RANDOM HOUSE eBOOKS

Darien Dogs

Henry Shukman

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About the Author

Henry Shukman has worked as a trombonist, a trawler-man and a travelwriter. He is also a prize-winning poet. His first poetry collection, *In Doctor No's Garden*, was published by Jonathan Cape and won the Aldeburgh Poetry Festival Prize for best first collection in 2002. He is also the author of the novel *Sandstorm*.

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Darien Dogs

ROGERS DID NOT remember coming aboard. He lay on the hard surface listening to the voices swooping round him. Black voices on black wings.

Yeah man, you lucky we pass.

Lucky we stop, man. Ain't easy to stop like that.

They were talking a language he had once known. He didn't know what a language was now. It was sounds made in the back of the head. It was something you heard and you knew you knew why you were hearing but just then you couldn't remember the reason. It was bright light in a steep stairwell. Sunlight on a deck, sunlight in a hatch. The sound of men eating, the clatter of plates, a screech-boom on a television mounted above.

Take a lot a fuel you want to stop fas' like we did back there. You see? So man, where you from?

Leave the man alone, Silas.

Don't talk how that Silas does talk.

Likely the fella could want to know who ship he on. That we ain't no Colombian pirate boat running no drugs or nothin.

A cup a water and a bunk, thass all the fella need.

He need a doctor, man. Look at them scrapes.

Somebody laid a blanket over him. The blanket was night and it was warm. Rogers could feel its weight all over his limbs, light and heavy at once like a fur coat, prickly with stars. The night bled into his mouth. Melted into his throat like ice. Like ink. Could be he was drinking ink. Surely ink would go down the throat like this, slick so it clung to your gullet.

Then he was gone.

I

1

‘You want AC?’ the taxi driver asked in indeterminately accented English.

What a question. Ten minutes out of the plane and Jim Rogers’ shirt was already dissolving into his skin.

‘AC twenny-fy, no AC twenny,’ the driver went on.

‘*Claro que sí*,’ Rogers snapped. What kind of country was this? It didn’t even have its own language, it didn’t care who occupied it. Brits one year, Yanks the next, Spaniards the year after. And the taxi drivers charged for air-conditioning.

The car, a mid-seventies Lincoln, was of the vintage that favoured the colour burgundy. There was a long line of them at the Mario Rosales Airport. Rogers sank into its velvet upholstery and with something like relief felt the ancient suspension sag into the first pothole. The suspension of America, the potholes of Latinismo: two things he thought he knew how to love. Panama lay ahead, a whole week of it, but at least he was out of New York, away from Sylvester Securities. Sylvester’s: the seal and stamp of his shame. What a *name* for a bank – you could just hear how shoddy and low-budget they were.

The driver buzzed up the windows and switched on the air-conditioning. A clattering of maracas burst forth under the hood, and steam poured from the vents. Rogers wondered if he ought to have economised after all.

He watched a fan of banana bushes move past, coated in a sheen from another world, and thought: I’m a ruin, a shell of a man. Lately he’d been suffering terrible attacks of panic, misery, dread – he wasn’t sure what to call them. The

smallest setbacks shook him with annoyance, rattled about inside him. And at the same time, things – objects, sights, smells – could find no purchase in him. There was nothing left in him for them to get a toehold on.

Take those spindly palm trees. They were probably beautiful, their fronds glittered like metal, like knives, in the equatorial sun. But he couldn't say if they were beautiful. He could barely have said if they existed. Maybe they were just figments of a dream. When consciousness was backed into the blackest corner and only the tiniest chink of light still reached you, how did you really know if you were awake or asleep, alive or dead? It was as if he had woken at three in the morning in the depths of the circadian trough, only this trough went on and on. All the bright fields of the mind closed down one by one until all that was left was one gorge, which you gradually fouled with your daily presence.

Now, now, he told himself. Don't go that way, don't let it start.

Maybe the change of scene would do him good.

A bus pulled out in front of the taxi, a big old American school bus painted a riotous mosaic of colours. Smoke billowed from under the fender. At the back window the hairdos of five schoolgirls bounced up and down: ponytail, braids, plaits, all of them black. When the bus braked the heads bowed away from the window, then bobbed back into place. Rogers was cheered by the sight. They were poor, obviously, those girls, but he could see them smile and giggle at each other. There was something obscurely comforting about a land of poverty. Perhaps it reminded you of a simpler way of living.

