2014

Windows of exile

Sylvain, Patrick

http://hdl.handle.net/2144/15382

Boston University
BOSTON UNIVERSITY
GRADUATE SCHOOL OF ARTS AND SCIENCES

Thesis

WINDOWS OF EXILE

By

PATRICK SYLVAIN

B.A., University of Massachusetts/Boston, 1991
Ed.M., Harvard University Graduate School of Education, 1998

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts
2014
Approved by

First Reader
Robert Pinsky, Ph.D.
Professor of English, Boston University

Second Reader
Daniel Chiasson, Ph.D.
Lecturer in Creative Writing, Boston University
Associate Professor of English, Wellesley College

Third Reader
Sandy Alexandre, Ph.D.
Associate Professor of Literature, M.I.T
“In accumulating property for ourselves or our posterity, in founding a family or a state, or acquiring fame even, we are mortal; but in dealing with truth we are immortal, and need fear no change nor accident.”

- Henry David Thoreau
  (Walden. Ch.3, Reading)
Contents

Part One:

1- Prodigy 2
2- The Island Self 3
3- No Requiems 4
4- Pyramid Of Words 5
5- Crossroads 6
6- Star Apple 7
7- Custard Apple 8
8- Boiling Space 9
9- Choreography Of Discipline 11
10- Stanzas & Sawdust 14
11- Allure 16
12- The Roasted Goat 18
13- Miles Of Remembrance, 1978 21

Part Two:

14- Navigating 24
15- Windows Of Exile 26
16- Marooning 27
17- Elegy For My Father 28
18- Unexpected 29
19- Miles Of Remembrance, 1991 30
20- Rebirth 31
21- New York 33
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>Denial</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>Existing</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24</td>
<td>Semblance</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25</td>
<td>Once Upon A Soaring Ring</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26</td>
<td>Blue Rhinos</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27</td>
<td>History Of Laments</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28</td>
<td>The Coffin Maker &amp; The Poet</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29</td>
<td>Canonized Token</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30</td>
<td>Blue Blood</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31</td>
<td><em>Part Three:</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31</td>
<td>Congestion</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>32</td>
<td>Convulsion</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>33</td>
<td>Centuries Of Ashes</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>34</td>
<td>Cocoon Of Poverty</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35</td>
<td>Boulevard Jean-Jacques Dessalines</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36</td>
<td>A Palace Of Mourners</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>37</td>
<td>Catacomb</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>38</td>
<td>Port Of Sorrow</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>39</td>
<td>Stanzas To A Silent Executive</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40</td>
<td>Granulated Hopes</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41</td>
<td>Survey At Body #33</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>42</td>
<td>Grieving</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>43</td>
<td>Prolongation</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>44</td>
<td>Cracked</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45</td>
<td>Haiti: A Disavowal</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
46- Sacred Light
47- Confluence
48- Menelik
49- Secret of *La Sirène*
50- Polarization
51- Jujubean
52- Testimonial
53- Theseus' Shield
54- Underworld Enterprise
55- Plucking
56- Spice-Jack “Buju” Ambroise
57- Reflection & Improvisation
58- Contumelious
59- Thirty-One Years
60- Invocation
61- The Magic Of Rhythm
62- Cantor Of The Irish Spring
Part One

“It’s only when human beings want to solve a problem or figure out the casualty behind something that they carefully try to reconstruct chronological order…”

_Samuel R. Delany, On Writing_
Prodigy

I grew up in the sweltering heat among a proliferation of sugar cane,
Among imported mannerisms that buckled the freedom of youth.
I was raised within a constellation of wails, shouts, laughter and silences.
I flourished among a galaxy of brains, genuises, genies and unlettered eyes
Bursting with knowing like clear channels of radio waves. I listened.
I grew up with a universe of stars manifesting a code of politeness,
Through arranged doilies underneath gold-rimmed china plates
And silverware, forging attitudes. My latitude became more distant
From the center as I placed the host on my agnostic tongue.
At the table, crucified by my aunt’s cutting stares, I felt
Like a heathen when my gaze hinted at questioning heaven.
The dining room amplifying her mid-range dramatic contralto:
“Young man, watch your tongue. This is a Christian household.”
Canoodling my thoughts, I was immersed in the depths of wonder
Before the logarithmic spirals of nautili, forming a labyrinth
Of ephemeral splendor where life and death meet in an embrace.
Despite the scalding of whips and scoldings, I grew up questioning
Tongues praising genuises along a congregation of crucifixes and saints.
The Island Self

My capturing eyes cannot shutter the light
Of childhood that floods the shore of self.

My muse is a homeland lodged broken
In the spine and flickers in the mind.

To turn it off is to stop existing. A song that
Permanently worms in the inner chamber of the ear.

