

Mouth Mek Fi Nyam

An Anthology by Caribbean Elders



Edited by Courtney Conrad and Keith Jarrett
Supported by Spread the Word and Near Neighbours

Mouth Mek Fi Nyam

An Anthology by Caribbean Elders

Edited by Courtney Conrad & Keith Jarrett

Supported by Spread the Word and Near Neighbours



Contents

First published in Great Britain in 2025 by Spread the Word.

Copyright © remains with the authors.

Photographs copyright © Joladé Olusanya.

Cover credit Orietta Gaspari.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted, in any form or by any means electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording, or any information storage and retrieval system, without prior permission of the publisher.

The moral rights of the contributors to be identified as the authors of this work have been asserted in accordance with the Copyright Designs and Patents Act 1988.

ISBN 978-1-9998254-9-2

Designed by Katrina Clark

Spread the Word

The Albany

Douglas Way

London

SE8 4AG

spreadtheword.org.uk

Mouth Mek Fi Nyam is supported by funds awarded by the Near Neighbours' Windrush Day Grant Scheme.

Spread the Word would like to thank Coco Collective, the Hummingbird Social Club, Catford Library and The Albany for their partnership in the project.

Preface	1
Introduction	2
From Tin to Plate	4
Jennifer Brathwaite	
Cassareep Pepperpot	5
Jennifer Brathwaite	
Hungry Belly	7
Patricia Marson	
Morning Ritual	8
Patricia Marson	
Earth Mother	10
Laura Annansingh	
Everyting Have Its Use	12
Sharon Marshall	
Hot Pot in da Bush	14
Michelle Brooks	
The Castle and the Sea	15
Michelle Brooks	
Disrespect	17
Jacqueline Codrington	
Food Uniformity	19
Debbie Alleyne	
Gather Round	21
Jean Dowling	
Saturday Soup	23
Dorna McCorkle	

Beach Day	25
Joan Frater	
Let Me Tell You	27
Maria White	
Tun Yuh Han Mek Fashion	29
Yvonne Robinson	
Lessons from Granny	30
Yvonne Robinson	
Roti	32
Enomwoyi Damali	
And if I Think of Paradise	34
Lorna Shaw	
Kitchen Sacristy	36
Lisa Lore	
Mountain Chicken, a Dominican Delight	38
Anthea Durand	
And Another Sweet Thing	40
Keith Jarrett	
Mommy Carry Mi Guh Coronation Market	42
Courtney Conrad	
Lewisham, Borough of Literature Commissions	43
The Taste of Soup	46
Joan Anim-Addo	
Family Heart Troubles	54
Leone Ross	
About the Poets and Contributors	64
Acknowledgements	70
About Spread the Word	71
Contact Us	72

Preface

by **Spread the Word**

Spread the Word is delighted and honoured to be publishing the *Mouth Mek Fi Nyam* anthology featuring original poems and short stories from Caribbean elders, commissioned writers Leone Ross and Joan Anim-Addo and poetry workshop facilitators Courtney Conrad and Keith Jarrett. This is a Lewisham, Borough of Literature project.

The elders participated in numerous poetry workshops with poetry facilitators Courtney Conrad and Keith Jarrett. A series of gardening workshops with Coco Collective; and an oral history workshop with Leone Ross and Joan Anim-Addo. They also had an intimate portrait photoshoot with the photographer, Joladé Olusanya. The elder's creative input was invaluable to this process.

Mouth Mek Fi Nyam raises and celebrates the voices and experiences of the elders which often go unheard. The print edition of the Anthology is free with copies available at local libraries and at The Albany.

We would like to thank Courtney, Keith, Leone, and Joan for creating space for the elders to explore, have conversations, and be creative. Thanks to Coco Collective, Catford Library, and the Hummingbird Social Club for being such wonderful partners. We especially thank the elders for sharing their stories of food, gardening, migration, and home.

Their stories helped create personal and resonant work.

We hope you enjoy reading it.

Ruth Harrison | Director
Spread the Word

Courtney Conrad | Programme Manager – Community Engagement
Spread the Word

Introduction

Celebrating Caribbean Voices:

A journey of recollection through poetry and gardening. We reflect with excitement on the incredible journey of facilitating poetry, oral history and gardening workshops with Caribbean elders in Deptford. These sessions were designed exclusively for celebrating and preserving the rich tapestry of unique stories that have been nothing short of transformative. These sessions were a unique exploration of the ways culture, memory, and identity are preserved through cooking and gardening. Also, exploring themes of race, language, family and migration. The depth and richness of the discussions and creative expressions that have emerged are a testament to the profound impact of giving space for these voices to be heard. The poems and short stories in this anthology are a mosaic contribution to the collective tale of a resilient and vibrant community. To all the Caribbean elders who shared their stories and made these workshops a success, thank you for entrusting us with your narratives. We are grateful to have been part of this poetic journey, and we look forward to the continued impact these stories will have on generations to come. Here's to storytelling, and the enduring spirit of Caribbean heritage!

Please note that this project was a condensed series of exploratory poetry workshops, often involving elders who had never written poetry before. At the end of the process, we invited participants to make some light edits—offering them a brief introduction to the editorial process.

Courtney Conrad & Keith Jarrett

Jennifer



From Tin to Plate

by Jennifer Brathwaite

Tinned yellow ackee and green callaloo sit guarded
behind locked gates of knotted nylon and plastic alarms.
No one shops, too expensive. Nearby market stalls set them free
to touch. Experienced hands of discerning shoppers measure
the smooth purple aubergines and just-picked tomatoes. Eager eyes
search for the best bargains hard-earned money can buy. I'm never lost
browsing Brixton Market's alleys, listening to Gregory Porter's 'In Crowd'.

Home now, just in time now, food to cook now.
In my cottage garden, pots are on the fire. Dishes once imagined,
now realised. Brimming plates call over family and friends to eat,
their noses twitch, lips smack savouring the flavours of rice and peas
infused with coconut milk and more than a hint of wiri-wiri pepper.
Curry goat and chicken curry served in soft folded rotis,
quietly awaiting the signal to start our traditional late lunch.

Wait! Hold that spoon. Put down that fork.
Where's the golden phoulourie, the fried channa,
the saltfish patties in freshly warm coco bread?
Bring to the table the ice-cold mauby, sweet ginger beer,
and cinnamon-rich Guinness punch.
Now, my guests are ready.

Cassareep Pepperpot

by Jennifer Brathwaite

Rich, thick, molasses-coloured liquid of your form
bubbled gently in the ancient pot. Ancestors
declared you were born long ago, as the daughter
of the cassava root. Born far up in the lush savannas,
deep in Guyana's hinterland. But who are you,
with your enticing aroma of so long ago mixed with places far away?

Who am I? Who am I?
The ancients first taught me to preserve hunted meat.
Today, my fame has spread and circled the globe twice.
Thick cuts of beef, oxtail, and cow foot mixed with salted meats,
lashed with sweet cinnamon, bitter cloves, soft brown sugar
and cracked black pepper. Crushed garlic and thyme burst
with the flavour of the hot wiri-wiri peppers. All now seated
quietly simmering in my deep, dark, fragrant sea, enclosed
in the big Dutch pot.

We're best friends, you and I.
We share the secrets of times past and present.
I will tell you the secret of what makes me
special because, I'm Cassareep Pepperpot. Not oxtail stew
with gravy browning, and burnt brown sugar. I'm Cassareep Pepperpot,
with bold flavours and thick black form, I grace tables as a custom-made
requirement at Easter and Christmas celebrations. The enduring history
of my people is in every spoonful of my delicious Pepperpot.

A full-page photograph of a woman, Patricia, standing in a garden. She is wearing a vibrant green sleeveless jumpsuit and a large, colorful necklace. She is positioned in front of a brick wall and lush green plants, including palm trees. The name 'Patricia' is written in a white box in the top left corner.

