

What irks me and keeps me up at night and brings me back to my art and craft

Fred D'Aguiar

That beast. It can change shape and shift to the form of the thing sent to fight it and stop it in its tracks. That beast grows from the fight with what it meets. The act of a bout with it makes it grow like a sponge. So it is clear to me that the thing that I send must have in its nuts and bolts the keys to take the beast down and break that beast up. As the beast tries to eat the thing – and make my fight part of what it is, so that it may live as the genes of what was sent to fight it, so the thing starts to work to break up the beast. What I send to fight the beast looks like food, like more food for the beast, so it thinks. In fact, the meal is a ruse that the beast plays with, even as the real work of the thing starts to break down the beast.

Two things – one, a feel for the earth as a way to jump for joy in poems geared to big-up life; and two, a form that takes on greed by the few who add to their wealth while the rest of us fight to make ends meet and a lot of us die as we try our best – these two join to form a force that meets greed in a one-on-one and lives to tell the tale. The meet part is known; the live-to-tell-the-tale part not so much. Why? Well, it means that some trick must take place that does not leave a trace. That trick makes the beast *think* that it has won the fight and placed the force that tried to beat it on its side

as a slave that now works for it, which the beast does with all that it meets that tries to block its path.

But not this time. With this trick of two things (the form and the stuff in that form) rolled up to show as just one, the work starts just when the beast thinks and feels that it has won. Think of a code in the form of a thing that starts out of the blocks as soon as it is touched, though just kept out of your sight while your gaze is fixed on some piece of it that shows off in front of you – a piece that grabs your eye up close and keeps you from that big out-of-sight and more apt thing. What this smoke-screen-act does is place a key in the beast, a code, that the beast does not see, a tool that fits all the nuts and bolts that keep the beast whole, a tool that turns those nuts and bolts one by one, so that bit by bit they wind loose and cause that beast to trip and fall to the ground, pulled limb from limb in a way that stops it once and for all...

Let me say it once more with a mind in sync with how I feel: I know how hard it is to fight the beast while lodged inside it, in its gut. I know that the big ask is how can you fight it if you are in it? I think that the form is where and how the fight should be waged, not just what is said to block the path of the beast. That form (the 'way' or the 'how') is the thing that starts to work out of sight of the beast as it feasts on what is said to its face in a bid to stop it in its tracks. The form is not free of what is said (the two things tend to show up as one thing). It is just that it is not in plain sight; it is hidden from the gaze by what is loud and up front for the beast to get to grips with and feast on, making what is said one more thing to add to how it works through and on the crowds that chant and march to stop it.

Through my art I wage a war to stop the beast of greed and gain. Through my art I work to raise hearts and minds to come on board with this task of

change for good. Art steals round to the back of the field of troops paid by the beast to be on guard to stop art. Art says a thing in a way that is seen and heard, but not known to the full at that first meet and greet with it. Art wants to shake hands and sit and break bread and keep talk in the air, since talk is free and good for all of us, whoever we are. The beast is not on guard for such a foe as art. Such a foe is warm and brings a lot of good to give for free to the beast, who just knows how to take, take, take. The beast sees art as soft and hardly worth the fight. Once the beast starts to feed on what art gives it, then art can start to do the work that will stop that beast once and for all time.

The craft of art is made of the stuff of what I have lived, from the days of my youth up to now. I take the past and tweak it for how it sounds as a thing that comes from the past and takes hold of you. I see it and hear it, too. I try to give to it all of the things that I have in my nerves and flesh and blood and mind and heart. I give it a shape that looks good and looks as if it does not weigh much. I want it to lift with ease off of the tongue and latch on to the heart and stay lodged in the head. I point my art at what I see that looks wrong and hurts to see. My art tells me what does not feel right and needs me to say so.

My art is helped by shelves and sound files, and scenes framed on walls, or shapes stacked in cool rooms, and some left in the air or shown on the spot in a flash or left to break down in time for all to see, including those who do this same thing, too, or a thing like it. I learn from them (and I hope they learn from me). We join ranks for the fight with the beast. I do not feel that it is just me face-to-face with the beast. I am part of a crowd. There is a long line, that goes back in time, of those of us in the arts (all arts) who jump on board the craft of the arts on terms that we have worked out in our talks. These talks work out, as well, the terms of the fight that we find

when we turn up for it. I think all the time of the poor and those robbed of their rights, that they are the ones who guide my art and drive my need to read and write (and sing in the bath!), and I try my best to stop the beast who preys on those who need help – preys, in fact, on all of us. I count the dead left in the trail of the beast. Some of them have no names. Most of them died out of sight. The beast took them, killed and ate them, and threw what was left of them on a hill of the dead. Then the beast moved on.

Here I come to meet it. In it and out of it. With form and with what I put in that form. The two things are one thing, or so it seems. The beast clamps down on my art with teeth and with long nails. The fight and feed start, and so it looks as if my art will die and end up on a hill of the dead. So it looks as if I did not know how it is that the form of what I made has its real work to do once the beast takes hold of it.

I want my chants and spells, and calls to act, to work like charms with built-in shocks that can wake up a closed mind and stall the greed in a gut, tripping the beat of a heart geared to take, take, take from earth and the rest of life, with no mind for what is left or where it leaves us all. I say all this and yet I know that my words on their own do not act, but wish to lead to some good act; I know that this song and dance wants to put the mind in a trance for some good deed to break out. If there is a look for what I do, it is that youth strapped to skis and crouched as they race to the lip of a ramp that will launch them, so that they float, stretched out, for as long as they can defy the pull of the earth's poles back to the ground: the space that opens up as they float is the gap that I want to write into, and for these works to act through, from me to you.

Fred D'Aguiar

Fred D'Aguiar's fifteen books include, poetry, fiction, plays and a memoir. His latest books are, a memoir, *Year of Plagues* (2021) and a collection of poetry, *Letters to America* (2021). His most recent novel, *Children of Paradise* (2015) is based on events at Jonestown, Guyana.

Born in London in 1960 of Guyanese parents, he grew up in Guyana and returned to the UK for his secondary and tertiary education. He trained as a psychiatric nurse and attended the University of Kent. Currently, he is Professor of English at UCLA.

A recording of this talk can be found at **writersmosaic.org.uk**

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