No phonograph is needed. Such love never dies,
It is the cureless hurt. A dictatorial spring

That declares itself eternal. I cannot walk away
From the shore of myself, I’m already an island

Deeply rooted in the archipelago of memories where
Each egret leaping is an age of tenderness and knowing.
No Requiems

The children’s voices dive
With the crashing waves
And hollering west wind.
The old folks with *kachimbo*
Pipes puff tobacco
As their toothless mandibles
Masticate on the memories
Of promising words.
Freedom.
Silence, the cemeteries here
Are hungry pelicans
And there’s no symphony
That would sing
Requiems for dead fishes.
Dead fishes, we are.
The gluttonous sea
Vomited us here
On these wailing islands
And the seagulls fear our shrills.
Pyramid Of Words

I seek words when words speak memory.  
Memory of Columbus unleashing his swords  
Planting seeds of violence in the midst of tribes.

I seek words to speak for scorched tongues  
In a country where pain burns out of bones that beat  
For life where nightsticks sting skulls spreading terror.

I seek words to cleanse the infection of the conquerors’  
Languages, their long vowels of repression: the $A$’s,  
The $I$’s and the $O$’s screaming in the night.

I seek spicy words to feed stale tongues of zombies  
So the eyes of peasants on donkeys’ backs will read  
Themselves out of ignorance, entering pyramids  
Of words and unlocking the secrets of syntax.
Crossroads

Grandpa’s thick brown leather belt struck
When I forgot verses in Latin and threw
The hardcover book into the wooden latrine.

At school, when French lessons were difficult to recite,
A dry, thin, cow skin coiled into an Igwaz used to
Ceaselessly pinch my thighs, leaving worm-sized bruises.

I feared books. Words were like pebbles in my eyes
As their syllables rang, my vision blurred on every page.
Uninterested, my mind wandered to the soccer ball
Bouncing in the street. I wanted to kick
The book, but I was under grandpa’s tall frame
And fiery stare. I read: dragging my mind along the pages.

Now, at the neck of a crossroad,
I write, reaching out for familiar language
To voice the pain of mouths silenced by nightsticks.

At the crossroads of poetry and prose, where lyrics
Are magical hands that clap to bring life to the forgotten,
I write to dance beyond the frontier of pineapples and bananas.

Where the arms of world literature reach out
To hear the ringing of syllables like leaves telling
Tales of how fierce the Western wind blows.
Star Apple

In memoriam F.P.

Purplish red, plump, organically grown.
The star apple was a star among
The fruit bearing tropical trees. Bird

& human eyes minding for ripeness.
The star apple tree seemed to radiate
Splendor. Verdant & lush

With simple oval evergreen leaves,
Tiny purplish white flowers adorned
Its outer shell, desirous fragrance.

I was bewitched & seduced by the hermaphroditic
Star, its dark purple fruit breast milk,
Sweet sticky star-patterned pulp with hard

Oily, brown, flattened seeds that rolled
Around my tongue as if ambrosia.
Hard slaps behind the back of the head

Brought me back to Grandpa’s landscape.
A hummingbird whirred in my head
Until I saw the unhappiness of his star.

The garden was my paradise:
Coconut, mandarin, cherry, pomegranate,
Custard apple & the delicious star apple.

I watched Grandpa knife through the
Dense purple skin to reach soft pulp,
Then neatly arrange the seedless slices

On yellow Tupperware for his mulatto
Madame who insatiably consumed everything
We loved; even our milky & scrumptious star apples.
Custard Apple (*Kachiman*)

In memoriam F.P.

You hung there for 2 weeks, 14 feet above
The ground, 4 feet from the neighbor’s
Kitchen roof, & 6 feet from the fence wall.
Rocks, dead wood made the climb easy.

The pinkish red glow and cow’s heart shape
Formed the perfect pendant. The garden
Was a verdant waiting room. No wind,
I waited for you to drop. Then, a craving
Came from my gut. I ventured to the roof
To look closely at the long oval patterns
Clustered all over your pine cone-like shape.

Sweet, soft, slightly granular, and gooey.
I closed my eyes. Nose close to the skin,
I inhaled your sweet & ripe fragrance. I touched
Your thin tip, yellowish red, and envisioned
Your compacted seeds enveloped in white flesh.

Besides the birds & crickets, I was alone.
I’m not sure who whispered in Grandpa’s ears,
Or perhaps he had been eyeing the same custard.

But went to the yard determined,
Poking hook stick at hand, his eyes turning red
When he saw the stumped stem, empty. He knew
Whom to blame. Half eaten, grapefruit size
Was still on the table. With cowhide whips,
He made my legs and butt sing for mercy.

Then, calmly like an expert derider, he ordered me
To climb back and hang the other half of the *Kachiman.*
An audience gathered to eye my anguished steps.
I lassoed the stem as it hung waiting for fruit bats.
Boiling Space

The man who could have taught me love
Had an extended whip of an arm, whipping
Stalks of legs into shaved canes, bleeding.

