running. A sugar that employed all the people of all the towns of all of this island. Towns like that of the town of X. The town of X made up of people. A people that were razed in the fire with the sugarcane fields by Uncle Sam's "liberators." A people that were wiped from History bar these two boys. Two boys who lay under a mango tree

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peeling mangoes with their teeth, the juices staining the corners of their mouth, the strands of hair getting stuck between those teeth, the memories of a burning town still fanning in their minds, its flames consuming all other thoughts, its embers slowly erasing visions of mothers, and fathers, and brothers, and sisters, and friends, and lovers.

And what is History to me? And what is History to you? And what is History to two boys who decide to flee this scorched earth? Two boys who decide to flee to the countryside. Two boys who decide to pick the strawberry guavas, and the sweet guineps, and the prickly soursops, and the hairy mangoes from nature's bountiful arms. Two boys who decide to swim in the streams to clean the

gunk from behind their ears, the gunk from under their arms, the gunk from inside their belly buttons, and the gunk from between their toes. Two boys who decide to hide in trees and throw stones at passing caravans. Caravans filled with shapes that look like humans, but could not possibly be humans, carrying guns, and Uncle Sam's flag, and metal boxes playing music that did not sound like the throaty crooning of Bob Marley, or the jump up tunes of Lord Invader, or the rocksteady-ness of the Skatalites, but sounded like the deep and inevitable blaring horns of imperialism marching one step at a time, one foot in front of the other into oblivion. Left. Right. Left. Left. Left. Left. Right. Left.

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And when one of these boys, the one named Cain, wonders if life on this island will be like this forever, how is the other one, the one named Abel, supposed to respond? For what is forever to two boys devouring mangoes, bathing in streams, and skipping stones under the Caribbean sun? For what is forever to all those people who begin and end with 1492? I know what forever is. Forever is a long time and forever is no time. For Cain, forever is more time without a father. More time forgetting how he was taught to put his dominant hand on the shoulder of the cricket bat, and to put his weaker one on the handle. More time forgetting how he was taught to do a windmill motion with his arm when bowling the cricket ball so that he would muster up enough momentum for a quick and explosive release. Forever is a long time and forever is no time.

For Abel, forever is more time without a mother. More time forgetting how she would give him a few shillings to go to Mr. Singh's store and bring back rubbing alcohol, kerosene oil, two pieces of the cheapest linen, and return with change. More time forgetting how she would pick the peas out of his rice because he hated the dry and unexciting flavor it always had. Because what is forever if not more time spent forgetting, remembering, and forgetting again?

And when these two boys wonder about tomorrow, when these two boys wonder about the future, what could they possibly know? Could they know what their futures entail? When they planned to rise early and check the burning shacks for signs of life, to raid the burning

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farms for any type of meat, would they know that the shacks and the farms would be empty? When they decided to hide in the burning shacks to evade the passing caravans filled with shapes that looked like humans but could not possibly be humans, would they know that evasion was impossible? When these two boys wondered about the future, would they know that it would be different? Would they know that the future is not constantly changing? That it is set in stone? That the future is more static than the past? Could they know that every shack they hid in, every farm they raided, every tree they climbed would carry them that much closer to the inevitable?

And when they find no surviving bodies in these burning shacks, what will they do? And when the charred animals are being feasted on by maggots, and vultures,

and the most peculiar kinds of bacteria, what will they do? And when Abel offers Cain a mango and Cain reveals that he is tired of surviving on mangoes, what will they do? And when Abel climbs up a tree to hide from the passing caravans and Cain reveals that he is tired of hiding from passing caravans, what will they do? And when Abel brings up the toothy smile of their mother, or the dirty jokes of their father, or the cheery carnivals of their people, and Cain tells him to be quiet, what will they do?

And when these two boys finally go to sleep in the burnt fields, is Cain wrong for waking in the middle of the night? Is he wrong for looking to the heavens only to find emptiness? A wide and unending black void with no balls

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of gas we call stars, and no amalgam of elements we call the moon, and no sign of hope we call the future. Is he wrong for getting up and leaving Abel behind? Is he wrong for deciding that he cannot survive on mangoes till eternity, that he cannot hide till eternity? Is he wrong for seeking out the caravans with the shapes? Is he wrong for offering these shapes, shapes that look like humans but could not possibly be humans, his labor in exchange for real food, in exchange for real shelter, in exchange for real life? Is he wrong for speaking with an accent so that they understand him? Is he wrong for saying that he never liked his town, his people, his island? Is he wrong for saying that they drink too much, smoke too much, dance too much, smile too much, did everything too much? Is he wrong for saying that hostile people still roam the countryside? Is he wrong for saying that they

frequent burning shacks, and burning farms, and mango trees, and sparkling streams?

