

**NO
SAFEGUARDS**

NO SAFEGUARDS

H. Nigel Thomas



GUERNICA
EDITIONS

TORONTO • BUFFALO • LANCASTER (U.K.)
2015

Copyright © 2015, H. Nigel Thomas and Guernica Editions Inc.

All rights reserved. The use of any part of this publication, reproduced, transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise stored in a retrieval system, without the prior consent of the publisher is an infringement of the copyright law.

Michael Mirolla, editor

David Moratto, cover and interior book design

Guernica Editions Inc.

1569 Heritage Way, Oakville, (ON), Canada L6M 2Z7

2250 Military Road, Tonawanda, N.Y. 14150-6000 U.S.A.

www.GuernicaEditions.com

Distributors:

University of Toronto Press Distribution,

5201 Dufferin Street, Toronto (ON), Canada M3H 5T8

Gazelle Book Services, White Cross Mills, High Town, Lancaster LA1 4XS U.K.

First edition.

Printed in Canada.

Legal Deposit—Third Quarter

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 2015936503

Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Thomas, H. Nigel, 1947-, author

No safeguards / H. Nigel Thomas. -- 1st edition.

(Essential prose series ; 113)

Issued in print and electronic formats.

ISBN 978-1-55071-984-0 (pbk.)--ISBN 978-1-55071-985-7 (epub)--

ISBN 978-1-55071-986-4 (mobi)

I. Title. II. Series: Essential prose series ; 113

PS8589.H4578N67 2015

C813'.54

C2015-902311-4

C2015-902312-2

For all the world's oppressed children.

... And thus

*Was founded a sure safeguard and defence
Against the weight of meanness, selfish care,
Coarse manners, vulgar passions that beat
On all sides from the ordinary world
In which we traffic.*

— Wordsworth: *The Prelude*, Book Eighth

BOOK ONE

ROCKY FOUNDATIONS

|
—

PAUL, WHERE ARE you? You said you'd be home by October. It's May. I'm standing at the head of Anna's bed, listening to her rattling breath. A nurse with a flashlight beamed on Anna's IV is on the other side of the bed. She leaves. I glance at my watch. 9:17. I sit in the chair beside the bed and begin tonight's watch.

Departures. In the note Anna left me 19 years ago, she'd asked me not to cry and had promised to come and get Paul and me soon. If things didn't work out, she would return to St. Vincent to be with us. And, after Grama took us to live with her, Anna told me I must show that I loved her by being a good boy and by taking care of Paul. And I did; felt I owed it to her. A week after that phone conversation, she told me in a dream that I'd caused the breakup of her marriage. *Soon:* nine years later. Paul was nearly 12 and I almost 18.

Paul, where are you? Your last letter was in August. How did you end up hating Ma? *"One of these days you all will drive me so mad, I'll show up here with a Uzi and blow your asses to smithereens."* I'm still surprised that you would think let alone say that.

I glance at Ma's form in the dim light, and for a moment hold my breath as she raucously expels hers. She'd fled St. Vincent; fled from Caleb's fists; ended her marriage.

My thoughts go back to the night before my seventh birthday: the night the breakup began.

I'm tossing in bed. It's October 6. Tomorrow I'll be seven. Last year I got nothing for my birthday except the clothes that Grama sent me. I cried and tried to forget about it. I'll get nothing this year. I won't remind Ma.

Talk about such things vexes Daddy. He asks me questions I can't answer, usually before beating me. Last year I asked Ma if she'd forgotten my birthday. She said no. Her belly was big with Paul. (Now I know that Ma has always had trouble remembering birthdays.)

I didn't know that Daddy was nearby until I heard him say in his beating voice: "Jay, you hungry?"

"No, Daddy."

"Come here."

I went into the room where he was and stood facing him.

"You got a full belly. That's the best gift in the world, birthday or no birthday. Not another word about your birthday. Too much simmidimmy spoil pickney. Millions o' children the world over go to bed hungry and wake up hungry. You know that?"

