

EARLE BIRNEY

SALTFISH AND ACKEE

Earle Birney (1904-1995) was born in Calgary, Alberta, and grew up in Banff and Creston, British Columbia. He studied English at the University of British Columbia and the University of Toronto, where he earned a doctorate in 1936. He was literary editor of *The Canadian Forum* from 1936 to 1940, and his first poetry collection, *David and Other Poems* (1942), won the Governor General's Award. He enlisted in the army during WWII, and after the war he taught English at the University of British Columbia, where he established the first creative writing program in Canada. He also published several additional collections, including *Now Is Time* (1945), *The Strait of Anian* (1948), *Trial of a City and Other Verse* (1952), and *Ice Cod Bell or Stone* (1962). The following poem was published in the winter 1963-1964 issue and included in the collection *Near False Creek Mouth* (1964).

The ackee's flower is fat and pallid
too aptly named *Blighia*
sapida for Capt. (Charles Laughton) Bligh
of the *Bounty*
In his imperial impatient days
some white men forced the lacquer pods
died eating their spicy pulp too soon

But on Jamaica the freed slaves' children
took time for loving
waiting for the black seeds to unsheathe
and let the bounty of their pith
glorify a plain salt codfish sauté

My last night on the island
one hostess was a girl whose blood
branched back to Pekin, Dahomey,
Bangalore perhaps The other
velvet-skinned graceful as a dark gladiolus
served saltfish and ackee to us three:

 their pink young Montreal boyfriends
 (export men in Kingston Town)
 and one greywhite Vancouver poet

The cod was from Newfoundland they said
The new found land is here I said