Patricia

Hungry Belly

by Patricia Marson

Papa was a salesman whose truck travelled every winding road in Jamaica. Praise the generous country men who never let him leave without a full crocus bag of yellow and green banana, yams, booby eggs, ackee, jack fruit and cow foot. Mama used to have the fire on the stove by the time he pulled up. When it came to serving, the best parts of the meat went to Papa. He was round not because of genetics but Mama's servings. His plate piled with kidney, liver, yam, banana and dumpling, all cleaned in minutes. We grew up fast once the matriarch of the family died. Six, seven and ten-year-olds learnt how to boil water for coco tea, eggs, and dumplings. As the years went by, we graduated to cooking curry, brown stew chicken and oxtail. Trialling the pressure cooker was like playing Russian Roulette. We never knew if the food would remain in the pot or plastered to the ceiling. We anticipated each other's verdict, whether the first spoonful was too salty or too peppery. It was our duty now, not to let Papa go hungry.

Morning Ritual

by Patricia Marson

My morning ritual begins at the kitchen window
over a cup of ginger tea, watching the birds take

turn flying back and forth from the fence to the feeds
like soldiers in an army. In the early spring, earth

pushes out daffodils like a mother giving birth.
My thoughts wander to my sister who like daffodils

is here one day and gone the next, only I can't get her back.
At least my husband is still alive and well, after his car crash

almost turned him to dust. He's a joint owner of the kitchen window,
together like a board meeting, we assess the garden, its vegetable beds,

overgrown trees, and sneaky weeds. When we pass, our children
know how to tend to our garden and that it must flower our funerals.

Laura



Earth Mother

by Laura Annansingh

Since mama died, nothing
flourishes. She is dust, as are you.

She really loved you. Nourished,
spoonfed you from root to flower.

Shielded you from impending storms,
actively annihilating predators threatening your life.

For 40 years, your ebony skin shone,
variegated dahlia ribbons decorating your heirs

beneath a crown of tiger lily beams.
Adorned with earrings of purple fuchsias.

Necklaces of explosive red hydrangeas were your signature,
riotous nasturtiums entwined your treasures with vibrant oranges,

innocent creams. Bracelets of pink begonias kissed you,
rings of yellow daisies bound you to her heart.

A kaleidoscope of unbound miracles.
All cultivated to stir. Her ungloved hands welcomed your birth.

Caressing you with a bouquet of whispers.
Your flexible limbs continually heralded renewal.

Solely for you, her life force thrust bamboos deep into the soil,
assuring you were never laid low, ravished, beaten, eaten, into submission.

All trails cleared affording you the possibility to rejoice
in purest sunlight. You were mama's dream child,

I envied the attention lavished upon you.
You needed no permission to grow according to your wildest nature.

Sharon



Everything Have Its Use

by Sharon Marshall

after Jacob Sam-La Rose

Our mothers used to say, *Don't t'row 'way de limes!*
Good t' freshen up de sink.

Don't t'row 'way de bags!
Good fa shoppin' trips.

Don't t'row 'way de hot water!
Good t' kill de ants.

Don't t'row 'way de tea bags!
Good fa de plants

Don't t'row 'way de bones!
Good fa de dogs.

Don't t'row 'way de slop!
Good fa de hogs.

Nowadays, they say hoarding blocks
blessings like clouds do sunshine,

but my mother's voice still fills
every room in my home, instructing me

to hold on to this, hold on to that,
even my soul follows suit.

Michelle



Hot Pot in da Bush

by Michelle Brooks

I remember my first time
at Hot Pot in da Bush, choosing

stewed chicken to see if I could trust them.
Men swear dat dey can cook.

I don't remember who served me that day,
though I remember the buttery soft chicken

and that they made sure we had paid.
I remembered the slow brown drip of gravy,

sliding down the wings with ease, the pimentos
and peppers. Dad picked out the stick of thyme

that stood in my rice and peas like a flag pole.
I don't remember how long we ate in silence,

hypnotised, before we locked eyes in deep appreciation.
I remember, assuring Dad, before we left

that we'd return to Hot Pot in da bush,
It wasn't til years later that I passed

the hallowed shop. Dark, forlorn, rejected.
Zinc shutters to the ground.

The Castle and the Sea

by Michelle Brooks

We sat around the Big Black box, the Castle and the Sea,
Dad on the chair, my two brothers and I on the floor.
It turned on — all shaky with pastel coloured hue, then bright.

At nighttime, the test card girl was due. Dad
would watch Alf Garnett's *Till Death Do Us Part*.
Sometimes, he'd shake and clutch his chest shouting *Bombaclaat!*

For me I loved the sitcoms *Love Thy Neighbour*,
In Sickness all a dat. The Black Box held adventure.
Took us everywhere from news of Rodney's bombing Malcolm X

and Cassius Clay to Mandela's sentencing. *Panorama*
had its say. It didn't really matter, what you did at school that day,
we'd eat our chicken, rice and peas, then the box meant time to play.



Jacqueline

Disrespect

by Jacqueline Codrington

Rockstone. You thought you could give me this to eat — fresh chicken, salty pigtail and tough rice. I could tell from the colour of the rice, the tin poured the peas. Not a trace of coconut milk. Imagine, I wasn't even worthy of your time to cook a proper meal. Daddy would've asked, *You think you're feeding a hog?* Your food isn't even good enough for that. Would've been better if you served me tea with tough crackers. After all I've done for you, your face should've tun kitchen sink to known the taste of dead food and plate.

Food Uniformity

by Debbie Alleyne

i. There

Contained in impersonal tins on supermarket shelves,
clothed in bland printed labels. Prisoners captured
by metal chains, ransomed at choke & rob prices. A clone
to one's neighbour in size, colour, taste; individuality lost.

ii. Here

Piled higgledy-piggledy on Miss Maisie's stall,
my vibrant nakedness on show, proud of slight bruises
from dropping in her yard this morning; badges of honour
flaunts brown velvet skin to catch customers' eyes
as they bustle by "you know you want to come and try...

my unique sweetness!

I fresh up with myself – yuh didn' know?!

Natural juiciness – not forced ripe",

Taste before you buy, voices bellow
above the market hustle, laughter, life banter and barter.

Savour sun joy and nectar dew all in one bite
nestled between sisters of purple star apples,
red cashews, green guineps, yellow Buxton Spice mangoes,
white lady guavas, black jamaons. A kaleidoscope of calypso
colours with total disorder in fruit placement

Freeeeedooooommmmm

You can keep your food uniformity.....right over THERE.



Jean

Gather Round

by Jean Dowling

Summer enters
and the children of the village
finish their house chores before assembling
at the feet of the village storyteller, a kind
but firm lady with no children.
She sits on a stool, knife in hand,
with a bowl of smooth yellow mangoes.
Sometimes, one of her slices reach out
towards us. Our mouths opened
not only to swallow juicy flesh
but wisdom as if we were her unborn children.



Saturday Soup

by Dorna McCorkle

Mum would say, *you have to give your system a break*, so, on Saturday we always had soup, my face contorted at the sight of the bowl which swayed Mum to make stew chicken and rice for me, annoying my older siblings.

At least I went to the market with her, supervising Her choice in pumpkin, yam, chow chow, thyme and carrots. Once we got home, I was the only one interested in helping to chop the vegetables and beef for dinner. She'd say, I would find a good husband.

In these moments we were as close as the food stewing together in the pot. She didn't give compliments easily. I grew to love Saturday soup that could feed a family of six and neighbours and friends who popped in unannounced.

A photograph of a woman, Joan, standing outdoors. She is wearing a black long-sleeved top with a teal and white striped pattern on the side, a gold brooch, and sunglasses. She is positioned in front of a brick wall and large, spiky plants with reddish-brown and yellow-green leaves. The name 'Joan' is written in a white box in the top left corner.

Joan

Beach Day

by Joan Frater

On the beach, under the shade of palm trees, I feast surrounded by family and friends. The sand a hot frying pan; the salty air adds extra seasoning to our ackee, saltfish and fritters. Plenty mangoes rest in our dress bowls, adding more sweetness to our day. Mum's famous carrot juice a lazy river washing everything down. We look out at the horizon watching the boats rock to Bob Marley's *One Love* blaring from my husband's speakers. *Devon House's* rum and raisin ice-cream calls us home, and the drive back to town begins.



