

Vol. 37 No. 21 · 5 November 2015

Goings-on in the Tivoli Gardens

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A BRIEF HISTORY OF SEVEN KILLINGS

by Marlon James.

Oneworld, 688 pp., £8.99, June 2015, 978 1 78074 635 7

BOB MARLEY had called a break during a band rehearsal at his house on the evening of 3 December 1976 when two cars pulled up and seven or more gunmen got out. One found his way to the kitchen, where Marley was eating a grapefruit, and opened fire. A bullet scraped his chest before hitting his upper arm, and four or five hit his manager, Don Taylor, who was standing between him and the doorway. The keyboard player's girlfriend saw 'a kid' with his eyes squeezed shut emptying a pistol into the rehearsal area. The lead guitarist, an American session man on his first visit to Jamaica, took cover behind a flight case. The bass player and others – accounts vary as to how many – dived into a metal bathtub. Marley's wife, Rita, was hit in the driveway while trying to get their children out and went down with a bullet fragment in her scalp. There were shouts: 'Did you get him?' 'Yeah! I shot him!' Then police arrived to investigate the gunfire and the attackers took off.

The manager had to be flown to Miami for surgery, but all the victims survived, and while each of the gunmen gets killed in *A Brief History of Seven Killings*, the novel restages the assault on Marley's house with eight shooters, most of whom get given names: Josey Wales, Weeper, Bam-Bam, Demus, Heckle and Funky Chicken, plus 'two man from Jungle, one fat, one skinny'. ('Jungle' is a nickname for one of the many social housing developments that sprang up in Kingston in the 1960s and 1970s.) The killings in the title of Marlon James's novel – a novel that's built around the attempt on Marley's life much as Don DeLillo's *Libra* (1988) and James Ellroy's *American Tabloid* (1995) are built around the Kennedy assassination – turn out, after hundreds of pages, to be modelled on a massacre carried out years later in an American crack house, allegedly by Lester Coke, a Kingston gang boss who burned to death, in unexplained circumstances, in a high-security prison cell in 1992. His son and heir, Christopher 'Dudus' Coke, is the man the Jamaican army and police were looking for when they killed at least 73 civilians in a raid on the Tivoli Gardens estate in West Kingston in 2010. So there are more than enough killings to go around.

James begins his story with the build-up to Marley's shooting and ends with the burning of Josey Wales, the character corresponding to Lester Coke, with a Dudus-like figure ready in the wings. (A sequel was projected early on, but I wouldn't be surprised if it got slowed down by James's work on a script for HBO, which bought the screen rights to the novel in April.) He has no trouble constructing a plausible narrative connecting the attack to many aspects of

Jamaican history, and in outline his plot sticks closely, especially in its opening stages, to the facts and testimony and rumours gathered up by Timothy White, an American music journalist who periodically updated his 1983 biography of Marley, *Catch a Fire*, until his death in 2002. The characters are all freely imagined even when they're filling the roles of real people, with the exception of Marley, who's seen only through the eyes of a range of first-person narrators, and whose stage time is judiciously rationed. He's referred to throughout as 'the Singer', though James doesn't tie himself in knots for the sake of consistency: a character called Alex Pierce, a writer for Rolling Stone whose research seems to be a fantasized version of White's, urges himself at one point to 'head back to Marley's house'.

Marley isn't left blank, exactly: we hear quite a lot about his under-the-table philanthropy, his physical beauty, his politico-religious worldview, and about the sniffiness with which he was viewed by the small, determinedly self-improving black middle class, which wasn't at first thrilled by the outside world's interest in some 'damn nasty Rasta', all 'ganja smell and frowsy arm', as an angry mother puts it. Other characters do impressions of foreign music-business types – 'You reggae dudes are far out, man, got any gawn-ja?' – or fulminate about Eric Clapton, who drunkenly shared his views on 'wogs' and 'fucking Jamaicans' with an audience in Birmingham in August 1976, two years after he had his first American number one with a cover of Marley's 'I Shot the Sheriff'. ('He think naigger boy never going read the Melody Maker.') But animating a pre-mythic Marley, 'outside of him being in every frat boy's dorm room', as James put it in an interview last year, isn't the first order of business. 'The people around him, the ones who come and go,' Alex the journalist muses, 'might actually provide a bigger picture than me asking him why he smokes ganja. Damn if I'm not fooling myself I'm Gay Talese again.'