I embraced my future with tears and gritted
Teeth as nights brought interrogations into
A churning space of a river advancing within me.

The man who could have taught me love
Had his own bit to bite when chaos swarmed
His home after an army of hornets took over

The family’s vast land in Paillant hauling
Rich earth encrusted with bauxite, a site
Of destruction ensued as lives were gun-whipped

To submission. Bitterness grew from his spine
And infected his love ventricles. Rejected by his
In-laws for his tanned mango-skin and calloused

Hands, he hammered anguish like nails into
His home. Sandpapering order to smooth finishing.
A barrack of a man, he was. Emotions well quartered.

By the time I was born, laughter had burrowed into
Face turned marble by imprisonment and confiscation
Of the source of his pride: a 200 men furniture shop.

His own rapids ran through him as he scolded
Loved ones with mere contacts. As a buoyant boy,
Ignorant of his past, I turned the house into my resort

Shuttling the hallways as if I were a conveyer of delight.
My happiness soon quivered at grandpa’s mercy while
Raising me with an ominous masked-face. My innocence
Sailed through the heart of fear as coarse leather belts
Welted thighs into a dance of fire. A boiling space
Ran through me as he turned my life into a ballads

Of sorrow. And through his own constellation
Of pain, he wanted for my memories to remain
On a permanent shore wafted by his presence.
Choreography of Discipline
For Grandpa F. P.

Tall and thin like a plank, yellow
You were at the center of my grief.

My fingers had just begun holding quills,
So poetic ink could not ooze globules

Of pain. Terror emitted from your eyes
As you hovered over me like an omen.

You wanted a man erected from a boy
My legs sculpted by staccatoed lashes.

You were a maestro of construction.
Wood and metal mesh wielded to your measures.

I took note of how you slowly bent cedar
and smoothed out protrusions so precious wood

Wouldn’t be wasted. It was my job to collect
And separate the scraps by type and shape.

Wicker baskets filed along the back wall
Of the depot room, where you once placed

A coffin for a relative who died in New York,
But desired tropical ground for burial.

Within a week you sawed through an entire *acajou*,
The precise cuts & delicate curves cleaved

Rendered you a virtuoso at shaping refractory
Elements into functional objects. Refractory

I was. At twelve, playing marbles, or football
Was more important than sandpapering handles.
I remember the afternoon when you bruised
My right thigh for leaving the polish undone.

A twisted cowhide, colonial whip became
Your fearful baton while imploring

Light mahogany colored legs to instruct
Your will. I hated the mean grips that twisted

My ears, inclined to your choreography of discipline.
You yearned for a calibrated mortise and tenon,

A perfectly fitted mold and peg to adjoin your
Faultless regiment. With just a hacksaw, a clean-

Bladed plane & your soft filers, you instructed
My own joint making: lap, mortise and tenon.

But I couldn’t be shaped into submission
The way wood, cane fiber & metal mesh did.

I was strong willed like a bent mason nail,
Those whose shanks you hated to redress.

The more you pounded, the more I resisted.
What was the point of making me stand

In front of that empty mahogany coffin?
I shuddered not out of fear, but because of

The gripping hunger and stabbing sun that broke
My will. I knew you were not one to dilute

Your inflictive pain. Your cans of primers & paint
Were never diluted. You favored purity because

Your reputation had to remain stellar. Long hours
Spent meshing cane for your prized Rattan chairs.
Your choreography of discipline was unbearable,  
And after a crescendo of wood-stripping

Cracks, I had to adjust under the clamping weight  
Of callused fingers. Your gripping hands mastered

Stubbornness. I slowly became transfixed by your  
Reverence for structure. My hands mirrored yours.

When I build my own bookshelves, or steady a line,  
I’m reminded they should always be flush fitting.
Stanzas & Sawdust
For Grandpa F. P.

Our birthdays were two days apart; we were distant
Gemini. I was always cheery and you were gloomy like
An overcoat of mastic. Uncle Ed told me you used
To joke; you were your employees’ sap and heartwood.

I wish I had known the non-acrid you, the unfurrowed
Brow of your impossible face that I grew reluctant to read.
I wish I had played with those aging knuckles and callused
Hands that shaped happiness and pain. Presidents sat on

Your chairs, signed contracts on your desks, and hung their
Vests inside your flawless mahogany armoires. You were
History. In the 1950s, you were among the top five carpenters
In the country & commanded two hundred employees, until

A whirlwind swept in as dictator a man you once denied
A seat. Memories of the past went foxhunting.
You were high-yellow & successful, his brand of Noirisme
Was sawdust in the people’s eyes. It was 1957.

By the time I met you, the workmen were long gone
And you had been hauled off to the penitentiary. A short stay,
Powerful clients pried open the system and implored you to
Make a chair. A signatory cane cabriolet armchair for the Doc.

