

## Words Need Love Too

KAMAU BRATHWAITE was born in Barbados in 1930. He graduated from Cambridge University with a B.A. in history in the early '50s, and received his Ph.D from the University of Sussex in 1968. He lived and worked in Ghana from 1955 to 1962. *The Arrivants: A New World Trilogy* (1973), and a second trilogy, *Mother Poem, Sun Poem* (1982) and *X/Self* (1987) collected as *Ancestors* (2000), defined Brathwaite's international reputation. He has taught at the University of the West Indies and is currently lecturing at New York University. He lives in New York and at CowPastor, Barbados.

STEWART BROWN is Reader in African and Caribbean Literatures in the Centre of West African Studies, University of Birmingham. He taught in Jamaica for several years, at Bayero University in Nigeria, and briefly at the UWI in Barbados. He has edited major anthologies of contemporary African and Caribbean writing and published books and essays on aspects of contemporary West African and West Indian poetry, including studies of the poets Derek Walcott, Martin Carter and Kamau Brathwaite.



# Words Need Love Too

KAMAU BRATHWAITE

*Introduction by Stewart Brown*



CAMBRIDGE

PUBLISHED BY SALT PUBLISHING  
PO Box 937, Great Wilbraham, Cambridge PDO CB1 5JX United Kingdom  
PO Box 202, Applecross, Western Australia 6153

All rights reserved

© Kamau Brathwaite, 2004  
Introduction © Stewart Brown, 2004

The right of Kamau Brathwaite to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted by him in accordance with Section 77 of the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

This book is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception and to provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements, no reproduction of any part may take place without the written permission of Salt Publishing.

First published by House of Nehesi, St Martin, 2000  
Second edition 2004

Printed and bound in the United Kingdom by Lightning Source

Typeset in Swift 9.5 / 13

*This book is sold subject to the conditions that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, re-sold, hired out, or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.*

ISBN 1 876857 49 8 paperback

SP

1 3 5 7 9 8 6 4 2

*for Dream Chad*



# Contents

<i>Foreword</i>	xi
<i>Introduction by Stewart Brown</i>	xiii
PART ONE	
JerryWard & the fragmented spaceship dreamstorie	3
PART TWO	
Alice in Wonderland	9
Poem for Esse	11
Papak	12
Vulture	13
Boy at the Blind School	14
Blanche	16
Dread	17
Bread	20
Défilée	22
Words Need Love Too	28
PART THREE	
Yao	39
Requiem	40
The Zoo	41
llannmmmmmwè	46
Bird Rising	47
Descending Gardens	49
The SilverSands Poem	52
Esplanade Poem	54

Bamako Poem	61
Viridian	67
Praise Poem	72
Namsetoura	77
Xângo at the Summer Solstice	86
PART FOUR	
Agoue	91

## Acknowledgments & Ises

to the spirits of this pasture—birds man/woman walking  
working in their Thyme Bottom homes . two-tail bull cows  
blackbelly sheep insects & angels—sky rain rainblows  
dewdrops dawn deep sunsets of the harmattan the duncks  
the sea always there—marine shimmering. green  
dreaming. blue-white grey-white & sometimes shivering  
sharkskin & whales—

for the help & hospitality of all these muses powvrs  
the insights & inspiration that make this collection  
possible. planted & prepared. the yamFestival  
of three DreamChad years of love & interstanding  
we have here @ CowPastor



## Foreword

Kamau Brathwaite was born Barbados in 1930 and educated there and at Cambridge University, where he graduated in History in 1953. He later returned to Sussex University to complete his PhD, *The Development of Creole Society in Jamaica 1770–1820*, published by Oxford University Press in 1971. He received an Honorary Doctorate of Letters from Sussex in 2002.

Brathwaite worked as an Education Officer in the Gold Coast/Ghana, during its period of independence (1955–1962), and while there developed with his wife, Zea Mexican, a Children’s Theatre at Saltpond. Between 1960 and 1962 the theatre produced *Pageant of Ghana*, *Edina*, *Odale’s Choice* (Evans, 1968) and several Anansesem for Primary Schools (Longman, 1964).

