

PREFACE / Audrey Thomas

About fifteen years ago the phone rang, and as I was nearest, I answered it. A voice with a strong West African accent asked if this was Mrs. Thomas. I said yes, and the voice introduced itself as belonging to a Mr. Owusu-Banahene (or some similar Ghanaian name), and he went on to say that he was at the Vancouver Airport. Mr. Thomas had said that if by any remote and lucky chance he should happen to find himself in Canada he was to ring up straight away. So here he was and he was ringing up and his wife and children were with him too and he wondered, if, for a few days — just until we get settled, you understand — could they stay with us?

I didn't know what to say. I couldn't remember the man; he hadn't been one of Ian's students, I knew that, but the only hospitable thing to do was invite them to come on over. "How many children do you have?" I asked. "Seven," he said, but not to worry, two were at home. Five of theirs and two of ours and tenants already upstairs and in the basement suite. I said, "Just a minute, please. I'll get my husband." (Since he had issued the invitation he could deal with its consequences.) Just as I was putting down the phone I heard a burst of maniacal laughter; it wasn't Mr. Owusu-Banahene after all. It was Bill Schermbrucker, our new friend from up the street, absolutely delighted that he had fooled me.

It was the first time he fooled me but not the last. Bill has an almost uncanny ear for dialect and he can switch quite easily from playing the District Commissioner giving the toast to the Queen on a sweltering Christmas Day to an East Indian customs official, a garage mechanic — you name it. But if this were all he could do, simply *mimic* people, he would be no more than a clever, very sophisticated form of parrot. However, he also has the ability to see beyond what the words are saying to what they are *really* saying, right to the essence of the speaker behind the words. I think this requires a certain largeness of heart that goes beyond mere cleverness. He is one of the few people I've ever met who really listens, and he listens because he is truly interested. People respond to him because of this (my landlady in Crete who had all the chairs and tables out in the street for a farewell party the night before he left for home; our concierge in Paris who was not very pleased with us because we washed our linen out in the bidet — “*Je vous en prie*,” her note began, “*Je vous en prie*.” — but who blushed like a girl when Bill had the inspiration to buy her a bunch of flowers on La Fête des Mères).

One might say that if someone grows up into a world of privilege — and there is no doubt in my mind that the world Bill describes in his African stories is in many many ways a very privileged world indeed — then it is easy to be easy with the rest of the world. But he is never patronizing, never casual about his treatment of other people, and I have seen white people of equal privilege who were both casual and patronizing and often much much worse.

For years I despaired of Bill ever writing down his African stories. He seemed (as he so readily admits in the introduction to *Chameleon and Other Stories*) to want to turn his back on all that; it was “over.” He seemed to me to be writing about all the wrong things, ignoring the rich ore of his early life in favour of material that had not yet had time to shift and settle. He was like a man who absentmindedly carries a witching wand in his hand and when it dips down over the place where there is water he says, “Ah, this is just an old stick I’m out walking with and besides, even if it were true, all this nonsense about diviners, I’m not sure I’m interested in water any more.”

I'm writing all this not knowing which story will appear in this special section of *TCR* but I was interested to discover, reading so many of them together, as I have just done in *Chameleon and Other Stories*, what a male world Bill describes. The women are peripheral. Most of the time they don't even have names. "My mother," "the woman I live with," and so on. Their power is felt (their power both to wound and to cure) but they are not named. And most of the action is male. Boys at school, boys with guns shooting ducks, snakes, oxen, terrorists (boys with guns growing up). The one great exception to this is the woman he calls "Marie Johnson" in the beautiful story "Afterbirth." Now, in the original Acknowledgements, disclaimers, dedications, etc. to this book, Bill made the traditional remarks about "no resemblance to persons living or dead" and so on. He tells me that has now been cut out and, if only for my own sake, I'm glad. For was it a dream then, that I journeyed to that farm with "Calvin" and his wife and children, and met "Marie," the woman who brought my dearest friend into the world, the woman who first touched him (and who can still touch him, it is obvious, after all these years)? "Pete" was there, very tall and tanned, in khaki shorts and white shirt, every inch the "Settler" or the "Settler's son." Old Martin was there and the native servants (although probably none of these from Bill's time). I knew from an historical point of view I was seeing something equivalent to the dinosaurs. I didn't take any notes; maybe I should have. But I watched "Marie's" hands twist together and then her radiant smile as I was introduced. "Billy," she said, "you know Billy?" And then the stories began, went on over lunch, went on and on. They may not understand him but they love him and are proud of him. I was deeply moved.

Bill wrote a poem once, years ago, and I'm probably going to misquote it (he can tell you how often I do that). All I remember is two lines and it was about Africa, about the white man whose family may go back for generations but who's now in "the new philosophy" redundant.

*Now that I have no fathers
Who do I call my fathers?*

Something like that.