

John Thieme

Legba*

There is a tap tap tapping on Massiah's stairs.
Pipe in mouth and hobbled stick in hand,
Papa Legba climbs slowly to the top.
A hush descends upon the barbershop,
as the old man steps inside the door.

He seldom comes to have his hair cut,
but when he does, he breathes the beauty of lost youth.
The waiting clients are hungry for his words.
Shaves and haircuts are unimportant now.
He is their gateway to another world.

Only Massiah breaks the silence.
He speaks to Legba in respectful tones.
'What's happening, Papa? How are you doing?
I have to say you're looking really good.'

The tap tap tapping ceases,
as Legba puts his cane aside
and slides himself into Massiah's chair.
He pauses, sighs and says, 'I feelin' tired,
but udderwise I'm doin' pretty good.'

Each customer leans forwards,
eager to hear whatever he may say.
They know he speaks all human languages
and converses with all beasts on earth.
He can retell the shaman's tales
of this land, and a land beyond.
He stores all knowledge in his wizened head.

Today he speaks of far-off forests,
folk have forgotten in the careless years.
He talks of uncut trees, unsilted rivers,
and green tales the griots told at night.

His rasping voice remembers old-time stories,
like how the tortoiseshell got cracked
and how the leopard got its spots.
Looking upwards to Massiah's rafters,
he says the spiders are his fellow-kinsmen.
Their tricks, he says, were practised for good reasons,
though creatures could be punished when they strayed.

He also speaks of chains and darkened ship-holds,
and chopping cane on unforgiving ground.
All this, he says, is true. It really happened,
but it did not stop folk being elsewhere,
when they travelled to the green land in their minds.

'So, when yuh reach yuh home tonight,
jes' close yuh eyes and see what yuh duz find.
If yuh dig deep inside yuh brainbox,
Yuh, too, can reach the green land of yuh mind.

His listeners are a reverent assembly,
attentive, each and every one,
and as Massiah finishes his haircut,
Don speaks up for the gathered group:
'In trut', we will do what yuh say, beloved Papa.
You've opened up a doorway to the gods.'

There is a tap tap tapping on Massiah's stairs,
as Legba goes back down to the street,
a lonely soul amid the morning traffic,
but he exudes a glow of inner peace.

* "Legba" and the poem "Douglá" that follows are sequels to "A Barber's Tale", published in *SARE*, 56, 1 (2019):
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Doula

In the all-day downpours of the rainy season,
when clouds infect the city's streets with mud,
Massiah's shop becomes a second home to clients
who neither need a haircut nor a shave,
but climb his well-worn stairs for old talk and green gossip.
And often as they gather, they retell a tale
that Massiah's heard a hundred times.
It's a legend said to come from memory.
but memory can play fast and loose with facts.

They speak about a doula 'on the East Coast',
who grew up with Legba and Ananse,
and never thought to ask himself just who he was,
until the riots broke out in the city
and with no other cause to fight
his 'loving' brothers in the town where he was born –
the storytellers can't agree which one it was –
decided he was different and pelted him with stones.
He fled towards the 'kindly' village down the road,
where everyone was called Persaud or Singh –
the storytellers can't agree which village *this* one was.
Warm welcomes can turn cool in times of strife;
folk bond against the unknown when in fear of life.
Here brandishing grass-cutting cutlasses,
the people told him to go back to 'home'.
Sometimes the storytellers change the stones to sticks;
sometimes the cutlasses become just knives.

The many versions crystallise to history
and yet its truth remains a misty shimmer,
less proven than the rain's remorseless fall.
Perhaps it is a fiction after all.

What happened to the dougla is yet more uncertain.
Some say he sat beside a drainage ditch,
mute and unmoving, for days or months or ... years.
Some say he walked into the restive sea,
which swiftly claimed him as its own.
Some say he found a welcome in the bush
and never came back to the coast again.

Massiah keeps his counsel, hearing all these versions.
He knows another ending to this tale,
in which the dougla travelled to the city
and, like the spiders in his rafters,
hid within a farrago of lies.