

Letters Home

Dulani Kulasinghe



When a young man and his friends travel from St Lucia to a military training camp in Seaford during World War I, expectation and experience collide.

Prologue: On Seaford Head

Grasses wave in undying wind
the sea
sharp bright
broken
by light from 93 million miles away
Here there is no empire but
the invisible roar of wind
pulled inland
high pressure to low pressure
sea to land
sea to island
I land here.

What pulls us?
What makes us restless to leave our places
and come
undone by passage over water, through air
and time and space to find – what?
A new version of ourselves, maybe
forged by
our hands
our minds
a birth of our own making.

What we don't reckon with is other forces
beyond our ken
the sea
the wind
the heat
the cold
what shapes the land will shape us too.

I. Micoud, St Lucia, August 1915

What did that man just say?
'Are you going to sit down and be slaves' or fight?
He said that out loud?
Or did his moustache muffle his fine words – Nelson, man, you say he meant 'safe'
but look at that damn moustache.
I know what the donkey said.
How the hell's he think we got here?

II.

I'm going. Don't care what Mama says nor Papa.
Granny got it right – it's their war but my future
and there ain't no future here.
I'm leaving this small island for that one –
an island maybe, but somehow it stretches far
iron bridge to get here
sugar bridge to leave

and now war.

Money makes the tide.

Their King is ours too

His face – *his* damn moustache – on every building I enter, cap in hand

to learn

to work

to marry.

No man who can tie his own shoes is staying

old men sit in doorways spinning yarns of cotton and sugar

waiting to die in this sweet hell

but I won't be tied.

I love my home it's why I aim to go

Make a man of me, they say, that's what war will do.

So let me try.

Fly or

die.

III.

Got my kit today.

Walked past Violet's house in it

fine shiny buttons flashed in the midday sun

fit to blind me.

Her sisters hooted from the kitchen yard,

little girls in plaits, their mama chased them inside with a smile.

But no Vi.

Maybe tomorrow.

IV.

I saw him, the fool.

Strutting with Nelson so cocky

line by fine line

Nelson's cousin Dennis behind

they marched past our house and all the others.

On to what?

Glory?

Riches?

Hunh.

He knows how it is.

White English rule here.

He shared my desk in that school

and copied my work, lazy boy, though he didn't need to.

He heard them teach they freed us.

Freed us?

Freed *us?*

Fool's us if we think that's how we came to choose our own lives.

But free...now there's a puzzle.

Free to starve

to wear our clothes ragged no matter how we patch them
to work for less than English doing the same work though they never would
That free?

It is here.

Will it be different there? Is that what he thinks?

He'll be dead in a ditch he had to dig himself, that's what.

Damn fool.

Damn handsome fool.

I want to hate his pride but it's what I love best, his bright strong face

his smile, his wide shoulders

big laugh

hands on my waist.

Sth, girl, stop that.

Wash to hang and babes to feed.

He'll have to take care of Nelson, Dennis *and* himself.

V. 2 October 1915, Micoud, St Lucia

As we leave I see her, waving.

Even from here she looks good.

A new dress?

No, it's her face that's new.

Hope suits her, makes her new penny bright

eyes shining so I can see from way out.

Violet, I'm here! Here!

No I won't stop shouting, that's my girl!

Wait for me Vi, wait!

I'll be back!

VI. SS Berbice, October 1915

100 men strong from green St Lucia

32 already aboard from St Kitts

34 from Antigua, another

34 from Dominica

We're still in our island kit

buttons bright but cold now in the sea wind and at night

wondering when we'll get the warmer uniforms the officers wear.

Maybe it's the bone cold makes me see

what we don't talk about.

More black men than white on this ship

Shiploads more – from Jamaica, Guiana, Bahamas, Trinidad – gone before.

Last time so many black men sailed with so few white

the ships travelled from a different direction

for a different purpose.

Ancestors taken from their home to mine.

Lean out and you can see bodies

flashing bellies

speeding alongside.

Nelson says 'Dolphins!'
But I see the drowned
the ones who leapt
rather than be held down
the women and children rising up
to free the men...oh Vi.

Shake that off, Nelson says.
Breathe. His excitement warms me.
With mates new and old by my side I can do this. I will.
Brothers now.

VII. 7 November 1915

Plymouth!
I think 'Land of the Free'
but Nelson laughs at me –
that's America, this is England.

Smells of salt fish petrol sweat
rush of men's bodies
onto waiting trains
headed east into dawn.

VIII. Seaford, November 1915

Full moon when they arrive but no one would know

covered in cloud as it is.

No eye raised in the dark and high endless wind

Cold squints them down to feet shuffling to higher ground –

fall in

attention

stand fast

stand fast

stand fast

(stiff exhausted cold)

fall out.

When they last did this the sun shone and the crowds cheered so proud

so proud of the handsome boys in their island kit

shining.

Now there's no sun on these sons

the moon hides her face.

They keep theirs low and hope

inside will warm their outsides.

Heartsore, their insides will wait.

IX. To Violet, December 1915

Never been so cold, not in the daytime nor at night.