In 1962 Brathwaite returned to the Caribbean to work with the University of the West Indies, based first in St Lucia, and from 1963 until 1991 in Mona, Jamaica—taking a break between 1966 and 1968 to work in Sussex and London. While in England, he co-founded with John LaRose and Andrew Salkey, the Caribbean Artists Movement, and published the books of his first trilogy, *The Arrivants* (*Rights of Passage* 1967, *Masks* 1968 and *Islands* 1969). On his return to Mona in 1968, he continued developing the Caribbean Artist Movement as a journal and publishing business called Savacou. It is during this time that the books of his second trilogy, *Ancestors*, were published, *Mother Poem* 1977, *Sun Poem* 1982 and *X/Self* 1997.

What is less well known to readers outside the Caribbean is Brathwaite’s ‘Time of Salt’: the years between 1986 and 1990, which saw in rapid and catastrophic succession, the death of his wife, Zea Mexican in 1986, the destruction by hurricane of their home and archives at Irish Town in Kingston in 1988, and his own ‘death’ at the hands of brigand gunmen in his Kingston apartment in 1990. These

events are chronicled in his largely unknown, but groundbreaking ‘post-catastrophe’ work—his third trilogy, published as *The Zea Mexican Diary* (1993), *Shar: The Hurricane Poem* (1990) and *Trench Town Rock* (1994). This period also saw the development of Brathwaite’s ‘Namsetoura/Sycorax Video/tidialectics style’, within such works as *Dream Stories* (1994), *Dream Haiti* (1995), *Barabajan Poems* (1994) and *ConVERSations with Nathaniel Mackey* (1999), and continued in the two volume *MR/Magical Realism*, (2002) and *Golokwati* (2002), as well as the New Directions edition of *Ancestors* (2001). This prolific phase has seen a profound extension of Brathwaite’s work, far beyond the ‘definitions’ of his first two trilogies.

Brathwaite’s ‘post-Salt’ poetry is strikingly evident in this present volume, the second edition of *Words Need Love Too*, as well as in *Ark* (Savacou), *Born to Slow Horses* (Wesleyan), *DS(2)* (New Directions), and the *Amem Poems* (California)—but all these works should be read in the context of Brathwaite’s post-1990 MR and Sycorax period.

Salt Publishing is taking a first step towards recovering and making available for readers some of this experience.

## Introduction

by Stewart Brown

“I have a thing that I call seametrics, because the sea influences the landscape. The sea influences the nature of poetry—the pauses between the words, the tidalectic nature of the sea”

KAMAU BRATHWAITE, “The search for a Caribbean aesthetic”,  
*Trinidad Express*, 1992

“We were brought up by the sea. I do not mean merely that as island people we saw the sea always there, but that our home was actually by the sea . . . the sand, the rhythm, the movement, the restlessness, and indeed the changeable nature of the sea are certainly in his (KB’s) work. . . . It was from this that my brother developed his notion of ‘tidalectics’, a way of interpreting our life and history as sea change, the ebb and flow of sea movement: and with the suggestion of surf comes the contrapuntal sound of waves on the shore . . .”

MARY E. MORGAN, ‘Highway to vision: this sea our nexus’,  
*World Literature Today*, VOL. 68. NO.4. Autumn 1994

Those two quotations, the one by the poet himself and the other by his sister, provide an important clue to Kamau Brathwaite’s philosophy and practice in the writing of *Words Need Love Too*. A consciousness of the sea and its many associations pervades and shapes the collection. The Haitian loa or divine spirit Agwe (or Agoue), lord of the seas (and represented by the symbolic veve of a boat or a ship) presides over the collection, with two poems addressing him directly. But as with much of Brathwaite’s mythologizing Agwe is creolised into a Bajan—indeed a pan-Caribbean—presence shape and gender-shifting into Yemoja, the Afro-Cuban orisha or goddess of the sea, who is also Stella Maris, the star of the sea, one of the names of Mary the mother of Jesus, more familiar to the conventional Christians of Brathwaite’s home island of Barbados. Indeed in another incarnation Stella Marris appears as Venus

rising from the sea in Botticelli's famous painting, an image evoked and developed in *Hymn to the Sea*, by Frank Collymore, Brathwaite's literary mentor through his schoolboy years in Barbados. Although of a different generation and with a very different cultural perspective, Collymore was an important influence for Brathwaite, not least in the ways the younger poet has developed – like a jazz pianist working from a standard theme – the resonances of the best known lines from *Hymn to the Sea* – (a poem which has become one of Caribbean poetry's anthology classics)