Maria

Let Me Tell You

by **Maria White**

after Lucille Clifton

what's worth celebrating,
having crept into Babylon
everything appearing the same.
Everywhere and person cold.
Desperate to be whole again
back on my island, St. Vincent.

To live in Babylon is to trust God
to save me from foolish questions,
Did you use to live in a mud hut?
Where is your tail?
Did you used to eat
your chicken and rice from the garbage?

With time, I married at eighteen
looking for love, a place to call home,
but found everything but —
My first child birthed a purpose in me,
made me believe I could have a bright future.

But she died at six months,
I wanted to join her
but couldn't for my two future daughters' sake.
Life, a malfunctioned roller coaster
but I made it to the ripe age of seventy-one.

By God's grace,
by God's grace,
I got through it.
I got through it.

A woman with dark curly hair, wearing a black headband and a vibrant red, black, and white patterned dress with a black sash, stands smiling in front of a large, dense green bush. A brick wall is partially visible behind the foliage.

Yvonne

Tun Yuh Han Mek Fashion

by Yvonne Robinson

Jamaica's summertime, hunger arrives at the crack of dawn
we race to the mango trees and fight the birds and pigs
for our share of easy pickings. My siblings, cousins
and I gallivant drenched by the boiling sun, in the green fields
with grass taller than us. We play eye spy picking out
watermelons the size of the moon. Praise our backyard
never-ending with ripe bananas, apples, tamarind,
jelly coconut, sour sops allowing hunger to never know us.
My eldest sister cooked for all of us once mum left.
From morning till dinner time, I sat in the sun
sucking my thumb, each plane that passed by, I would jump,
waving and bawling out my mother's name.
The sky swallowing my cries as they all left one after the other —
mother, father and siblings.

Lessons from Granny

by Yvonne Robinson

Learning to cook was not an option for me, from the tender age of six, granny demanded my presence in the kitchen like another one of her appliances. I observed all of her pinches, dashes, stirs and massaging seasonings into meat.

By the age of ten, my hands mastered curry / fried / stewed chicken, pepperpot soup and rice and peas. By thirteen, my hands turned me into an entrepreneur, pouring cornmeal pudding and coconut drops into baking tins filling my oven and pockets.

Granny's harsh teachings and ordering around felt like torture but now, I thank God it turned me into an independent woman, a multitasker. Whenever people ate my tasty food their plates stretched out for more. Granny, I give praise to you.

Enomwoyi



Roti

by **Enomwoyi Damali**

1) Roti is the best food in the entire world.

2) It takes time to prepare, unless you have more than one tawa but it is worth it.

You can only cook one at a time, make sure your family and friends aren't waiting with bellies hanging out.

Rough Instructions:

You'll need a tawa, which is a flat, iron, baking stone.

Self-raising flour, water, a pinch of baking powder, salt, geera, cumin and curry powder.

Roll the mixture into a ball, then you leave it to settle...I guess.

I have only ever cooked roti once, so you'll have to check the quantities with an experienced roti maker.

Additional notes:

I can't make roti. But my aunt can.

I keep meaning to ask her for a lesson, or two.

I remember arriving home from work and there was nothing to eat. I remember being surprised she rang. Maybe to give me a roti lesson before uncle's birthday party. She said, *He's gone*. I was a soggy roti falling apart. Any previous thoughts of soft roti skin and steaming curry, burnt.

Lorna



And if I Think of Paradise

by **Lorna Shaw**

after Roger Robinson

then, I am thinking of Dunns River Falls
with my nieces, grand nieces, nephews, and friends.
Driving from Red Ground grooving to reggae
and gospel blasting. Along the roadside
under the glistening sun mangoes, star apples,
june plums and sweet sops beckon us to pull over.
We arrive to the falls swimsuits and climbing
shoes ready, water beating our faces and backs
like a drum as we try to make it to the end.
Celebratory dances and pictures at the top
as if we have discovered treasure.
Picnic benches treat us to fry chicken and fish,
rice and peas, salad and sour sop juice replenishing our energy.

Lisa



Kitchen Sacristy

by Lisa Lore

And confession box,
and therapist's couch,
and bedside.

Church sisters and brothers,
kin direct and long-lost, and admirers
come from everywhere and nowhere.

On the stove dutchpots bubble
with brownstew chicken, mannish water, fish tea,
skillet sizzling with onions and peppers, plantain diamonds.

kettle in service for a hot drink,
hard dough toast, rum cake, coconut gizzardas,
bulla cake to nibble on.

A long-handled spoon stirring
my grandmother's creations,
her tongue licking the back of her hand to test it.

She gifts me the spatula to taste sweet batter from the bowl.
She soothes minds with mint and cerassie tea,
Guinness punch, Irish moss, and prayers to the Most High.

Anthea



Mountain Chicken, a Dominican Delight

by **Anthea Durand**

for my parents Vaughney Durand and Maria Guiste who met on the boat coming to England.

At dusk we returned with mum to the island of Dominica. Cowering on the tiny plane, we prepared to land. As we approached, I held my mother's hand. She had waited 30 years to return.

The volcano in the distance witnessed our approach. I thought of our strong ancestral history, and of my own lineage, of a Carib community that could not be defeated. I was moved to tears. I was finally here, where my parents came from, my parents who guided me all these years.

Embraced by my relatives, more tears flowed. I thought of the abundant rivers inside the mountains. We drove on the winding roads through the mountains towards Uncle Alan's home.

A great feast greeted us, a rainbow-coloured buffet. My plate was full.

'Ooh this is delicious', I told my uncle as I ate. "From where did these chickens come?"

I chewed each leg slowly, biting through its succulent flesh, seasoned with thyme, fried in oil and flour.

He replied that the mountain chicken was the giant frog that lived in the mountains and provided food for many.

'Frogs' I exclaimed not knowing that I was eating frogs' legs that tasted so much like chicken.

I hold these memories of gathering and eating with the elders who are no more, listening to our stories and traditions. My elders are now gone. Mountain Chicken is now extinct.

Their footprints will always remain on the landscape, and their memories will remain eternal. Their memories are gathered in my sacred heart. They fill me with joy. They connect me with the land and my elders that reconnected me with myself.

Keith



And Another Sweet Thing

by Keith Jarrett

(Rose Hall, Jamaica, June 2016)

Even though the gaps between my teeth are laced with stringy
even though the gap between the fence reveals a pile of fallen fruit
even though the gaps between this draft
and the previous draft

included a whole interlude
where I tried to scrub the juice stain from my shirt
to find an adequate metaphor for my family history
but I failed and it all seeped through

and while it is the season
and while the Caribbean Sea grabs my ankles like an anxious child
and while I know one day these waters will rearrange themselves
and rise up against its borders

and the gap between this draft and the last
involved discovering my name in a paragraph
in a chapter on the history of Montego Bay
via a 1655 settler named Colonel Nicholas Jarrett
an English patriot whose descendants still remain

and though I am sucking on this new strand of information
and though my hand is full of middle fingers and digger thumbs
and though I know how the tree was introduced from India
and into the other colonies by the Portuguese – uprooted, if you will –

I still cannot give space to this exoticised fruit, conscious as I am
to not satisfy the reader's hunger for bucolic descriptions
of coastal sunrises and cool breeze and itchy sand

but perhaps not extending to the ants
reclaiming all the flesh
left sticking to the knife. A colony of ants
appearing so fast, so fast.