The taxi driver said, 'You got some pretty girls where you're going.'

Rogers didn't answer.

'Great girls,' the driver repeated, as if Rogers might not have understood. 'Chicas. You looking for chicas?'

Rogers shrugged involuntarily.

The man growled out a laugh. Rogers glanced at the rear-view mirror and saw that the driver was staring at him. 'The Geisha Sauna. Good place. The girls they've got – *good ass*.' He uttered the final phrase in English, with much relish, and a protracted cackle.

These Third World types, they had no concept of personal space. The word *intrude* wasn't in the lexicon. There was nothing remotely embarrassing, apparently, about discussing sex with a stranger.

Yet Rogers found that oddly comforting too.

The city was nothing but concrete. Concrete transmission shops, concrete stalls loaded with papayas, concrete high-rises pale in the distance, and everywhere the unmistakable smell of the cheap Caribbean, a smell composed of rotting fruit, diesel fumes and urine. This was the real Caribbean, nothing to do with beaches and Bacardi. It was a land of Indian businessmen, Syrian traders, Chinese storekeepers, of graceful black cabbies with wrinkled notes wadded in breast pockets, of Range Rovered whites in button-downs, of small-time salesmen prowling the ports with their briefcases of catalogues. It was a world of mildew and oil drums, and concrete. Rogers felt something almost like nostalgia to be back in it.

He surveyed the fetid scene and wondered: could this really be the setting for his great comeback? He had got wind of a chance to steal a march not just on his so-called colleagues at Sylvester's, not just on the market, but on the very multinationals themselves. Rogers had had to visit the desk manager three times in his glass office to get him to listen. Twice he was brushed off with a 'Later, Rogers', like an office boy, until finally the man said, 'We're sending you down to Panama,' as if it hadn't been his idea all along.

And it was a good idea, just the kind he had been waiting for: a chance to lead a consortium of banks. They would finance a new pipeline. The beauty of it was that the

line was short: less than a hundred miles. Short, hassle-free, and buildable in less than three years. Yet it would link the two great oceans. All you had to do was look at a map to see its beauty. The Isthmus of Darien, the snake of Panama, the gateway between the two worlds: you could either say that land had been illogically and inconveniently placed where by all that was rational there ought to have been no country, no land at all, only open sea to allow the passage of free trade. Or else you could seize the opportunity. There was still only one way through. With its choppy blue channel of warm water Panama was nothing but an inverse ferryman, the ferryman's tollbooth. Pierce it, puncture it, plumb it into the world's oil trade, and you could be picking up fees on millions of barrrels a day. And with the Gulf the way it was, the timing couldn't have been better. It was a miracle no one else had thought of it. But then Panama was a closed shop: you had to find the right way in.

Yet when the taxi man pressed a button on the Deluxe radio and a salsa tune jangled from the speakers, the music's optimism didn't infect Rogers. He felt nothing, none of the spark and clarity that in the past used to presage a good deal. Rogers was unhappy with many things: his age – halfway – appalled him; his marital status – zero – sickened him; and his job – which was all it was now – had shrunk to banana republics, the nowheres, the armpits of the continent. Latin American accounts were the dead end, the sump of the business.

Yet he couldn't help liking Latin music. Every time he heard it he would catch a whiff of his first few months in New York – the odour of traffic, of pizza, of a perfume called Kosaku worn by a girl called Monica, and the detergent smell of the tiny never-used kitchen in his apartment: they all came back to him, together with the tremendous hopefulness of those early days in Manhattan. Surely those had been the best months of his life. Monica

had hailed from the upper-upper east side, the Spanish quarter. He'd had his school-dance fumblings before, his moody college loves, but nothing to prepare him for the love of a hot-blooded Latina. On the first warm day of March her many uncles would set out tin tables on sidewalk and fire-escape, and clack down their dominoes, dewy beer bottle between the legs, while their transistors filled the city's hazy atmosphere with a dawn-to-dusk background of Latin rhythm – popping congas, dinging cowbells, screeching trumpets, and above all of it the high-octane, high-stave, highly excitable Hispanic male vocals. Monica taught him the dance steps right out there on the sidewalk, to the amusement of her uncles. She painted her nails and her lips blood-red, and in the bedroom dominated him in every way until the final moment of submission, whereupon she would become a helpless victim of passion. It was very flattering.

But all that was long, long ago, in another life.