*Like all who live on small islands/ I must always be remembering the sea*<sup>1</sup>

But Brathwaite's notion of 'tidalectics' is more than simply an acknowledgement of the force and impact of the sea on island peoples' consciousness. It is an image for understanding the processes of global history and the evolution of that creolised multi layered Caribbean culture that Brathwaite's work both illustrates and celebrates. The characteristic compressions and confluences across 'source' cultures, mythologies and religions in Brathwaite's poetry might infuriate the pedantic anthropologist and literary critic but as he has consistently argued "the unity is submarine".<sup>2</sup> The post-Columbian Caribbean is quintessentially a place of cultural meetings and mixing that requires of its artists and intellectuals new ways of thinking about and presenting cultural materials. So Brathwaite's controversial development of his "Sycorax video style" – which explores the potentialities of the computer/word processor as a generator of texts that challenge conventional ways of reading – is in part at least a response to that understanding of the history and culture of the region as the tidal detritus of global powers determined to shape (and sound) the 'new world' in their image. Even in this revised, textually more complex edition<sup>3</sup> *Words Need Love Too* doesn't exploit the full range of 'sycorax' techniques evident in some recent Brathwaite publications, but rather we find the poet more gently playing with orthography, spelling, grammar and punctuation – generating what he has called 'Calibanisms' – as a way of subverting the reader comfortable with the cultural baggage implicit

in the process of reading ‘poetry in English’ but not disabling him/her from an engagement with these texts ‘as poems’.

As an image for the process of creative endeavour the ‘seametrics’/ ‘tidalectics’ metaphor works at various levels; as Mary Morgan suggests it has formal and technical implications in terms of understanding the rhythmical swell and pull that shapes some of Brathwaite’s longer poems, but in relation to *Words Need Love Too* it seems to me that the image is useful in relating the celebratory tone and cast of this collection overall (although as we shall see there are some very dread poems within it) to the predominantly dark and indeed despairing character of most of his recent creative output. To spell it out, it seems that this collection marks the turning of the tide in terms of Brathwaite’s personal life which—given the kind of poet he is—very much underpins and informs his public writings. It marks his emergence from what he has called (perhaps unfortunately given the imprint of this edition!) “the time of salt”<sup>4</sup> which begins with the death of his wife Doris in 1986 and includes the destruction of his home and library in the hurricane that hit Jamaica in 1988, his almost being murdered by gunmen breaking into his flat in Kingston in 1990, various health problems and the deaths of several close family members through the years that followed. The writings that chronicle that period are, unsurprisingly, essentially bleak; *SHAR—hurricane poem* (1990), *Zea Mexican Diary* (1993) which so poignantly and powerfully responds to his wife’s death, the *Dreamstories* (1994)—many of which are more nightmare than dream, *Trench Town Rock* (1994) which graphically documents the story of the break-in and shooting at Brathwaite’s Marley Manor apartment, and the *ConVERSations with Nathaniel Mackey* (1999) which reflect on and try to make sense of this whole period, among much else. It is important to read the poems in *Words Need Love Too* through the lens that the Acknowledgements page to the collection offers us, itself a kind of praise poem to the people, places and spirits that have informed this new period in Brathwaite’s writing. It lists, among other muses, “the sea / always there—marine shimmering, green / dreaming . . .” and acknowledges particularly the inspiration of his second wife, called here “DreamChad.” As an epithalamium—a wedding poem—the title

poem, too, marks and celebrates this new beginning/ new phase in the poet's life and writing.

Not that *Words Need Love Too* is a simplistic celebration of 'coming through', the pain of the preceding fifteen years went too deep for that, but rather the collection is structured as a kind of praise song which, as in its West African model, often includes satire, protest and lamentation as well as more straightforward praise. Divided into four sections, the body of the collection is framed by the single poem sections, which open and close the book. Those two poems make an intriguing pair, the opening "fragmented spaceship dreamstorie" and the long closing poem, 'Agoue', which is itself a kind of dream narrative, an entering into the world of a Haitian painting. In a sense those two poems represent the ever extending boundaries of Brathwaite's creative practice and enquiry—outward into [cyber]space with all its potentialities in terms of technology and vision and communication,

        . . . . so that as in space travel  
        there cd be an evanescent but v/real four dimensional  
                image of the origins made out of atoms of light  
                        —a holograph?—giving (allowing)  
        each one of us in our different parts a common memory  
                                & language & angel

and inward to the underground, submarine, remembered / imagined spirit of African / Haitian / pan-Caribbean culture and history.

