

# P O E T R Y

---

LAURENCE LIEBERMAN

---

THE ILLIMITABLE LINE:  
LESSONS OF THE WAX PEN

1.

Late afternoon. Pale sun's  
disc won't retreat below the horizon  
for a full hour. But a cloak of shadow from lofty  
frond-thick gardens that encroach over Compound D, where most paintings  
are installed, already darkens the ground floor  
alcove and corridors, making us have to grope for both dim-lit lamps  
and squint at works distant  
from either light source. Ishi, so amazed to come upon  
early oils he'd forgotten he sold  
(some 8 or 9 years back)  
to hotelier Bonnie, many titles  
and dates elude him... Forget about prices! We peer,  
together, at a favorite of the innkeeper's: *The Craftsman*, she named  
it to me that morning. *No. Wrong title*, he says,  
trying to look behind the frame for data, but it's frozen, wall-stuck.  
No budging it. He puts  
his eye up close, too close to see much, and then sniffs  
both portrait and frame,  
  
suspiciously. He runs  
his finger up and down, gently sampling  
the oil textures. And now he starts to fret aloud,  
mumbling to himself, mostly. He recalls that in the early nineties he  
always treated his fresh clean canvas and sheets  
of pasteboard with cornstarch to protect and preserve the spotless medium  
before he dared to paint  
a stroke—safeguard for the future. But this piece from circa  
'92, alas, is *the worse for wear*.  
Cracks appear, nearest  
the mountings in the frame. No slits  
show through to the backing yet, so maybe the canvas  
can still be saved. But his hopes are dashed. He descries that some *fool*  
*meddler has been trying to seal the brittle*  
*nicks and dents with cheap varnish. It's the moisture, the bad sea air*  
*that attacks the mouldering*  
*surface and warps the wood frames, as well. Bah! No help*  
*for it...* I'm shocked



to learn that he'd never before  
set foot in this makeshift museum, where  
so many of his best works have been stored on display  
over the years. I offer balm to cheer him, praising the lovely true-to-  
life hip-twist and leg-stretch of crouching figure  
plying his tools, hammer and chisel, as he shapes those cedar frames  
of table and chair set  
he assembles. The artist's lavish detail work, his care  
in evoking the wood master's precision:  
such beauty of focus,  
reveals the quiet relish Ishi himself  
must take in his model's joy in privacy of craft,  
his only company the budding flowers and shrubbery of lush gardens  
that engulf his torso stooped on a narrow  
deck. His long rasta dreadlocks, henna-tinted black, spiralling down,  
nearly grazing the pile  
of wood shavings at his feet, bespeak a protean  
raw impulsiveness

in the fellow affirmed  
by his posture. Looseness of joints, twirl  
of his neck and shoulder, are close kin to the unruly  
shoots and blooms of frangipani, pods of flamboyants: royal poincianas,  
and that diversity of wildflowers looming near  
his roost... But Ishi ducks my ardor, either from shyness or modesty  
(begs to differ: *Tradesman*,  
alas, is one of his *lesser oils* of that period), then  
finds himself drawn back to the pristine  
pulse beat he felt  
as he, hauntedly, laid out this drawing  
prior to brushing in the color oils. Now he recalls  
how he was touched by the nobility of the worker as he observed him,  
unawares, in his forested nook: a model  
oblivious to Ishi's theft of his poised trance at carpentry. *I stayed  
hidden from his eyes'  
range, hanging back. He was humble and small. A man happy  
to work in secret.*



*At his own domain...* So near  
 to an apology for his tiresome current  
*bog-down in the useless arts*, my helpmate—I infer—  
 was once a hired hand at house-painting and other domestic skills.  
 This persona's a stand-in for himself, a guise  
 he winnowed away from, but still hankers back to for its rank-and-file  
 blue collar dailiness.

Our embowered artisan evokes the classic showpiece, *Hills*

*And Valleys*, that shook me and snatched

my breath away when I

first met the portrait at the main foyer

of Casuarina's front lobby—curator's choice painting,

one in hundreds, to fetch the eyes of all newcomers at her entryway.