'The ones who come and go', in James's telling, include a young woman called Nina Burgess, who's had a one night stand with Marley; Barry Diflorio, a CIA man; and Alex. The rest are gangsters, and the bigger picture they open up is a view from the ground of the working relationship between organised crime and Jamaican parliamentary politics. Marley's shooting is a good device for getting at that, because no one seriously disputes that it was triggered by the 1976 election campaign, then the most violent in the country's history, contested by two sons of the light-skinned post-independence elite: Michael Manley, the leader of the social democratic People's National Party, and Edward Seaga, the leader of the conservative Jamaica Labour Party. The Jamaican system of 'garrisons' – social housing estates, usually built over bulldozed shantytowns, run by 'dons' on behalf of one or other of the parties – was up and running by the 1970s, with Tivoli Gardens, a pet project of Seaga's and his electoral power base, as exhibit A. The novel reimagines it as 'Copenhagen City', perhaps to emphasise the contrast between the name's promise of Scandinavian sleekness and the reality of votes delivered by armed enforcers.

Marley wasn't faking it when he sang about his memories of a similarly downtrodden 'government yard', and didn't need instruction on the dons' multiple roles as providers of stuff the state wasn't supplying, such as arbitration and policing of sorts, on top of their function as political goons and in workaday criminal enterprises. After he'd become a national celebrity in the 1960s, he sometimes played host to Claudio Massop, the JLP gang boss of Tivoli Gardens, whom he'd known as a child. Massop's counterpart in the novel is called Papa-Lo. James casts him as an enforcer of the old school, still capable of murdering a schoolboy when necessary but sick at heart and out of his depth in an increasingly vicious electoral struggle. Papa-Lo's younger ally, who calls himself Josey Wales after the Clint Eastwood character (Lester Coke himself operated as 'Jim Brown' in tribute to the only African-American star of *The Dirty Dozen*), is better adapted to the shifting state of affairs.

Josey is made to seem dangerous not so much because he's irretrievably damaged by previous rounds of slum clearance, gang warfare and police brutality – so is everyone around him – as because he's attuned to goings-on in the wider world.

The opportunities Josey sees come from the external pressures that made the 1976 election, in the eyes of many participants, a Cold War proxy conflict. Manley's PNP government, in power since 1972, had annoyed the bauxite companies, Washington and large swathes of local elite opinion with its leftish reforms and friendliness to Cuba. Manley blamed a rise in political shootouts and some of the country's economic setbacks on a covert destabilisation campaign, and the Americans were widely understood – thanks partly to the writings of Philip Agee, a CIA whistleblower – to be shipping arms and money to Seaga's JLP. Seaga's supporters countered by putting it about that Castro was training the other side's gunmen, and portrayed the sweeping police powers introduced by Manley's government as a step towards a one-party state. Either way, no one was badly off for guns and grievances when Manley offered himself for re-election. 'The world,' Papa-Lo says, 'now feeling like the seven seals breaking one after the other. Hataclaps' – from 'apocalypse' – 'in the air.'

Marley dropped a hint about his stance towards all this in one of the less cryptic lines on *Rastaman Vibration*, released eight months before the election: 'Rasta don't work for no CIA.' Formal politics, he felt, belonged to Babylon, the modern materialist society, and he tried to keep his distance from it. But he was suspected, with some reason, of supporting the PNP. Both party leaders took an interest in the kinds of constituency Marley spoke for, and kept an ear to the ground when it came to popular culture. Seaga, early on in his career, had produced a few ska recordings in West Kingston, some of them featuring Marley's mentor Joe Higgs. Manley, not to be outdone, had visited Ethiopia and returned with – in White's words – 'an elaborate miniature walking stick', a gift from Haile Selassie, to show Rasta voters. Back in 1971 he had also pressed Marley into joining an explicitly PNP-oriented Carnival of Stars tour to warm up his first campaign. And in 1976 his people issued Marley with a pressing invitation to play a free concert in the name of national unity. It was to take place shortly before the election with an eye to overshadowing a JLP campaign event, and it's what Marley was rehearsing for when, two days before the concert, the shooters arrived.

