Two Poems by Earle Birney

YAHLES MOUNTAIN TRANSISTOR

She clung to the broom
a long witchy affair she'd been using
to swipe the ancient floor
of this one habitable room
when we came in for a breather
out of the jeep and the humid morning
into the mountain guesthouse
where no one stayed any more
Two fathomless eyes
gleamed above the homemade handle
She was just tall enough to see over
and her arms from the grip of the hands
were torsioned as burnt tree-roots

"Like she was hol'in' a mike"
the engineer's little black steno said
and giggled drifting then to the porch
where her girl friend already had vanished
They had come along for the ride

But the old girl was belting songs out
as if she had to send them all the way
back down to the sea and the canebrakes
her greatgrandfather ran from
the night he brought the coiled words
in his rebellious head beyond the howl
of the last slavechasing hound
to this remotest hilltop in Jamaica
An anchor to keep the rest of her tiny shelf
from floating up level with the notes
was more what she needed the broom for
I thought utterly stilled in my chair
under the clean power of the art
stored like walnuts inside four generations
of skulls and springing out now
from the mouth of this bird-still body

In truth she’d never faced a mike or tape
or Lomax (though he was said to be coming)
Today was the first she’d seen a transistor
and she’d looked at that more with fear
than interest when the little steno
had sauntered in with it from the jeep
The broom was only the defense she clung to
a wand of office

It was the engineer she sang for
because he had asked her he always did
on his trips to the dam or back
but before this he’d come alone
or with hillfarmers I was the one
she couldn’t be sure about
I had the color to make anyone wary
up in these mountains

So she stood poised for reversal
back to the caretaker’s role
But I think she soon forgot me him too
as the mind unravelled to airs
an old grandmother might have woven
stooping in dappled coffee groves
in the high Victorian days
when this was a plantation house
buzzing with brief whiteman’s prospering
She paused only once and took one hand
off the broom for a glass of rum
the engineer poured from the bottle he had

He knew what songs to ask for
and out they came whorling now
as if her voice were immortal and separate
within her and she only the toughened reed
vibrated still by the singing dead
by the slaved and the singing dead
by the slaved and the half-free
The narrow high-ceilinged room was a box
resounding with all the mourning of loves
and deaths the fear of Mamba hope of Jesus
the bitter years and the bawdy till suddenly
at her first falter she stopped

It was not quite all though my thanks alone
might have sent her off
if the engineer hadn't silently offered
a second rum The broom again in one hand
like a rifle at ease she swung to me
and in the grave high rhythms of the Victorians
toasted my health
and that of all the gentlemen of my nation
with all the dignity of hers
then disappeared broom already waggling
into her kitchen

It was only then my mind let my ear tell me
there'd been a counter-bass going on all along
Out on the empty porch I found the girls
sitting on the rail at the farthest corner
Their two faces black and anxious
leant together under the transistor
They'd found a nail in a pillar to hang it by
The morning disc spin from Puerto Rico
was sending a cowboy from last year's parade
The machine swung his voice from shriek
to silence and back

I suppose they’d been listening to him
as intently as I to her
and out just as much need to exchange
our pasts

**SALTFISH AND ACKEE**

The ackee’s flower is fat and pallid
too aptly named *Blighia*
sapida for Capt. (Charles Laughton) Bligh
of the *Bounty*
In his imperial impatient days
some white men forced the lacquer pods
died eating their spicy pulp too soon

But on Jamaica the freed slaves’ children
took time for loving
waiting for the black seeds to unsheath
and let the bounty of their pith
glorify a plain salt codfish sauté

My last night on the island
one hostess was a girl whose blood
branched back to Pekin, Dahomey,
Bangalore perhaps. The other
velvet-skinned graceful as a dark gladiolus
served saltfish and ackee to us three:
their pink young Montreal boyfriends
(export men in Kingston Town)
and one greywhite Vancouver poet

The cod was from Newfoundland they said
The new found land is here I said