That ample red-bonneted woman in riotous

embrace of lush vegetation, chaste figure of fertility, her watering

pail in one hand, long

trimming shears in the other... This, he'd have me know,

was his *nonpareil*

genre of the early nineties.

His gifts show to best advantage in such

modes, for he'd completed a whole three-year sequence

of these idylls: that seated or standing black woman, ensconced snugly

in her rife-blooming garden. *The lady*, he slyly

quips, *is perhaps too ample for your tastes...* His idea of female beauty,

akin to African sculpture,

leans to fullness of figure. Rotund hips & thighs.

Plump bosoms. Ladies of *some girth*.

They're Ishi's answer

to European fixation on *svelte*

*lasses*—he's breaking away from any styles that copy

or duplicate Western prototypes... I shut my eyes. In a flash I view,

again, my heart-winning pastoral. Woman in vine-

riddled leafy arbor (was it from his earth mother cycle?): I'd spotted

that work, lofty panorama

in sweep, during my over-hasty trot through many

halls and corridors



escorted by Bonnie Wilson  
herself. *Ivies and Thistles*, she named my pick-  
of-the-lot as we sped past. O how I'd wished to linger  
and while away some extra time on this virtuoso gem, but I was chary  
to impede her pace or spiel, so we hustled  
our peripatetic walk-through of meandering gallery, that labyrinthine  
maze... We kept stalling  
for brisk momentary detours into private rooms, or suites,  
despite some intrusions on huffy  
guests she'd wrongly  
surmised had vacated: quick apologies  
and dashed exits, then on to next byways in the near-  
endless survey of her twenty-five-year assemblage of local finds, all  
treasures... *That title does ring a bell*, he says,  
*take me to it*, my partner at last in hunts for works of his own handi-  
craft, all-but-forgotten  
in quick turnover of early career stardom. We're a team,  
a duo of sleuths....

2.

Chasing down  
his old vignettes  
& masterworks, we must rush  
to catch glimpses  
of them in the last of failing light.  
We race up and down the many corridors and stair-  
wells of Compounds  
C (*The Mahoganies*) and D

(*Pelican Bills*),  
each multi-storied  
quarters bearing its own title  
and uniquely  
florid layout. And sure enough, I  
guess right on the second try. This Magnum Opus  
of Ishi's leaf-  
bowered damsels is spread



across the fourth-  
    floor high stairwell  
        overhang. And lacking a stool,  
        we both must stand  
on tiptoe, even hopping on one foot—  
from time to time—to snatch a closer peep at  
    remote details.  
    His demeanor brightens. O he's

greatly cheered  
    to find that his oils  
        are faring much better over time  
        at these higher  
levels, not even cracks or mildews  
visible up here. He sighs with relief. The colors  
    have retained  
    something close to pristine newly

stroked brilliance,  
    helped by sun's natural  
        glimmer, the fading sheen of late  
        afternoon still  
high and bright enough to illuminate  
our broad purview, in welcome contrast to ground floor  
    front lounge. Down  
    below, those weak lamps afforded

so little help  
    as we stumbled, here  
        & there, in our frustrated attempts  
        to aim more light  
at wall-hung oils in dark corner's  
recess... The color maestro now hums with new zest,  
    no less eager  
    than I am, it seems, to explore

this half-forgotten  
    early favorite, then  
        to reminisce about poignant steps  
        in its genesis,  
his first impulse for the project's dream-  
life rekindled. A nostalgia trip for him. And chance  
    to reclaim lost  
    scaffolding of his Soul's edifice,



as if he knew  
    how he'd mortared—  
        brick by brick—certain key parts  
        of his heart's  
cornerstone. For moments, he's stricken  
to recall the horror and pain of selling a few best  
    works. *Amputations!*  
    O it feels unthinkable, today,

to give, or barter  
    away, *forever*—at  
        whatever price—actual pieces,  
        true components,  
of his hard-bought soul weave. Soul map...  
But he continues to find succor in this painting's  
    high gloss, its  
    freedom from wear or tear, taking

heart from the blest  
    help of the high-level  
        fourth story placement. *The canvas,*  
        he murmurs to  
himself, *spared the worst humidities,*  
*may resist mildews that crack the surface like knife*  
    *slashes. Yes,*  
    *it's drier up here, fresh trade*

