

*Dreaming of Home: A Conversation with Liberian poet Patricia Jabbeh Wesley, author of Where the Road Turns (Autumn House Press, 2007,) The River is Rising (Autumn House Press, 2007) Becoming Ebony, (Crab Orchard Award Series in Poetry, 2003) Before The Palm Could Bloom: Poems of Africa (New Issues Press, 1998)*

Published: Bloomsbury Review, VOLUME 23/ISSUE 5 SEPTEMBER/OCTOBER 2003

Hal Herring—Could you give us just a brief history of yourself?

Well, I was born somewhere near Tugbakeh, in Maryland County, Liberia, in one of the villages there. Tugbakeh is about forty miles inland from Harper, where my husband grew up, which is on the coast. I lived at a boarding school in Tugbakeh during the school year, and stayed with my uncle, Tugba Jabbeh, in a little mission town near there in the summers. The people there are subsistence farmers, and they grow rice, some corn, cassava, cocoa. My uncle also grew coffee, and he would go out in the mornings and tap rubber. I'd go back with him in the afternoons and get the latex when it dried. But I just went for fun—tapping rubber isn't women's work. My mother took me to live in Monrovia when I was six—then she sent me back to Tugbakeh when I was eleven. Then I came back to Monrovia for junior and high school and stayed there. My mother didn't have a lot of education, and sometimes our lives were pretty rough. Shifting back and forth like that was hard, too—I think now that's why both those places, both those cultures, are imprinted on me so strongly—that contrast between the village and the city is so strong. The kids in Tugbakeh would beat me up because I didn't speak Grebo, and I didn't know how to fight because I came from the city. But I learned, and I learned to speak Grebo, too.

My father was the first person in that chiefdom to graduate from college—he always had a good job, and houses, money, women. He worked for the US government, as a property supervisor for USAID.

When you talk about a chiefdom, what it was like there?

Uncle Jabbeh lived in a mission town, with a mission school, and there were maybe twenty families there, in big huts gathered around the mission. Then a little ways away there was what we called Big Town, where all the non-Christians lived, and the people followed the traditional African religions. The Bodio, which is the high priest, lived there and so did the majority of the people of our area. But there was a lot of mixing back and forth, and a lot of the Christian people came to Big town to have fun—the Christians had kicked the drums out of the churches in the mission towns, and said our culture was of

the Devil, and in Big Town they had all the drums and the dances. The country Devil would come to Big Town, and that was a big day—the women would all go indoors, because they weren't supposed to see him or they'd die. I don't know if that's true, but I've never seen him. He kind of represents order, and the cleanliness of the town. He's also a spiritual mediator, and a big part of the religion.

There's also the Kwee society, an organization that keeps order and mediates disputes. You have a chief, and a paramount chief, and they do a lot of that, too, but the Kwee does the daily regulating. They step up whenever they're needed.

One thing, when you are talking about living in huts, you're not talking about some poor broken down dwelling. They make great houses. If I had my way, I'd have a hut here, a great big artistic hut.

I guess another thing important about Tugbakeh, and Maryland County—the capitol city is Gbolobo—is that the Grebo people have always been a war-like people, they have revolted against the government many times. They are proud, and hard to govern. I mean, if you look at other peoples in Liberia, if you go to Lofa County, you will see huge towns, everybody together, but when you come into Grebo country you see small towns, everybody scattered, not easy to rule over them.

How did you get started writing poetry?

My grandfather always said I'd be a storyteller. He said give me the story, and I'd twist it all around! When I was about fourteen I found my father's English Lit textbook—Beowulf, Shakespeare. I spent a lot of time copying out those poems. I already loved that twisting, turning language from reading the Psalms in the Bible. About that time, my father found some things I had written, and he said to me, "this is a poem! You can write!" He bought me a manual typewriter and told me I had one month to learn to type. I knew I had to teach myself, because my father was not a good teacher. He was an unyielding man, just like a steel band. He couldn't teach anybody anything. So I taught myself, and after a month I was writing short stories, just things I made up, you know. There must have been about fifty of them, and my father was so proud, and my father was so proud, you know how you get with your children, he said, "This is my girl right here, she's a writer and she's going to take on the whole world!" And my stepmother, my father's second wife, she yells out, "Let's have some quiet in here! She's not going to be taking on anything!" She was my rival, always.

