‘a story will come to steal your breath’ writes Kei Miller in the parting words of his third poetry collection, *A Light Song of Light*. He does not make false promises. It is no exaggeration to say that Miller has already left the scorch marks of an ascending star on the literary scenes of both the Anglophone Caribbean and Britain since his debut in 2006 with his first poetry collection, *Kingdom of Empty Bellies*. His short story collection, *Fear of Stones*, published just one year later, was shortlisted for the Commonwealth Writers’ Prize. In 2008, his second poetry collection, *There is an Anger That Moves*, was shortlisted for the Dylan Thomas Prize and his first novel *The Same Earth*, for the Scottish Book of the Year. His second novel, *The Last Warner Woman*, was published in 2010, the same year that this third poetry collection was shortlisted for the John Llewellyn Rhys Prize.

Miller, born in Jamaica in 1978, is unmistakably a Caribbean writer. His works are infused with knowledge and voice from a range of distinct and embedded cultural sources. At the centre of *A Light Song of Light*’s lyrical and reverse gravity is the figure of the Singerman, a man employed to sing songs as people worked the roads - a properly local poet. The collection also draws on the oral dexterity and experiential density of voices from the balmyard and the church, invoking the foreboding wit of the reluctant Justice of the Peace and gesturing to a regional literary dialogue with fellow Caribbean writers Thomas Glave, Lorna Goodison, Mervyn Morris and the late Martin Carter. As one might expect from a Jamaican poet, Miller makes light work of the rhythmic possibilities of words and the dynamic vernacular repertoire of Jamaican creole underpins the sometimes astonishing velocity and lift of these works. The edges between poetry and song are never marked and never indulged.

As the title gives away, this collection consciously orbits around the concepts of light and of song, laying down a number of possible definitions for both but also lifting these up to the light. This seemingly benign curiosity and a deceptive ease of crafted language can be seen in a number of poems that resemble dictionary definitions, appearing on the page without line breaks as an apparent tumbling of words and thoughts. ‘Some Definitions for Song’, for example, ruminates,

Think what we could purchase with songs, thrown across the counter and landing more softly than coins…Song was a low-cost airline operated by Delta. Tourists were flown by Song to Florida. Song’s last flight was on April 30, 2006. All that pleases the heart. All that pleases the ear. The final measure of joy. When we have lost song, we have lost everything. A common surname in Korea, often transliterated as Soong. What would it mean if your name was Song?

Yet these listings of possible and alternate meanings not only hum with linguistic revelry, they also remind us not to take the known for granted, not to let language speak us too easily, to deaden our senses or flatten our relation to things, to words, to each other.

*A Light Song of Light* shimmers with both philosophical intensity and the wonder of the ordinary. Reminding us in the opening poem that ‘it is not that the
song/ needs to write one hundred times on a chalkboard-/ I will be heavy,/ I will be heavy’, there is still a resolve in this collection to bring to light lives and issues that are usually kept in the dark. Indeed, Miller’s ability to represent the inevitable entanglements of personal and political acts of living without a stultifying seriousness is one of the most impressive qualities of his work across literary genres.

Although the collection is divided into two parts, a unifying motif is the raising of spirits. In the first section, ‘Day Time’, this motif is carried by the Singerman, a real figure from the Jamaican past whose job was to raise the spirits of the labourers, to set the rhythm by which to keep the work moving but also to make lighter the load of that physical labour. His imprint of song on the roads he built, suggests a synergy between voice and body and spirit that is as sure as the roads themselves: ‘Your journey, even when bumpy,/will be as sweet, the ascents lifting you/as in a chorus, the sharp corners/turning you like a force of melody.’ Appearing in eight poems, the Singerman releases the poetry of the everyday and the harmony to be found despite hardship. In the second section, ‘Night Time’, the Singerman takes up his nocturnal duty of funeral singing, raising spirits in a different sense, ‘If it takes all night, he will sing all night, until/ his melody is as sure as what he builds in the daytime./ The dead will step on roofs, on trees; they will float/ up to the stars.’ This part of the collection issues praise songs and elegies for the hushed, the forgotten and the dead. It is themed by the release of hidden histories and throws light on lives relegated to social darkness.

