Foreword: the roaring

You can’t get away from it: the roaring, I mean. On our celebrity-haunted Grenadines (Mustique, Bequia, Canouan …) it will subside to the merest susurration of sea breezes, of parrot fish nibbling at coral, of fine grains of coral-white sand in the tilt of wavelets. But come nightfall it will be back with the squeaking of bats, the keening of mosquitoes, and the surround-sound shrilling of cricket and cicada. And under these, but also in these, in a concatenated mesh as fine as your mosquito netting, after the last small plane has landed and the last ferry docked, you will hear the roaring, the very breathing of our mainland.

Our small island is a volcanic beast, roaring from its lair 4,000 feet above the (mainly mineral-black or -grey) beaches of the Atlantic on our windward side and the Caribbean Sea to leeward. A hundred miles down is the inferno. Tectonic plates meet in a classic pressure arc. Think of the crease that results when you press your thumb down on the surface of a ping-pong ball, then trace the arc of the Antilles. The Atlantic plate, new-minted along the mid-ocean ridge and pushing westwards at the rate of a few centimetres a year, meets the Caribbean plate along that arc, and tucks under it, deflecting down towards the mantle. Our inferno is one of the hotspots where this process creates a magma spiral and an active volcano visible as an island for about a million years.

The seawater sucked down in the subduction has been shown to issue from the mouth of the beast in gouts of steam; it is an element in our aquifers, another note in the constant under-song of the countless folded ravines we call ‘gutters’. We are suffused with energies we cannot dispel, with an almost intolerable richness in our new-made soil. Two-hundred-and-fifty years ago we grew the tobacco that, exported to Macuba in Martinique by our ‘Black Caribs’ (Garinagu, or Garifuna, as they still prefer to be known), ended up in the ‘maccaboy’ stuffed into the most prestigious snuffboxes that circulated in Jonathan’s Coffeehouse in Change Alley, the avatar of the London Stock Exchange.
Along with the first lists of stock and commodity prices, coffeehouse patrons took in the grand plan of Newton’s universe through artfully constructed ‘orreries’, displayed newly invented technologies, hatched colonising companies and new wars of domination, and wrote verse and prose that celebrated or satirised all these trappings of capitalism’s emergence. These days, Amsterdam’s coffeehouses are a good place to reflect on how it all began and how it is ending … and if you choose to enhance the reverie with the most expensive marijuana you can buy, chances are you will end up smoking a substance grown in exactly the same soil (DeVolet, on our forested north-western coast) that afforded Europe its first heady sniff of the future all those years ago.

Perhaps we are fated to supply no more than the intoxicating plume of consciousness that is exhaled by and lingers over the tumultuous creations of modernity. Perhaps this role will continue to occlude the reality that we have been deeply implicated, from the first eruptions and since, in the making of this brave new world (first named for places like us) of which we continue to be an inescapable part, even as we are remodelled into a white-sand (tankered in) holiday destination (though once we served as a laboratory for the financial calculations and industrial organisation of labour that shaped world production in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries). Meanwhile, we continue to remodel ourselves and each other.

Nicotiana tabacum and Cannabis sativa were brought or wandered here. Bligh finally planted his breadfruit in our once celebrated but now sadly petrified Botanical Gardens, among the first in our hemisphere. Breadfruit (Artocarpus altitis), in all its cultivars, and its near relative the jackfruit (Artocarpus heterophyllus), are famous for their genetic diversity, based on extremely rapid, prolific and repeated hybridisation. After two centuries as runaways in our mountains, under closer study our breadfruit may reveal some interesting mutations. Certainly, scientists have come here to study indigenous plants, birds and bats that are of interest precisely because they are still evolving. Everything that grows or breathes on our island (and even the restless boulders that tumble and clash in our torrential rivers) is continuously pushing
up against, winding round, entangling and interfering with, burrowing under, or flowing over everything else. Our ‘built environment’ is so much a party to this relentless, continuous energy exchange – affording, adapting, merging, diverging – that it is almost impossible to tell our ruins from our unfinished projects.

That is why we roar. Even when our volcano is stilled (it last erupted on Good Friday 1979, to mark a controversial independence); even when the hurricanes give us a miss (we were overdue when Tomas found us out); even when the latest rainsquall has left the mountains – visible and audible from afar, deafening on a tin roof, then dissolving into thin air before reaching the coast – the roaring continues, taken up by toad, beetle and bat, by bird and beast, and amplified exponentially by our human habitudes. If our June carnival is the annual climax, it has been building throughout the year, with minor crescendos at Christmas and Easter, and a daily hubbub that starts with the mobile fish hawker’s insistent conch trumpet and ends with the ice-cream van’s relentless circling of the Mulberry Bush in search of a Muffin Man last seen when London Bridge was Falling Down.

