

Southern Sublime

Julian Lucas

Morning, Paramin

by Derek Walcott and Peter Doig.
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The solitary artist on the snowy ridge of Peter Doig's *Figure in Mountain Landscape* (1997–1998) couldn't be farther from the Caribbean. Back turned, he looks over his easel toward a smattering of evergreens on a mauve hillside. It is winter, but there is hardly any white on the canvas, and the distant lime-green mountains suggest the arrival of spring. The painter, a flame in the wilderness, seems almost to smolder, covered in jagged pink patches as though pictured by a thermographic camera.

Derek Walcott's poem on the facing page begins with serene indifference to climate or continent, describing the painter as the poet's houseguest. A studio is mentioned; shortly thereafter, a pool. Discrepancies accumulate and we begin to wonder where, between text and image, we have disembarked. But the poem's final lines excuse this sleight of land, invoking the painter's peripatetic biography and the deceptive license of his art:

*Drawing is a sort of duplicity,
he joins them, the pousis and
gommier's avalanche,
after the crisp, fierce snow's
ferocity
has left her tattered fabric on a
branch,
as foam or snowfall whiten from
one brush
the double climate that he keeps
inside
the landscapes that astound him
with their ambush.*

Two crafts converge in *Morning, Paramin*, an entrancing collection that couples fifty-one of Doig's paintings with answering verses from Walcott. Each pair is a meditation on privacy and possession, transience and belonging, youth, mortality, inheritance—and how all of these disclose themselves in landscape. Snowbound Canadian houses mingle with costumed carnival apparitions; the windows of a Vienna picture shop repeat themselves in the gaps of a sea wall; a lion haunts the barred entrance of a yellow prison. But the book centers on Trinidad, an island both artists have called home. Doig, who was born in Edinburgh and grew up in Canada, spent his early childhood in Port of Spain and resettled nearby in 2002. Walcott built his career there; in 1959 (the year of his collaborator's birth) he founded the Trinidad Theater Workshop.

Doig couldn't have asked for a more daunting appraiser than the eighty-seven-year-old Nobel laureate. No one has scrutinized the Caribbean with more devotion, sensitivity, and protectiveness than Walcott, a St. Lucian poet, playwright, and painter who has made its landscape the touchstone of his art. He flew to Montreal in 2014 for Doig's exhibition "No Foreign Lands," urged by the French editor Harry Jan-covici, who after reading Walcott on Caribbean painting proposed a joint project. It began with the artist steer-

ing Walcott through the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, watching from behind his wheelchair as he evaluated each painting, inaugurating the series of exchanges that would become *Morning, Paramin*.

The collaborators are in many ways fellow travelers, sharing an obstinate attachment to "outmoded" mediums (figurative painting, formal poetry) and to themes you might call, depending on your generosity, either conservative or timeless: natural beauty, the saintly qualities of ordinary people, and the elusiveness of home. Both have divided their lives between Canada, the United Kingdom, and the Caribbean; climate in their works is a force that can estrange worlds or, through metaphor, bind them. Wandering, solitary figures are another common fixation. In *The Hitch-Hiker* (1989–1990) a red truck crosses a twilight Canadian meadow, while in *100 Years Ago* (Carrera) (2001) a distant island looms behind a haggard rower's craft: "The canoe is a hyphen between centuries,/between generations, between trees." (And between careers. In 2007 Doig's *White Canoe* broke the record for most expensive painting sold by a living European artist; Walcott's epic *Omeros*, published two years before his Nobel Prize, opens: "This is how, one sunrise, we cut down them canoes.") Between Doig's drifters and the castaways of Walcott's Caribbean emerges a sense of serendipitous, even providential encounter.

The stunning result is less a dialogue than a shared dream, Doig's paintings a pilgrimage along which Walcott lights votive candles for all that he has loved. The unreal atmosphere resembles Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities*, Marco Polo narrating the oneiric empire of Kublai Khan. Walcott drifts between ekphrasis and personal reflection, often working in near sonnets that, like those of *Midsummer* (1984), demarcate a season in his life. It is old age, palpable in a disencumbered style ("My disenchantment with all adjectives/is deepening, a certain sign of age"), and discovering its footprints across a landscape where two lives, and two Caribbeans, blend. The poems are suffused with twilight, but the dominant register is celebration, delight in the fresh eyes of a painter whom Walcott addresses much as Shakespeare does the young man of the sonnets: with an injunction to preserve beauty in the world, to produce and reproduce, perhaps even to inherit.