I do. In the booklets the Americans send Daddy, there are pictures of naked black children with swollen bellies. "Worms and wind," Daddy says. "Sometimes they're so hungry they eat dirt." Why do their parents let them go hungry and naked, and let them eat dirt? I'm afraid to ask Daddy, so I ask Ma, and she says their parents are poor because they serve the wrong God, and God is angry with them, but God loves everyone and can do anything he wants. I remember that Christ multiplied five loaves and two fishes to feed thousands; Daddy says often that with God all things are possible. It's wrong for children to eat dirt but I'm afraid to tell her so.

Gramma—everyone calls her Ma Kirton—sucked her teeth at Daddy one time and told him: "This religion o' yours—it's all foolishness and lies—lies, nothing but lies—to make poor people think injustice comes from God. Heaven is in my heart." She tapped her chest. "Hell too. When I die I done." She sucked her teeth again, grinned, and stared at Daddy.

"Get to hell out!" Daddy said, his voice trembling. "BEELZEBUB, be gone!" He balled his fists and began moving toward Gramma.

Gramma grabbed her handbag and scuttled. I didn't even get to kiss her.

"Zelzebub," I asked Ma as soon as Daddy left. "Ma, who is Zelzebub?"

"Who?" she said, frowning. I sidled up to her. She folded both arms around me, pressed my back against her thighs, and rocked me gently. She can't do this when Daddy is around.

"The name that Daddy called Gramma."

“That’s an evil angel that God threw out of heaven. He came with plenty others. And they go into people’s souls and make them evil.”

“One is in Grama!”

“Stop looking so frightened. No. Your father said so because he hates it when anyone badtalks his religion. Grama is a good person, Jay.”

“But one time Daddy said she hates him.”

“She doesn’t hate anybody, Jay.”

Tonight, I toss in bed and hear the Atlantic pounding away at the shore. In the distance dogs are barking. In the lulls, I hear the wind whistling through the fronds of the coconut palms that line the shore. Through the drawn curtains I see the land outside, silvery in the moonlight. The glare from the street lamp outside my window falls onto my bed.

Percy and Samuel—their fathers are elders in Daddy’s church. Our parents and teachers tell us that we are hell-bound. We’ll burn forever; will never turn to ash; we’ll be like the stones campers and poor people use to build their cook fires. No, not like the stones: stones can’t feel pain; all our feelings will remain.

The Holy Spirit tells Daddy to beat me. Every few days he flogs me “to curb the evil” in me—evil that everyone is born with but must control, because long ago Adam and Eve disobeyed God and ate an apple; evil that only the blood of God’s son can remove. They killed him long ago to get his blood. Once every month they take a tiny sip of it. They don’t give me any. Every night I beg God to make me good. But I can’t resist stealing candy, and I want bad things to happen to Daddy and my teachers when they scream at me or beat me. I know I’ll get real bad if Daddy stops beating me, bad like Joseph who steals goats and chickens and is in prison now. He used to come with his mother to Daddy’s church. And Daddy said in one of his sermons that Joseph put down praying and took up thieving, and that evil grows bigger than breadfruit trees in the hearts of those who don’t obey God. I don’t want a breadfruit tree to grow in my heart. Why don’t they give me any of Christ’s blood? God, why is it so hard to be good? Why don’t you make me good? You can do anything. And you know everything.

Daddy says: “We must not question God; God’s ways are past finding out.” In church we sing: “God moves in a mysterious way, his wonders to perform; he plants his footsteps in the sea and rides upon the storm”; and I

imagine God as this huge giant, bigger than the one in “Jack and the Beanstalk” (which I sinned and read in school; Daddy says such stories are lies, and prevents Ma from reading them to me: “The bible is the only book to be read in my house;” and Grama told Ma: “Ignore the two-legged jackass and read to your child”) — God with legs longer than the trunks of the tallest coconut trees, legs planted in the deepest part of the Atlantic, and long arms reaching all the way up into heaven. What would it be like to see God hurtling across Georgetown in the strong winds that come off the Atlantic? I’m glad God is invisible. My heart is drumming. I catch myself suddenly. I questioned God. I blasphemed. Something bad will happen to me.