Nightfall brings no relief. We have more dogs than people. We have cockerels that sense the new day just after midnight and donkeys that people the island with lewd and lusty nightmares. But when the fireflies are out something extraordinary may happen. The Cuban writer Antonio Benítez-Rojo invokes a certain Caribbean way of walking, in which:

a person might feel that he wants to walk not with his feet alone, and to this end he imbues the muscles of his neck, back, abdomen, arms, in short all his muscles, with their own rhythm, different from the rhythm of footsteps, which no longer dominate … What has happened is that the centre of the rhythmic ensemble framed by the footsteps has been displaced and now it runs from muscle to muscle, stopping here and there and illuminating in intermittent succession, like a firefly, each rhythmic focus of the body. (Benítez-Rojo, 1996: 19)

Sometimes – you have to listen for it, but once heard it is as inescapable as a dream you long to dream again – our polyrhythm prospers and
the noises we are so full of segue into sounds and sweet airs that give delight and hurt not, even if a thousand twangling instruments hum about our ears.

Every weekday morning we take our roaring to the round island road: a lasso woven from tar, concrete and *terra firma* that snakes along our leeward and windward coastlines from the noose-knot of Kingstown, our capital. We are in bondage to this road, ever more reliant on the capital for jobs and imported goods, including the staple foods we used to grow. The road is narrow as a ligature, and our lives chafe at its edges. It twists and ascends sharply, turns and descends; its coils tighten interminably. The body of our island is asymmetrically ribbed, with multiform ridges that diverge from a central, rainforested spine that tends southeast–northwest, separating our windward and leeward coasts. Three towering 'volcanic centres' – two ancient and dormant, the third the present roarer – define the discontinuous series of mountains that make up this backbone, at once a landscape and the island’s autobiography, its physical signature. A journey along the high ridges, from the south-east to the present site of the volcano on Mount Soufriere in the north-west, would recapitulate the main events of the island’s geological and ecostructural making, the way of the volcano. At our north-western corner the road falters and is incomplete; the spinning lasso is out of its range and loses form; passing overhead, a light plane may report disturbances; in this sector our soils are richest and our future indeterminable.

It is this body – with the ways it once taught us to move around its ‘odd angles’ and ‘every fertile inch’, learning infinite ‘subtleties of the isle that will not let us believe things certain’ – that the road now holds captive. Along the shackled flanks of ridges we now build our homes tight to the roadside and hold them precariously in place with high concrete-block retaining walls and steep cemented access points. The road has no pavements; typically it is edged by a deep concrete drain abutting the high ground to which the houses cling, and a precipitous drop on the other side of a crumbling margin of waste ground. Along these margins pedestrians – including tiny school children, the old and frail, and those who bellow and threaten to hurl themselves at passing
cars – move at considerable risk to their lives. There be monsters, including concrete mixers. For some reason these vehicles are driven at high speed. To encounter three of them racing to a new construction site in convoy is a definitively stomach-churning experience. Lazier, but genuinely juggernautical on such a road as ours, are the increasingly common container lorries. Equipped with hooters as deafening as foghorns, they bellow mournfully within our maze of blind corners, forcing other vehicles to halt as they shudder past. Frequently enough, the combination of a hairpin bend and a forty-five-degree gradient is too much for them, despite the audacious skill of their drivers. Capsizing, they wait several days to be rescued, as helpless as upturned beetles. Overburdened by these behemoths and an exponential rise in the number of private vehicles (often imported second-hand from Japan), and undermined by torrential rain for nine months of the year, our road is constantly shedding its wrinkled and peeling skin, and coming out in a fresh rash of potholes.