The first thing Rogers did in his room at the Hotel Panama was step out on to the balcony and smell the air. It was thick, rich, a balm, full of tropical heaviness. Across the car park sat a squat brown building with a curly neon sign on the roof: 'Geisha Sauna'. He took one look at it and with a heavy heart acknowledged that he would not be able to resist its sordid allure. There was simply no reason to.

The girl said she was called Paulina. She spoke Spanish with a mellifluous accent he hadn't heard before, a flow of words perhaps devised specially for use in the little room where she led him – the death chamber of love, he reflected, with its white-sheeted bench. When she agreed to the acrobatic posture he suggested and commenced to tackle him, the tangle of emotion he had carried with him from New York fell slack, unbinding him. He expected a tremor of vague guilt – this wasn't something he had done

in a long while, after all – but felt only a flutter of gratitude. He buried his hungry face in her, mumbling something about ‘love’.

And she was lovely. Afterwards, relief administered, he lit them a cigarette each, sighed out a column of smoke and studied her face. She could have been oriental. She had strong cheeks and warm, intelligent eyes, and a smile of curiosity played on her lips as if she were interested in him, as if he pleased her.

He asked where she was from. Sitting on a stool with her bare legs drawn into her chest, she cocked her head, blew out smoke. ‘San Blas,’ she said.

‘San Blas?’ He imagined some market town where they grew grapefruits and coffee, somewhere she had gone blind with boredom before delivering herself into this noncity, neither suburb nor downtown, of plastic and concrete. Panama, really, was nothing but a shopping mall, to which the label-struck of all Latin America came for their Dior and de la Renta.

She frowned. ‘You haven’t heard of San Blas?’

Rogers shook his head. This sort of thing could be a bore – having to hear about My Country, *mi país*, pronounced with an emphatic caesura. Latins could get maudlin about their homeland, he thought, their *patria*. But she was pretty. He propped himself on an elbow.

‘Tell me about San Blas.’

She hesitated, perhaps thinking about money.

‘I’d like to hear,’ he said. ‘Charge me whatever.’ Yes, he might be down on ’90, ’91, ’92, but he still had deep pockets, he could dip and dip and the well would not at once run dry. The material of his trade, if you could call it a trade, was after all money.

Her cigarette hand rose to her lips and she paused as she inhaled. Then she smiled, revealing good teeth, perhaps a little big in the middle, though that added character.

‘San Blas is a different world,’ she told him. ‘We have no illness, no poverty, no hurricanes. People live a long, long time.’

He raised his eyebrows. ‘Like how long?’

The girl whistled and shrugged. ‘We have our own doctors, they keep us well with their songs. A hundred, a hundred and twenty, that’s normal.’

‘With their songs?’ She was obviously some tribal girl from the pages of anthropology.

‘Our doctors sing to keep illness away. Sharks too. If any shark comes near, they hear the song and go away. Sharks are like dogs, we call them sea-dogs. The doctors know what to tell them, and they stay away.’

He watched her as she talked. She was very watchable. The flare of her cheeks, their copper hue: she must be an Indian, a real native. But a pretty one, nothing like the heavy people he had seen out west in the States. She spoke languorously, crossing her knees, resting her wrists on them, fingertips lifting and dropping as she spoke, like some nightclub socialite. She was lovely, her belief in folklore was charming. For the first time in months, Rogers kept his attention right on what was before him. She was worth it. He felt vaguely sad that she should be living in a soulless city – sooner or later it would infect her and she would forget about the shark-doctors back home – but he was also excited to be sitting, or reclining, here with her.

One of her shoes dangled from a toe. She swung it about. ‘You should go to San Blas,’ she said.

‘You should take me.’

The truth was, he felt like asking her to dinner. She was bright, he could see that already. Something in her eyes matched what was left of his own intelligence. He didn’t know what protocol there might be to seeing a prostitute outside her place of trade, but he didn’t care. His heart beat harder as he said, ‘I’d like to see you again.’

She smiled. ‘Come back later.’

‘If I didn’t have a business dinner I’d take you out.’

‘Another night, hombre.’

He could see her eyes cloud over. Which made him all the more determined to set something up, something other than a further appointment on the white bench. ‘How’s tomorrow?’ he tried.

‘I’m here.’

Rogers didn’t know if that meant she was busy or available. ‘Could we go out for dinner?’

‘Why not?’ She smiled again.

‘Let’s make it a date.’ He was unexpectedly pleased. Maybe the week wouldn’t be so bad after all.