"Dedication to S.H.," the collection's first poem, is a bittersweet invita-

tion to the Antilles, juxtaposing Doig's arrival as a Caribbean painter with the passing of Walcott's friends ("S.H." is the late Seamus Heaney) and the gradual vanishing of the island he knew in childhood. The verses are an apostrophe to the distant bather in Doig's *J. M. at Paragon* (2004), who appears wading in the shallows under a cloudless orange sky. The title of Doig's painting alludes to a bay in Trinidad, but Walcott imagines the view from his home

and here, the synecdoche for a history of encroachment that briefly implicates Doig. But whatever grounds this suspicion—an older artist's misgivings about a younger one, a native's about an islander by adoption—falls away as the poem unfolds. Walcott admits Doig to that aristocracy of perception that, for him, determines who belongs. My land is "utterly yours."

Whether it is *ours* is another question. *Morning, Paramin* has a beauty that almost excludes its readers, the aggressive intimacy of correspondence. Bypassing any question of audience, it is a communion between artists, its sacrament the landscape as shared secret:

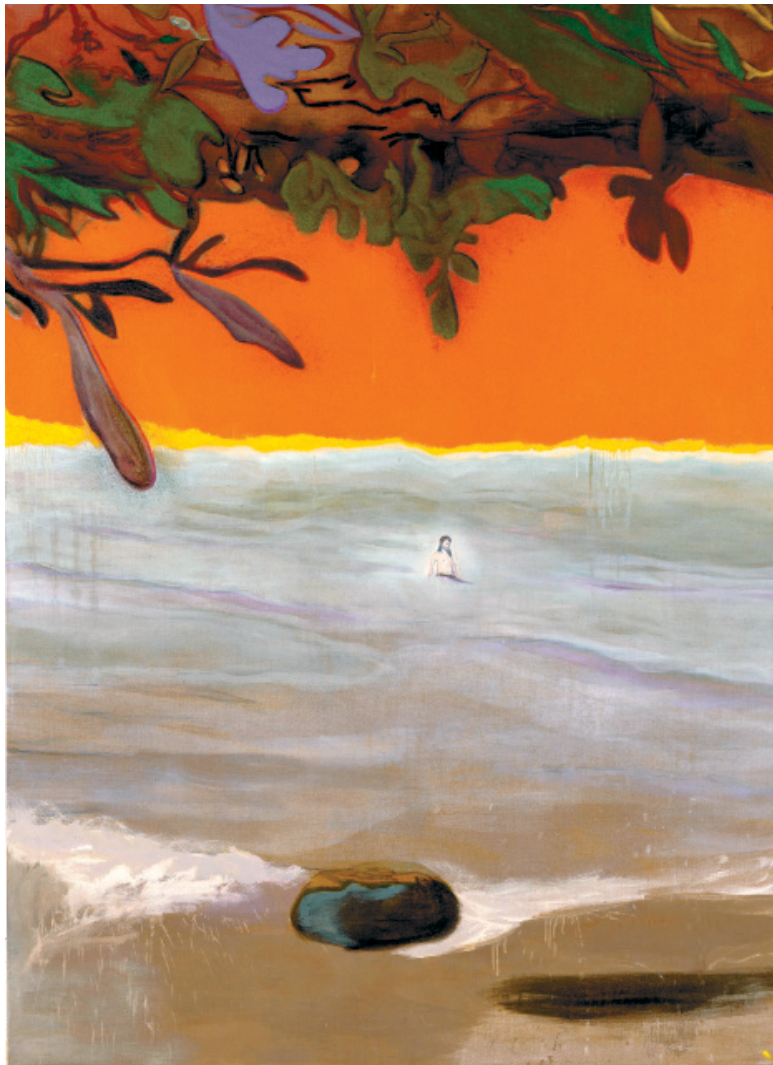
*They're yours: those
scenes I knew in my
green years
with a young man's joy
at Choc, at
Blanchisseuse.*

Derek Walcott has spent a lifetime learning how to see the Caribbean. The archipelago's history is for him a tale of perspectives in parallax: of the eyes that have beheld the islands, and those with which the islands have beheld the world. The story begins with the willful blindness of colonialism, a misapprehension of the people and the natural environment. In his 1992 Nobel lecture, the poet decried "that consoling pity... [in] tinted engravings of Antillean forests, with their proper palm trees, ferns, and water-

falls"—the prelude to an aesthetic indictment charged with moral force: "A century looked at a landscape furious with vegetation in the wrong light and with the wrong eye."