God made everything and everyone and makes everything happen. Daddy says so. A month ago Eva-Marie drowned. She was standing alone on the seashore and, all of a sudden, a huge wave came and knocked her down and dragged her out to sea. We walked behind her coffin; and Daddy said, as they put Eva-Marie’s coffin into the hole: “The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh. Blessed be the name of the Lord.” And afterward, when everybody was leaving the graveside, Eva-Marie’s mother threw herself on the ground, and pounded it with her head, and dirtied her clean white frock, and bawled that she wanted to be buried too. Daddy lifted her to her feet, and said: “Sister Gertrude, God do everything for the better. In his wisdom he decide heaven is the best place for Eva-Marie.”

Eva-Marie won’t go to heaven. It’s 32 days since she died; and Frederick, whose parents are Spiritual Baptists, says Eva-Marie’s spirit must wander on earth for 40 days before it goes to heaven or hell. Eva-Marie was two years older than me. A week before she died, she pulled me into a clump of fat pork bushes on the beach, pulled down my pants, hoisted her dress, lay down on her back, and told me to lie on her and wind. She said it was what adults did, and it was how women got big bellies that babies come out from. In Daddy’s church, women who get big bellies and don’t have husbands leave. It’s why Sister Celestine left. She used to sit on the front bench. Her voice was loud when we sang, and when the holy ghost filled her she cried out and jumped up and down. Then she stopped coming to church. And one Saturday I was out front watching Ma pulling up the weeds and Sister Celestine came by with a big belly. When she saw Ma she began to sing: “Christ is getting us ready for that great day. Who will be able to

THE NURSE COMES to the bedside and takes a quick look at Anna. I listen to her rasping breath and for a while hold my own until she lets out hers. When the nurse leaves I stand at the head of the bed and stare at Anna's face half-hidden in the dim light. I sit down again. My fingers feel numb. I open and close them to warm them up. *Ma, you can't die. Don't do this to me.*

She was born in Havre de la Paix (shortened to Havre), a town of fewer than 1,200 on St. Vincent's Leeward coast. Havre is snuggled in a cove semi-hugged by two spurs of intermixed limestone and black volcanic rock jutting out into the sea like floating ribs from the mountain range that forms a spine the entire length of the island. A booklet by one of the town's residents states that Havre was built "on the floor of an extinct volcano, one of many extinct volcanoes on the leeward side of the island the force of whose eruptions had blown out their seaward rims." At Havre's northern end, the spur is less steep. At the shore, where the crater's rim had been blasted away (so that there the arms don't join), the spurs rise sheer from the sea, forming solid walls on both sides. They continue inland for a good 50 metres before rounding out in a steep slope. I surmised that, over time, soil had accumulated in the blown-out crater on whose floor the town is built. From the front porch of my grandmother's home near the seashore, I'd look inland, up at the mass of black rock intermixed with limestone that forms a 270-degree

girder, crowned at the top and contoured at the bottom with wild vegetation. In the rainy season, the summit is bonneted in mist, and the rocks hold dozens of fountains that turn off when the dry season comes. After Georgetown, on the windward side of the island, with its numerous gentle intersecting valleys and miles of flat and rolling land, I found Havre both suffocating and comforting. But in its calm sea without whirlpools I became an excellent swimmer, ignoring my grandmother's fears; she'd grown up in Georgetown beside the Atlantic's roaring, battering three-metre waves and many whirlpools with invisible hands waiting to pull you in.

To the north, over in the next valley from Havre, is all the flat land that can be found on this part of the Leeward coast. All of it was at one time Laird's Plantation. Beyond that there are the mountains, often cloud-capped, and blue-grey when they're not, and a volcano, waiting to blow out its own seaward rim. A month after Anna married Caleb and moved to Georgetown—a Good Friday morning just before sunrise, it had tried, and forced the residents of Havre and all of northern St. Vincent to move into evacuation camps. Beginning with rumbles that sounded like thunder, followed by a loud explosion, it shook the island and sent a succession of fireballs far up into the sky before they fragmented and cascaded in showers of ashes and red-hot stones.