'Jerry Ward & the fragmented spaceship dreamstorie' is written in the genre-blurring manner of Brathwaite's other dreamstories, although as laid out here suggesting a poetic rather than a prose address to the reader.<sup>5</sup> Part journal entry, part reportage, part homesick blues, part testament of revelation, the piece is triggered by a telephone conversation recalling a talk the poet had given (but had forgotten) back before the 'time of salt' began but which had obviously deeply affected a member of the audience, Jerry Ward. Ward, through his re-telling of the occasion, returns the power of those ideas to the poet, and somehow revives his belief in the power of words—his words

—to make a difference, to change the way a reader/hearer understands the world,

. . . . someone unknown & unexpected  
had picked one of the green shoots of metal or mental  
fragment up & planted  
it & it had grown & spread & **flourish**  
perhaps in his own work & person/ality . . . .

Anyone who has ever been present at one of Brathwaite's talks/readings will not be so surprised that the experience/encounter should have made such an impression on the young student Jerry Ward. However the poet, at that ebb tide point in his life and vocation, feeling, in New York, far from home, needs that revelation, that reconfirmation that his words—in essence his life's work—have not been wasted. But it's also 'love'—the care and attention and commitment of people like Jerry Ward to those words—that enables their creative, transformatory powers to work. So this opening poem in the collection sets up these two intertwined ideas, explored through the rest of the collection in various ways, that words have power and great potential to change but that they—like their author—"need love too".

The second section of the collection begins with what seem quite whimsical—not to say coded—meditations on the nature of love, its varieties and variations, but always with a darker shadow edging the story. 'Alice in Wonderland' speaks of love glimpsed but then lost, the stately 'Poem for Esse'—who in *Mother Poem* and later in *Golokwati 2000*—appears as the boy-who-will-be-the-poet's first sweetheart, reads as a kind of benediction or even eulogy—which of course it might be. 'Papak' is a nightmare of distorted love, anticipating some of the violence-tied-to-love to come in later poems in this section of the collection, while 'Vulture' explores the deceptions of racial consciousness tied to love ". . . Columbus not down-/hearted Caliban is who she is after." That prejudice is a kind of blindness, of course, a theme explored more literally in 'Boy at the Blind School' although the poem is more interested in questions of perception and loyalty, affection and betrayal.

Those issues are addressed from another angle in 'Blanche,' a portrait of a landlady/hostess—with all the ambiguities those titles suggest—whose customers rely on her—like her door-locks—to be “safe w/their secrets.” What goes on behind those locked doors is a kind of loving but has undertones of the furtive and dangerous, and as this section of the book proceeds those darker shades predominate, through the cynicism and hypocrisies of 'Dread', the rage and violence of 'Bread', culminating in the horrors—embroidered around historical facts—of 'Defillee.' 'Defillee' is an intensely powerful, disturbing, vividly imaged poem—one of many such voice poems in Brathwaite's work, as haunting and memorable as 'Wings of a Dove' or 'Stone—for Mikey Smith' or 'Kingston in the Kingdom of this world.' 'Défilée' is an imaginative engagement with a story/legend which—as the epigraph tells us—attaches to the death of Emperor Jean Jacques Dessalines, the successor to Toussaint L'Overture in the Haitian revolution. Assassinated by disgruntled soldiers, Dessaline's dismembered body was—so the story goes—gathered up and buried by the 'mad woman' Défilée, a meat seller who had once been his lover. Told through Défilée's voice, events are seen from the perspective of the 'mad' / wise woman who has known Dessalines as both the cruel Emperor and the laughing, playful lover, someone who has endured—as a 'groundling'—all the struggles of the Haitian revolution

... my rape. witness

my parents death. how Rochambeau come kill  
down all my breddas and my two only suns  
inside the Cahos mountains. trick Toussaint off

to France till i go mad w/all this blood  
this trekking death down in this mud  
betrayals

Although very different in terms of its setting and the brutality of its imagery, the poem reminds us of one of Brathwaite's most admired and remarkable early poems, 'The Dust', in which a group of Barbadian village women, talking in the local shop, find the words to approach

an understanding of profound philosophical and theological issues that bear on their lives. Here Défilée suggests a very different understanding of the historical times she has lived through than that afforded by any of the conflicting historical ‘records’. She tries to make sense of the great events she is caught up in but her focus is always the pain and grief of the immediate horror that is Dessalines’ fate.