And when Abel rose, should he have known?

Should he have known that you cannot survive on mangoes, and kumquats, and plums, and peaches for months on end? Should he have known that one can only eat so much sugarcane stalks before the bleeding of the gums would become unbearable, before the jaw would tire of chewing, before brittle teeth would start to chip away? Should he have known that not everyone can handle the sight of their town, their mother, their father, their people, their everyone burning intensely with the sugarcane in the fields? Should he have known that such a thing could make one go crazy? Should he have known that such a thing could make one go mad? Should he

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have known that such a thing corrodes the memory,
corrodes the mind?

And so, what is Memory for two boys on an island
which is smaller than Delaware and has a name like
Jamaica but is not Jamaica? Of what use is Memory to
someone like Cain? Of what use is the memory of his
town, a town populated with zinc fences, boarded
windows, and faces scarred by machete cuts, to
someone like him? How will the memory of his father
clearing the weeds from his tomato garden with a cutlass
help him when a shape, a shape that looks like a human
but could not possibly be a human, calls him "boy" with
so much venom it sounds like nigger? How will the
memory of his mother cleaning the floorboards with
coconut husks keep him from descending into a torrent of
tears when he is given a bowl of worm-infested mash, the

same they give to the dogs, to eat twice a day? How will
the memory of his times spent stealing beers in the pool
halls help him when he is sent outside to sleep in the
unending Caribbean rain?

Of what use is Memory to someone like Abel?
How will the memory of his mother going to the river to
catch buckets of water help him when his ribs begin to
show through his skin? How will the memory of his father
teaching him how to skin and fillet a fish help him hide
from the patrolling caravans? How will Memory stop him
from, in his loneliness, thinking about tying his hands,
and tying his feet, and walking to the bottom of the
Caribbean Sea? I know of what use Memory is. I know
that it has no use. For Memory is a prison. For Memory is
a jail. For Memory is a cell with bars as cold as the Blue
Mountain's peak and floors as unloving as the Crown's

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embrace. For Memory is all that you have and nothing that I have.

And so, when in his last days, is it okay for Abel to give up hope? Is it okay for him to slowly peel a mango with his brittle teeth as he waits for the caravans to find him? Is it okay for him to lay under the shade of a mango tree for just another minute? Is it okay for him to wander down to the stream and fill his sunken jaws with water?

And so, when in his last days, is it okay for Cain to tell the shapes, shapes that look like humans but could not possibly be humans, where Abel would be hiding? Is it okay for Cain to stalk Abel's tracks with a bloodhound? Is it okay for Cain to spot Abel bathing in a stream? Is it okay for Cain to call out affectionately to Abel? Is it okay

for Abel to turn around? Is it okay for Cain to let the bloodhound loose? Is it okay for Abel to be frozen? Is it okay for the bloodhounds to rip and tear at Abel's naked body? Is it okay for the bloodhounds to gnaw at his toes? Is it okay to tear at his knees? Is it okay to masticate his manhood? Is it okay to nibble at his elbows? Is it okay to claw at what was once a face but is now an abstract expression—a nose where his left eye was, an eye where his mouth was, a mouth just above the eyebrows, and holes punctured throughout, wisps of black skin clinging on for dear life?

And when a shape, a shape that looks like a human but could not possibly be a human, chuckles and says that the hounds were hungry today, is Cain allowed to cry? Is Cain allowed to witness the blood of Abel slowly pour down the sides of his emaciated chest and

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cry? Is Cain allowed to mourn the loss of his brother? Is Cain allowed to call Abel his brother? Is Cain allowed to mourn the loss of a brother who was of a people who were burnt to death with the sugarcane in the fields? Is Cain allowed to be of a people who had no history but the History that began in 1492?

And so, I wonder, will you weep for Cain? Will you weep for Cain when a shape, a shape that looks like a human but could not possibly be a human, removes a pistol from its holster? Will you weep for Cain when the pistol caresses the back of his head? Will you weep for Cain when a finger turns off the safety? Will you weep for Cain when a finger rests on the trigger? Will you weep for Cain when that trigger is finally pulled?

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