We laughed at how tough you were with your six-foot thin frame.
I remember you smelling of wood- at times pine, cedar, mahogany.
At other times, it was the scent of glue, red chestnut.
With you, the barnyard of my childhood vanished as idleness was

Mutinous. A man’s life ought to be upright and dignified. Poets
And politicians were blurry. My father was a poet who loved
Politics and couldn’t use tools the way you did. You were cynical
And the dictator’s spectacle chiseled your bliss to the bones.

If you had known of my compact to poetry, that I never inherited
The clamoring gift of turning poles into smooth tapering shafts,
My creativity would have been suffocated in a whirlwind of sawdust.
To you, hands were not made to construct stanzas.
Warm touches only for finished banisters & fluted dowels.
I used to watch your hands run blades over planks, curled
Shavings flipping under the motion of your brawny arms.
They formed an ocean of golden waves engulfing your feet.

Now, I know why you used to quip, shut off the radio before
Duvalier blared. You preferred the cascading of sweat on your brow
As you measured your joints to fit frames. Some of your poet friends
Vanished while trying to unveil the sun in metered forms.
Allure

As a child, despite my grandpa’s disciplinary
Belt, I felt the ocean’s allure,
The thrill of the waves rocking my body,
Or thundering slaps against rocks,
Then the waning echo of suction as if
Swallowing its last gulp.
Minutes later, new waves repeated
Nature’s symphony. I would hoot.

Over the years, the Caribbean Sea became
My secret companion.
Beyond the rolling waves, the salty mists
Against my face, I grew to love what I feared.
Underneath the blue wonder of life,
Lurked death. Eat and be eaten, the paradox
Of existence, the way passion and fury cohabitare.

I lived about a mile from two palm-crowned beaches:
“Ideal Domain”, and “White Woman” (Fanm Blanch)
Where Canadian tourists once flocked and flopped
Their bodies to be baked by the sun.
There, some swam with us naked,
Encouraging our native eyes to take in their foreign Glow. Their nightly flow with local flesh.

I was too young to go into the clubs,
Despite my grandfather’s belt, I learned
To swim against the tide, to climb the rocks
And fearlessly dive into the warm depths
Like a scud without tainting my form.
Then, one late afternoon, I was challenged
By a girl, two years older, Canadian, topless and cocky.

Her athletic body with broad shoulders signaled
A stoutness that I discovered only after we dove.
Eighteen feet on the highest rock, we were
Expected to swim strokeless under water for fifty feet.
Perfect dive and perfect entry, but after thirty feet
My swimming skill reached its peak I panicked
When a young man’s limp body flashed,

And broke open my memory screen.
Two months prior his body was pulled
From the slow-rocking sea, lifeless as ringing
Screams stunned the air. We were not friends,
But I recognized his bow-legged walk.
The gaped mouth and half-open eyes that had been
Imprinted in the crevices of my brain flicked
To the surface when I needed air the most.

Taut muscles, ribcage compressed, stinging eyes,
I felt the gravity of the water like shore-waves,
Heaved back to the sea. I took a deep breath
And drifted downward. My acumen surrendered,
And I descended, wanting to hit bottom,
Until a pair of hands were against my soles thrusting
Me upward like a hurdling fish. I gasped.

When my vision cleared, Pauline was facing me
With a concerned look, our bodies touched.
I thanked her and we slowly swam sidestroke towards
The cove. Dusk streaked the sky when my feet should
Have been jetting home. But Pauline kept me planted.
The warmness of our bodies, pockets of air and salt
Of the sea made us one. Until Zeus’s thunderbolt
Exploded from my spine and made me quiver for mercy.

By the time I reached home, it was past sunset
And grandpa’s belt was the welcoming sentinel.
I closed my eyes, clenched my teeth and took
In a storm of lashes. His denouncing voice
Drowned out as my brain was lulled by waves.
That night, I dreamed of an elated mermaid
Luring me back to the cove where my new
Canadian maiden awaited another dive.
The Roasted Goat

Six a.m. on the Southern National Route,
My father, brothers, and I were lulled by the sounds
Of watery fingers as they played hide-and-seek,
Lapping slow-to-rouse groves and thickets.
I sat on the back seat of my father’s Land Cruiser,
Wedged between an emerald sea of sugarcane and the Caribbean.
The aroma of crushed pulp filtered the air,
Not yet bearing midday’s heavy languishing.

As dad shifted gears, my eyes took in the vista,
A brown-shirted man pushing a wheelbarrow
With containers of rum, a woman dressed in white
Sipping coffee from a white enamel cup, a bare-chested
Man striking a bullwhip against his herd of cows.
The blues of the ocean beckoning our embrace,
But we had three more plantations, one public market
And a turbulent river to cross.