Across his work Walcott has sought a rectification of vision, a way of contending with those who, inverting the crime of Lot's wife, sin by refusing to look. The tourist with postcards printed on the insides of his eyelids, the Afrocentrist whose motherland mirage rejects the Creole culture around him, the Naipauline exile who measures his home by the tape of another world—all are heretics in Walcott's universe, which is governed by values similar to those enumerated in St. Lucia's motto: "The land, the people, the light." *Another Life* (1973), Walcott's first long poem and the story of his birth as an artist, remembers the exuberance with which the poet and his friend "Gregorias" (the painter Dunstan St. Omer) devoted themselves to the St. Lucian landscape, swearing "that we would never leave the island/until we had put down, in paint, in words/...every neglected, self-pitying inlet."

This geography in art was also an assumption of prerogative, Walcott's



Peter Doig: J. M. at Paragon, 2004

in St. Lucia. Addressing the solitary figure as Peter Doig, he proffers the painter's own landscape with a patriarch's reluctance:

*A crest, and then a slope of barren
acres,
a forest on its flank, the wide
sea-swell;
from my wide balcony you can
watch the breakers
bursting in sheets of spray across
the hotel.
You're welcome to it, Peter Doig:
Pigeon Island,
that once had an avenue of
casuarinas;
everything that offers my land
to be utterly yours...¹*

The welcome is tinged with wariness. Just before Walcott addresses Doig, the scenery is interrupted by a bathetic "hotel": the Sandals Grande St. Lucia, a resort near the ruined British fortifications on the Pigeon Island peninsula,

¹The passage echoes and reverses the usurpation of a colonial master's verandah that begins Walcott's *Another Life* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1973).

Peter Doig/PinchukArtCentre Collection



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identification of his own artistic maturity with St. Lucia's independence from the British Empire. Consecrating his homeland in paint and verse, the poet located himself at the beginning of a Caribbean tradition. He counted as peers and forebears all those painters who, regardless of origin, "got the light right": Winslow Homer, Paul Gauguin, the Trinidadian watercolorist Jackie Hinkson, and the Impressionist painter Camille Pissarro, subject of Walcott's long poem *Tiepolo's Hound* (2000). A biography in verse, the book traces Pissarro's gifted eye and transformative influence (he taught both Cézanne and Gauguin) to his childhood in St. Thomas.

It is also a lament that Pissarro rarely painted his birthplace. (Walcott's own paintings, most of them watercolors of Trinidad and St. Lucia, are reproduced alongside Pissarro's story in mute reproach.) Near the poem's end, Walcott addresses a moving plaint to the prodigal of Charlotte Amalie, who abandoned the West Indies for Paris and Pontoise, and deprived his homeland of a genius. His judgment is unsparing: "You could have been our pioneer."

Peter Doig, a renowned landscape artist in a time without many, became famous long before he settled in Trinidad. When he won the Walker Art Gallery's John Moores Prize in 1993, it was for one of a portfolio of snow paintings: richly colored yet melancholy works that draw on postcards, photographs, and advertisements to refract the scenery of his Canadian youth. He spent most of his childhood around Quebec and in Toronto, but left at nineteen for London, where he studied painting at St. Martin's and the Chelsea School of Art.

At the time his work gained attention, the city was dominated by the Young British Artists. Conceptual pieces and large installations were prominent, while painting, especially figurative work, seemed exhausted. But Doig wanted to make "homely paintings"—of houses and train stations, fallow fields and frozen ponds, explorations of weather and light that used thickly layered surfaces, complex reflections, and the imperfections of his source materials. (What appear to be snowflakes in many of his paintings are incidental paint-splashes, reproduced from the source photographs upon which they dripped.) He succeeded despite this supposedly archaic practice: *Frieze* featured his work in 1992; two years later, he was nominated for the Turner Prize, Britain's most important award for contemporary art.

Doig relocated to Trinidad in 2002, establishing a studio in the Laventille quarter of Port of Spain. Soon after moving he began *Moruga* (2002–2008), a morose riff on Columbus's landfall that exchanges the heroic light of "discovery" for cataclysmic gloom.² The scene—a swordsman aboard a boat with a cross-emblazoned sail—is based on a newspaper photograph of 2005 "Discovery Day" festivities in

²The Haitian artist Frantz Zephirin has a painting in a similar mood: *The Crucifixion of the New World* (2002). Three ships with a crew of living skeletons cross the ocean behind a bloody crucifix, its stigmata the hands and tongue of doomed indigenous deities.