Courtney



Mommy Carry Mi Guh Coronation Market

by Courtney Conrad

Saturday morning punishment, I fish crocus bags from under the kitchen sink. Mommy empties her handbag and tucks money into the lining. We bare our necks, earlobes, and wrists. Fuel our stomachs with beef patties and bag juice. In the front seat, I scribble a shopping list on the light bill. Trains of families weave through renk side streets. Where sale medleys— *yuh want a good wash out buy di prune and peppermint bush fi di gas*; clash with street Pastors, *God a come fi him world yuh see, yuh fi repent*. Mommy and I invest in Trisha's eviction tribulations and Delroy's bun giving. Coronation Market: rusty iron with patch paintings of the sky. Tarpaulins display cassava, yams and green bananas. Wire hangers dangle crisp plastic bags of garlic and gungo peas. Piano fingers press into june plums, tomatoes, and soursops. Scales twirl in the wind like dreamcatchers. Market women makeshift cardboard beds for toddlers. Older daughters braid hair; sons hijack trollies selling soft drinks; wrapping notes around knuckles like rings; fathers drive coconut hand carts with spliffs hanging off lips, *coconut fi wash off yuh heart*; gold teeth men to likkle girls, *psst brownin, empress, cutie, fifty dolla a pound fi di pumpkin weh sweet like yuh*. Barefoot yutes sneak off with loose mangoes and naseberries; pelting stones chase after them, *mi will obeah unnu*. Transactions end with *blessings every time*, except when customers seh, *tek off likkle something nuh*. Police jeeps patrol with long guns eager to fill cupboards at home.

Lewisham, Borough of Literature Commissions

About the commissions

Joan Anim-Addo and Leone Ross attended an oral history event with Caribbean elders on Windrush Day, 22 June. The event focused on themes of migration, food, gardening, and cultural preservation, with elders sharing personal experiences of carrying and sustaining traditions across generations. Joan and Leone were commissioned to transform the experiences the elders shared into original short stories that capture the richness of Caribbean heritage.



The Taste of Soup

by Joan Anim-Addo

The child – if she could still be called ‘child’ – didn’t seem to understand what soup really was. Only the week before, Loretta had watched her, scissors in hand, cutting open a packet – a ‘sachet’ she’d said – emptying it into a mug, pouring hot water onto it, leaving it for a while, then sipping at it, as if it was hot tea. And she called that ‘soup.’ Even more worrying was that she really seemed to believe that that was soup!

‘This flavour is delicious, mum. You should try it!’

When Loretta peered into the steaming mug, what she had seen was tiny, unrecognisable bits of solid – except for the odd green pellet that might have been a pea or maybe two stuck together – floating on brackish water. The word that had sprung to mind was ‘scum’. But she didn’t say it. She’d hoped, at least, that the word had not fallen out of her mouth because the problem was that increasingly these days, her true-true thoughts fell out. No lie! But if her daughter didn’t know what soup really looked like, or how it should taste, whose fault was it? As the girl’s mother, she had failed. She had not taught her daughter about proper soup and since that hardly placed her in a position to complain, she would have to put the matter right.

‘If I don’t show her, how can I expect her to know?’ Loretta asked aloud.

Her father came to mind, for that was exactly his question when her own mother would ask what the two of them were deep in conversation about in her kitchen. Now, *he* knew about food. He always had stories about different foods. Once, he’d told her about the breadfruit, how a certain captain had been packed off a long time ago all the way to the South Seas to bring back breadfruit to their islands. She never understood that story because there was no end of different food growing on her island. When she was taken to the

market in town on the odd special Saturday, bright and early before it got too crowded there, she followed her mother, who bustling her way through to her regular vendors, ignored so many others with their fruit and vegetables piled in an array of colourful heaps and clusters. In any case, Loretta never cared for breadfruit, apart from when it was very ripe and roasted over hot coals. It had been the rarest of treats.

Her father’s food passion was not just about meals that tasted good. He had quietly passed on to her the health secrets of plants and vegetables such as ginger and garlic, bitter melon, pawpaw, beetroot and seaweed. He would take time to ruminate over her questions before he answered. A man of few words, her father, and so many of those words were about food: growing it, storing it, and making it his business to know what was good for this condition or that. If you wanted to know which kind of tea was good for almost any kind of ailment, he was the one to consult. How could she have failed to pass on even the least bit of that kind of wisdom to her daughter?

Loretta laid in bed simply waiting for her daughter to leave for school. Her final year, thank goodness. It was a Wednesday morning, three weeks after Loretta had been made redundant. She had accepted the deal the blasted people had offered and now found herself waking to no routine. Just like that. No more feeling with naked feet for her slippers after the dull thud of upstairs’ front door; no topping up her boiling coffee with cold water to swallow at least three mouthfuls before she had to dash the rest away; no last minute scribbled instructions for Alana before scrambling to catch the train that would get her to the ‘Admin’ pool with a few minutes to spare before everyone else piled in.

Loretta’s pastor had once described her as a ‘no-frills sort of person.’ She liked that. She felt that she really was just that: no frills; no fuss. She took what life handed to her, so that this Wednesday morning in June with the sun shining so brightly that summer seemed

to be knocking at every single window, soup was on Loretta's mind, and she had decided: it was going to be pigeon peas soup.

By the time she found, near the local post office, the small Indian shop that stocked the peas – she didn't want tinned anything – she discovered that getting the ingredients she wanted was more trouble than she had imagined. She took home two packets of brown dried peas that she studied with a special intensity after unpacking her shopping. The packets declared themselves 'gungo peas.' Fair enough, she thought, she was perfectly prepared to adapt to that. Since Jamaica was exporting the peas, they could call them whatever they wanted. She knew that it was really pigeon peas. They needed to be soaked. She had almost forgotten about that, for it was a long time since she had last made this soup. She emptied a packet, left it in a pot of water and set off for the shops again.

Looking for oxtail, the meat of choice to go into the soup, became itself a mission. In the end, Loretta had to take herself onto a couple of buses all the way to Peckham to search for oxtail. The bonus was that she stumbled on some salted meat during the trek. She found okra, too. Some of them a bit dry, but okra, nevertheless. Though she was pretty sure that Alana would screw up her face about trying it, she got a few anyway, despite the damn stallholder who clearly thought he could shortchange her. The sheer liberty of it! But her daughter needed educating and not even a thieving stall holder was going to spoil her plans.

Having returned to the flat, she decided that she would not put okra in the soup. As a child, herself, she really didn't like it. Too slippery. In Alana's case, things would be surely worse for having given in to far too much fish fingers, sausages and meat balls.

Now on this stuffy afternoon with no breeze stirring, just noise from unruly children in the area below, she remembered Alana's so-called soup. She should have taken matters into her hands immediately. Loretta's lips clamped together, curled and twisted this way and

that. The sourness and the bad words in her thoughts lasted only a moment as she recalled the conversation.

'What it have in it?' She had snapped.

'Onions and carrots and swede. It's soup, mum!' was all the child had said. The watery concoction offended her. She recalled now how suddenly she had moved herself and headed for the wooden outhouse building, its rough door tied open and secured with stout string to a giant nail. Sanctuary, it welcomed her.

Inside, its exposed rafters stood blackened by years of smoke. At one end, the familiar wooden 'safe' stood with its store of shop-bought groceries, salt, oil and rice. Macaroni, too, and brown paper bags with sugar and flour. The dried fruit for baking especially intrigued her. Perhaps, though, not as much as the spices – mace, cinnamon sticks in small, tied bundles, anise and mauby – that came there only after the market visits on a Saturday, and afterwards were stored in assorted jars and tins. None labelled.

Sometimes, tamarind balls coated in loose grains of crunchy sugar hid at the back of the safe, and at other times, that was just the place where one of the aunts would find coconut buns, safely wrapped far away from hungry eyes. And on top of the safe, dyed a deep green now so faded that the woodgrain seemed begging to be stroked, stood a mountain of dented baking tins, pans and sheets. When those demanded to be tidied up, a tempestuous metallic din followed. Oh, and the steupsing! Who the hell had used the pans and put them away just so? Her mother would ask as if she didn't really know. And always there was a coming and going. 'Cause family was just that, family. Not just two or three or four or more people living in a box. Family meant people and she, herself, was one of six, so you cooked enough for whoever might turn up.