I never learned to type the numbers on the typewriter, and I never have learned that, I still have to look down to find them. When I told my father that he said "What you need the numbers for? You don't need math to write a book!" He was very excited. A flip side to all this was that I was always writing, even when I was doing the chores—you now African children have to work, to help in the house and wherever, that's just the way life is there—and one time, I was working very hard on a poem while I was cooking, and the supper was burning up on the kerosene stove, just about burning the house down, there was a big uproar! My stepmother was ready to kill me! And my father was standing there reading

my poem, saying “Look at this! She wrote a poem!” and my stepmother said “That’s great! Give it to me, and I’ll put it in the fire!”

It just went on and on, you know. I wrote all the time. When I was in high school in Monrovia, I wrote for the school paper, and published my first story in a collection of Liberian short stories. We had all these categories in our high school yearbook, like Best Dressed, Most Charming. I was always Best Writer, or Best Poet, never anything else. I couldn’t wear my clothes properly, or concentrate on anything else because I was always trying to write!

What education did you have?

When I was young I always wanted to go to Catholic school because I liked the uniforms, but my father wouldn’t hear of it. He sent me to CWA, College of West Africa, which was a Methodist school, and by far the best school in Liberia. I had to learn to be competitive, tough, there because the Americo-Liberians dominated the school, and I wasn’t one of them. The CWA was like a metaphor for all of Liberia at the time—dominated by the Americo-liberians, but beginning to change, with highly educated indigenous students rising up and demanding some power.

I went to the University of Liberia in Monrovia in the early 1970’s. I was active in student politics, and there was a lot of trouble, you know. It was during the time when Tolbert was president of Liberia, and the country was starting to be very torn. My last year of college was the year the coup took place—there was so much happening. Your president Carter came to Liberia then. I had many, many close friends who were imprisoned, and one who was killed in a riot calling for the end of Tolbert and his True Whig party. One thing that happened to me then, I was an activist, interested in politics, and after the coup, after Samuel Doe assumed power, many of my friends took places in his government and a lot of them became just like the corrupt people we had been so against—exactly like them. My husband convinced me to leave MOJA (Movement for Justice in Africa) and the politics and just be what I needed to be, a poet, not a politician.

Also, I went on a grant to the University of Indiana in Bloomington in 1984—the grant was for teachers to go to the US and then return to work in Liberia. My father put his house up for us to go—if we didn’t come back, he lost the house. My husband and I were in Indiana for a little over a year. We were so glad to get back home.

Now, of course, I’m finishing a Ph.d in English here at Western Michigan.

You refer to the rivalry between the Americo-Liberians (called Congos in Liberia) and the indigenous students at your high school as “a metaphor for Liberia.” Was there prejudice between the Americo-Liberians and the indigenous peoples? Or between tribes in general?

Prejudice was not really overt, but there was a power struggle going on, especially at higher levels in the government, and in the country in general. I mean, our high school elections were always Americo-Liberians against the indigenous students. My father used to say to me, "Never bring a Congo boy into this house!" so the prejudice was there.

It's true to say that the Americo-Liberians had kept our country back. Africa was moving, and nothing was happening for us. They were always saying, "We came from Georgia! We came from Alabama!" They were so proud of having been slaves, and they were all tied up in the idea of America, what can America do for us, we're Americans. What we indigenous people knew was that America wasn't going to help us. America was like a man who goes out and takes his pleasure with a woman, and then she thinks he's going to support her, look after her forever. That was not going to happen for Liberia. Liberia is the outside child of America, and it's not going to get any help.

A lot of Americo-Liberians are still proud they came from America, but they are all so mixed up with indigenous peoples now. As far as I'm concerned, Americo-Liberian is more of an ideology now than anything else. People used to say that because I was educated—they called me Big Book Woman, said I talked Big Book, and because I wore glasses—that I was an Americo-Liberian, Congo Woman. But of course I'm Grebo, indigenous.