About two kilometres north of the volcano, the mountains come to an abrupt halt at the seashore. One time when Grama, Paul, and I went to the area by boat, to a picnic at the Falls of Baleine, I saw that there, for almost a kilometre, black rock streaked with coral and limestone rises perpendicular from the sea. The main road does not go beyond Laird Plantation, now a tiny fraction of its original size. The Lairds inherited it from other Whites to whom it had been given or sold when the French and later the British took the island from the Kalinago. In 1795 most of those who'd survived European attacks and diseases (many had mated with free Africans, whose means of coming to St. Vincent is still in dispute) were banished to Honduras. The others were corralled into an area under the volcano on the windward side, where the descendants of those not killed in earlier volcanic eruptions—over a thousand died in the 1902 eruption—now live. When I lived in

Georgetown I sometimes saw them there, and busloads of them were always heading to and from Kingstown. When Grama, Paul, and I visited Grenada, we saw a monument at Sauteurs, at the cliff overlooking the sea where the Grenadian Kalinago had jumped to their death rather than surrender to the French. The town's name memorializes the event: *Sauteurs*—leapers. A Catholic complex—Church and school—is located on it. Grama told Paul and me to bow our heads and remain silent for a minute. A bug-eyed Paul pestered her with questions afterwards. Grama told us then that her father was Kalinago, one of the few times she ever mentioned him.

I catch myself biting the nail of my right thumb, a habit Grama had tried in vain to break. I check my cellphone. Nothing. No message from Paul. I stare at Anna's outline in the dim light, at her chest rising and falling and quarrelling with the air it's pulling in and pushing out.

I'd always sensed, even before I went to live with Grama, before I could put it into words even, that Anna was not quite the child Grama had wanted. She's certainly not the mother Paul thinks he deserves. The week our visas for Canada arrived, Grama confirmed my suspicions. "When you all reach this age, the hormones turn you all giddy, and you all think adults know nothing, like if adults weren't adolescents too; and you all want all sorts of independence that you all can't handle. That is what happened to your mother. Three years into high school she dropped out. In her second year, a group of evangelists from the States came to Havre 'to win souls for Christ.'" She chuckled and slowly shook her head. "They said the Second Coming would be on August 23, 1970. They told people it was pointless to struggle to get material things when in just over a year the Rapture would happen. Your mother fell for it. She stopped swimming in the sea. 'If men look at my body and lust after it, God will hold me accountable.' She stopped wearing perfume,

jewellery, and bright colours; she started hiding her hair under black scarves; she bamboozled my seamstress into sewing her three long-sleeved, ankle-length smocks, each one a different shade of grey. Then they baptized her.

“What you intend to do with all your clothes?’ I asked her.

“Burn them. They’re sinful. They imperil men’s souls. And I’ve stopped wearing slacks. Deuteronomy forbids it.’

“She even extended her foolishness to me. One August Monday I was getting ready to go on a picnic and couldn’t find the pair of Bermuda shorts I wanted to wear. I turned my dressing table inside out. In the end I wore something else. A week later I went to look for a pantsuit to wear to a social Mr. Morrison was having, and I couldn’t find that either. And then it hit me. ‘Anna’, I called out to your mother sitting in the living room, ‘you know what became of my tangerine pant suit?’ She came into the bedroom with a big grin on her face. Jay, I could hear the blood beating in my temples.

“I am only obeying God’s commandment. Deuteronomy says ...’

“Jay, she didn’t have time to finish. ‘God’s what? You damn fool!’ I grabbed her by the shoulders and I shook her. ‘Go, bring my clothes for me, forthwith.’ I gave her such a shove she stumbled.

“I put them in the garbage. I threw them out already. “The woman shalt not wear that which pertaineth unto a man; neither shall a man put on a woman’s garment: for all that do so are abomination unto the Lord Thy God.” God commands me to show you the errors in your ways.’

“Jay, I don’t know how I kept from strangling Anna that day.

“The evangelists rented a small wooden house up there.” Grama pointed to the northern spur, up to the hill where the church, bigger now and made of cement blocks, stands. “The converts met up there every evening to sing and pray. They called it tarrying. ‘Child, see? You’re trapped in a tarry ring.’ I sometimes teased her. An adolescent phase. Adolescent angst. It will pass. I’d already read an article about it in *Psychology Today*. This child will come to her senses.