Now here w/out yr head w/out yr virile hands. bereft  
of Claire Hereuse. of balls. bereft of eyes. yr ears cut  
off from music. matross. cannon. chasseurs

Although he had at times betrayed and abandoned her, still her love and respect for who he was and what he had achieved overrides the bitterness of those memories. It is as a grim act of love – and the language of the poem is sexually charged – that she searches out and reassembles the scattered elements of his body so that it may be buried with honour

let me ride with you général. let me ride with you  
in these dark eyes i will restore  
in this fine head i plant here in this place of burial

And with that image the tide/tone of the collection turns – from dread and carnage and despair towards the love that survives even that – though it be a kind of madness. The final piece in this section of *Words Need Love Too* is the title poem, a poem written to celebrate the poet’s second marriage in February 1998.<sup>6</sup> Even though the poem begins with an horrific image of the slave forced to speak even the words of love in that broken *other* tongue of the plantation, it opens out to become a kind quest for recovery, for a kind of optimism – or at least a belief in the possibility of joy as well as grief in life,

How to make sense  
of all this. all this pain. this drought  
scramble together vowels jewels that will help  
you understand will help you understand these rain.  
these rain. these rain. less  
words . need love. love too

Typically, for Brathwaite the historian/mythmaker that quest involves a delving back into the elemental past of his island(s)—“down to the deep drown/pools of human history”—to image a different kind of ordering, a fundamentally different way of saying. Not just to celebrate that breaking/taking of language that was, as he said in *The History of the Voice*, at once the slaver’s most powerful tool of oppression and—in their resistance to it—the slaves most effective agent of assertion and identification, but at some deeper spiritual level to remember/re-imagine a language that knows the lime-stone caves of Barbados, the waterfalls of Guyana, the cliffs of Dominica and the cockpit crevices of Jamaica. A language that comprehends the “silent singing colour / curv- / ing from the storm.” The poem is a quest too that evokes and samples—like some learned dancehall DJ—the overlaying elements of human language that have gone into the voicing of the modern Caribbean: Babel and Babylon, Raleigh and Rastafari, Yoruba and alas-poor-Yorick. ‘Words Need Love Too’ is a tidalectic interweaving of images across Caribbean time and space, at one level a poem in praise of poetry, of itself, of the ways words and word-making-man—to invoke Brathwaite’s description of the great Cuban poet Nicholas Guillen—can reveal and inform and inspire. But the poem is also an admission of vulnerability, that words—and by implication word-making-man—need nurturing, need love too; that the environment, the *hounfor*, the ground from which that word-work happens is crucially important to the work that *can* be done. And it is that admission of vulnerability that makes the ending of the poem so affecting—that on this occasion of words, when the formal public words of declaration before wo/man and gods and the legal words that bind the contract are said and signed, the poem is a beautifully tender assertion of love and trust and promise.

The poems that follow ‘Words Need Love Too’ in the third section of the book now chronicle that tidalectic turning of fortune that the poet’s marriage represents. The image at the end of ‘The Zoo’ of pink flamingos rising to

find in their silent fleets now sailing heaven  
release from this harsh xile’s solitude with  
-holding them