As far as conflict between tribes, it's there. You can research the war and find out all about that.

What has led you back to poetry since you've been in Michigan?

For me, poetry is an outlet for my grief and a way to immortalize some of the suffering that we've endured, my family, my people, Liberia—sometimes when I'm working well I can revive some of what is lost. You know, when I go to a museum here and see those masks from West Africa, I don't see the art, I see the destruction of a people. When I was in Harlem, I saw the faces of all the parts of Africa--Africa breaking down, spilling its people across the world. That is the first poem, in my first book, the poem called "Africa"

The calabash

now shattered

her contents

spilled

like palm wine

across the regions

of the world

When I first got here, after the war, someone gave me an old computer, and I just sat and wrote, no polishing, hundreds of pages, just putting it down—dates, and who came by our house, and what we did in the camps, and in Monrovia. It is very valuable to me now, because without that, I'd never remember. I don't remember most of it now, but it's in those pages somewhere.

I think it was W.H. Auden who said "Poetry is the language of crisis," which certainly seems to fit the situation of Liberia, and her people, and your situation as an expatriate.

That's true. That's true. That is why the Psalms are written in poetry, why King David was such a powerful poet. Nobody studies King David as a poet anymore—I have taught his work in my poetry classes. It is very beautiful writing.

I would say too that poetry is the language of Africa. If my mother wanted me to shut up, or do something else, she wouldn't just tell me to do it, she always had a proverb from her growing up days to give me. Having listened to that way of speaking all their lives, Africans seem to come more easily to poetry. It's something that people on this side of the world really don't see. They don't know anything about Africa, they have misconceptions, they seem to love their ignorance that way.

You refer to the Psalms as being a big influence on you. Did you read the Bible growing up?

Oh yeah. We read the Bible at the mission every day. But the people at the mission believed a lot of things that I found out not to be true. They believed in Jesus, and in love, but they had a kind of holier attitude towards everybody else. They believed that everybody was going to hell, you know, and I was so afraid of that. I remember seeing a young girl at boarding school that was pregnant, and the preacher was talking to her, and I just cried and cried, because she was going to hell, no chance for forgiveness.

Then I went to live with my father—he didn't go to church then, he does now—and I would do my household chores and then go to church by myself. I met my husband in 1975, and he converted me, he preached to me. The God I knew was a kind of mean God with an iron rod, you know, the Pentecostal God. My husband taught me about a forgiving, loving God. And I needed that—I was very angry, at my

father, at my stepmother, at how hard life had been. God was there for me and He gave me a kind of love for these people that taught me about forgiveness. And how to suffer. And that turned out to be very important, because during the war, my husband and I were doing Christian work, and practicing forgiveness, and prayer—we prayed with rebels, when they asked us for prayer, and we prayed with the people in the refugee camps, we prayed with soldiers. It was a strong part of our survival, and of our healing later. It is still a strong part of our lives. I mean, in the Grebo language, the word for God is “Nysuh” the same as the word for thirst.

You and your family were in Monrovia during the coup in 1980 where Tolbert was killed and Doe took power. Did you see the second war coming?

Everybody saw it coming. There was a big difference between those two wars—the coup on 1980 was just dangerous for Tolbert and the people with him in the government—they were all executed—but the Taylor war was all over the country, it was a war on civilians. But yes, you could see it coming. We didn't get trapped by the war or anything. We could have evacuated but we thought it was better to stay and help, work, you know, we thought we'd be better off. We had our three children with us, and my half-brother Norris. I'm glad I stayed now, to see this ordeal of my country, and see how strong people could be. At the time, though, when the fighting came into our neighborhood, I wasn't glad then.

What was life like during the early part of the Taylor war?

Our house in Monrovia was right on the Measurado River. At one time during the war we had forty pigs and a big garden. We would take the children to school and come back and spend the afternoons gardening, tending chickens. We all worked hard. Of course, by the time the fighting reached us, the ALF (the Liberian Army under Doe) soldiers had stolen a lot of the pigs, shot them there, you know. And we gave a lot of them away to people.