Her eyes sought the other end of the room and the raised fireplace that Loretta would slowly approach, as if to an altar. There, fed by chopped wood, a cooking fire roared, its sparks fizzing, rising and

dancing into the air. Sometimes the blazing wood would be pulled away from the fire's roaring centre, allowing the flame a steady half slumber, enough to keep the pot gently humming. Soup spluttering with pigeon peas. Peas picked in their garden and dried in the storeroom. Her fingers shared in that job. She would help to shell some of that heap of peas on the backroom table; peas gathered from *their* soil. Her small fingers would be among those easing each individual pea out of its pod, playing with the tiny baby ones that just hadn't grown enough to count as proper peas. Marvelling at the odd small worm snuggling there. And the shades of green and cream inside the pods. And sure enough, a pan of peeled and washed vegetables – sweet potatoes, yam and green bananas – stood waiting to be placed into the pot as soon as the peas became just soft enough. For the dumplings, she only wanted those mixed with corn.

It all had seemed so simple, in a way. House meant garden and garden meant food. And she supposed that that was what she had wanted here too, in England. A house with a garden, however small. Then, just as they'd managed the impossible and bought that house, it was snatched away. Compulsory order. Moved to a box. People in their box above them, people in boxes below them, people in boxes to the side of them. Depressing balconies the width of the building. And, oh, yes you could have a window box. Uh-uh! And they called it an estate. Well! The estates she had known had land for growing things. These estates in London grew boxes for dumping people together, whether they liked it or not. Don't tell her about estates. She knew!

Much, much later, after the meal, after the washing of the dishes out of doors, and when all was quiet and even the dogs had gone quiet, perhaps because they, too, had been fed – warm ash might reveal roasted sweet potatoes, long after she'd even dreamt that they were there. Her mother producing these domestic miracles with hardly a word, but with quick eyes and quicker hands, or so it seemed.

It was only while savouring the smell of the roasted sweet potato that she would turn her full attention again to the three large stones that supported the Dutch pot, stark black against its shining aluminium lid. She, a little girl being shooed further back away from the fire.

'Come out from under mi foot!' Her mother would warn.

When did she become tall enough to reach that heavy pot, with chopped firewood glowing underneath? When did she first take a turn at fanning the fire? And did she really have to stand on a chair to do so? She blinked now at the glow and the sparks that the flame threw at her.

Perhaps the room across from the open doorway had been added afterwards. The concrete floor on which she now stood, sat squarely on the ground, giving way to a step up to the back room. One room led into the other, with a half door of slatted wood that met in the middle separating the space. Up the single step and to the right, the huge box on which they sat and which itself provided storage for all kinds of garden produce: corn, yams, dasheen, dried peas long gone brown. Did her father make all these wooden things that served as storage? She used to like trying to reach both handles of the home-made mill that he had erected in the outer room where someone would stand next to the open door, grinding the corn they had dried on the rafters.

Underneath the backroom she had played with her cousins, often completely forgetting the adult world until a quick reprimand from above reminded the children that the adults could hear everything. She needed to go back; to see for herself. To feel whole again. How long, oh Lord? Alana would have to decide for herself what she wanted to do with her life. But suppose she couldn't wait out for the girl's decision? After all this time, surely, she could finally say at least this to herself: I do not belong here. I do not. I cannot belong here.

Was it wrong to feel that way? Boysie had gone on. New pastures. USA. To whatever. She had waited for the child to grow. He did

what he wanted, of course. And then Alana, who at last had come to understand that her father was not coming back. 'Now, I have to go home,' she said aloud. Touch the soil. Dirty my hands in it. Stand under a tree bearing familiar fruit: guava, and mango and sapodilla. Feel the hot sun, the sweat forming under my neck, the warm breeze.

If the day had been prickly and uncomfortable, their meal together that evening brought even less comfort. The gungo peas that had been boiling in the pressure cooker for hours, simply refused to burst by the time Alana was due home. Worse than that, the baking powder trick that Loretta remembered seemed to make no difference. There would be no soup. She'd have to resort to meatballs. As for the wretched meatballs, at the table, they tasted of nothing but salt and the pepper sauce she'd added at the last minute.

The food felt like mush in her mouth. Said she wasn't hungry. She had been made redundant. Again. Twice in ten years. This time from, well, what did it matter? Another day. Another job. Less pay. This was surely not anything that anyone would call 'life.' She was going back home. This was life? She stopped abruptly. She had begun repeating herself. Bad sign.

'Mum, you need a holiday.'

She clamped her lips together and held them tight until she realised that she was holding her breath.

'Where?' She yelled. 'Spend good money that I don't have to go and sit in a hotel room? In a tourist bar? A Spanish beach full of rented deckchairs and you can't even see the sea? What is this stuff about holiday you always so ready to tell me about?'

Alana groaned. 'You need a holiday.'

'Message your father,' Loretta said in the direction of Alana's dinner plate. 'Let him know that I'm going back home. He should invite you over for the summer.' There, the words had fallen out, though she had tried so hard to keep them in.

The night stood still. You could hear the breathing in the room

until suddenly, the row began. Their voices grew ferocious, built to a crescendo. Loretta found herself gasping for air.

'Message your father!' she shouted.

'Going to my room!' Alana fought back tears.

'Uh-huh!'

'Goodnight!'

'Uh-huh!'

Then a thunderclap. 'You can't do this to me!' Alana yelled.

'I can't do this to myself. Any longer! I don't belong here.'

'And suppose I do?'

'Well,' Loretta began, 'it isn't easy.'

'But ... I do belong! Here!' her daughter bellowed. 'I belong here,' she was punctuating every word. 'I don't know anywhere else!' Then she fled the room, choking back violent sobs.

Family Heart Troubles

by Leone Ross

I'm not sure how I got to where I am right this minute, sitting on a chair next to Mr Bertrand Arthur, lying in a hospital bed, hooked up to a ferocious looking machine in the corner, pipes down his throat. But here I am, watching him wilt like one of my Beryl's sunflowers when it don't get enough water.

It all started with the pain in my side that I'd had since Beryl went on holiday. I can imagine what she would say if she was here, too many days now, Johnny. Go doctor. I'm not texting her about it because she's off on a girl's jolly. Ten precious days in Greece. 'They rented a villa,' she said. I knew as soon as she said it that her garden would fall to me and I think maybe the worry about her flowers is what's been piercing my side. Beryl would be saying, 'don't come over here in the bed with your complaining self, I look like a doctor to you? Go doctor!' When she comes back I'm going to tell her how she had me stressing about those bloody flowers. One day they flop, the next they are springing upright. But I know they are her babies and I won't hear the end of it if I don't at least try. She could've left instructions.

I signed in at the A&E desk and got a slip for number 7 to be seen and went into the waiting room. There was no one else but an elder sitting in the corner. He had his cheek against the wall, and a small well-polished brown leather hat on the back of his head. I don't know how it didn't fall off. His face was doing that melty caramel thing some light skinned Black men's faces do – the way their chins slide down, over the collar. I judged him as in his late seventies or thereabouts. I nodded, but his eyes were closed so I didn't get the nod back.

I sat for a little while and attended to my own pain, which didn't really seem much of anything now I was here. The elder was groaning under his breath, rhythmically; how do we always make a song of everything, even pain? I didn't want to look at him anymore because he might open his eyes and see me looking. I was just thinking how maybe I was wasting my own time and I needed to get on home, when the man keeled over on to the floor, panting like somebody setting up to be a dead dog soon.

I would've expected to respond quicker, but all I did was stare at him first, for a few too many beats. Wheezing and thrashing, Lord. Then finally I opened my mouth to bawl for help and all that croaked out was: 'hello, hello, please.' I got myself up off my seat, clearing my stupid throat and joined him on the floor, both of us gulping for breath, and finally I was yelling, 'somebody, somebody,' and scrabbling around in his jacket pocket, looking for ID. That's what you need first in an emergency, right? In TV shows, they always asking, what's his name, and then saying 'Mr So and So, can you hear me?' I found his wallet and his driver's license. Mr. Bertrand Arthur. So I'm saying Bertrand, Bertrand into his neck, but also bawling out: 'somebody come,' and finally some nurses shuffled in, and called to somebody else, and they were beside him.