sums up the sense of release—earned and suffered for—that the rest of the collection essentially celebrates. In the ‘The SilverSands Poem’ for example, the poet/persona re-engages with the island landscape known so intimately from childhood—as explored particularly in *Mother Poem* and *Sun Poem*—but lost, or at least distanced, through his ‘time of salt’. The district of Silver Sands has in recent years been identified as an important archaeological location, site of both Amerindian settlements and—uniquely in Barbados—a slaves’ graveyard. Silver Sands is not far from Cowpastor where Brathwaite and his new wife settled on his return to the island, where—as the Acknowledgements page informs us—he was to write the poems in this collection. All of which makes the kind of elemental cleansing and re-connection with the land/sea/man-cape, in a sacred place, that ‘The SilverSands Poem’ seems to be enacting, the more resonant. The consciousness of the sea as the shaping elemental agency of island being—before the Amerindians, after the Europeans—emerges in this poem; the sea in its several moods, “this south sea so soft” or “this loud & this labour of water . . .” So we are prepared for the poem that follows, ‘Agwe’—the first of the two praise songs to the Haitian loa or god of the sea. In Haiti—and in coastal parts of West Africa where, though he has other names, the loa has its roots—he is a feared and honoured deity, particularly in concert with his wife, La Siren. The poem describes some of his attributes and associations, and dramatises some of the ritual ways of honouring him that sailors and fishermen and others who live near the sea have practised. But the poem is not simply a piece of literary anthropology, the whole of Haitian history is glossed in this short poem, and a way of understanding it—as perhaps many Haitian people might—outside the framework of traditional historiography.

Sea imagery runs through many of the poems in the rest of the collection—in ‘Requiem’ the sea’s various musics are invoked; in ‘Bird Rising’ ‘and ‘Descending Gardens’ the sea serves as a metaphor to understand the experience of flight and to muse about language; in ‘Praise Poem 2000’ the sea is acknowledged as the source and inspiration for the poet’s life’s work; and in ‘Esplanade Poem’ the sea is the elemental backdrop to human micro-dramas that mundanely re-enact

history in the poet/historians eye. Such “rediscovery of the ordinary” – to borrow the South African writer Njabulo Ndebele’s term – is another theme that runs through this group of poems. Ndebele coined the phrase in relation to his thinking about the role of the black South African writer in the final years of apartheid/ early years of the new political order. He argued that many South African writers had perhaps been overly concerned – understandably enough – with the stark or symbolic representation of the political situation and consequently had sacrificed a certain intimacy and connection with the ‘ordinary’ lives of the majority of people who lived out the drama of their days according to different agendas than those set by the political establishment. Brathwaite is perhaps acknowledging a similar phase of distancing in his recent writing, work that has so represented the dread and despair of a certain kind of African/Caribbean experience, whether in history or in his personal life story. In many of his early and much loved/anthologised poems Brathwaite had, indeed, given credence and – most powerfully – voice too such ‘ordinary’ folk. We have already recalled the women in ‘The Dust’ but one thinks too of the tailor and his friends in ‘Rites’, of ‘Tizzic’ or ‘Francina.’ Here, passages in ‘*Words Need Love Too*’, in ‘Praise poem 2000’ and ‘Bamako Poem’ suggest such a refocusing on – and re-evaluation of – seemingly unremarkable people who in fact represent a whole tradition and way of life. As, in the latter poem, people like the thousands of

mostly tall thin and unsmiling men  
from distant unseen alligator villages. dark ridges  
of residual forest

far out on the Sahel horizon

who each day walk into the city, Bamako, to work. Elsewhere in that poem there is a beautifully observed and so tenderly drawn portrait of a young brother and sister “step in step. ticking together like bi/-cycle clicks”. These impressions, snapshots – *fleches* – from the life of the city one “pure Bamako katatora morning” are allowed to speak for themselves.

Both of those concerns—with the sea and with a rediscovery of the ordinary—are explored in ‘Praise Poem 2000’. The poem is a kind of taking stock at the turn of the new millennium, as the poet turns 70, and a manifesto of renewal. ‘Praise Poem 2000’ is attempting in one poem what the collection as a whole comes to represent. The poem surveys the poet’s life and work to date—beginning with that resolution (so reminiscent of Derek Walcott in St. Lucia, reminding us that for all the hype and [op]positioning of the two great island poets of the Anglophone Caribbean they were essentially set on the same course) to establish, in words, the *truth* of his island home. So Brathwaite declares,

i have tried so long to properly describe these things  
the seas ceaseless sound & colour. how its waters  
snake these coral beaches & how the sunlight lights