Our lives are lived under the spell of this road, a smear of belched-up tar from the innards of a restless earth. All the enforced journeys of our lives are made on its scabby dragon's back, and most of our enchanted wanderings too. But it is also our stage, and across it we roar under its roaring, and seek out the faces we know, and shout the names of friend and foe. Valley still calls to valley, though now all the valleys are plaited into the same rope. Recently I made a journey along it with an old man whose early life – he had been a woodcutter – had been lived peripatetically on the ridge lines that conjoin valley and valley, windward and leeward. As we counted the number of hairpin bends in the road – more than fifty in the course of our half-hour journey – he remarked that there had once been many more. The older road snared every descending ridge, snaking in and out to reveal small settlements that the road now bypasses. All these folds within folds he had known as intimately as the wrinkles on his mother's face. He had known what it is to leave one place as a venturer beyond the familiar – therefore a potential outcast and ne'er-do-well – and to enter another as a sinister stranger who might simultaneously be a bearer of the new and the useful.
A special place in his memory of how we were – perhaps its fount – is held by an event that links this ridge-walking style of communication with another just as old. He tells of felling gommier trees (*Dacryodes hexandra*), the giant gumtrees that signpost the way of the volcano through the rainforest. For this task the woodcutters would assemble a small army of mountain-goers – men and women, young and old – and lead them up from the villages below. This rite of passage – a once-in-a-lifetime event for many of the participants – is a reminder that, although the ridge-walkers were outcasts/strangers in the eyes of their more sedentary kin and neighbours, they nevertheless held to a way of life that was bred in the bone. When we ‘shout’ each other in public places – in joyous recognition, in open challenge, in feigned remonstrance or even in abusive imprecation – we are using a communicative form that was bred in the mountains, in a zone of freedom, discovery, danger and suspicion – and within a form of fellowship in which all these states of mind were woven together. The journey to the height and the heart of the island, where the gommier trees grow, was a celebration of that fellowship.

The felling of a gommier tree was followed by an arduous portage down through the forest to the coast that took several days. While the work would consume all the energy of the assembled villagers, the ardour of the enterprise was replenished at the end of each stage by feasting, singing and storytelling around their campfires, intermittently visible from below, deep into the night. In this way the rhythmic ensemble of focused bodies would be transferred to the gommier, teaching the giant tree to walk. For its part, the gommier would light the fires that marked the stages of its progress towards the sea. When mountain-goers come upon a gommier tree in the forest they scarify its bark, allowing its resin to ooze out, forming bulbous weals. These are plucked from the tree by the next traveller and compacted into balls (‘gummy’), which form a portable source of fire. Making a campfire on the wet forest floor is a delicate matter. Gummy not only makes the fire thrive but also releases an aroma that wafts as randomly as a priest shakes his censer.
Gommiers began crossing seas almost as soon as they learned to walk down the mountain from the high forests. From the sixteenth century, canoes or pirogues (both words are of Carib origin) transported African slaves captured from Spanish colonies deep in the Gulf of Mexico back to our ‘capital of the Carib republic’. Captured or liberated? In the Island Carib language the word for ‘slave’ also meant ‘son-in-law’. And the ethno-genesis of the Garifuna began with these early additions to our population (more African people landed from wrecked slave ships, and there was a steady influx of ‘runaway negroes’ from nearby Barbados in the century between the first sugar plantations there and the colonisation of St Vincent by the British in 1763). Before and after colonisation, despite an embargo enforced by British warships, Garifuna pirogues took their tobacco and other contraband products to Macuba and other destinations. In later colonial times these craft continued to be our main communicative device before the road was built. Within living memory the leeward side of our island was connected to Kingstown by a fleet of thirty-foot, multi-oared giant canoes (‘canoe-boats’ as they had come to be called) that operated a regular service ferrying passengers, produce and animals to the capital. Each major settlement had its own champion and there was great rivalry between the crews. The gommiers that walked down the mountain would be hollowed out and fashioned with axe, adze and fires that fed on their own resinous hearts.

But before the road, or any roads, the gommier boats linked the various nodes of life on the island on its windward and leeward shores. As simultaneously and expeditiously, they linked St Vincent not only to its Grenadines, but also to the other archipelagos of which it formed a part – to the arc of the eastern Antilles and beyond. Crossing ridges or seas we are in the thrall of a dynamic that moves us from deeply insular habitations – whether bounded by mountains or shorelines – to the multiple thresholds of other valleys or islands. In the ‘first time’ of the Garifuna these encompassed the entire Caribbean region, and they have since been extended by emigration to niches within New York, Greater London and beyond. Interestingly, the Garifuna Diaspora has
both foretold and shadowed the late- and postcolonial movement of what has become the Vincentian nation.