Then Taylor's troops moved into the suburbs, and it was just fighting, all the time. We were in the middle of it, life and death, executions in the streets, bombing, bullets flying. The peacekeeping forces were holding Taylor's troops before they could take the Executive Mansion, where Doe was, so the fighting there in the suburbs lasted a long time. This is the time I wrote about in “Broken World.” There's no winner in a war like that. Whoever wins, loses it all.

On July 31st, we heard on the BBC that that the ALF had massacred 600 people at the Lutheran Church, and we knew we had to get out of Monrovia.

Where did you go?

We could choose either Doe or Taylor, and we chose Taylor, because he seemed like the better of the two. There was no way of knowing then that Taylor was Doe, a different man, the same thing. And it wouldn't have mattered if we had known. We left our house and made our way out of Monrovia. It took us twelve hours to go fifteen miles through the rebel roadblocks—I don't want to talk too much about this, because I'm writing it now, in my memoir. Also, I don't like to talk about it. You can research what it was like in any account of the war. It was just very bad. My half-brother, Norris, was seventeen, so he was in terrible danger, all the time.

Were the rebels looking for particular people, or particular tribes, at the roadblocks?

The rebels were not looking for anybody in particular, just anybody who offended them. For awhile they hated all teachers, not because they didn't like education but because the University of Liberia had given Samuel Doe an honorary degree. It was like that. Rebels don't discuss anything. You try and discuss something with a rebel, Bang! is what you get.

So you ended up in Taylor's camps?

We reached Taylor's camps, and we got trapped there. We arrived at what was called the Soul Clinic Mission, an elementary boarding school that had been turned into a refugee camp. It was part of what we called No Return Country. Traffic was all one way. You could go in, but the Army would kill you if you left. And the rebels would kill you if you tried to come back.

For awhile we were still in the battle—ECOMOG (the peacekeeping forces) were bombing the camps, and it seemed like they were going to kill us trying to help us. But they stopped when they found out the camps were full of civilians. I don't hold it against them, either. They were trying to stop the fighting.

We were in the camps about four months, while Taylor was trying to take Monrovia. We just survived, and we were lucky. We had water, and our children with us, and we made it. But tons of people didn't—people were executed there, they got sick. A lot of babies died early on, then toddlers, then older people, there was a lot of starvation, and people dying every day. There was also life—we had birthday cakes and parties for the children, there was a lot of joking. One woman who was a friend of mine said one time, when we were really hungry, "You know, I think I need some cholesterol now. My cholesterol

is too low.” We ate all kinds of strange things to survive, you know. And some people ate the wrong kinds of things, and died.

My son Gee was just a baby then, and he stayed very healthy, always looked really strong. The people from the UN were always amazed at him. The rebels liked to come to our camp, and play with him, bounce him up and down, say “Big Gee!” Big Gee!”

At some point you left the camps and went back to your home in Monrovia. What made you decide to do that?

After about four months, Taylor’s rebels had taken the suburbs and were in control, mostly. It was still dangerous, but they weren’t fighting in Congotown, where we lived. So we went home. And we looked at that river right there behind the house and thought “Oh, how blessed we are!” We never thought much about the Measurado before that.

Everything was destroyed, you know, and there wasn’t anything much to eat. There were the poorest people, there in our neighborhood, and they were doing all right, because they knew how to get along with nothing. I would say the middle classes suffered the most from the war because they didn’t know how to do for themselves. I went to a fisherman on the river there, said, “I want to get some fish,” he said “Poor you!” Then he told me, you know, “all you big spoiled rotten people in your big houses, always buying fish, you suffer now! Nobody fishing for you now!” But he asked me did I have a basket, he said ‘find you a basket, make a basket, I’ll show you how to get some fish.” He helped me make a fish basket, you know, and I couldn’t do it very well, but I did catch some crabs, and the fisherman said, “Good, you got crabs, that’s just as good.” One time, I went to a stream near there to fish with my basket, jumped in the water there, and one leech got on my foot, stuck there. I screamed, you know! I thought I was going to die!

The fisherman and the other poor people just looked at me. He said, “You and your people are just not going to make it. You don’t know how to live in this world.”

I guess that extremity is the great equalizer.