'Bertrand Arthur,' I said to a big fat nurse, 'that's his name.' And she said, 'Are you with him, are you related?' And I don't know why I said yes, I just did. 'Yes,' I said, 'I'm related.' 'You're his son?' That seemed acceptable enough, so again, I said yes, and the fat nurse said 'come then', and they had me follow on behind as they took him.

I gave them the information: his name, his date of birth, his address, and nobody seemed to notice I was reading it off the driver's license. And I'm acting like a bad son, the worst son there could be, when they

ask more: 'Is there a history of diabetes? History of hypertension? Family heart troubles?' 'I don't know,' I say, to everything. 'I don't know.' At least I was responsible enough, *sane* enough not to say yes or no and set them wrong.

And now I am sitting here, however many hours later, watching Bertrand Arthur sleep, with the pipe-thing down his throat, sleeping after they cracked his chest open.

I remember when Beryl first decided to grow a garden, a few years ago. She said a Jamaican woman should know how to grow things, and she had left it a shameful time to learn. As long as I've known her she's killed any bunch of flowers she bought from the supermarket and even the cactus I once bought her. When we were younger and first together, she always kept a big pot in the kitchen, the kind with extra dumplings, and extra everything on the weekend when bans' o people would come filing through, aunties and uncles and eventually even the white people on the road would pass by for Saturday soup, know they welcome too. Corn and pumpkin and white rum. It's been a while since we did that kind of party. The house is quieter. The point is, I never thought of no garden.

Beryl announced that she'd start with red things: tomatoes and ranunc-something flowers, I can't remember the name. She went and bought a whole load of black grower bags and sprinkled them with seeds and came into the bedroom with her hands dirty and smiling. I wasn't convinced. 'Why them fancy flowers,' I said. 'You could've gone for roses, something easy.' Beryl always has had a high chest. 'They're *red*,' she said with this goofy grin on her face. I asked her how much this was costing. 'You begrudge me, John?' she snapped. 'You going happy when you eating fresh tomatoes with breakfast.' She never asked *me* what vegetable I wanted, suppose

I wanted carrots? But I didn't think of it much. it was Beryl's way to begin things and lose steam and I expected none of it would last.

Bertrand sleeps on. Now I look at him, he's quite a noble-looking man. I am sure he has a good son, somewhere, and that they'll be coming soon. After they whisked him off, they shoved me into a different room and said somebody would be back to talk to me as soon as they knew something. There were ten people there, all with worried faces, which made sense. This was the room where people *knew* something was wrong. I got a cup of water and rubbed my side and sat down. I thought about leaving. Mr Bertrand Arthur would have next of kin on file and they would be contacted. I had told one lie, and I was reluctant to tell another. But I just sat there.

I haven't been sleeping well since Beryl left; she had an old fashioned alarm clock that I really liked, a robust, clapping thing, but she'd taken it with her and now I had to rely on my phone alarm.

Time passed; a nurse came in and called out for Bertrand Arthur's son. And I thought: I can keep doing this, for this evening, be Bertrand's one-son. So I put up my hand and said present. She explained some things to me, about him going into surgery and it would be some hours before I could see him, some heart troubles. I didn't really listen, I just nodded. I was impressed, appalled, distracted by my own decision to make this claim, to stay right here. She said I could go away and come back if I wanted, or just return in the morning with family. There was an all-night cafe down the road. 'He is somewhat frail. Has he been eating enough?' I could tell by the accusatory way she said it that Bertrand Arthur absolutely had not been eating well, and that she blamed me, his one-son, for it.

'Does your mother know what happened,' she said.

'I don't know,' I said. It wasn't a lie.

'She's marked emergency contact, Mistress Patty Arthur.'

'OK,' I said.

'She's not answering when we call,' said the nurse. 'We'll keep trying, but maybe you can get through and warn her.'

'Yes,' I said.

'He's going to be alright, you know,' said the nurse, softening. 'Where is he from? He has a look of Trelawny people about him.'

'How you know,' I said. The nurse beamed.

I went and ate eggs and coffee in the cafe. After all, Beryl wasn't home.

Them ranuncu-plants and those tomato plants, they did grow for Beryl! 'Come see!' she always came to get me at the wrong time, when I was exhausted coming through the door and just wanted supper. 'You really don't want to see them?' she'd whine. 'Not if you not growing chicken leg out there,' I joked. What I didn't like was how much time it took. I didn't see the point, if I tell you the truth.

I tried very hard to be sympathetic when all the tomatoes died in the same week. Beryl said she thought she'd crowded too many plants together and then when she separated them, they just died. I went out to see the remaining ranunculus flowers, I had the name right now. She snapped at me when I said I thought they were supposed to be red, not yellow. Told me not to be so bumborassclaht *clever* and I said, could she not swear please. It was a real question, I didn't mean anything by it. I don't know anything about flowers now and I knew less, then. The yellowing plants gave her a single red blossom and then died violently, all in the same moment, she said, which didn't sound right to me. 'I overwatered them,' she said. Her best friend said she drowned them in love, and that seemed to perk her up. It was common, said the friend. In beginners. She should try again, something different.

'Well there you go,' I said. 'It's normal. You're going to kill things, so no reason to be mad.'

'I am not mad,' she snapped. 'You always say that.'

'Lord, Beryl,' I said.

I went back to the waiting room from the cafe after four hours and sat with the worried people. The pain in my side wasn't paining anymore and everyone in the worried room deserved to be there more than I did, but I got called first to come through, anyway.

Mr Bertrand Arthur had been given a small room in the urgent care unit. I hovered at the door just in case any real family had arrived and the nurse had to push me forward, into the room with the machine making ticking noises. She said she'd bring me tea. I didn't want tea. That's Beryl's drink.

Mr Bertrand's face isn't pudgy anymore, like he's lost ten pounds under one operation, like they put him through a drying machine that sucked his doughy cheeks back around his eyes and jowls. There's spittle at his mouth corners, but he's breathing good though, or it seems that way to me. Now that I know he's not dead, I should definitely leave. Go home and make a tea like Beryl makes them: huge mug, three Yorkshire Blend teabags, white with condensed milk.

I used to pack Yorkshire teabags for her in little plastic bags when we were younger and travelled to Portugal or Spain or back home. I'd slip Rich Tea biscuits in, but she'd always eat them on the way to the airport because she said food wasn't allowed. She worried that customs would mistake the teabags for marijuana, because we were Black. I think she packed the tea herself, this time. I haven't done it for a while. She took her favourite bedspread as well, she's fussy and likes her things around her. She began taking her tea out to the garden

with her, early in the summer mornings, before I'd get up and go to work and not even see her sometimes until I came home. I used to go to the back door and wave but her back was to me, digging and cutting and talking.

Mr Bertrand grunts and lets out a bag of wind. I know that should be enough to drive me out of here, sitting here listening to a stranger's farts, for what? But it smells wrong and not even so bad: dusty and medicinal, and it makes me feel like staying, he's a person in need and nobody's come for him yet. Suppose Mistress Patty Arthur is dead? Suppose they're divorced? Suppose she doesn't care for him, anymore? He came alone. He's not alone, with me here. I reach out and touch his wrist, as gently as I can. I wonder if he has a son, and what Mistress Patty will say when they reach her, and say, your son is here.

I've heard unconscious people like to hear people speaking to them. So 'Hello, hi, Mr Bertrand,' I say. I tell him Beryl has always been good at planning holidays. She'd take care of everything: rooms I'd like, not too close to the water because she knows how I feel about storms and giant waves. She'd make sure the AC was right and pack our soft towels from home because she knew I hated those scratchy hard hotel towels. I let her know about it too, if she didn't attend to the details.

Beryl's second attempt at the plants, took money. She insisted I give her fifty pounds – fifty! – and went off to the local nursery garden with her green-thumb girlfriends who she should have consulted from the start. She came back with nine small pots of white and pink flowers. 'Mexican asters and starburst dahlias,' she reported delightedly. I asked her if she bought them just for the pretty names or whether there was a plan this time. 'Was this lot harder to kill?' Her friend sucked her teeth and said I should be more supportive.