James gives us access to the thoughts of four of the gunmen: Josey, his junior partner Weeper, and two of the teenage footsoldiers, Bam-Bam and Demus. Papa-Lo and the CIA station chief, Diflorio, who get turns as narrator too, aren't let in on the plan. Josey rightly suspects Papa-Lo of going soft, relatively speaking, after too many nights spent listening to Marley's wild talk about the iniquity of the black Jamaican poor shooting one another up for the local oligarchy's benefit. Diflorio, a desk man whose biggest project involves distributing anti-communist colouring books, is too busy grumbling about his wife and the activities of a whistleblower called William Adler to pay much attention, until it's too late, to the hotheads from Langley and the School of the Americas who've started playing their tricks behind his back on his turf. Two further narrators – Alex, in town on a hopeless mission to secure an interview with Marley, and Nina, convinced that her night with the singer will lead to something more – are even less well-informed. Alex, at this stage, mostly picks up red herrings. Nina, mooning by Marley's gate on the night of the attack, thinks she hears firecrackers and wanders in.

All go about their narratorial business in a kind of interior monologue, sometimes addressing the reader directly – usually in a conversational tone, though Papa-Lo throws in some preacherly flourishes – but mostly talking to themselves and digesting recent memories while scenes unfold around them. You soon stop noticing these devices thanks to what they're

presumably there to help set up, which is a strong illusion that the words on the page are unmediated natural speech. The two outsiders, the journalist and the CIA man, think in 1970s-flavoured American English. Everyone else's inner voice slides around on a continuum between Jamaican English and patois, a predominately spoken language which James renders using standard American English spelling in order to make things easier for non-Jamaican readers. 'Deh' and 'yuh' and the like are reserved for scraps of dialogue, and their use is socially graded: Nina, a child – like her creator – of a respectable uptown household, starts 'chatting bad' only when she's angry or upset, and doesn't sound very different from the Americans most of the time. Papa-Lo's thoughts are rich with mixed registers ('Still I have to wonder 'bout the level of bangarang a man going to perpetrate when he won't even tell me about it'), while Bam-Bam, at the bottom of the heap, doesn't have many words to rub together.

A few of the gunmen are proud of their way with language. 'When he talk like a Jamaican he talk all coarse and evil,' Demus observes of Weeper. 'When he talk like a white man, he sound like he reading a book.' But it's foolish to show off, according to Josey, who thinks in a more standard English than his peers yet takes a bitter pleasure in posing as an 'ignorant naigger'. He reminds himself to call his CIA contact 'Sah' and 'to say at least one no problem, mon ... just so he leave thinking he find the right man'. He knows the PNP has looked into 'replacing me when things get too big, or too heavy, or too sophisticated for a man who didn't go to secondary school', and returns his handlers' contempt with interest. They don't imagine that he speaks Spanish, or that the professional right-wing terrorist the CIA has hooked him up with, a Cuban exile who goes by the name of Dr Love, is a talent scout for the Medellín cartel. Supplanting Papa-Lo is the least of his concerns: his main aim is to ensure that his sponsors will continue to turn a blind eye to his expanding cocaine shipping business, with which he means to cut himself loose from political patronage.

First, though, there's the raid on Marley's house to get through. James pays less attention to the attack itself – which is over very quickly, done from Bam-Bam's point of view in a stream of coked-up sentence fragments: the prose fiction equivalent of a shaky hand-held camera – than he does to the mopping up afterwards. What became of the historical footsoldiers isn't known, but according to Kingston rumour they were quickly disposed of. Two 'were last seen alive', White reported in magic-realist mode in 1983,

wandering aimlessly through Trench Town and Rae Town, respectively ... They stammered about a strange salivalike substance that would splash against their faces in the night, and of duppies [ghosts] cloaked in blue flame that came to them just before sunrise and slapped and punched them ... They screamed about snakes in their heads that were trying to eat their way out of their skulls through their eye sockets. One of the men was found hanging from a tree in a field in St Catherine; the other has never been found.