*winds & breezes*  
    *rippling through all*  
        *louvers, constantly...* He vows he  
        must warn Bonnie  
to *raise* his prints and other precious  
single copy paint drafts, milestones of early career,  
    so often photo-  
    copied for anthologies or art

textbooks, printed  
    at home or abroad.  
    If only she would *raise the bottom-*  
        *floor originals, at*  
*least, to saving altitudes,* he pleads  
to her absent ears, as if summoning an Angel to lift  
    all downtrodden  
    spirits of the newly-buried Dead.

## 3.

Novice shaman, Ishi struggles to recount,  
one by one, those Black  
Magic rituals he deployed—grooming to launch  
*Ivies and Thistles*. The great challenge  
was to enter that woman's  
deep fantasy as she gardened.

He was in a rage  
to become a partner in her mind-  
games, to eerily share her waking dreamlife.

He'd often sneak  
upon her unawares—his acquiescent, if unpaid,  
model—and hear her holding converse  
with some little plants  
and creatures she presided over... She spoke  
in a hushed gibberish, a secret invented lingo  
she knew only *they* would comprehend. So steeped in trance,  
she'd suddenly *come to*—  
as sleeper might snap awake with a start,  
then laugh at herself, gently  
mocking. Did she doubt her sanity? Perhaps so.  
But she knew she could control the game,  
a puppeteer who held the marionette strings  
and could bring down the curtain on dramas  
of the tiny Beings,

at will... In the painting her hand reaches,  
warily, to touch a webless  
spider propped on hairline-thin legs over flat leaf,  
afraid he may be mere *Anancy* spider, joke  
played on her too-fallible  
eyes by elves, say. He catches  
her in a rare lapse  
of self doubt. The spider, a harmless  
species, is vividly real *to us*, as are

glistening shiny-  
 winged blackbirds above and below her half-stooped  
 figure, the green butterfly and orange  
 slim-bellied grasshoppers  
 at lower right... Reluctant, before now, to give  
 away clues to his work habits, he is so drawn back  
 into mystique of this exacting portrait, sifting near-lost  
 memory to find again  
 discoveries that helped him to push through  
 an impasse, a gruelling stuck  
 place in his art of some months duration, he seems  
 pleased to have me there: O any listener,  
 while he works his way through countless musty  
 layers of outlived strategy to best paths  
 he has pursued since

his breakthrough. Yes, that was the pivotal  
 work. A true crossroads...  
 He's waving his arm this way and that, as if daubing  
 with his paint wand again, whether swiftly  
 to reenact those lost moments  
 bristling with fresh tactic sprung  
*extempore*—plying  
 his colors at record speed, harkening  
 back; or to illustrate his brushwork process

for my tutelage  
 only... We both teeter on the landing, the nearest  
 step ledge, scarily balanced, all-but-  
 tumbling down the stairwell  
 shaft agape below us. Must we court physical  
 danger, actual peril, to trigger the lost motion  
 in his reflexes: nerve voltage spurting across his joint  
 synapses, and thus revive  
 shock jolts he undertook to find his new style...  
 That surge of reentry spills over  
 into utterance, half-sputtered words and phrases,  
 a gift to me—but partial at best. For how  
 can verbal codes, mere lexicon of alphabets,  
 do full justice to painterly inscapes  
 he crossed, as never

before, seven years back. And now again.