them. they burn white fire along the sapphire shore

Later in the poem he lists Walcott among those “Caribbean stars”—the poets Césaire, Collymore, Bruce St. John, the painter Wilfredo Lam, calypsonians Sparrow and Gabby, the lexicographer Richard Allsopp, the cricketer Sir Garfield Sobers, among others—who “by their light” have also made and celebrated the cultures of the region. But although the poem is essentially a thanksgiving, it is not all the simple praise of nostalgia; in reviewing his life he must recall the ‘time of salt’, the disappointments and set backs, the pain and the loss of so many people he has loved. Similarly the praise of the sea, which in this poem particularly is such a vivid presence, must acknowledge too its associations with danger and loss, and its ‘complicity’ in the dread history of the middle passage. The poem remembers the horrific sea-passage of the Africans who would become the slaves (and those “lost tribes of atlantis” who didn’t survive the crossing) from “the hollow dungeons of goree”—the infamous slaving station in what is modern Senegal—to the auction blocks on the “coral beaches” of Barbados. The grim fate of one such slave/ancestor is shockingly recovered in “The Nansetoura of Cowpastor”, the poem which follows ‘Praise Poem 2000’ in this collec-

tion. So, as Brathwaite reminds us in other poems, Caribbean people maintain a wary ambivalence towards the sea—both playground and graveyard—hence Agwe and the other gods of the oceans must be placated as well as praised. But in ‘Praise Poem 2000’ the deity to whom thanksgivings are directed is Olodumare, the supreme creator in the Yoruba pantheon. In characteristic Brathwaite style however, Olodumare’s name is called almost in passing, alongside the poets and artists, as just another of those creative “Caribbean stars” “lightning up the sky.” Perhaps inevitably the ‘coincidence’ of the millennium year marking also the poet’s achieving the biblical three-score-years-and-ten is occasion for this kind of reflection and appraisal, certainly Brathwaite seems to have felt it important to take stock, and that process is reflected not only in this collection of poems but in talks and presentations the poet has given around the world in the last few years and in his mammoth *Golokwati 2000* volume, which sets out in a sycorax prose version a commentary on his life and work to date.

*Words Need Love Too* concludes with the long poem ‘Agoue’, a variant spelling of Agwe, which I read as an imaginative entering into a painting by the well known Haitian artist Gerard Valcin (though Brathwaite spells his name Valsin). Or perhaps the vision of the poem is seen *as if* painted by Valcin. Either way the piece is a kind of creation story, in which all life emerges from the sea, overseen by Agoue and his counterpart in the Yoruba / Orisa tradition Yemoja. Appropriately the other creative spirit active in the poem is Damballah, the Haitian loa associated with fertility and procreation. The ‘ceremony’ of the poem—as text—is complex, vividly imaged but sometimes a little confusing (for example the reference to ‘iya’ which in some West African languages can mean ‘mother’ but in some Amerindian traditions is the name of the devil!) But this is one of the few Brathwaite texts that explicitly calls for performance, the directions beneath the title describing the piece as “a sequence for voice, choral chorus, music and vodounistas”, so it is not surprising if the poem-as-text is tantalising in some ways. Although there are sea-sounds and echoing musics within the world of the painting/vision there is no speech. No words direct the ritual until the poet intervenes. Notwithstanding that difficulty, as the

American critic June D. Bobb observed in her review of the poem in *The Caribbean Writer*,

“ Brathwaite’s vision is compelling and expansive. At the centre of this dreampoem there is a wild energy that is at the heart of creation, Brathwaite, the prophet tells the story of the genesis of the new world with accompanying ceremony and rituals . . . ”<sup>7</sup>

The poem is a kind of journey which the reader undertakes as s/he enters the world of the painting with the poet. In that sense we are back where we began with ‘Jerry Ward and the fragmented spaceship dreamstorie’, trusting to the power of Brathwaite’s words to guide us into worlds where we otherwise have no access.

As a collection, then, *Words Need Love Too* represents both a summation—a drawing together of concerns that the poet has explored in his writings through the previous ‘years of salt’—and a turning point, a hopeful new beginning. With hindsight we can already see the shadow of events like “nine eleven”—which happened when Brathwaite was in New York, living only blocks away from the World Trade Centre—that inevitably drives the poet and his writing back into explorations of the dread spectrum. But for the optimistic epithalamium moment of ‘Words Need Love Too’ the visionary celebration of poems like ‘Agoue’ again seems both possible and important to this poet whose early work had been as much about celebrating connection and the possibilities inherent in the Caribbean’s rediscovery of its African heritage as it had been concerned to chronicle the barbarities and hurts of the process of cultural alienation that made such a rediscovery necessary. In terms of the prevailing tone of Brathwaite’s later writing that optimistic moment may be short lived but *Words Need Love Too* serves as an important reminder of the emotional and spiritual range of this great Caribbean poet’s work.

