

*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 wagging  
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 unsheathe  
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