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Rare jewels in dazzling network of poetry

By DEBBIE JACOB, Staff Writer

A GOOD POEM can make you feel as though you're made of nothing more than a bowl of quivering jelly. A good poem can turn a heart into a pin cushion.

An Island of His Own is filled with poems that prick the heart and make you turn to jelly. That's because the author of this remarkable set of poems, Mervyn Taylor, is one of those unusual poets who can gather images like rare jewels and put them together into a dazzling necklace.

Taylor is thought-provoking without being mushy. His images are woven together like fine tapestry. His rhythm is hypnotic.

"Honest" is how Nobel laureate Derek Walcott describes

Taylor's poems. Taylor's life is one of those unimaginable poetic struggles. He once worked at the Trinidad treasury. He earned a B.A. from Howard University and an MFA from Columbia University. He once taught at the Bronx Community College and SUNY-Stonybrook and now teaches at-risk adolescents in Harlem.

An Island of His Own, published by Junction Press New York and Tucson, 1992 is Taylor's first collection of poems.

From the first poem, *The White Shell*, it is evident that Taylor is no ordinary poet. He has an uncanny gift for presenting a simple story by stringing together vivid images which all culminate in a powerful point.

In *The White Shell*, a man searches for the perfect gift and finds it not in the "bazaars [which] have gone crazy with bamboo flutes and wicker" but on the beach where he chooses the perfect shell from among thousands. *The White Shell*, of course, is a symbolic gift. Taylor lovingly writes of the search: "Then I remembered, you love the sea, and things that outlast the living. People use these [shells] in their yards crushed to retard rootworm."

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AN ISLAND OF HIS OWN



poems by
MERVYN TAYLOR

BEST SHOPS IN SOUTH

Trinidadian poet with wry sense of humour

POETRY from page 20

I thought it might also ward off disappointment.

Nothing is more powerful than the juxtaposition of two poems *The Conductor* and *The Conductor, Another Version*. Here, Taylor takes two different versions of a little boy's observations of his father, a train conductor, during a train ride to Sangre Grande. It's an eerie display of how one set of images can have numerous interpretations.

In *Departure*, Taylor captures the inner turmoil of those migrating. In one ending sentence he brings home the point that in all its excitement there is that inevitable tugging of the heart strings. "But all the way, next to some stranger in first class where they let you sit because it's empty, you keep looking

down, hoping to catch the red of a small Hillman threading its way back over the hills of Belmont."

Taylor rarely slips into dialect, but the poem called *It Have*, makes fitting use of that Trinidadian colloquialism.

In *Many Mansions*, Taylor presents a portrait of misplaced machismo, with a brief store of a man who fathers many children. He ends the portrait with a wry Trini sense



MERVYN TAYLOR

of humour.

Many of Taylor's poems are brushed ever so lightly with humour like *Ode to Retirement*. But humour aside, there's something very poignant about his descriptions and something very dignified about the relationships between men and women.

Taylor's landscapes contain American and West Indian images and sometimes the images are blurred. There's the long lost train of Trinidad, now a mere phantom travelling to Sangre Grande. Orange peel drying in the kitchen contrasted with snowmen on a New York street. Somehow, Taylor effortlessly ties the images of coconut trees to snow, of the Orinoco and the Caroni river to the Mississippi and the Ganges rivers.

Some poems are quite provocative—quite sensual. In *Onomatopoeia* Taylor says, "It's

not my imagination. The woman in the coat of crimped nylon is gently pressing her left nipple into my arm." Then there's *Sweets*, a description really of a West Indian love tap on the rump and all its repercussions. "...[T]he bees are stirred up and the Chinaman kept his head over the rancid jar and measured four cents worth of the good salt butter."

But sex is dealt with lightly, never taking on the heavy, bitter, depressing overtones that so many poets often exploit.

My favourite line in the entire book comes in the poem *Disguises*—"You vent your anger in a string of long vowels. A heart is your dictionary and you're always looking up flowers."

Taylor's poems are all powerful but not heavy. His most recurring images are those of the sea. It seems, at times, that he longs for the sea. An understandable longing for some-

one who writes soft poems and works hard to create something of love in the Harlem ghetto.

Those poems in the middle of the book tend to be more abstract and they demand more thought and more attention. But it's difficult to leave any of Taylor's poems and move on to another.

Taylor's first collection of poetry is surprisingly solid. A good poem is the most difficult piece of writing anyone can undertake and Taylor writes his poems with a comfortable voice. Crisp, clear, clean images converge for an impressive impact. Taylor instinctively knows that a poem has to ring true and it has to make you feel...like jelly.

An Island Of His Own can be ordered at Inprint Bookstore, 35 Independence Square, Port of Spain.

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