As a cattle-drawn wagon filled with sugarcane appeared
On the main road, dad pointed to the mills, the remnants
Of a French colony where lives were cut short, crushed
By six days of the whip and bone hammering labor.
The details of brutality vanished by crushing years, but
Blades of sugarcane leaves still cut workers’ skins.
As they toiled for a mere breath of existence.
Old plantations morphed into the vagueness of a city,
Where streets were once paths carved for carts and carriages.

Dad shifted gears, we passed a modern motel
With pinkish-red fresco walls, and then a small blue
Painted schoolhouse. Just at the outskirts of the town,
A little boy ventured onto the road with a wheel
Tube and a guiding stick. “Tonnerre de Dieu!”
God’s thunder! Father yelled as we veered to the right
Toward an almond tree, and then quickly swerved to the left,
A loud whack silenced our voices before screams
Brought the morning to a commotion. The engine idled.
I climbed out on my father’s side with quaking feet, Where a pool of blood was visible beside a man’s Shoulder. There was litter on the road, a pair of dirty Sandals, as fear curdled in Frantz’ eyes, signaling For Gerald and me to get back into the car. My dread crucified to an imagined death. Machetes Were raised like winged serpents. A man with missing Front teeth glowered, shouting unholy words at dad.

By the time the shouts subsided and the crowd Dispersed, I saw dad counting dollar bills. Twelve, maybe fifteen, certainly more than the man Would earn in a month. Large banana leaves Were brought with pieces of rope, then I saw The bloody black head of a male goat, mangled, And its matted bulging eyes gawking like a drunk. Someone wiped the red blotches off the fender, Handshakes exchanged. A lifeless goat hoisted, Tied and wrapped in green leaves on the white roof.

Back on the road, we joked about the dead goat And predicted the many stories it would breed. Dad boasted about his artful bargaining, and how He calmly escaped a peasant’s anger over a prized Animal. My brother Frantz beamed, showing off His teeth for the grilled meat he dreamed of eating. Gerald and I giggled, salivated at the thought Of gobbling our own zesty chunks. Intoxicated By the heat, we arrived at Sāira beach oblivious.

There, my dad spoke to a local vendor, a large lady In a navy blue dress, black headscarf tied beneath Her straw hat, her hands swallowed by a black apron. With a broad smile and a furtive head gesture, she sent Two men to fetch the goat. We watched as if a present Was being unwrapped. With a long pole threaded Between the tied legs, they carried the dead animal Upside-down. With just a tap on Gerald’s shoulder, We raced to the water’s edge where soft waves greeted Our bare feet. Not long after, we were signaling Underwater to each other as we counted seconds.
Breath racing, we scampered across the hot sand
To dad’s table, by then surrounded by six plastic
Chairs and set underneath a small almond tree.
The sun had already begun to parch our skin
As we gawked at the large bowls filled with fried
Plantains, sweet potatoes, and crispy dark
Morsels of roasted goat. Hungry beach neighbors
Complimented dad for his stunning display.

As expected, dad prepared a large plate for each
Of their tables. We watched with dismay
As the mountain of meat dwindled into a hill.
I brought a plate to the table on our right, and Gerald
Went to the one to our left. The man who greeted me
Had a booming voice, and a basketball-sized belly.
With a broad smile, he sent dad one of his rum bottles.
The other neighbor sent fried fish, two big red snappers.
A marble-size lump descended down my throat.

I feared the winding road would turn into a two headed
Serpent, a nightmare on wheels as darkness would
Embrace our return. Dad traced my eyes, smiled,
Pushed the bottle. And signaled for us to eat,
Our fantasies turned us into chattering boys
With mouths full of dreams. We satiated ourselves,
Turning the roasted goat into the altar of our happiness.
When I noticed the bottle was barely touched,
Butterflies stopped fluttering in my chest
And the goat’s dead stare like stone gargoyles
Vacated the contour of my fear.
Miles of Remembrance, 1978

My pre-teenage legs loved walking.  
In elementary school, I once missed 
My contracted bus, a cherry red 
Daihatsu mini-van that seated twelve. 

It was a Friday in April before the first 
Of May national holiday. My mind 
Ignored time as the football bounced 
From ground to foot and into rock-goal-posts. 

With the sea breeze to our left 
And onlookers clapping and screaming 
With excitement, I forgot that I had 
Drifted from the school playground. 

Tall palm and coconut trees created an enclave 
From the whirring cars that travelled up and 
Down Harry Truman Boulevard. Shouts 
Drowned out Mr. Danbreville’s horn. 

We heatedly kicked the ball until a penalty shot 
Was called out against our team. My stomach 
Churned when I realized that time had tricked 
Me to a pleasure of dust, sweat and taut muscles. 

My legs imagined the distance to be travelled 
And buckled under the weight of worries. 
No more pocket change, no extra bus fare, 
No friends with a dime and nine miles to tread. 