Unlocking the old mystery  
waves of nerve impulse, hidden source of his *ever-*  
*continuous line*. And how he loves that line,  
its endless surprise loops, twists  
& swerves. But the unique special moves,  
or strokes of color  
swirl, which had become his personal  
trademark with a whole coterie of art critics,

would take cunning  
detour around all those European master painters,  
his long-supposed troop of influences,  
to the specialized knacks  
of his three youth-time careers: jewelry design,  
hand painting (running a gamut from house-and-barn  
walls to fences and gigantic billboard posters), and batik  
craft work. After brief flings  
with the first two, he'd earned a rep as skilled  
batik artisan. But he long resisted  
allure to take up painting in oils and mixed media,  
despite urgings from fellow batik crew, who  
sensed his amazing talents for colorist and  
pictorial technique left untapped, held  
in check. He balked,

but why? He distrusted the Fine Art world,  
*per se*, his scrupulous  
and demanding eye always catching his country-  
men's thefts from European ikons. Picasso,  
Matisse, Van Gogh chief among  
scores of models. Not only Barbadians,  
but the whole West  
Indies School of painters were *drab*  
*underlings, sychophants, half-baked copycats*

of famous olden  
 luminaries. He abhorred the medium, for all its  
 feeble practitioners. No true artist  
 exemplars were handed  
 down to Island Man. A total void... Only music,  
 of all the arts, held its own with the global best.  
 Calypso and Reggae, they scaled the heights, fed a starved  
 identity of West Indies  
 stock. It was the drumbeat, echoing a human  
 heart beat, that seemed to guarantee  
 our islanders' commanding lead in music on the world  
 stage... But he took the plunge, never veering  
 too far from lessons he'd learned at earlier  
 trades. And he points to the decorative  
 undulations of color

bands edging the butterfly wings, diamond-  
 like glassy striations  
 of the grasshopper's eyes and ornamental wedge  
 patterns on the scarab beetles (these,  
 to be sure, Egyptian emblems  
 displaced from an old Millennium—  
 not endemic to this  
 Barbados garden), all byproducts  
 of his scrimshaw-fine detail work in jewelry

sculpting days. Hand  
 painting comes down to his interplay with cross-  
 webbed units like roof and wall corner  
 segments in barn lofts.  
 But batik skill was the one little-guessed  
 source for his genius in disposing the hellbent  
 flyaway, unstoppable line, a line flowingness that had *brio*  
 to match the Calypsonian's  
 drum thumps. And maybe even go it *one better*.  
 Perhaps he could forge a medium  
 surpassing music's obvious power to connect with all  
 peoples... Ishi's first love in the workplace  
 was still handicrafts, the gifted lone maker's  
 keeping *Ego free*, unlike the star-struck  
 flamboyant artists.

## 4.

Until today, it had all-but-slipped his memory.  
His long-term apprenticeship  
and tenure  
in Batik had given him the choppy stop-and-go  
pulse of the line beat. An ideal  
precursor  
for delicate paintbrush was batik's common  
wax pen. The pen would drink up  
molten wax  
from the full goblet in one softly whispered  
gulp. He had to train his hand  
to be super-  
agile, quick to respond to unforeseen surges  
and retardation of wax flow.  
Controlled  
meandering of the line must be kept on track  
with outlines of the Master  
Ink Drawing  
(composed by a second draftsman, like as not;  
or perhaps his own sketched  
pictorial,  
dashed off in later months, when he'd come  
into best graces of the boss—  
who trusted  
him to be inventor and technician of designs,  
alike)...  
The wax pen's wavery  
eccentric  
pattern of ebb and flow was always chock-full  
of surprises, keeping him alert  
for sudden  
shifts. Few mistakes were allowed. Near zero  
tolerance. When a wax smudge  
slipped past,  
unnoticed, a whole completed garment or seat-  
coverlet would have to be thrown  
out, no help  
for it...  
Some young lady associates, adored  
peers, lost their jobs—fired  
over just one  
or two such costly mishaps. After three years'  
practice, his pen seemed to pulse



with a ghostly  
life of its own, as if blood ran in that one  
central artery. And so adept  
he'd become  
at spotting the abrupt reversals of flow, wax  
tool felt like an extension  
of his right  
arm, or as if he'd grown a third arm... His pen  
was some mysterious negative-  
space marker,  
which laid out borders of non-inked blankness.  
It shut out all dyes from empty  
desert zones  
it guarded. No color agent could ever infringe  
upon those bold demarcations. It  
maintained  
absence, color void...

