**On Not Knowing - 3732**

*A name is the first thing a man owns in this world.*

I spelt your name with letters clipped from a newspaper. It was all that was left of you, one word,

      

a name found among others upon the browned pages of a ledger, sealed within its leather jacket:

**[[1]](#footnote-1)Records of property of Dr.** **William John Nielson**,

Son of John William Nielson

Doctor of Surgery and physic

Owner of coffee lands in Woodside, St. Mary, Jamaica

1000 acres

Your *given name* (among others) was all I knew you:

Brown

Edward

Walker

**Binning**

Smith

Thomas

Forbes

Others…

Some children *“entered by name, colour, place of birth and name of female parent.”*

Billy Ferguson aged 3 Mary Ann Drew

Margaret Conchie (mulatto) aged 3 Isabell Bell

Jacky Hermit aged 1 ½ Pamela Cunningham

But you, a single name.

Meticulously, I glued my letter clippings unto the black-grey surface of a smooth river stone as the summer school teacher instructed.

*It is my name too*, I knew as much, but did not yet know that this name was not your first…not truly *ours*. I did not yet re-cognize that it came with your state of servitude, that this name, stitched onto my homemade schoolbag, drawn laboriously onto my notebooks, and coached early into my infant memory as my possession, legacy from my father’s father’s father, was not *ours* to begin with.

Now, with new knowledge, I do not know what to make of this name, this entity that like the scarlet letter is me.

But is it?

Is it me if my father’s father’s father’s *real name* was not this name but was the one he carried silently beneath it? For there must have been another name before he came to this island. And if he came to this island from another with this name, there would still be that other name he would have had had he not been taken, a silent name he carried because he himself did not know it or had forgotten its sound.

Is the silent name mine then? Could it be that in not knowing the-name-I-do-not-know I too carry it beneath the name I have been given? And what does that make me? Who does that make me?

I do not know.

And there is no comfort in not knowing. In not knowing there are only questions and suppositions that spin their own tales, never satisfied with theorized answers. There is no satisfaction in not knowing for it is only in knowing that one is certain that they need not look for more. Knowing is everything then. And though some say, “forget and move on,” it is not as easy as their words flow.

“What’s in a name anyway?”

*A rose by any other name would smell as sweet* Yes? No?

Do all names smell sweet like rain on hot dirt,

feel like the soft silence of a mother’s approving smile,

sound like the natal announcement of old mid-wives,

taste like mangoes’ thick yellow honey juice?

Do all names look like the first light of day that gifts to you itself?

I placed my river stone with its paper clippings of your *given name* on the monument my community created for those we only know by *given names*. I placed it with other rocks with other names cut and pasted by other children, who like me kept silent names beneath their *given names*. Like a trophy, I placed my rock against the sun-warmed surface, not realizing that rain would eventually wash the clippings from the rock; strip the *given name* away, leaving the stone as it was holding within itself its own identity, everything it truly was, no longer hidden.

1. Brodber, Erna. *The People of My Jamaican Village*: 1817-1948. University Printers, UWI Mona, Kingston. 1999.

   Names referenced are from official state records, declarations of “slave returns,” obtained and published by Dr. Erna Brodber. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)