That’s true. We learned tolerance for all kinds of people, but it was taught to us by force.

I remember one woman, I got so mad at her because her little child had pooped on the floor at this place we were staying, and she said “What are you so mad about? Why don’t you go back to your big house? Nobody needs you here at all. We are trying to make it through a war.” She was right, of course.



Did the situation improve over the next year?

We got so busy, so busy. Mlen-too was preaching every Sunday, and working to rebuild the community, get food, reestablish the marketplace. We got a high school going, advised for the UN, opened a clinic, helped get the rebuilding of CongoTown going, helped repatriate refugees . We felt like we had so much to offer.

In 1991, we were offered positions in the interim government of Dr. Amos Sawyer. There were still no cars, no telephones, so we walked from CongoTown to Monrovia. Sawyer was heavily guarded, there were guards and soldiers everywhere, and they were dangerous too. There was fighting between all the factions then.

We knew some of the guards, and they let us through. Sawyer came in from somewhere, and saw us and hugged us, and pulled us into his office. He was the old Sawyer that we had known at the University, he was the Dean, the advisor, a great man. He had co-signed the grant with my father for us to go to Indiana, and was a great influence on me all my life, always trying to help. He said "I need God with me now!" and we knelt there in his office and prayed together.

In the end, we didn't accept the positions in the government. We were so tired, and the fighting was still going on. We just needed to get away. We never planned to stay away for very long, maybe a year at most. But then the 1992 war came, and the 1996 war came. We couldn't take our children back into that situation. That would not be right. And then Taylor took the Presidency in 1997. We had already lived in his camps, you know, so we decided to stay here.

Was it difficult to get out?

We had friends in Michigan, from doing Christian work there in Liberia, and we had friends in Indiana from our time there. They had all been very worried about our safety.

We walked to the US Embassy, many times, to try and get visas, but they said no, or they said only one of us, or one of our children could leave. Then one day we went there and they said, "Let's go. If you don't have any money, we'll pay your way..." We didn't know what it was then, but it turned out they had a huge file of letters from our friends in the US, who were angry that we were not being allowed to leave. We came to Grand Rapids, by way of Freetown, Sierra Leone, which was not yet at war.

What is it like to live here in Kalamazoo, so far from home?

It is not terrible to live in America, for us. The main thing, I guess, is that I wanted to raise my children in Africa, to have African children, Liberian children who respect their elders and their neighbors, who have my culture. My father wept when we left, because of that. I don't think he has ever forgiven me for taking them away.

It was no big shock for us to arrive here—Monrovia is a very westernized city, and Liberia and America have always interacted. We were not nearly as green as people here thought we would be. I don't think we are at all what people expected us to be.

It can be very beautiful here in the fall, and when the snow melts and the flowers first bloom.

But it is our dream to return home. We have so much to offer our country, and we can just be of more use there. You know, I went home, recently, for my mother's funeral, and I got so sad, and disappointed. Nothing's happening.

She turns to Norris, who is with us in the living room,

The EJ Roy building, the Centennial Pavillion, they are all just falling down, about to fall on somebody walking down the sidewalk. It makes me feel so bad. Those beautiful buildings, just crumbling.

We had a big dance for my mother, you know, and the drums and the singing went on all night. Sometime during the night, I woke up there, where I was staying, and I could hear the songs, and they had my name in them you know, "Patricia!" It was wonderful. And there are all these plants I planted years and years ago, still growing, still producing. Here in Michigan, everything dies every year, over and over, anything you plant in your garden, just about, you have to plant it again in the spring. It just seems so much easier there.

The bad things about living here are hard to talk about. Sometimes, when I have a lot of food left, over, I look around and there's nobody to give it to. There's no interdependence here. In Liberia, if you don't need your neighbor, you act like you do, anyway. Here, you hear about some old man who dies in his home and nobody finds him for weeks. That is poverty of another kind.

And it happens to me, too. People become invisible. I've gotten to a point where I don't need other people and that's terrible. When I was home for the funeral, I carried that with me somehow, and I felt just like a stranger in my country.

When our children are out on their own, Mlen-Too and I will be heading home.

Thank you