He roused again. She put a finger to his lips and pressed him back down, climbing on board. He trusted her – her turn to show him the native ways, the San Blas formulas. Which she did. She swam over him like a dolphin, roosted on him like a bird, raced him like a pair of horses to the line. She was very convincing.

2

Once, and not all that long ago, Jim Rogers had had everything – a huge income, an office in the sky, a girlfriend whose face graced the continent’s highways and its palaces of darkness. His three cars, of German obsidian, Detroit’s best chrome, and one piloted by an angel of English gold, slumbered in the underworld beneath his home. His home had been a palazzo hoisted atop a stone-clad pillar of industry in a historic district. From his balconies he could see the light beating off the Hudson River and all the flatlands of America groaning into the sunset beneath their burden of iron.

Nor had he been one of those men imprisoned by their wealth, encumbered by sections of sod, piles of bricks, acres of rippling roof sheltering ranked machinery. He

didn’t own his wealth, he was paid it. Month after month, in the cheques came. To go every day empty-handed into the office, free on this earth, and emerge with a slip of paper in one’s pocket that had the right numbers on it – that was truly to live by one’s wits, as a modern-day hunter-gatherer. He made it a point never to put down. The cars, for instance: from the figures that flew in each month lesser figures winged off to take care of them. His life was a flight of figures.

Year after year, he wore his wealth lightly for indeed it weighed little. The crash of ’87 saw him sway on his pillar but not topple. He had laughed to feel the breeze of risk on his cheek, then tightened the belt by one or two holes.

Rogers’ partner had been European, like him, but of ancient, long-distilled stock. Royalty flickered distantly in her blood. She had fled the Sorbonne after three weeks, hopped on a whim to America, joined a modern-dance studio, and changed her name from Kandele to Candlebury. Five years on, when Jim met her, the lowlands of Benelux still hovered in her voice like an aroma.

Sometimes he wondered if they had treated each other well because they came from different countries and met in a third, never quite shaking off a certain diplomatic protocol.

Somewhere he had read: *a lost soul groping in the darkness of remembered ways*. That was right, exactly. To be lost, as he was now, was to remember the time when you were not lost, and to dream, or despair, of recovering it; but either way to look back. And he had also read about love being a rock, and if the rock is cleaved then either half dwindles, corrodes in the air. You know by that litmus if it has been real love. And he knew that yes, his had been true love and he had thrown it away. Happiness – which was the same as his soul – had shrivelled up in him like a dead spider. Three years had passed since he gave her up, three years of disaster, disaster metaphysical, moral, material.

Morgan's had moved him from Far East to Middle East, then London, then Latin accounts. Then they dropped him entirely, and he had had to scramble on to a stool at Sylvester's.

He tried to be a good man, a flexible man. He knew fortune was a wheel and wheels spun. He had had to give up the loft, had moved to the West Village, to a narrow three-room railroad with a strip of a view of the Empire State and a friendly Colombian across the hall who invited him in to watch Mexican football matches on cable. Occasionally they got a UEFA match too. The place was cheap enough that he could save.

In the hotel car park clouds of insects whirled about the lamps, cars gleamed and from a pair of poles two translucent flags hung limply above a coarse lawn. There was something about a lawn in the tropics, and a city of concrete: they acquired glamour in the heat. Here in the warmth you could believe that even if you were no longer the success you had once been, you were at least still a man making his own way, you still had some kind of chance.

An oil-bird flapped out of the darkness, disappeared into a palm tree.

Re-entering the tropics always gave Rogers a buzz, even now, after many trips, after two years of Latin accounts. Every time he came down he still couldn't help enjoying the first fragrance of night blossom in humid air.

The Panama Pipe Corporation had taken a back room at the Casa Frattini. Or rather the company's ghost had. The PPC didn't really exist, it was just a name and an all but empty bank account. That was why they were gathering: to see if they could make it exist.

Rogers' flight caught up with him. When his lobster bisque appeared, dizziness swamped him. He guzzled his

Chablis, doubting it would have the power to inebriate but hoping it might plant his feet on the ground.

The company was what you got at such dinners. A Swedish ex-dish in her fifties with cropped blonde hair, from a Scandinavian bank; a Señor Carreras with bald head and injudiciously solemn countenance who was the official host, being high up in the Bank of Panama; Señora Carreras too, who patted the corners of her mouth with her napkin after every forkful; and a slick young banker with wavy hair and expensive loafers called Jean-Louis Codrin, Carreras's sidekick.