'What else did you buy with my supportive money?' I said.

'Oh hush,' said Beryl. She looked embarrassed, but I didn't rightly like her attitude in company.

She planted the flowers in pots in the backyard, the site of the Red Death. She lined up all manner of things in the shed. I went and looked at them last week after she left: lady's gardening gloves, clippers, trowels, bags of topsoil and compost and plant food, a little jug for delicate watering. The hose is always snaked across the yard, but I don't trip over it anymore.

She spent morning and evening out there with her special girls, she called them. Over the weeks, she added African violets and honeysuckle, sunflowers that waved and orange poppies. She sowed sweet pepper and kale; she ran a honeysuckle vine up the fence. I said that might annoy the neighbours.

'More than we usually do?' she said.

'Oh, you sassy,' I said, and she was quiet after that.

I ask Mr Bertrand if his wife Mistress Patty ever tested his patience over these years. Women were sent to try us after all. I tried to remember if he had been wearing a wedding band when I first bent down to him thrashing on the floor, but I didn't recall. They would have taken it off him for surgery. 'I'm sure she's beautiful and you love her,' I say, not wanting to be rude if he could hear me. Mr B just sleeps on, snoring and snuffling.

I tried to help Beryl with those plants, once. There had been an aphid attack, she explained to me one evening, with tears in her eyes, and now her asters were covered with black sticky stuff and blighting, browning. The aphids produced a liquid called honeydew that the ants liked, and so they protected the aphids from predators. She'd been out there brushing it off with a tiny brush, but she was afraid it was too late. I went and looked at the plants later that afternoon

when she went out for groceries. I hadn't been out there in weeks and I was a little...shocked. By the beauty, the love, the fat green things growing, the colours waving. The asters were sagging, though. Sagging, like old men, Mr Bertrand.

I found the ants' nest. I poured boiling water and bleach on that bastard and watched the ants run around and around. I never told Beryl I did it. You know she named all those plants, Mr B? Named them all after scandalous Biblical women: Delilah and Bathsheba, Esther and Jezebel, Mary Magdalene, Rahab, Tabitha, Lilith. Eve. She let them stay for a full month before she named them, to give them time to get over the re-potting shock. 'Plants don't get shocked,' I said. 'They just natural and fine.'

'It's a real thing, I *read* about it,' she insisted. 'I can see it. They're unhappy at first, but I take care of them.'

I went to see the flowers last night, for the first time since she went on holiday. They are drooping. The pansies in particular were gloomy and big-faced. Maybe they are in need of water, I don't know. She never left clear instructions. The local foxes were yelping. I thought I heard one fall out of a neighbour's tree and it made me laugh so hard, my side hurt. I'll tell Beryl about that next week when she comes back. It will tickle her. She doesn't answer my texts, but she's probably too busy having a good old time.

I wonder if your wife left you and your house is quiet, which is why you're alone here by yourself, Mr Bertram. He's grunting, almost like he can hear me, but it's probably a coincidence. Is it normal to sleep this long after surgery? Might he take a bad turn and die in front of me? The doctor came earlier and said things at me. Reassuring things, and warning things. 'A man of your age should also take care,' he said. 'Now you know there's family heart troubles.'

There's twenty minutes of Visitor's Hours left. The nurse says so; I think she's looking at me strangely. Will they come in these last minutes? Mr Bertrand's brothers and sisters and cousins and friends, clatter in here and look at me and bawl out for security? Who is this stranger, hold him, give him two good lick, there! There's nowhere to leave by, except the one door. I keep moving around the room, testing out how to make a clear dash. The minutes tick. I'll go home soon. Perhaps you'll wake up and look at me before I leave, Mr Bertrand. You'll ask me, why am I here, soft-like. You won't say I'm wrong. You won't say anything is wrong. You'll ask, why are you here? And I'll say, I don't know, but I haven't watered the plants since my wife went away. I know she must be coming back, because surely she wouldn't leave the plants behind, with me. She knows I don't know how to take care of such things. I never did.

About the Poets and Contributors

Jennifer Brathwaite is semi-retired after a long career in education. Her family migrated from Guyana to the UK many decades ago. When time permits, she enjoys visiting gardens, especially herb gardens and is creating one of her own. She also creates a variety of ready-made seasonings, using fruits and herbs. The poetry workshops taught her new skills and she enjoyed making new friends.

Patricia Marson was born and raised in Jamaica. She is a proud mother, grandmother and wife. Throughout life's challenges, she has persevered with resilience and determination. Ambitious and self-driven from a young age, she purchased her first home at just 19. Her passion for creativity led her to become an entrepreneur. She owned a garment factory, clothing store and printery in Jamaica before migrating to the UK, where she continues to embrace new opportunities for growth. She has started a new creative journey as a jewellery maker.

📷 @patmardesigns01

Laura Annansingh is a Lewisham resident of Jamaican parentage. Over the last 20 years, she has contributed poems to twenty-eight poetry anthologies. During the covid pandemic lockdowns, she and her writing partner sent weekly prompts to each other. The outcome was a book of prose and poetry, entitled "Black and White."

Sharon Marshall is a British-born and raised Bajan. She graduated from DMU with a BA Hons and worked in art management for many years. She is now healing after diagnosis and treatment for colorectal cancer. The career break prompted her to reflect and reevaluate her life choices and pursue creative interests.

Michelle Brooks is a British born writer, director and poet of Jamaican heritage who started out as an actor before writing and directing for TV, Theatre and Film. Brooks has performed pieces at Questors Theatre, BBC TV Club and Imperial College LOL Lab. Her sitcom was shortlisted by Hattrick TV and Comedy 50:50, she performed her one woman show at the Camden Fringe and had her first short film selected for the BFI Outline Programme in 2024. Brooks's work explores themes of belonging, identity and heritage and she has been published in several anthologies. She is a Co-Director at the Caribbean African Collective in Ealing.

Jacqueline Codrington was born to Jamaican parents. She is the author of four poetry collections and a fiction chapbook. Her work has also been published in several anthologies. She has a passion for giving a voice to the voiceless and amplifying untold stories.

Debbie Alleyne, born to Guyanese parents, studying in England in the 60s. She's recently retired from a career in accounting, and now blends married life with parental caring responsibilities. She is currently exploring the joy of reclaiming her voice in words and capturing her heritage in poetry.

Jean Dowling was formed in Dominica until the age of nine. Now classified as a pensioner and sadly a widow. Prior to ill-health retirement my working career began as an Office (Clerk) Administrator and later a Personal Assistant/Project Manager. Later she became a mature student and undertook a number of studies one of which was undertaking a master's degree; Certificate in Management Studies, Diploma in Management (Merit) and Master's in Business Management Studies. Today, she now understand and value fully the importance of life that is to have the Almighty God and Jesus Christ in all her endeavours is the true meaning of life.

Dorna McCorkle was born in the UK to Jamaican parents who arrived in the 1950s. She is a proud wife, mother, and grandmother whose career began in local government. Before retiring, she successfully ran her own business in the health and wellbeing industry. Creativity has always been close to Dorna's heart, and in recent years she has found joy in sharing her artistic talents. She now teaches arts and crafts to Caribbean seniors and is expanding her work to include regular "sip and craft" events, bringing people together to relax, create, and connect.

Joan Frater embarked on her journey from Jamaica November 1961 migrated on BOAC flight holding her black blue British passport. This was quite significant because a referendum happened in JA and on 6th August 1962 gained its independence from Britain. Yes 7yrs old and a new journey in life living and conforming to her new English school, then work as a telephonist. She found the love of her life and married in 1973. Now in her 70s she reflects on her Jamaican culture and is always being positive. She loves to sing, also good with flowers and plants not forgetting her cooking skills.