White revised this account in 1991, saying that most of the shooters were hunted down by 'Rasta vigilantes' acting on mysterious tip-offs. The duppy-plagued men were 'poisoned with a powerful herbal hallucinogen that drove them insane', and the one who wasn't hanged was 'reliably reported to have been buried alive'. James splits the difference: Josey and Weeper start shooting as soon as the Datsuns have come to a halt, and some of those who manage to get away fall victim to Papa-Lo's justice. Demus is hanged by eerie white-clad Rastas, while Bam-Bam, an orphaned street kid, aged 15 and missing Weeper's supply of cocaine, lasts long enough on the run to wake up with 'thick juice like saliva on my face'. He's seeing duppies among the crowds watching Marley's defiant performance at the concert when Josey's men

catch up with him. They take him out to the bush, where he spends the last two pages of his monologue suffocating underground.

Soon afterwards, as the plotting begins to spread out, the reader gets the shifty feeling conveyed by, say, the closing episode of a season of *The Sopranos*: an awareness of a great subterranean effort to adjust the dynamics of the storylines in preparation for new material. The transition – from an exhaustive re-creation of the two days leading up to Marley’s shooting to a longer-range story of a big boss’s rise and fall – is bumpier than it might have been because the historical timeline, which James tries hard not to tamper with, isn’t helpfully laid out from a storyteller’s point of view. Another election and another politicised performance – the One Love Peace Concert in 1978 during which Marley somehow cajoled the leaders of the rival parties into joining him on stage and linking hands – need to be dealt with before Josey can assume the role of Don of Dons. Also cluttering up the late 1970s is the prolonged, messy business of a massacre at a firing range, the peace treaty it prompts Papa-Lo to draw up with Shotta Sherrif, his PNP opposite number, and both men’s subsequent deaths in hails of bullets. Marley’s death from cancer, in May 1981, chimes neatly with Seaga’s election victory seven months earlier, but takes place far out on the periphery of the main action.

By the time the plot reaches 1985, about two-thirds of the way through the book, however, James has reoriented the story and brought the reader with him. Josey is now a near-untouchable figure in West Kingston, doling out patronage on his own account from the sums made by the Storm Posse, a smuggling network that controls a healthy share of the global crack market. The New York end is overseen by Eubie, a poshly schooled, dandyish Jamaican expatriate. Weeper is in New York too, not doing a great job of defending their territory from a rival group, which has caused disquiet in Medellín. He’s been pilfering his own supply, but his main problem is his unsettled attitude to his homosexuality, a problem he shares with a hitman who’s come to town to take him out. Josey, in New York to find out what’s going on, and worried that Eubie is planning a hostile move, loses his temper when a crackhead mugs him. His response – following the mugger into a crack house and killing everyone inside – sets in motion a process leading to an extradition order and an epilogue set in 1991, in which Dr Love makes an unexpected return.

A common problem for stories of this sort is the difficulty of finding roles for women beyond those of wife, moll, mother or – in the case of a recent Netflix series, *Narcos* – sexy Marxist guerrilla and sexy television journalist. James comes up with a terrific minor part for a psychopathic Colombian matriarch, but focuses his efforts on Nina, who outgrows her beginning as a self-deluding groupie to function as one of the characters holding the novel together. Having looked Josey in the eye on the night of the shooting, she understands that he’ll kill her if she sticks around and so becomes the novel’s window onto the Jamaican diaspora. After a stint as a Montego Bay bar girl trying to use an American mining executive as her ticket out, she escapes to an episodic life as a cleaner, caregiver and nurse in New York, where she keeps an anxious eye on the news from Jamaica and a more ironic one on the different ways in which the two countries handle race. She’s also a spokesperson for the Kingston middle class, and James has fun giving her uncharitable asides about such matters as Rastafari-speak: ‘I and I, well God knows what that means ... All a load of shit if you ask me.’

