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*Mister Rhumbay*

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*Calabash: A Journal of Caribbean Arts and Letters* is an international literary journal dedicated to publishing works encompassing, but not limited to, the Anglophone, Francophone, Hispanophone and Dutch-speaking Caribbean. The Journal is especially dedicated to presenting the arts and letters of those communities that have long been under-represented within the creative discourse of the region, among them: Aruba and the Netherlands Antilles, Maroon societies, and the Asian and Amerindian societies of the region. Calabash has a strong visual arts component.

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*Gus Edwards*

## MISTER RHUMBAY

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Now, I need to tell you about mister Rhumbay ... Rhumbay was a local fellow who lived in a place called Buckhole. Buckhole was a swamp area where only the poorest people lived. It wasn't only a ghetto. It was a disgrace and a tragedy. It doesn't exist any more. The year just before I left the island government sent in bulldozers, razed the whole area, filled in the swamp and built low court housing for everybody. But in those days, Buckhole was a world unto itself. As kids in high school, we would often walk through Buckhole because they said Buckhole girls were easier and wore less clothes. It wasn't necessarily true, but we believed the fantasy right into adulthood.

Rhumbay came out of Buckhole and Rhumbay had more muscles than any human has a right to have. Rhumbay had so many muscles that we used to say that Rhumbay had strongman muscles even in his eyeballs. He wasn't tall but he was strapping. And his skin was black. Not brown or dark, but black. Jet black. Word had it that Rhumbay hadn't worn a shirt in maybe fifteen years. That's the reason they say his skin was so black. Because of the sun beating down on it so much. And Rhumbay didn't do anything special to get those muscles. He was just born that way, that's all. Short, strapping and strong. Rhumbay was so strong that everybody use not leave him alone. Even when he would get drunk and start acting disorderly, police wouldn't try to arrest him. They were afraid he would break something on one of them. Or maybe pick them up and throw them into a tree or something. So they would just let him do what he had to do until he got tired and fell to sleep.

Rhumbay never went to school. I have no idea if he could read or write. Rhumbay was a caveman. And everybody knows cavemen didn't need any education. So that was that.

What Rhumbay did for a living was also a mystery. Sometimes he farmed a piece of property he had up in the hills. Other times he would work for the West India Company packing freight. I've seen him in town posing for tourists who would take his picture and then give him money . . . . One other thing he would do from time to time is swim way outside the harbor to the big ocean liner tourist ships, with a bag tied around his waist. Him and three other Buckhole fellows would do this. When they got there, they would call out and tease the crew on the ship. "Hey! Hey! You up there. Ugly ape man. Your mother musta been a ape before you," and things like that. The crew would take potatoes and throw at them, trying to hit them in the head. It was kind of a game with real live targets. Rhumbay and his friends would dive, get the potatoes and put them in the bag. When the bags were full they would swim, cook some of the potatoes, sell the rest and make some money out of the deal. Now you have to realize the length they had to swim to get to the ship. It was perhaps six or seven miles. And the depth of the water when they got there. This was enough water to displace a monster ocean liner and keep it afloat. The bottom must be miles and miles below. But Rhumbay and his friends didn't care. So long as they could get the crew to throw potatoes, everything was fine.

Rhumbay loved movies, and Saturday night was his night. He used to sit in the pit with his friends and talk in a loud voice all through the pictures and nobody would tell him a word.

One night after the movies there was some excitement going on at the pier close by. The hour was close to midnight but there was lots of flashlights and spotlights and police cars and stuff. Something was definitely going on. So all of us went to see what the commotion was about.

There was a good crowd of people. And the word was somebody fell off the pier and drowned. At the time there was a whole lot of dredging going on because they were getting ready to make a waterfront out of the whole area. People were warned not to go on the docks because the boards were rotten. And with the dredging, the bottom was deep and sticky.

Coast Guard boat and divers were there. People were talking over loud speakers and police were telling everyone to keep away from the edge.

The sea at the hour looked to be as black as ink. And a strange mood came over the crowd. All of us stood there silent and looking, but all of us were scared. The cloud of death was in the air. A man was drowned under that water and they hadn't found his body. We had no idea what else could be down there. All kinds of phantom monstrous creatures, I suppose. Even the Coast Guard people looked like they were ready to give it up. One death was bad enough, nobody wanted two.

Then Mr. Rhumbay came on the scene, pushing his way through. "Wha going on?" he asked.

"A man drown down hey," he was told.

"Who? Who? Wha man drown?"

"A man name George, Georgie Lanclos."

"But that a mi friend," Rhumbay said. "That a me fucking friend." And with that, fully clothed as he was, he dived into that mysterious and frightening looking water. He was under there so long people thought that he, too, had drowned. The he surfaced, took a deep breath and went back down again. This time when he came up, he had Georgie's body with him.

The Coast Guard launch took them both aboard. Georgie was dead, there was no question about it. But nobody could believe Rhumbay had done such a thing. Dived into hell without fear or hesitation and came out victorious with a dead friend in his arms.

Since that time, I have seen lots of courageous thins done in movies, but I have never seen anything to match what Rhumbay did that night. And after that night, people stopped calling him "Caveman" or even "Rhumbay." After that he became "Mister Rhumbay," man of distinction.