Of the five men and two women who made up the party, Sylvester's would be wanting him to watch the various bank executives, but Rogers was interested in Albert Jones, an improbably named Argentinian with a flushed face and bouffant of white hair. He had put together the consortium of Latin investors and was close to Milagros, a Colombian of immense wealth renowned for his 'clean nose'. Milagros, ultimately, was the man one needed, and the way to him was through Jones. Rogers and Jones had talked on the phone a few times, and Rogers had steered him to a friend on the trading floor for some low-commission sweeteners on the Nasdaq.

Twice Jones sent Rogers a curious look across the table, a smile at once supplicating and smug. Rogers wasn't sure what to make of it.

Jones spoke English fluently, with a richness no native speaker could muster, fluting his way through the syllables as if the language were Brazilian, a delight to listen to.

Tournedos Rossini, Lobster Thermidor, Poulet à la Kiev: it was that kind of place, nothing but famous dishes. The least one could do was bury it with one's credit line. That was the point of a dinner like this, after all: to eat well then be the one who paid for it. Sylvester's policy: it is better to give than receive hospitality. Rogers had the platinum

trump up his sleeve. Soon he would excuse himself and slip it into the maître d's palm.

In the lavatory the ventilation hummed. A tiled floor and dark wood cubicles gave an Iberian touch. Rogers looked at himself in the mirror and felt exhausted. He was exhausted. He was approaching forty womanless, childless and not moneyless exactly but with less money, much less, than ever before. He was a man with troubles, a man who needed to sit through dull dinners in the hope of pulling off a deal worthy of his past, worthy of his aspirations, what was left of them. And that was another worry: his aspirations were dwindling fast. All the more need to pull something off now, before they disappeared altogether.

The floor tiles swayed, flexed, became spongey, settled again. He was tired of his aspirations. What was the point of them? So the folks back home could say, My, isn't he doing well? So his one-time fellows in rainy Blighty could look wistfully across the ocean and follow the dazzling trail he left behind him? What was glamour anyway but something you were bound to lose? He remembered the glamorous dinners in the early days in Manhattan, dinners clustered with the up and coming, all attracted to one another by the mutual flicker of success. They were long gone now. Or rather not they, but *he*. He was long gone. Whatever you did, however bravely you swept across the hills and fought your way up the gleaming towers of downtown, sooner or later you started losing your hair, succumbing to male standard pattern, while your stomach swelled and success drained from you like lymph.

Rogers scooped his hands under the tap, not as cold as he'd hoped, and lifted a bubbly handful which defrothed into a tiny dribble before it reached his face. His cheeks prickled.

Albert Jones walked in while Rogers was drying his hands. 'So,' Jones said. It was a question. He looked up from an industrious scrubbing of the hands, the water

roaring, and stared at Rogers that way he had, half appraising, half appealing.

Perhaps he was gay, Rogers thought. He didn't know what to do. 'Cool,' he said, to say something.

Jones smiled. 'When in Rome . . . What do you think?' He sniffed, tapped his nose with a knuckle.

'Good idea,' Rogers answered, before he could stop himself. 'Do as the bloody Romans. Wonderful.' He injected a trace of cockney into his voice, a touch of Claptonese. Foreigners sometimes liked that in an Englishman.

'Here.' Albert Jones held out a closed hand. 'Welcome package.'

In a locked cubicle Rogers opened up the little envelope. It was a long time since he had had any cocaine, and for just a moment he considered pouring it down the toilet. Then he thought: Why not? He exercised too much restraint, he had forgotten how to let go and get on a roll. He pulled out a credit card, a bill and stooped to the cistern. Nothing like the good stuff. And these people tonight, they were partners, future partners. He had nothing to fear. They were all on the same side in the fight against moneylessness, against the indifference of the world. Their job was to take a mountain, a cliff, a bay, a forest, and make it *mean* something. It was up to human beings to inscribe their meaning on to the world, and the number-one language was money: sterling, balboa, inti, cruzeiro, whatever you called it it all amounted to the same thing. No one *needed* Tournedos Rossini medium rare, no one *needed* Porsches or Connoisseur Class, except to give a little indication, an index of what they had; except to talk their talk in the one universal language, the *idioma del mundo*.

Rogers' sinuses felt hollow, almost visible they were so happily defined. A smile affixed itself to his cheeks and in the back of his throat the wonderful chalky taste settled in. Why didn't he do this more often?