

## SHADES

By Alake Pilgrim (Trinidad and Tobago)

He stand up there posing on the side of the road with a new football under his arm. Every evening he there in the same pose, on the same spot, liking himself, leaning back against the railing on his elbows and one bent blue-jeaned leg. Some days he wear a cap saying I Heart New York, in scarlet ibis red to match his jacket and belt and sneakers, the brim pulled down and to one side, conspiring with his sunglasses to guard the secrets of his face. Half past five, by the clock, you could find him prop up against iron bars chipped like teeth, looking oblivious to the cars streaking past like gassy hissing whistling tooting tin men. He pose up now with his brand new ball, waiting to impress the fellas collecting in the Arima savannah for the evening game, to hear their 'You is the real man Shades!', to feel their respect, and to share in the joy as they test out what this ball could really do.

Blood money, the oldpeople whispered, shaking their heads and looking the other way. The football, the sunglasses, the clothes all bought with blood money. He working for Noriega, the druglord. He does get pay in cash and coke. Nobody asking out loud where Noriega getting the drugs; how the cocaine and guns coming from South America in crates mark 'CLOTH' and 'SHOES'; fat blocks of cocaine in demand on North-American shores, dropped off on island beaches by boats faster than anything the Coast Guard have. And the police only shaking down men like Shades. So the young fellas, restless, knowing him to be 'a cool soldier', always willing to help out if they need money for rent or food, ruthlessly fair in deciding all squabbles among them and one of the best forwards in the whole northeast; knowing all that, when the police come to shake him down, the fellas, standing a good distance away, spit hard on the ground and say, 'They too hypocrite'. But we all watch without a sound the day they finally come to take him away.

I could see him standing there still, not paying none of them any mind, waiting with the new ball. A boy playing man whose name I did not dare to say out loud in my mother's house until I grew up and went away. Until I came back to find him changed, a wasted sentinel, king of dirt and all things wholly unclean, whose smell flew to spit in your face on the unwilling back of the wind; a redolent introduction few people pursued, preferring to risk the traffic and cross the street, re-directing their eyes, dragging their children along with firm hands. His former teammates, some dressed in suits now, driving jeeps too big for the road, hiding their pity and fear behind tinted glass, breathed a sigh of airconditioned relief that they, at least, had escaped. Everyone quickened their pace and their thoughts until they were safely past the madman in broken shades, looking for the ball he had lost in piles of garbage. Everyone hurried past the sight, the smell of all they had thrown away, to go on with the business of living.

But I cannot go past him without looking into his face, searching his eyes and my heart for the words that will become a bridge between us, arriving whole on the other side, as they were intended. I cannot float by without some greeting, some recognition to offer his empty, averted eyes, because I know that Shades' real name is David, and he was once my brother.