With a biting hunger, I took my first steps home. 
A mile down the road, out of lush grass and gated 
Fences, parents with blond and rust colored hair 
Drove out of the Union School in Land-Rovers. 

I watched those foreign bodies with envy, a large 
And brand new school with an American flag. 
I longed to step in, but my Haitian tongue 
Couldn’t voice Shakespearean sounds. I walked on.
At the bend of the road, where the South-western shore
Of Port-au-Prince Bay formed salty lagoons,
I watched flocks of pink flamingos, egrets and pelicans
Dotting the sea, and looked past the miles ahead.

A grumbling noise in the gut, impelled me to hasten
My steps soaked shirt and prickly feet for the distance
Yet travelled. Tropical frescos on public buses with loud
Music, and muscular porters framed my vision as sweat

Saturated my brow. I pushed on while the sun shifted
Latitude becoming less piercing, then I thought of
Grandpa with his stern gaze, raised eyebrows and hands
Clasped behind his back with a cowhide surprise.

As my feet nervously strode the last few yards toward
The house’s gate, shouts of exultations rang out followed
By hard slaps for the grief caused. I cried out of hunger.
My dusted shoes became my makeshift odometer.
Part Two
Navigating

I-
It was never my dream to read the world,
Passing through clouds, leaving jet trails
Amidst gestures, languages, and leafing through
Pages in front of my eyes—Enchanted
patchwork yet scared, unknown frailty.

Window seat, fading land, fading shore, fading sun.
New York was an ocean of lights that illuminated
A dark, menacing sky. I tasted the cold.
“Just come!” a group of Haitian cabbies hollered, and
Then guided me back to the connecting terminal.

Traveling alone, my learnt English proved insufficient
As misshapen words dispersed like seeds from my mouth:
“Hip me,” instead of “help me.” I hoped to end my journey
At the Port of Liberty, but a black woman from Philadelphia
Addressed me in French. Ushered my steps to the Pan Am gate.

In Boston, I was greeted by my Bajan step-father
Whose English was a new tune to my ears. For a while,
Language rattled in my head. In Cambridge, the American
Dialect was speckled with Spanish, Amharic, Portuguese
And Jamaican patois. I cemented friendships with acquired words.

II-
One day in early June, my mother shed tears as we idled
On Mass Ave waiting for the procession of graduates to enter
Harvard Yard, wishing one of us would graduate from there.
It took me a while to understand Cambridge, its importance,
Its arrogance, as a town that housed two colossal universities.

Two years later, I attended summer school there and studied with
A poet whose soft demeanor belied his experience. Vietnam on his
Orange skin. With him, I discovered Martin Luther King’s Letter
From Birmingham Jail. The bars of a divided United States weighed
On my tongue as I grappled with a new understanding.
Rooted in Massachusetts, I discovered The Wampanoags,
How they were stripped of their hills and bays by trickery,
Decrees, smallpox, and bullets. I recognized the swords
And crosses of imposition and dispossession. The caravels
Brought diseases and despair since the first encounter.

In high school, I had never met a Native American but our mascot was
An “Indian” head that was stamped on brown and gold jerseys. We were
Warriors, and I had worn the lies of history as we shattered records.
My determined legs were often first to cross finish lines; I became
Known as the Haitian sensation. From high school to college,

I found myself representing a people, a country handcuffed in despair.
Each step taken became an aspiration, a window to a world of dreams,
Shattered and rebuilt. Shattered again with piercing shards. I felt buried
In an open grave of excess, and with each consumption my flight was
On standby. I gasped for air, as my eyes wandered the sky, gratte-ciel.

III-
I envisioned an horizon of palm trees with vertical swords gone
Weak like corroded nails. I wanted to take back my sky, but the cancer
Of corruption, of indiscriminate bullets, and burning tires had radiated
Into the soil to ferment odium. Discouraged, I gave up track and
The dream of wearing my nation’s colors to an Olympic stadium.

I navigated into the republic of letters voicing my own anthem
With syllables that rejected nihilism and honeyed-tongues. I embraced
Césaire, Shengor, Komunyakaa, Bei Dao, Walcott, Pinsky, Laraque,
Espada and Heaney to run stanzas with. They became my mind-warriors
As I stepped into a world doused in language and verve cadences.

Great doers of the word who hammered at pages shaped my world.
Hands chiseling fat to bare muscles and bones, reflecting my own
Accent, my own tenor, so that the lost Wampanoags could speak
With the Tainos, and Africans decomposed in the Atlantic crossing
And those hacked on the plantations where hatred was cultivated.

Having passed through many institutional doors, where Europe
Is affixed as the apex of knowledge, my dream is to re-read the world,
Leafing book pages where history is not a blur of dove wings, but hands
Slapping natives into submission. Enchanted and no longer scared
Of the discomfort of a barred tongue, I’ll sing my anthem with an edge.
Windows of Exile

Wings soar in the flares of dawn
To uncover the hidden aches of feet
Treading slushy rivulets of snow.
The sun, a ripe orange
In the sky, is a mirage.
Wrapped heads and hands
Remind tropical skins
This land is of fruit and thorns.