STEWART BROWN  
Centre of West African Studies,  
University of Birmingham

## Notes

- 1 See also Brathwaite's discussion of Collymore in *Golokwatti 2000*, (Savacou North Publications, 2002)
- 2 Brathwaite, *Contradictory Omens*, (Savacou Publications, Mona, Jamaica, 1974). See also Bridget Jones's essay "'The Unity is Submarine": aspects of a pan-Caribbean consciousness in the work of Kamau Brathwaite', in S. Brown, (ed.), *The Art of Kamau Brathwaite*, (Seren, Bridgend, 1995).
- 3 See the first edition of *Words Need Love Too*, (House of Nehesi, St Martin 2000)
- 4 See *Golokwatti 2000*, (Savacou North Publications, 2002)
- 5 Some of Brathwaite's other Dreamstories have been anthologised in collections of short stories.
- 6 I'm not sure how much to make of the actual date of Feb. 14th, St. Valentine's day. St. Valentine the patron saint of lovers of course . . .
- 7 June D. Bobb, *The Caribbean Writer*, vol. 15., 2001, p. 182.

# Part One



JerryWard & the fragmented  
spaceship dreamstorie

*Jerry Ward  
remind me on Fri 14 Feb/telephone conversation  
at NYU/of a talk i grieve at his College/Tougaloo Mississippi  
in 1650 about the slave trade /middle passage*

*'You may recall having met me  
when you lectured at a Southern Black Cultural Alliance  
meeting here in summer 1650 . . .'/TougalooCollege Feb 5  
1992 i/i'm afraid/ had not writ anything down nor was  
it recorded but he remembers a passage in which (he trie  
to spell it back out for me on a telephone)*

i said that it was as if the spaceship bringing us here  
had like **crash** into the New World /plantation  
& xploded on impact/ the **stars** of the ship  
from their commune origen scattering over a wide  
wide area & each part/ you see/ in the godness  
or badnage of time springin it own roots  
& gettin on wit it own business but

preservin the memory since each was a part/ now tryin  
to be whole/ of the original the source/ the energy  
w/the possibility indeed the ideal intention of one day  
reconstructing/reconstituting the orig  
-inal ancestral at least symbolically at least  
metaphoricall at least spirituall at least philo  
-sophicall. so that as in space

travel there cd be an evanescent but v/ real four dimen  
-sional image of the origins made out of atoms of light  
—a holograph?—giving (allowing)  
each one of us in our different parts a commune memory  
& language & angel really  
w/ which to speak to each other & to the world

He did not 'say' in effect all this to me—he might have  
said more he might have said less/ i remember  
him sayin that he often wonder what had **happen**

to my piece & what had happen to the pieces  
of my piece/where/ if/when/how/ they had grown

& i thank him/thank him for this gift  
of memory so early in the morning of snow  
& that it was good & wonderful (w/ clear sun  
-light despite the snow) that the idea—the words  
—the images—had remain/had/ i suspect/ been staining  
in his mind so that now he had meet me so many years

after/ even tho i had forgotten  
that night i think it was or must or might have been  
in Mounn Bayou or Toogaloo  
& what i had said thought  
& felt that evening & had allow(ed) it to be cost  
by the wayside/ someone unknown & unXpect

-ing/ had pick one of the green shoots of metal  
or mental  
fragment up & planted it & it had grown & spread  
& **flourish** perhaps in his own work & person /ality  
(recall VP casting my bread on other people waters?)

so that as i sit  
here by the roadside in this strange city so far  
from flowers & the flames of candlefields  
& Mudda Africa walk  
-in w/me over the wooden fence & thru the ploughed  
brown earth near Indian Ground & touching the great  
black anthracite stones come out of those canefields  
discovering tolmecc & totomecc Barabadoes  
wrapp in cardboard & old half-forgotten letters  
& something lookin like flourbags from the latex  
unperdicted snowfall ('not one a my seed' [the Bob Marley song  
about 'shall beg yr bread in the sidewalk'/**So Jah Seh**])