



The T S Eliot Prize 2009

Reading Groups: *Continental Shelf*

Fred D'Aguiar was born in London in 1960 to Guyanese parents and grew up in Guyana, returning to England when he was a teenager. His previous collections include *Airy Hall* (1989, winner of the Guyana Poetry Prize) and *Bill of Rights* (1998, shortlisted for the T S Eliot Prize). He is also the author of four novels, the first of which, *The Longest Memory* (1994), won both the David Higham Prize for Fiction and the Whitbread First Novel Award. He teaches at Virginia Tech University and a sequence of poems in *Continental Shelf* (Carcanet) was written after the shootings there. This collection was the Poetry Book Society Summer Choice.



Matriarch

In the dry season
she sprinkles water
in the yard to keep the dust
down, dust that otherwise
flies through slatted windows.
Cool takes shape as shadows
locked in a house on stilts.
Underneath a dog pants in sleep
paws flicked in a chase.
Her headache soothes, forehead
wrapped in Limocol-soaked linen.
Children tiptoe around the house,
speak in water trickles.
Laughter explodes behind
sealed lips and eyes
whitened wide. If there is
mercy here it is accidental
and lives in the flea's
escape from two thumbnails
squashed together shooting
said flea between floorboards.
By late afternoon the yard
dries and spins a crop
of whirlwinds house high.

Elegies *

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Not twenty but thirty-two innocents killed, just think,
Thirty-two mown down in classrooms by weapons
You can buy legally before you can legally drink.

Flags at half-mast, funeral music on hit parade stations,
Everyone in black or Tech colours, ribbons on lampposts
In town, restaurant menus offer special condolences,

Students mill around, hug each other, some look lost,
Others search for the missing and ignore journalists' lenses
Thrust at them as the names of the dead begin

To trickle in, some learn about dead friends in Facebook
And MySpace and commemorate them by Instant Messaging:
Cyber prayers in virtual cathedrals by this most wired lot;

While the dead lie in mortuaries, their names and faces shine
Through optic fibres and satellite feeds for all time.

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I meet one of my students face to face. Her red eyes, drained
Dry, make four with mine. She asks if I heard about Erin.
What about her? I know what she will say but before I complain,

No, more a moan than a protest, she says, Erin's gone, Sir.
I see her desk three desks back in that first row where she dived
For cover, like the rest of the class she always sat in one spot

Every time, so much so that I said one morning I'd arrive
Early and rearrange the desks and confuse them to bits.
What will we do come Tuesday when we meet as usual

But Erin's desk will be empty? I see her loping way
Of crossing a room. An athlete, she moves off the basketball
Court with so much economy for her strong body, as if space

In which she did not compete, hardly merited movement,
Like a coiled spring, off duty, or a loved government.

* The 'Elegies' within the collection are for the thirty three people who died as a result of a school shooting at Virginia Tech State University on 16 April 2007. Fred D'Aguiar is currently Professor of English and Gloria D. Smith Professor of Africana Studies at Virginia Tech State University.

Leaving

I left Mum, at the big house
Deep in country, for the capital.
The taxi kicked dust as I looked
Out the back windscreen into cloud,
My mother adrift and zeroing
Away from me. Copper strips
Buried in the taxi rear window,
Divided her into narrow segments

And allowed me to see her in parts,
One at a time, and feel her in portions,
Her entirety kindly apportioned
To fit my fifty-pound, sixth-year body.

For her head, long neck and round
Shoulders I cried without sound.
For her arms waving, I bawled.
For her torso and breasts I imagined
As mine for months after my birth,
I shouted her name, Mum, Mum.
For her waist that gyrated to calypso
As she carried me in her belly and
In her arms when the transistor played
Her favourite tune on the hit parade,
I begged her to keep me with her,
Between coughing fits and sleeving
My eyes so that I could make her out
Among cloud. And for her long legs
As she turned off the road to amble
Over log bridge, back to the house,
My head in my arms and my feet
Stamping the yielding rubber mat.

That was how I stored it for years.
In fact, she left me, not me her.
Mum twisted around in the cab.
I saw her head, neck and shoulders
Divided by those heat strips before
The car manufactured cloud with me
Occluded in it and beyond her reach.
I dashed after the hire, and my aunt
Swept me up and carried me kicking
And screaming across that log bridge
Back indoors, where I cried myself
Hoarse calling my mother and missed
Two meals and would have ignored a third
Were it not for black tea in an enamel cup
My aunt made for me, as I looked on,
Spoonng (until she drew a smile from me)
As many sugars as my years, and chopping,
A veritable doorstep of a chunk of bread,
Fresh from the clay oven, and buttered so,
That the homespun clump of gold ran
Right off the slice and had to be caught
By my tongue stuck out without thinking.

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