“The only point I fussed with her about was her frequent fasting. By the second year I was able to solve the transportation problem to

school and have her come home every day. ‘You’re a growing child. You need your daily nourishment, plenty of it too. How can you concentrate and learn on an empty stomach?’

“‘The Holy Spirit is more nourishing than anything you’ll ever feed me.’

“‘*The Holy Spirit!* May, a woman from Georgetown whose rotting body they found in a locked-up shack up there a few months ago, had stopped having sex with her husband *because the Holy Spirit had ordered her to*. Two years later she gave birth to a child, and people rechristened her Immaculate May. Anna, dear, stop abusing your body in the name of religion. You promise me?’

“Jay, your mother stared at the floor and said not one word. With my thumb I lifted her chin and attempted to stare into her eyes. She closed them.

“Your mother was an average student; in intelligence nowhere near you, and definitely not your brother. She failed all her third-year exams. She read the Bible when she should have been studying. Sometimes I’d overhear her trying to convert Mercy while they were doing chores. I used to listen to them and laugh.

“At the end of July 1970, your mother announced that she was not returning to school. I argued with her. ‘The Second Coming might be near. The early Christians had thought so too, but, one thousand nine hundred and seventy years later, it hasn’t happened. In the meantime a body, filled or unfilled with the Holy Spirit, has to eat; and everyone knows you eat better if you have a good education.’ Jay, your mother refused to return to school.”

A week later, Grama and I were on the back porch, the sun about an hour from setting in the Caribbean Sea; I standing, Grama sitting, Paul inside reading. I took up the conversation from where she had left off. “What happened on August 23, 1970?”

“Jay, sit.”

I sat in the lounge chair beside her.

She was silent for a while, her face showing deep thought. Then she told me where I would find a bible on her bookshelves and to bring it for her. She sent me back for her glasses. She resumed the story.

“On the morning of August 23, 1970, your mother and the other converts, between 35 and 40 of them—the men in white trousers and shirts, some with shoes, some with flip-flops, and most plain bare-foot; the women in white dresses and white headscarves, some in shoes, some in flip-flops, and many barefoot—gathered in the shack up there. A huge gathering from here and all the surrounding villages came to stare at the singing and praying *saints*. Mercy and I among them. The *saints* would interrupt their praying and singing and stare out to sea every time the breeze gusted. At midnight—we were a huge crowd outside: everyone who couldn’t come earlier because of work or what have you was there—we broke into loud laughter and began to heckle them. Some Rapture! ‘This look more like *rupture*?’ Sefus Butcher called out to them. Even so, I couldn’t convince your mother to return to school.

“The Rapture didn’t happen in 1970—or for that matter, since—but the Church of the Elect continued to grow. Every year the missionaries from the States would come and give out aspirins and gauze and second-hand clothes. People are cheap, you hear me. It’s something priests and politicians know well. They made new converts and rented one- and two-room shacks all over the island, meeting-places for their converts. Now instead of giving a precise date, they said the Rapture was imminent.

“The next big dispute between your mother and me began one day three years later—around eleven o’clock one morning. Anna was leaning against the front porch railing, reading some tract or the other the church in The States sent her. I was sitting on a porch chair braiding my hair. Jay, I told your mother in dialect—she wasn’t allowed to talk to me in it, just like I forbid you and Paul to—‘Yo’ mean to tell me, the one pickney I have is a jackass!’ She was just past 17. I’m seeing her clearly like if it’s happening now: in a grey-three-quarter-sleeve smock almost to her ankles, head tied in a dark brown rag. I told her: ‘I can’t go on feeding and clothing you. If you were still in school it would have been different. Your father left me well off: enough to educate you all the way through university. You have to find a job. Your holiness is bad for both of us.’

“I don’t have any qualifications.’

“You should have thought about that when you left school to join that bradabangbang up there.’ I’d already come close to wearing out poor Mercy’s ears complaining about her. Jay, my patience had run out. Gone completely. I said to your mother: ‘You bewitched or what? Their white skin and Yankee talk mesmerize you?’

“Your mother replied: ‘You won’t understand. Mama, you have to be born again. The natural man cannot understand the things of God.’

“I guess that includes women too,’ I told her. ‘Your dear St. Paul—that misogynist and supporter of slavery—wouldn’t have wanted women, natural or unnatural, to understand anything.’