Moruga—where Columbus, Walcott notes, never set foot. ("Everything has been thoroughly rehearsed," he writes. "Doig paints it for what it is: a fable.") A reproduction of an inaccurate reenactment of an illegitimate annexation, the painting is an example of the layered, interrupted sequences of reference that connect Doig's paintings to reality—and perhaps a wry reflection on his own resettlement.

He was criticized in the art world as an outsider to his adopted home, a white tourist sampling a poor, brown country. In an admiring review of Doig's 2015 show at Denmark's Louisiana Museum of Modern Art in these pages, Hilton Als ventriloquized these naysayers as seekers after an "authentic" misery that the painter's work refused:



Peter Doig: Lapeyrouse Wall, 2004

Was he not indulging the privilege of the colonialist when he painted Trinidad, a "third-world" country, with the lushness of an observer who was... more interested in "exoticism" than the truth?... Was Doig not cheating the viewer of the misery of that "other" world?³

But Trinidad is not quite other to Doig, who in the fifteen years since settling there has raised children, worked with a show for incarcerated artists on Carrera, and cofounded the popular Port of Spain screening series Studio-FilmClub. (For each film Doig paints a poster, and three of them are reproduced in *Morning, Paramin*. Walcott contrasts the less cosmopolitan Port of Spain movie theaters he remembers, all Hollywood films and no air conditioning.) Doig also spent five years of his childhood in Trinidad. His father, who worked for a shipping company and painted in his spare time, brought the family to Port of Spain a year after his birth. The house was full of work by local artists—Carlyle Chan, Willi Chen, Sibyl Attack—and even after the Doigs went on to Canada, the only paintings on their walls were from Trinidad. As Walcott writes, "If [a traveler] returns to what he loved in a landscape and stays there, he is no longer a traveler but in stasis and concentration, the lover of that particular part of earth, a native."

³"Peter Doig: The Transformer," *The New York Review*, June 25, 2015.

What does it mean to possess a landscape? "You're welcome to it, Peter Doig"—and yet everything in *Morning, Paramin* suggests that ownership, even certainty of reference, is provisional. Privacy is conveyed by all of the paintings, from the web of frosty branches that conceals the anatomy of *The Architect's Home in the Ravine* (1991) to the colorful ice marring the reflection of the lodge in *Pond Life* (1993). But the painter's reticence has particular poignancy for the Caribbean, so besieged by sun-washed simulacra that it is almost inextricable from visions of paradise or picturesque poverty.

Doig's art refers to a more private world, equal parts enchanted and quotidian, cobbled together from pickup cricket games, idling motorboats, aban-

doned bottles of beer, and chance transients recast as tutelary guardians while, contra the postcards, night falls. In a suite of nocturnal portraits, Walcott animates the drunk reveler of *Stag* (2002–2005), the carnival masker in *Man Dressed as Bat (Night)* (2008), and the startled poacher, "caught by an electric flash," of *Pelican Man* (2003). The high point of the sequence is a paean to Antillean evening:

*Night with its diadems and coronets seen
as contradictions of Hellenic sense,
because she is our island's fairy queen
blood-lipped and candle-eyed, la diablesse,
of bats and werewolves, loup garous, douennes.*

Slipping into a shadowed French Creole for a litany of folkloric terrors, these verses accompany the blue, horned figure who emerges from the bush in Doig's painting *Untitled (Paramin)* (2004). A traditional blue *djab* (devil) from Trinidad's carnival, the phantom glows in lapis lazuli outline against the dark fronds of the forest, naked but for a pair of khaki shorts. He stands as though on the threshold of a closed territory, a boundary reinforced by the poem's assertion of a distinct tradition (Hellenic antiquity and Spenser's *Faerie Queen* gestured at, then swept aside), its possessive language, and the flickering Creole of

its incantatory end. Not for everyone this kingdom of night, contradicting sense.

