

Remember

Remember your great-grandmother Miriam.

These were my mother's words
when she wanted to tell me:
Be a person of faith.
Be a person of prayer.
These were her words
when she wanted to tell me:
Be proud of your African heritage.

She spoke of seeing the slave bracelet
her family kept in a drawer.
Remember her, mom said:
this is the world she came from
but she overcame.

Her life wasn't easy, mom said.
Born in Barbados,
she married a Scotsman,
a drunk who died young of his drunkenness
and bore a son who did the same.
But perhaps by her prayers
that curse was broken:
her other son became a man of faith
and among his children the curse of drunkenness
did not strike again.

And so, mom said: remember.
Remember your great-grandmother Miriam.

We speak far less of my other great-grandmother,
but I know her name: Vera May.
She was a black woman of British Guyana,
a Demerara Beauty, they called women like her.
And she was smart, our stories say,
and good with money.

She married an Englishman,
mixed-race and a man of colour, mind you,
but an Englishman.
He owned a printing press,
and like I said, she was smart and good with money.
As long as she lived,
their business thrived

and in their big house,
their children watched her dance at parties
floating along in flowing dresses
elegantly stepping to elegant music.

I learned only lately
another story:
her sister-in-law sister spoke
of how, as a little girl
her father had her carry coins,
holding them in a fold of her skirt
when she went with him to pay the workers...

The workers who worked
on their plantation.

Slavery, as such,
was dead by those days,
but before that,
were my people slave-owners?

I'll never know.
That's not the kind of story anyone wants to tell.

Yet what do you do with the stories that tell you:
you are the seed of the plantation owners,
born to the Empire of the colonizers?

What indeed do we do with the stories of this land,
this land where I farm fertile ground
fenced off from the Indigenous people
whose fore-bearers' stone tools
were found in these same fields?

What do I do with the stories that tell me
every step I take
I take on ground taken from others?

The only answer I can find
is to keep on telling all the stories

and to remember what my mother told me:

Remember your great-grandmother Miriam.
Become a person of faith.
Become a person of prayer.
And remember, remember, remember.

~ *anonymous*