“Anna said: ‘I don’t have to put up with your blasphemy. God will take care of you in his own way. I’m leaving this house of iniquity.’

“I thought she was joking and played along. ‘How will you eat?’

“‘God will take care of me,’ your mother replied.

“‘Child, stop your foolishness.’

“‘Mama, I’m serious.’

“‘What? You’re going off to get knocked-up? That’s what happens to know-it-all young women who leave home. I’m warning you: don’t come back here with any man’s bastard. Don’t come back here crying to me with any inside you, in your arms, or pulling at your skirt.’

“Anna closed her eyes, stood stiffer and straighter than a coconut-trunk, and began quoting scripture.” Grama put on her glasses then, flipped through the pages of the bible, until she found what she was looking for. “This is what your mother recited to me: ‘Take no thought for your life, what ye shall eat, or what ye shall drink; nor yet for your body what ye shall put on.’ Then your mother put down the bible, stretched out her arms as if she herself was the cross Christ was crucified on; next she clasped her hands under chin, threw back her head, gazed upwards and recited”—Grama picked up the bible and read: “Take therefore no thought for the morrow: for the morrow shall take thought for the things of itself. Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof.” Grama closed the bible and put it on the patio table. “Jay, I would have laughed if I didn’t see the horror awaiting her. I was frightened.

“For a full thirty seconds your mother sneered at me, then folded her arms across her breasts and burst into song:

*The Lord's my shepherd.
I'll not want.
He makes me down to lie
In pastures green. he leadeth me
The quiet waters by.*

“Still singing, your mother went into the house and began to pack. ‘You bring pickney into this world; you don’t bring their mind,’ I shouted to her.

“She sang her reply:

*My father is rich in houses and lands.
He holdeth the wealth of the world in his hands.
Of rubies and diamonds, of silver and gold,
His coffers are full; he has riches untold.*

“‘Can I borrow a suitcase?’

“I didn’t answer. I still didn’t believe she was serious. I put the comb next to the hairbrush and the jar of Vaseline on the patio table beside me, and if I hadn’t been sitting I would have fainted. I remember that Mr. Morris came to the foot of the porch steps then. ‘Look like you’re having family problems, Sis,’ he said.

“‘You’re a lucky man, Bertie. A lucky man, you hear me. You don’t have any child to make you wet your pillow of a night.’ Jay, the tears came then.

“‘Go easy with Anna, Sis. We the older heads know the cliff. We mustn’t let the young ones run carelessly and fall over it.’ He went back inside his own gate and into his house.

“If your mother ever thought she was spirit, she found out soon enough that she had a body too. God fed the sparrows and clothed the lilies and dropped manna for the Israelites in the wilderness, but no such remedies awaited your mother. She moved in with Mopsy, a

Acknowledgements

I offer my thanks to the members of Ilona Martonfi's writing group for the valuable critiques they offered, to Michael Mirolla for a rigorous editing of the manuscript, and to David Moratto for his evocative cover design.

About The Author

H[ubert] Nigel Thomas was born in St. Vincent and the Grenadines and has been living in Canada since 1968. He was a mental health worker, a high school teacher and finally a professor of US literature at Université Laval. He is the author of several essays in literary criticism as well as three novels: *Return to Arcadia* (2007), *Behind the Face of Winter* (2001—to appear in a French translation in autumn 2015), *Spirits in the Dark* (1993); three collections of short fiction: *When the Bottom Falls Out and Other Stories* (2014), *Lives: Whole and Otherwise* (2010—translated as *Des vies cassées*, 2013); *How Loud Can the Village Cock Crow and Other Stories* (1995); a collection of poems: *Moving through Darkness* (2000); and two scholarly texts: *Why We Write: Conversations with African Canadian Poets and Novelists* (2006), and *From Folklore to Fiction: A Study of Folk Heroes and Rituals in the Black American Novel* (1988). In 1994 he was shortlisted for the Hugh MacLennan Fiction Award; in 2000 he received the Montreal Association of Business Persons and Professionals' Jackie Robinson Award for Professional of the Year; and in 2013 was awarded Université Laval's *Hommage aux créateurs*.