What sunlit, tropical views do appear in *Morning, Paramin* are always screened out or at a distance, only ironically offered up. The browsing connoisseur in *Metropolitain (House of Pictures)* (2004), lifted from Honoré Daumier's *The Print Collector* (1857–1863), loiters with his hands in his pockets before a crowded gallery wall. From behind, a hilly, verdant landscape bleeds into view, overtaking the grid of empty frames. But the collector seems to miss the larger picture, fixated on a single colorless drawing of palm trees that appears before his eyes:

*It is the distance of the heart
from what it cannot own, an old,
old tune
hummed by the critic with his
scarf and patches.*

Paramin is a village high in Trinidad's Northern Range known for its parang bands, herb gardens, and the lofty view of the Caribbean from its namesake hill. It is a place Derek Walcott shares not only with Peter Doig, but also *Morning, Paramin's* other major presence, the late Margaret Maillard. The poet's second wife and mother of his two daughters, Maillard died in 2014. Walcott first met Doig at her funeral reception (the painter knew her through his children), a gathering in Port of Spain recollected by "In the Heart of Old San Juan." The city is transfigured by elegy: "Margaret was gone but all the streets were hers, .../

all these are her monuments, not paint or verse."

Grief's itinerary turns Doig's landscapes into a cartography of mourning. The man who walks beside the cemetery in *Lapeyrouse Wall* (2004) becomes an echo of the poet's loss ("The parasol, I'd say, belongs to his dead wife"). While most of Doig's paintings have an almost confrontational flatness, *Lapeyrouse Wall* recedes toward a vanishing point in which Walcott sees "both infinity and patience, / the qualities that are praised in a Protestant hymn." In the poem "Lapeyrouse Umbrella," which faces a detail of the scene in *Lapeyrouse Wall*, mourning turns to morning as a place lost with one intimacy is reborn in the dawning of another: "What she has forgotten you learn every day, Peter."

The Trinidad Walcott shared with Margaret is transubstantiated, redrawn from Doig's vantage. Paramin, in the hilly country north of Port of Spain, where the artist lives, serves as the mediator for this act of communion. Walcott visited him there in 2015, and the poem he wrote about it—perhaps the collection's most beautiful—is both epitaph and ascension, a remembrance and anticipation of shared life:

*She loved to say it and I loved to
hear it,
"Paramin," it had the scent of
cocoa in it,
the criss-crossing trunks of leafy
gommiers straight
out of Cézanne and Sisley, the
road rose then fell fast
into the lush valley where my
daughters live.*

*The name said by itself could
make us laugh
as if some deep, deep secret was
hidden there.
I see it through crossing tree
trunks framed with love
and she is gone but the hill is still
there
and when I join her it will be
Paramin
for both of us and the children,
the mountain air
and music with no hint of what
the name could mean,
rocking gently by itself,
"Paramin," "Paramin."*

"Paramin" and its echo seem a password to the hereafter, a spellbinding name exchanged in a moment that excludes us. A conversation between solitudes—bereavement, death—it draws a veil of private meaning over a beloved place. The most moving portraits in Walcott's poetry are of such solitary communions in landscape, not only the mourner's encounter with loss but the artist's or the craftsman's with tradition. This finds its highest expression in the lonely, sometimes ecstatic concentration of labor—a fisherman at sea, a widowed seamstress at her Singer, or Peter Doig as he appears in *Portrait (Under Water)* (2007), eyes closed, head an island breaking the surface, turbaned by currents in a composition that vaguely recalls Van Gogh's *Self-Portrait with Bandaged Ear* (1889). ("Beauty without speech/is what great painting is," writes Walcott in "The Tanker.") His reply to *Portrait*, "Abstraction," conveys an assembly of silent painters

and the music of their solitude:

*We imagine that we can hear what
certain painters
heard as they worked: Pollock the
cacophony of traffic,
O'Keefe the engines of certain
lilies, Bearden
cornets muffled in velvet, Peter
Doig the
brooding, breeding silence of deep
bush. . . .*

Addressed less to an audience than to posterity and tradition, this concept of art as higher conversation has a certain conservatism. Some would even say arrogance, as though the poet—whose works are so often homages or comments to other artists—were determined to speak over our heads. But this aspiration is inextricable from humility, an ambition born of astonishment at the "slow-burning signals/of the great" that Walcott defends in his 1976 poem "Volcano":

*At least it requires awe,
which has been lost to our time;
so many people have seen
everything,
so many people can predict,
so many people refuse to enter the
silence
of victory, the indolence
that burns at the core. . . .*

Silence, indolence, and awe are not characteristic of the art of our time. But they are values in which Derek Walcott, who so powerfully embodies them in these poems for Peter Doig, has never lost faith. □

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