Knots torment my head
Yearning to hear the somersault
Of sea breezes in conch shells
Deepens the incision of loneliness
Made by this savage winter.
Barren of heat and honeycombs,
I seek music to heal the scars
Inflicted by an uncle whose smile
Is a loaded M-16.

I dance anguished steps
When a man with unkempt hair
And cigar-caked teeth
Chants “nigger” with a jaw
Tightened like an unmerciful fist.
I wish to escape the rhythms of this land,
My words play different chords.

Tonight, although the sky is inviting,
Deep blue, half lit,
Stars gathering in clusters,
I'm standing behind my windows of exile
Fanning my wings,
Waiting for Haiti’s spring to eradicate
The scorching heat from khaki uniforms
And dragon eyes, pelting my native land.
Marooning

They’ve set their dreams sailing
Toward the Windward Passage.
Hundreds packed on rafters
Clinging to desires,
Ridding currents across the Atlantic,
Trying to escape fishbone existence
And hawkish eyes.

In the night sky,
Toussaint’s descendants maroon themselves
Heading towards metallic Lady Liberty
With haggard hopes.
Once proud founders of freedom,
They are once more, children of salt,
Avoiding sharks and coast-guard cutters,
Cutting waves, cutting dreams.

Feet-damped, skull-baked.
They’ve set their dreams sailing
Toward the Windward Passage.
Dark faces beaten by the sun,
And blistered hopes marked by scarlet stains,
Refusing to be consumed by the whirlwind
Of lurking death. They continue to navigate
Westward in search of Juan Ponce de Leon’s legends:
Florida’s water and gold.

Once ashore, they find neither the eternal
Fountain of youth, nor riches. Instead,
Some land at Chrome with their blistered hopes
Locked-up, or are found lifeless on sandy beaches.
Their corpses disturb fenced-Greenbacks’ eyes.
Others slip their way amongst Florida’s downtrodden
Until they are rescued by family members.
Their daubed lives, Agwe, the spirit of the sea,
Spared in the waves of life’s incisions
Where poverty, like Atlantic sharks,
Awaits with rows of festive teeth.
Elegy For My Father

I was twenty when my father died.
I cursed the gods like a storm
From Cambridge all the way to Brooklyn.
His love was my barrier reef.
Life became a flashback of the heart.
Mom taught me how to stitch
My pants when ripped, and how to meet
With dad in secret. Like they’d always done.
I remember, one morning, in 1970,
I was four, dressed in white shirt
And short Khaki pants, holding my mother’s
Hands. She wore a hibiscus printed dress.

My grandfather stood by the gate waving,
As my new ankle-high boots collected dust.
We walked to the bend of the road
Until we reached the main street,
Where my father’s red jeep idled.
I never understood why mom and dad
Met in secret. Why their kisses and touch
Could not cross grandpa’s eyes.

As the years curdled under my eyes,
I came to know that adults have secrets,
Layers that cannot be peeled the way of
An onion. How foolish were my prayers
To the rosary beads when dad announced
His departure and mom tasted the salt of mourning?

As I stood in front of my father’s coffin,
Crowned with flowers, my eyes surveyed his face,
Peaceful, mouth sealed, eyes closed.
I thought he had tears on his face, once more,
Like when I was eight, his head resting
On my mother’s shoulder. Crying.
His brother, an uncle I never knew,
Had died in Texas. I too cried.
Unexpected

It was early November 1986,
At night, the air had started to bite,
As if in the breath of an ugly dream,
Words departed my mouth when my brother
Gerald called and said a nurse found dad
Face down, by the window, empty of air.

A ram’s horn punctured my lungs.
I panted until my face needed a raincoat.
Dad was only 56, and could no longer carry
His New York’s cross of stodgy air.
This city will never be the same again.
Its entrance, absent of his embrace, remained
A rainbow of neon in the soulless sky.

I pulled back the curtain of memory,
Wishing I was sitting by the window,
Brushing his hair, flat back, the way he liked it,
And whispering my love before I drove back
Up North while replaying my childhood:
The long drives we used to take to Leogane,
And the aroma of crushed sugar cane
Occupying our nostrils, while dad inhaled
The scent. We would smile and then giggle.
Life seemed so sweet then, but we never knew
The harpoons he harbored.

Then, 10 years after his death, he came knocking,
Wanting me to emerge from my internal bunkers.
Unexpected, I held my fountain pen, and swam
Inside my own innards to surface with memories
Like sitting on a boulder, his arms around me, watching
The setting sun over the Atlantic Ocean. I closed my eyes,
Unlatched the evening, and felt reassembled, un-shattered.
Miles of Remembrance, 1991

I wanted to rekindle my memories. My athletic legs were eager to tread on tarmac of remembrance. After ten years of absence from my terra natal, more people, more cars, fewer trees, I was hesitant.