And while he learned  
the power of strong and sharp  
outlining,  
he kept being dizzied by finding his sight and  
mind cordoned off into the obverse  
blank side  
of silhouettes. The real life of a picture always  
fell away into those quadrants  
of universe  
that the wax pen left out. And in his dream life,  
he kept fancying he was constantly  
on opposite  
sides of the fence from the living rich panorama.

It was a never-ending visual riddle  
which taxed  
and befuddled his intellect, but groomed his hand  
for expert feats with line whirls  
throughout  
his future career as portraitist of inks and oils.

## 5.

And now he delights to limn for me  
 with his finger pointer the strong *Lifeline* that borders  
 his half-stooped heroine's  
 neck, shoulder and arm: once these outline  
 edges were in place, no other unwanted paint trails would ever seep  
 through, or trespass into forbidden  
 space blocks on the far side.

His demarcations would always hold  
 firm; such was the legacy of his perfect command

over that wayward Demoness, the wax  
 pen... His co-workers in the batik factory, mostly women,  
 lived in rural outposts  
 and farms, coming to town for salaried  
 jobs. *A living wage*, they'd say. His favorite breed of folks, parents  
 to a bevy of offspring, fertility  
 oozed from their pores: an elixir  
 more refined than sweat... *Ambrosia*  
*of the Gods*, to him. Not a few of these earthy gals

would find their way into the center-  
 place of his future paintings. Mildly worshipful his eye  
 in rendering their shapely  
 contours, and ever-ready his impervious  
 border lines to contain their near-to-bursting flesh melons. Rhonda,  
 who posed for such protracted loyal  
 durations, was one of this troop  
 of former batik mates. How she loved  
 to dawdle for untold hours, lolling her head this way

and that, humming tunes to herself.  
 When she basked in her sunny garden, time would disappear.  
 She kept up a tweety  
 exchange with the two blackbirds flying  
 relays above and below her arbor seat, tossing them a few snippets  
 of stale bread crusts to keep them  
 near. He captures both in mid-flux  
 winging short zips across her bower  
 setting, frozen in opposite corners of the scene

portrayed in *Ivies and Thistles*.

One over her head. The other below her knee... The yellow  
butterfly was so near  
her lips, she could bend to kiss its  
wings, except for her total absorption in the gray bulb of spider  
she puzzles over: *is he real or  
fancied?*—that the suave mystery  
and intrigue caught in her expression...  
How lucky for Ishi—on this day of fateful struggle

with his Muse and slow pushing  
through a stuck place in his vision—to have found one model  
happiest to while away  
all the daylight hours in his feeless  
employ! Rhonda—*far and away the best of my prize team of volunteer  
sitters*—he tells me, while directing  
my bewitched eye, yet again,  
to the magic twisting black line  
which borders her buxom figure, and then luminously

accentuates her limbs, starkly  
outlining her long fingers, before it subtly weaves around  
fronds of foliage below.

Unless we look close, we can miss  
those half-hidden junctures between her flesh margins and the near-  
embrace of shrubbery. Unstoppable  
edge, it's both the fluttery  
pulsing blood channel of the woman  
and threading continuous base-line of all Nature's

shoots and leafage... I look again,  
taking in full unbroken sweep of the line's journey from snug  
ample figure and limbs  
into the network of arbor's wild  
wreath-knotting of tendrils. Her life flow travels out from her body,  
making loops and undulant waves  
around blooms. The sweet gift  
runs both ways, as if everywhere  
interwoven—we cannot read where plasma starts or stops.

(after the paintings *Hills and Valleys*\*, *Tradesman* and *Ivies and  
Thistles*, by Ras Ishi)

---

\* See front cover.