

Jacqueline Bishop



Before Electricity

Nights my great grandfather sat on the darkened verandah of memory looking out into the ink-blue sky. I would be curled at his feet, a great dark cat. He would tell me then how he came to be in this place, how he had met my great grandmother, the life they built together. "I was a young man then," he would begin, "and there was nothing doing in Hanover. Already I had fathered two children and I spent my days carousing the streets and drinking. Someone told me there was work in Portland

and I packed my bags and came. I was a strapping young lad then, adventurous, with a simple plan of making enough money and returning home. I did not know I would never see that life again, would never see my parents again, and only one sister followed me here. I have often wondered about those first two children — they must be grown people by now, with children, grandchildren, of their own. When I met your great grandmother she was all arms and legs, nothing much to look at. From the start she was a difficult woman, set in her ways, unwilling to bend; a true

Jamaican woman. We were married one year later: she was sixteen, I was twenty-one. I then worked these sugar cane fields. Over the years life has been fairly good to us: we own the house we live in, eight of our twelve children are still alive. Can you believe after sixty-one years that woman still has a temper?" He would stop talking then, lean back into his chair and I would draw even closer to him. The stink-sweet smell of a ripe Jackfruit hung heavy in the air around us. His hair was silver-white, his mottled skin covered with dark brown spots. The tiny kerosene lamp on the verandah was the only light for miles.