How's it we're still in our kit from Port o' Spain, in December?

Our 'home' kit, they call it.

Their home kit is wool – scratchy, true, and the colour of cow's dung –
but warm against the bitter wind.

It makes me deaf, that wind.

At night, trying to sleep in these shacks, I hear it like we're still at sea
feel the bed rock under me
sick and tired and hungry
food plain as dishwater.

Bread!

Stale and pale
so dry I could write home on it instead.

But you'd throw it out, Vi – no good except for damn noisy seagulls and even they
turn their beaks the other way.

Like me.

Like these English looking at me, at Nelson, at our boys.

I turn away from the food – that's my protest –
but they protest *us* with their turning.

All they see is the colour of our skin and call us black!

I'm no more black than the sky at night

or crow

or the boots on our feet.

Black?

How's that? We were taught better.

There's no call for names.

No one made me come here –

smart, fast, strong – more than most in training.

I *chose* this, for better.

But some days, looks like, for worse.

Nelson is worse too. That cold is settled in him now
deep in his narrow chest.

Man, we just got here!

Man...boy, more like.

Should have stopped him signing up but couldn't.

He said "If Dennis is going, I go too!"

Cousins like brothers, them,
but he's my brother too, if not by blood.

Good Lord let him live
that's a letter I don't want to write.

X. Seaford, December 1915

The Ancient Order of Foresters Friendly Society of Seaford welcomes you!

So said Clement when he got back.

All the white men smiling
he couldn't believe they meant it
but they did.

He said

'We have left our homes and comforts because the call-to-arms is as much to us as
it is to an Englishman. We are all British and are proud to be members of the
Empire and we will shed our last drop of blood to uphold its integrity.'

At least so he says he said.

We are British, yes.

Proud, yes.

And Lord knows we'll bleed like any man if we're shot.

But integrity? I fight for my own.

XI. 5 January 1916

Blood...

Nelson coughed blood last night.

No one came.

I held his hand.

XII. 6 January 1916

Dear Aunty

Dear Nelson

this letter's not to him

Dear Aunty

I'm sorry to say

how sorry? God, have pity, make it clear

Dear Aunty

Last night Nelson died.

We prayed

I covered him with all my clothes but
he shivered and coughed

He loved you very much

he called out for you

Dennis is sick too
too sick to know his cousin
your son
my best friend is gone

I am more sorry than I have words to say.

Sincerely

Lazarus

XIII. Eighth Night

I found coffee
but no rum
one small shot of whisky
a song and stories for my friend

not like home
not all night
but
se silón
in mourning as in life
we do what we can where we are

XIV. 15 January 1916

Egypt, they tell us
though the war is in Europe.
Who will we fight there?

Do they think we don't know
there will be guns for us in France
but only to pack into crates
to unload
to carry
not to shoot.

Not by us freed by them.

Once I would have railed against it
argued with Captain Jenkins
stood up for us

now

part of me doesn't care where we go.

We dreamed of order progression
guns and drills leading to promotion elevation respect

but now

Dennis is delirious

forgetful in fever

he talks to Nelson

Or maybe it's me who's

forgetful

unseeing

he is closer to Nelson than me

I don't want to be left behind but it's Dennis I'm leaving

And Nelson...

but maybe Nelson will be with me

his cross in my pocket

maybe I'll listen to the priest, take communion before we go.

Body and blood

make me sick

though Nelson's blood covered my clothes and I couldn't wash them for fear of

losing

what I had left of him.

I had better

get used to the blood.

XV. 20 January 1916

After weeks of

drills

inspections
cleaning loading unloading
packing
unpacking then
cleaning the guns again

grinding teeth in sleep
bored and edgy by day
asleep nearly before eyes close.

Tonight, finally, we will take trains to Plymouth –
the journey here but in reverse –
for HMS Marathon
via Malta to Alexandria
and so from island to island until Africa.
Our journey in reverse indeed.

Visited Dennis one last time
face ashy
shrunk small under the scratchy green blanket
unseeing
or at least
not seeing me.

Visited Nelson
already buried in the old cemetery
like they were ready for us
cold stones his final place
no words for his headstone.

Mama Février will struggle to find them
what verse could sum up her sun?

I tried to remember words to the songs we sang together but
when drizzle soaked through coat to skin
I left him
knees wet
his dirt under my nails

no words left now
I won't be back
but I'll take Nelson, yeah, and Dennis,
with me when I go.

Dulani Kulasinghe

Dulani Kulasinghe is a writer and teacher whose creative practice explores belonging, contested histories and legacies of empire. Her writing is used in the interdisciplinary Liberal Arts BA at the University of Sussex and she has run creative workshops for young people and adults in Brighton, where she is also involved in anti-racist education. Her work – supported by Arts Council England, Writing Our Legacy and Brighton Dome – has been published in the anthology *Hidden Sussex: a new anthology for Sussex* (2019) and forms part of several site-responsive productions including *Witness Stand: The Chattri* for Brighton Festival 2022. Dulani is a 2021 Fellow of New Writing South and lives with her husband and two daughters in Brighton.

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

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