Deported from the island after two wars of conquest (the second of which at the end of the eighteenth century intersected with the French-Haitian revolutionary ferment, which provided the Garifuna with important allies and comrades-in-arms), they were first dumped on Balliceaux, a ‘bare, hard rock’ in the vicinity of the mainland where 5,000 people over nine months experienced what would now be termed a genocidal episode. Half the number survived what may have been a typhus epidemic (drinking water was in short supply) and were then moved to the island of Roatan off the coast of Honduras. Generation by generation, the Garifuna have reconstituted and remembered themselves as a people in Honduras, Belize, Guatemala and Nicaragua. Like Vincentians, they have a diasporic presence beyond these countries that exceeds numerically their ‘home’ populations. Their cultural renaissance – most popularly expressed in Punta Rock, a musical genre derived from performances first enjoyed on St Vincent two or three centuries ago – made them known to other diasporic groups comparatively recently, a process hastened by internet sites and blogs. Estimates of present Garifuna and Vincentian world populations both hover around the quarter-of-a-million mark. In places like Brooklyn and the Bronx, Doppelgänger Vincentian and Garifuna elements may have rubbed shoulders unknowingly, the latter preserving a language, music and culture expressive of a precolonial island where the former first became aware of themselves in colonial or postcolonial times. Most Vincentians in the diaspora dream of returning, and many do. Return to the native place is also a feature of the dugu, a Garifuna funerary rite that brings together community members from the diaspora, extended families and ancestor spirits (the gubida). Balliceaux has in recent times become the object of an annual Garifuna pilgrimage, and attempts by St Vincent’s current administration to set up exclusive tourist development on the islet have been opposed on the grounds of its importance as a national heritage site and a nesting ground for seabirds. In the traditional enactment of the rite, the pirogues are out all night, returning at
dawn with the gubida to a shoreline decked out in palm fronds where the buyia (shaman) and the populace are waiting. It is many years since a sea-leaning gommier was felled on our mountains, but I know at least one old woodcutter who has kept his two-handed saw in working order, the blade encased in its bamboo scabbard for easy travel to the high ridges where the gubida grew their maccaboy tobacco.

These days nearly all mountain haun ters who reach as far as the ridge lines and rainforest regions are growing ganja, a plant domesticated on St Vincent as recently as the 1970s. But the threshold between small mountain farmers and ganja crews is subtle and indistinct, whether we conceive it topographically or socially. The highest provision grounds reach deep into the secondary forest that fringes the rainforest zone. And ganja growers are nearly all from farming families. Many have switched by degrees from food crops, weighing the dangers and rewards through a calculus whose variables include global and local markets, age, family responsibilities, and employment opportunities. The Rastafarianism that many espouse is only the latest in a series of diverse, often syncretic religious and cultural expressions that are evolving along with so much else on an island where ‘demonic cults’ (‘Shakers’ in the late nineteenth century) may turn into staid patriarchal religions within a generation (the Shakers are now the Spiritual Baptist Church; already a similar trend within Rastafarianism can be observed).

Ganja growers are no different from most Vincentians in relying on a survival strategy that is as asymmetric and multiform as the island itself. The same individual may be a government employee, pursue a trade, run an agency for imported items, have a vehicle or machinery for hire – and, all the while, be a registered farmer whose main sideline is ganja. In short, we are roarers because we are hustlers. And the default métier of the Vincentian hustler is undoubtedly the passenger van, usually a refurbished import of Japanese manufacture, often fitted, upholstered and spray-painted on the island, and capable of carrying eighteen passengers (with ingenious flip-down seating in the companion-way for the last to board). Their sound systems churn out music suited to the route – reggae classics.
on the deep leeward run, dancehall music for the run from the capital to the tourist enclaves of the near windward coast. Although the vans and their drivers are demonised by the self-driving middle class – as noisy, inconsiderate, a law unto themselves, conduits for drugs and lower-depth chicanery in all forms – the vans can and do claim (there is an active van owners’ association) to be a self-seeded, self-organising public transport system. It is one of the few public services on our island that really does work – fares are low, journeys are rapid, waiting times are brief and passenger security on the whole is excellent.

The life of a van – like many of the themes sketched in what I have written here – is a topic in itself. Suffice it to say that visitors who wish to claim, returning home, that they know what we are like, would be well advised to see the island from, and most certainly from within, these ubiquitous microcosms that hurtle through our collective life. It is something of an honour to be offered a seat (with seatbelt!) up front with the driver; his ‘sweetie’ usually occupies the place between you and him. Once you have adjusted to the uncompromising speed of his driving, you will have a grand view of our roadside and further vistas, sea and mountain, and mountain beyond mountain. You will also begin to appreciate the considerable skill with which he drives, and his extensive and lightning-fast rapport with other (oncoming) van drivers, particularly over the protocols and intuitions governing pothole negotiation on bends and narrow stretches. A local story tells of a rare falling-out between drivers, one of whom was a well-known road warrior, a big-belly, bellicose man with a fierce and disconcerting squint. Forced to brake hard, he leaned out of his window to reprimand a driver who had failed to read his intentions: ‘Why you cyan’ look where you goin’?’. But his adversary won the bout hands down (on his horn as he retreated) with: ‘Why you cyan’ go where you lookin’!"