The other non-gangster who’s used as a binding agent is Alex, whose continuing investigation of Marley’s shooting serves as a parallel plotline and adds a metafictional grace note. His viewpoint comes in handy in the dense middle section, in which he’s acutely aware

of his embarrassing status as a white American reggae fan seeking the truth about Jamaica as he interviews people in 1979. When he finally sees that Josey was responsible for the raid, it's 1991, the year White publicised his updated findings in a long piece for *Spin* magazine. (James has said he remembers reading it at the time.) White waited until after Coke's death a year later to name him as his prime suspect, however, and the novel concocts a scenario in which Alex learns that it might be prudent to do something similar. This culminates in a brilliantly mad scene: Eubie and his enforcers barge into Alex's apartment, beat him up and make him edit, at gunpoint, a *New Yorker* piece he's writing about the massacre in the crack house, 'A Brief History of Seven Killings'. In addition to encouraging him to omit certain names, they have things to say about the racial coding he unconsciously brings to bear on his subjects, and about his splashy, *Rolling Stone*-style sentences.

As you'd expect, the New York sections don't have the panoramic ambitions of those set in Kingston. The crime plot becomes less an overview of the way a society works, or doesn't work, and more a means of sustaining narrative interest while taking a look at the characters' inner lives. Weeper's comes in for the closest inspection, and it relates to the earlier diagnoses of social ills: the nastiest gunmen we're introduced to in Kingston – among them the killer of Bam-Bam's parents – are models of sexual self-hatred who rant constantly about 'batty boys'. Josey, a bit implausibly for a Jamaican gang boss, doesn't care that Weeper is gay, but Weeper doesn't know that and fears for his life, struggling especially with moments of tenderness ('Is the tender thing that make this feel faggot-like'). In a novel in which nearly everyone complains about – or else takes as read – a lost capacity for feeling, these moments of his are about as good as it gets. But James is having too much fun with the character's possibilities to leave it at that, and arranges for Weeper to come out to himself while sympathising with the boyfriend troubles of the similarly mixed-up man who's about to administer his operatic death scene.

Understatement, in general, isn't a big part of the book's repertoire. The ghost of Sir Arthur George Jennings, who seems to be a pre-independence political figure and claims to have been pushed off a balcony by Josey's future PNP handler, narrates the opening pages and reappears from time to time. Characters sometimes see him when they're about to die, and Bam-Bam isn't the only one of the shooters to experience other folkloric premonitions as the end comes close. Pretty much every shred of curious information concerning the events of 1976 – the fact, for instance, that a member of the foreign camera crew brought in to film the big show was the estranged son of a former CIA director – is pressed into service whether it leads anywhere or not. Yet the novel doesn't wholly solve the problem of reconciling its portrayal of Josey as a lethally effective operator with the raid's failure to kill Marley, hand Seaga the election or even stop the concert. There are also sudden bursts of James Ellroyish excess whenever things start looking insufficiently intense. Nina concludes an argument with her lover by sending his bedroom up in flames and Alex kills Jamaica's deadliest assassin with a letter opener.

It's better to 'risk pornography', James told an interviewer last November, than to have a 'failure of nerve and kid yourself you're producing this sophisticated kind of art'. There's no question that he's kept his nerve, but it isn't a straight-up either/or, and in the novel he stages a different argument against applying notions of craftsmanship and restrained good taste to material of the kind he wants to deal with:

Seriously, Alex, prison library serious to fuck. Me go to plenty library in Jamaica and not one have book like the number of books me see in Rikers. One of them is this book *Middle Passage*. Some coolie write it, V.S. Naipaul. Brethren, the man say West Kingston is a place so fucking bad that you can't even take a picture of it, because the beauty of the photographic process lies to you as to just how ugly it really is. Oh you read it? Trust me, even him have it wrong. The beauty of how him write that sentence still lie to you as to how ugly it is. It so ugly it shouldn't produce no pretty sentence, ever.

James's management of the voice and the paragraph isn't what you'd call unpretty, and he's good at having it both ways on a larger scale too. Reptilian black-ops masterminds out of a Robert Stone novel as well as bumbling CIA bureaucrats, baroque deaths in the bush and casual killings by the side of the road, historical and magic realism, sex and violence and a more 'sophisticated kind of art': the guy's got it all. If HBO can do him justice, so much the better.