Maria White is the mother of two beautiful daughters and has two grandsons. She was born in the Port of Spain, Trinidad, of Vincentian parentage. Came to the UK in 1965 to join her mother. Educated in London. Worked as a Civil Servant for 30 years. After leaving the Civil Service she joined the NHS, and worked there for 12 years before retiring. She joined The Hummingbird Senior Citizens' Club 3 years ago, as a volunteer because she wanted to give something back to the community. Maria is enjoying her senior years, travelling and meeting new people. She loves gardening and listening to music. Warm at heart and compassionate by nature, Maria is always busy helping others when needed.

Yvonne is a retired Social Worker of Caribbean descent. She is a mother, grandmother and greatgrandmother and adores spending time with her family. Despite having a chronic illness, Yvonne loves people and takes an avid interest in giving support through involvement in community groups and church activities.

Enomwoyi Damali which means, 'she who has grace and charm', is a proud Trini to the Bone! She have spent her working life first as a primary teacher, and for the last 35 years as an educational psychologist she is a proud mother of four children and three grandchildren and when not running after them (!), she enjoys Zumba, gardening, park running, and steel pan. She has published five children's books about the children in Amber Class and is working on the sixth and seventh!

Lorna is first and foremost a child of God. She grew up in a very strong Christian home. She loves her family and friends. She's an encourager. She's involved in charities, especially Cancer Research. She loves dancing running and walking. She loves the Seniors and often visits them.

Lisa Lore is a Multidisciplinary Performing Artist working in Acting, Music, Spoken & Written Word, Poetry and Sound. Based in London of Jamaican, American and British heritage, she works under the banner of Quantum Noir Nubluz Aesthete, an Afrofuturistic blend of here and there.

Anthea Durand is an award-winning author. Her first book *Illumination of the Shadow: Ancestral Wisdom from the Past for the Future* was published in 2020. This won a number of international book awards, including the 2020 New York Big Book award for Best Self-Help book. She is passionate about helping others to connect to their ancestors

and heal negative ancestral patterns. She can be contacted via her Instagram page @durandanthea. Her podcast Ancestral Wisdom and Evolution will be relaunching late 2025.

Keith Jarrett's poetry, fiction and essays explore Caribbean British history, religion and sexuality. A multiple poetry slam champion of Jamaican heritage, he was selected for the International Literary Showcase as an outstanding LGBT writer. His poem, 'From the Logbook', was projected onto St. Paul's Cathedral. His play, Safest Spot in Town, was performed at the Old Vic and aired on BBC Four. He appeared in Benjamin Zephaniah's BAFTA-winning show Life & Rhymes. Keith is a Lambda Literary and an Obsidian Fellow and holds a PhD from Birkbeck University. He currently teaches at New York University in London. His collection, *Selah*, debuted in 2017; his second collection will be published in 2026, and his debut novel is forthcoming in 2027.

Courtney Conrad is a Jamaican poet. Her work explores migration, religion, family and womanhood. Her debut pamphlet *I Am Evidence* is published by Bloodaxe Books. She is a winner of the Eric Gregory Award, Michael Marks Award, Bridport Prize Young Writers Award and Mslexia Women's Pamphlet Prize. She is widely published.

🌐 courtneyconradpoet.com

📷 @courtneyconradpoetry

Joan Anim-Addo is a creative writer of several genres including theatre, poetry and the short story. She is an interdisciplinary scholar whose writing has engaged Lewisham for decades. Founding the Caribbean Women Writers' Alliance, she spearheaded 'Lewisham Literature Festival: A Celebration of Black Writing', 2003. Her *Longest Journey: A History of Black Lewisham* continues to inform and inspire action borough-wide and beyond. She is co-

founder of Goldsmiths' Creative and Life-Writing postgraduate programme which has produced many inspiring contemporary UK writers. She has recently co-founded and is at the heart of The Black British Writers and Scholars Alliance. She is Director of the Centre for Caribbean and Diaspora Studies, and Emeritus Professor, Goldsmiths University of London. She is the UK's first Black Professor of Literature. She was born in Grenada.

Leone Ross is a novelist, short story writer, editor and educator. Her third novel, *This One Sky Day* (Faber) was nominated for the Women's Prize, the Goldsmiths Prize, and the Ondaatje Prize, the BOCAS Prize — and named a New York Times Editor's Choice. Her short fiction has been widely anthologised and her first short-story collection, *Come Let Us Sing Anyway*, prompted the *Times Literary Supplement* to call her 'a pointiliste, a master of detail...'. In 2021, she won the Manchester Prize for Fiction for a single short story. She has judged the Mslexia Magazine, VS Pritchett Award and Bridport Prize writing competitions, in the short story category. Ross has taught creative writing for 27 years, up to PhD level, and presently works as a freelance writing mentor. She is the editor of *Glimpse: A Black British Anthology of Speculative Fiction*, published in 2022 (Peepal Tree).

Acknowledgements

We extend our heartfelt gratitude to the contributors who worked effortlessly to write their poems about their experience:

Jennifer Brathwaite, Patricia Marson, Laura Annansingh, Sharon Marshall, Michelle Brooks, Jacqueline Codrington, Debbie Alleyne, Jean Dowling, Dorna McCorkle, Joan Frater, Maria White, Yvonne Robinson, Enomwoyi Damali, Lorna Shaw, Lisa Lore, Anthea Durand, Keith Jarrett, Courtney Conrad, Joan Anim-Addo and Leone Ross.

We are also grateful to the following organisations that hosted these workshops whose invaluable contributions made this poetry anthology possible: Coco Collective, Catford Library and The Albany. We would also like to thank our funder for this project Near Neighbours' Windrush Day Grant Scheme.

Special thanks to Courtney Conrad, Keith Jarrett, Leone Ross, Joan Anim-Addo, Katrina Clark and Joladé Olusanya for their dedication throughout this project. We are immensely grateful for their passion and commitment.

About Spread the Word

Spread the Word is a literature charity and an Arts Council England National Portfolio Organisation. Our work is focused on engaging Black, Asian, Global Majority, deaf and disabled, LGBTQ+, working class and low-income writers, and young people.

We find new ways of using creative writing and reading to engage communities through programmes co-produced in partnership with diverse writers, local organisations and libraries. We run inclusive creative writing programmes and offer practical ways for writers to get their work into the world. We discover Londoners who love words, nurturing those who want to write, read and share stories.

We have been growing the work we deliver in our home borough of Lewisham including the annual Deptford Literature Festival and community projects with Youth First, Entelechy Arts, Triangle LGBTQ+ Centre amongst others. We have a big bold vision to have Lewisham named the UK's first Borough of Literature.

🌐 spreadtheword.org.uk

📷 @spreadthewordwriters

Contact Us

If you would like to find out more about the *Mouth Mek Fi Nyam* project and contributors, please email:

Courtney Conrad | Programme Manager – Community Engagement
courtney@spreadtheword.org.uk

🌐 spreadtheword.org.uk

📷 @spreadthewordwriters

Mouth Mek Fi Nyam is an anthology of poems and short stories created by Caribbean elders. During the project, the elders worked with writers Courtney Conrad, Keith Jarrett, Joan Anim-Addo, Leone Ross, photographer Joladé Olusanya and Coco Collective.

The project explored what it means to preserve culture through everyday practices that keep our roots alive. Cooking, gardening, and storytelling are not just traditions; they are living vessels of memory, identity, and resilience. Every recipe handed down, every plant tended, every story shared is a thread that connects us to those who came before us, and to those who will come after us. In our Caribbean heritage, food is more than nourishment, it is history on a plate. The herbs and gardens we cultivate are more than sources of healing and sustenance. They are connections to the land and to our ancestors who taught us how to live in harmony with it. And the stories of our elders are more than memories, they are lessons, guidance, and truths that the world still needs to hear.

This anthology raises and celebrates the voices of the elders which often go unheard. In the act of sharing their stories, the elders transformed into more than mere storytellers; they evolved into cultural custodians, imparting their experiences to future generations.

Mouth Mek Fi Nyam Anthology is also available online on the Spread the Word website.

We hope you enjoy reading it.

Cover image © Orietta Gaspari



Supported using public funding by
**ARTS COUNCIL
ENGLAND**