Once you have your bearings, the place to be is in the innards of the van. The views may be more fleeting, but you are better placed to savour a passage through the roaring bloodstream of our daily life, often quite as theatrical a place as, say, James I’s Whitehall Palace on Hallowmas
night (1 November) 1611, when Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* was first acted by the King’s Men. With a full complement of passengers, body cleaving to body through those fifty hairpin bends, the throb of the music answering the pulse of the engine, people are literally thrown together, and a strong sense emerges of the ‘ahl we’ Vincentians claim to be. The Ariel of this island within an island is undoubtedly the conductor, and he does his spriting gently enough. Very occasionally a woman takes the part, but usually he is a young man, elegantly shirted and coiffed. If never quite invisible, he is an agile shape-changer. Appearing from nowhere as you approach the central bus station in town, he will take charge of your parcels and escort you to the van. Effectively you are his prisoner, but his spell is effective, too, and you follow willingly enough where he leads. As, stop by stop, the van fills, he adjusts his lithe body to the available interior space, until finally he seems to hover over his charges, simultaneously sliding the door closed without damaging his wings. With several of the passengers he appears to be on intimate terms, though the prettier girls may pout their denials, suck their teeth and refuse to meet his gaze. He stows sacks of provisions and buckets of fish miraculously here and there, and then hands them out to waiting vendors at places where the driver pulls in without ever quite stopping.

At a certain time of day, when the crèches close, he becomes the pied piper of a troop of toddlers, leading them from roadside establishment to the waiting van and bestowing them expertly in such passenger niches as remain – they usually end up in the row immediately behind the driver and adjacent to his own seat (or hovering zone) at the door – or else releasing them into the arms of passengers known to the children. At stops along the way each of his charges is swiftly and safely delivered to a family member who is waiting to receive the child.

In addition to their value as a public service – and in such matters as the intimate and safe transfer of small children between crèche and home, or the therapeutic reassessment of identity in an impromptu, pell-mell dialogue, they endow ‘public’ with a higher order of meaning than such services can claim to offer in more ‘developed’ countries – vans represent a significant entry point into the ‘lived’ (and thus
'real') economy of the one-third of national income estimated to derive from the production and sale of marijuana. Frequently enough, the owner-driver of a van has purchased his vehicle and established his business with 'investment capital' accumulated via his ganja cultivation. His conductor and co-drivers may also be crew members in his ganja ‘farm’.

In this and other ways the mountains and the ridge systems descending from them are sutured to the road along which homes are precipitously stacked, and by which lives are bound under steadily increasing pressure. Hurricanes hit us or miss us and take their roaring elsewhere. Behind us or before us, under us or above us, all around us and most of all within us, the volcano persists. At full moon, as in our old-time ring dances, we gaze at the unattainable object of desire, at a remnant of the earth's formative crust that still regulates our seas, our bodies, our growing seasons and our dreams. And continue to make ourselves out of 'such stuff as dreams are made on', our Ur rock endlessly cycled and transformed by constant, eruptive shudders of energy expelled by 'the inexorable vice of tectonic plates'. We roar.
Punctuation Marks

Where sea and land meet, begin there.
The ampersand, the join, is a fault
that caused jagged peaks to rise
from the ocean’s floor
spanning a vacant gulf.
On any map of the world they are footnotes
reminders of nature’s force.

Long ago, nomads, fragile as their pottery
skimming waves, trekking from south to north
stopped once too often for wood and water
and perished.
From the pre-ceramic Cibony
to the ceramics of Saladoid and Suazoid
we know them by their shards.
Common island Caribs
sunk in a murderous tide
that flowed from East to West
bearing assassins and poets
discoverers of the new world.

Come nearer, focus on one dot of an island.
I was born there, on the rim of a volcano
on the edge of a large full stop
where the sand is black
where the hills are a gun-barrel blue
where the sea perpetually dashes at the shoreline
trying to reclaim it all.

Philip Nanton (first published as ‘I’ (Nanton, 1992))