The sequence of four poems that tell ‘De True Story’ of Rolling Calf, Nathaniel Morgan, Coolie Duppy and deLaurence brushes against the grain of received perception by mythologizing the living and historicizing the supernatural. The evil spirit of rolling calf is not the fiery breath of a world beyond but the casual cruelty of ‘Two bwoy with nothing but de devil/ inside dem, a cricket bat in their hands.’ Unacknowledged violence is also the stone’s underside in ‘Coolie Duppy’ which tells of the menacing Indian-Caribbean female spirit whose night-time vengeance, a commonplace of children’s nightmares, is here revealed as an act of historical justice: ‘and all/ what she did fraid to give when living/ she don’t romp to give when dead.’ In compensation for all the beatings she endured during her lifetime, her spectral presence is both brawny and beatific, ‘Coolie Duppy now turn patron saint and guardian/to any woman who walk into doors or fall down/ steps once a week.’

More provocatively, Miller delivers the counter narrative of Nathaniel ‘Natty’ Morgan, Jamaica’s most wanted fugitive, believed to be responsible for nineteen murders and almost countless other crimes. Replaying the television testimony of his lover, ‘her face, press up gainst de news camera, her tears rolling in a space between lens and cheek’ the poem relates the woman’s version of Morgan whose legendary sexual magnetism would draw women across alligator swamps to claim the blessings of his body. Humanizing the media monster, her words tell how ‘De real, real story of Natty Morgan is de story of de best of men – that he lived longer than he should have, and he had been loved by a woman.’

In the context of Jamaica, the most controversial history that this collection tells is that of the love and loving between men. Most directly told in a sequence of six short poems, A Short History of Beds We’ve Slept in Together. The opening poem, ‘Jamaica, 2002-2007’, stands as both testimony and defiance to the criminalization of homosexuality. While ‘Every bed was made illegal by the brush/of chest against
chest, and by our sweat’ the poem utters the surplus of being that no law can contain, ‘Those small ways of being which had pronounced/over us a sentence, but a sentence so short/it wasn’t half of what we kept inside.’

If advocating for the silent and the powerless is what we have come to expect of a postcolonial poet, what is so remarkable and so persuasive about Miller’s poetry is how the rhetorics of his works defy the gravity and weight of historical contestation, lifting subjects up to capture the simple lustre of their being in a new light. ‘Unsung’ intones a tribute to his father’s life of patience and gentle devotion, a life of caring for his mother, ‘a song/for the man whose life has not been the stuff of ballads/but has lived each day in incredible and untrumpeted ways.’ Elsewhere too, there is this tenderness to his writings, a summoning of kindness and truth (song and light) and a poetic craft that charges the heavy matters of injustice, prejudice and despair with linguistic particles of flight: the man with the noose around his neck whose last song is ten billion bottles standing on the wall, and the neighbours who simply turn on their lights in response to shouts of help, ‘Praise a decision/so small—the flicking of a switch, that could give you back/your life’.

Yet, while Miller’s poetry offers close and cherished portraits of Jamaican places and lives, it reaches beyond the Singerman’s island view. By the end of the collection, our ideas of where to look to for heroes and villains, for crime and salvation, the downpressed and the blessed, have been gently but powerfully rearranged. In ‘Call this apocalyptic propaganda if you must,’ the foundations of pessimism and terror that characterise the emotional valency of our collective age are shaken out. Reversing the received logic that hope lies in the triumph of rationality (and by implication Western civilisation), the poem imagines ‘parallel universes/the one thousand lives we lived simultaneously/and which could only be glimpsed through magic/mirrors or déjà vu’ and celebrates ‘the fact that you/are now reading these lines, means you belong/to the only world that did not go bang.’ In this re-imagining of lived possibilities, the paralysis of planetary panic is broken to reveal a sense of marvel and consolation, an observant irreverence that rejoices in ‘how fucking cool is that!’

Though the terrain Miller maps traverses America, England, and arguably the world, his poetic vision still retains the sensibility of the Singerman. His poems impart an intimate knowledge that turns our sightings of the world inside out to reveal the enchantment of the everyday, moments of urban grace and the secular miracle of living in a world that often seeks to legislate against the counting of blessings and the celebration of the life we have. In this way, the collection delivers its own promise of the light song, summoning

the dreadful luminosity
of everything we had been told to close
our eyes to (because they had no sharp
edges, because they could not be wielded
against our enemies)
Indeed, what is most compelling and engaging about Miller’s collection is the reminder it issues for us not to forget to question the conditions of our possibility. By rendering the proximity of the mundane and the transcendent, the material and the spiritual, the known and unknown, his works refuse apathy, complacency, or acceptance. They remind us that while laws and prohibitions still seek to shape our impossibilities, it is the absence of joy, of gratitude and of imagination that most diminishes our experience of living. Most impressively, his ‘light song of light swells up in dark/ times’ to show us how songs and light make things more possible and more things possible. His is a voice raised and made most radiant at the wonder and the delight that poetry itself enables.

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