

South

Matthew Williams • English Literature • March 18, 2026

South

But today I recapture the islands'
bright beaches: blue mist from the ocean
rolling into the fishermen's houses.

Analysis: The word "recapture" carries a deeper colonial resonance that the poem rewards. The Caribbean was "captured" by European colonisers, so "re-capture" implies the speaker is actively taking back what was stolen from him, not merely remembering it. The imagery is vivid and idealized, presenting the island as something emotionally and historically owned.

By these shores I was born: sound of the sea
came in at my window, life heaved and breathed in me then
with the strength of that turbulent soil.

Analysis: The personification "life heaved and breathed in me" presents the island as something that actively shaped and animated the speaker's identity. The assonance of "heaved and breathed", with its two long open vowel sounds, mimics a deep, slow exhale, as though the island itself breathes alongside him. "Turbulent soil" suggests both vitality and historical struggle: the land is alive with energy, but also scarred by the violence of its colonial past.

[stanza]

Since then I have travelled: moved far from the beaches:
sojourned in stoniest cities, walking the lands of the north
in sharp slanting sleet and the hail,

Analysis: "Sojourned" is precisely chosen: it means to stay somewhere temporarily, as a guest rather than a permanent resident. The speaker was never truly at home in the north; he was always passing through. "Stoniest cities" works on two levels: the people are cold and rigid like stone, incapable of warmth; and the cities themselves offer none of the natural beauty of the Caribbean, only stone, concrete, and sky. The contrast between "bright beaches" and harsh northern weather establishes displacement and alienation.

crossed countless saltless savannas and come
to this house in the forest where the shadows oppress me
and the only water is rain and the tepid taste of the river.

Analysis: "Saltless savannas" works on two levels. Most immediately, the savannas have no ocean nearby: no salt air, no sea. But in the Caribbean, salt and flavour are inseparable from identity and culture; to be "saltless" is also to be tasteless and bland, stripped of vitality. The personification "shadows oppress me" extends beyond the physical to the social: the "shadows" are not just shade but people, those who discriminate against and suppress him. The only water available is rain and the "tepid taste of the river", lukewarm and flavourless, nothing like the ocean that formed him.

[stanza]

We who are born of the ocean can never seek solace
in rivers: their flowing runs on like our longing,

Analysis: "We who are born of the ocean can never seek solace in rivers" is one of the poem's most defiant lines, a direct warning to other Caribbean islanders not to make the same mistake. The ocean is the source of identity for island people; a river, however long it runs, is a poor substitute. The simile "runs on like our longing" equates the endless movement of the river with the speaker's persistent homesickness, suggesting that longing is continuous and inescapable.

reproves us our lack of endeavour and purpose,
proves that our striving will founder on that.

Analysis: The river is given moral authority, suggesting judgment. It reflects internal doubt and a sense of inadequacy imposed by displacement.

We resent them this wisdom, this freedom: passing us
toiling, waiting and watching their cunning declension down to the sea.

Analysis: The river moves freely and inevitably toward the ocean, and "cunning declension" carries a sharp colonial irony. Northern people are free to travel south to the Caribbean whenever they choose; Caribbean islanders, by contrast, face enormous barriers to travelling north. The river's "cunning" is the freedom of movement that colonising nations take for granted while the colonised remain in place. Its "declension", the grammatical term for a word changing form, also suggests the river's subtle, shapeshifting power.

[stanza]

But today I would join you, travelling river,

Analysis: This marks a turning point where the speaker shifts from rejection to acceptance, indicating movement toward reconciliation.

borne down the years of your patientest flowing,
past pains that would wreck us, sorrows arrest us,

Analysis: The river becomes a symbol of endurance, carrying history and suffering forward without stopping.

hatred that washes us up on the flats;
and moving on through the plains that receive us,
processioned in tumult, come to the sea.

Analysis: "Processioned in tumult" is an oxymoron: a procession is ordered, ceremonial, and dignified; tumult is chaos and uproar. The phrase captures the contradictory attitudes of those who have lived through colonial history: some march through it with pride, others with shame, others with denial. The speaker joins this movement not as a conqueror but as someone claiming his rightful place in the procession.

[stanza]

Bright waves splash up from the rocks to refresh us,
blue sea-shells shift in their wake

Analysis: The return to the sea signals renewal. The ocean becomes a space of restoration and belonging.

and there is the thatch of the fishermen's houses, the path
made of pebbles, and look!

Analysis: The exclamation "and look!" conveys excitement and emotional intensity, showing the speaker's deep attachment to these familiar details.

Small urchins combing the beaches
look up from their traps to salute us:
they remember us just as we left them.

Analysis: Memory is mutual. The speaker feels recognized and accepted, reinforcing belonging and continuity.

[stanza]

The fisherman, hawking the surf on this side
of the reef, stands up in his boat
and halloos us: a starfish lies in its pool.

Analysis: The scene is communal and welcoming, contrasting sharply with the earlier isolation of the north.

And gulls, white sails slanted seaward,
fly into the limitless morning before us.

Analysis: The metaphor "limitless morning" represents renewal and possibility, suggesting a hopeful future rooted in reconnection with the homeland.

About the poem

Author: Kamau Brathwaite (1930–2020)

Context: Brathwaite was a Barbadian poet and one of the Caribbean's most significant literary voices. His work engages deeply with the African and colonial history of the Caribbean, exploring what it means to be Black and Caribbean in a world still shaped by empire.

Core idea: Identity is deeply tied to place. Displacement creates longing and fragmentation, while return or reconnection restores a sense of self.

• Main themes

- Nature
- Oppression
- Regret
- Migration
- Love/Admiration
- Nostalgia

- Patriotism
- Rural vs. Urban Life
- **Mood:** Reflective and nostalgic, shifting to warmth and renewal
- **Tone:** Reflective, conflicted, then increasingly hopeful and celebratory

Remember

- Ocean represents identity, origin, and belonging; river represents displacement, judgment, and borrowed existence
- “Re-capture” carries colonial resonance: the speaker is reclaiming what was taken from him, not merely remembering it
- “Sojourner” = stayed as a guest, never as a resident; the north was never truly home
- “Saltless” = not just no ocean, but also tasteless, bland; Caribbean flavour and identity are inseparable
- “Shadows oppress me” = people who discriminate, not just shade on the ground
- “Cunning declension” = colonial irony: Northern people move freely south; Islanders cannot move north as freely
- “Processioned in tumult” is an **oxymoron**: ordered procession + chaos = contradictory responses to colonial history
- **Assonance** in “heaved and breathed” mimics the sound of deep exhaling; the island breathes life into him
- “But today” signals key turning points in perspective
- Ending restores harmony through return to the sea