A saddened heart moaned inside of me. Tires, car carcasses strewn rubbish-filled lagoons: flamingos, egrets and pelicans evicted. Slums rose like a ratty army setting makeshift camps.

The scenery fragmented, as if viewed through a shattered mirror, drunken vision. I walked unaware of my clenched fists, as my past ran toward me with dead and truncated dreams.

The ocean seemed more distant, even foreign. Cinder block houses turned their backs to the shore, as chaotic paths led to doors intoxicated on their hinges. Life has grown unhinged, bitter.

Harry Truman Boulevard had turned into potholes, and junkyard parcels. The Union School shuffled its pupils away from the multitudes and climbed to the shaded hills, shard-guarded-walls and gated communities. I walked on.

My grandpa had sold his house, and I strolled through my old neighborhood incognito: goateed, capped and sixty pounds heavier. The rhythm of boys’ feet against soccer balls persisted as a ritual. I recognized some of the guys.

I walked on with a different beat to my steps, afraid that my old cadence would raise suspicion. I gestured hello as was customary for most passersby and cocked my ears for whispers. No one knew the foreign body that walked on.
Rebirth
For Grandpa F.P.

I am dancing with faltering steps in a consuming
Land of spiked honey. My flight to the carousel
Of possibilities brought tears to my grandfather’s
Angry eyes. His ancestral land confiscated, stripped
And hauled for bauxite. Now, an eroded site.
An unknown great-uncle buried with lead in the guts.
What am I to do when my land grimaces
And the breath of hell propels people onto paper boats?

I have taken permanent residency
In a carnival land of possibilities
Where hooded masquerades are celebrated
With fireworks. Burnt flesh in a photograph
Hung in faded memories. Cotton, picked,
Meshed, fabricated into white cloths
By Fulani and Hausa descendants, hung.
I am hanging in the salon of verses
Where history shadows are translated
Into pastoral stanzas, burying vocal couplets
That divulged the strange fruits of Southern poles:
Poplar, popular, bulging eyes. Hanging.

I have taken permanent residency
In a land of orange agents clad
In Samish suits tailored for an Uncle
Who wears a maniacal monocle.
His gaze envisions an ecosystem
Of Stars and Stripes stripping roots
Of robust mahoganies and cotton-silk wood
Without stubborn fire brushes so progenies
Could transform into Quasimodos
Dreaming of winged-angels and celestial bells.
Hell, an ironclad lung for those whose spines
Scaffolded the land. I closed my eyes
And dreamt of Moses reborn with the blood of Thor.
Possibility is the narrative of possibilities.
I caught the thunder’s whims in a land of dreams.
My grandfather, buried with stubborn eyes,
Never read my lines, compressed in the mind’s crevices.

I flew on a metallic eagle’s wings with fears
Tucked into a blue suitcase. No regrets, just
The trepidation of time and tales of violence
Cleaving capricious hopes. My mother, counting time
To re-unite, secretly seeded a new crop into
My unquiet heart. She did not know that the vestiges
Of memories would converge into verses, a new genesis.

I flew into a carnival land of possibilities
And took permanent residency with parchment,
So memories like collagen can melt onto surfaces.
I embrace the noesis of my mother’s dreams.
My grandfather’s bones are dust, despite residues,
His gaze still locked upon my steps I spun onto
The carousel, a go-round that can make merry,
Or regurgitate certain syntaxes into oblivion.
New York

Sidewalk poets
With barbed wire-tongues
Lash out truths like windmills.
The city is a nightmare
Its rocket-skylines
Thrust aggressively
Toward the mirage-sky
Where pollution plucks at angels’ eyes
And the apple has a rotten taste.
Fresh air is as rare
As a parking spot.
Denial
For all EDPs

In the middle of
Blistering winter,
Colonized toes
Sing requiems
Inside French
Or Italian shoes.
Their metered steps
Are measuring
The bitterness
Of exile.
Existing

In the cardinal points of belonging
Royal robes flung over the Atlantic,
And archipelagoes became aristocratic
Underpants. Slovenly costumes for field
Hands laboring arduously in the tropics.

In the cardinal points of belonging
Tongues were waxed to reflect the dictum
Of dominion. French is a lingua franca
Of guilt. Buffed tongues alienated from
The playground of kinship, over-enunciating.

In the cardinal points of belonging,
Skins were French fried in plantations’ skillets.
Millions seasoned, sizzled until nouns drowned
In cauldrons. Molasses coated descendants’ tongues
Too heavy to accentuate the unforgiving “U”.

In the cardinal points of belonging,
Conquest is a violent intimacy. Fragmented
Beings praised at the Tower of Eiffel forgetting
The grammars of overcast humiliation,
The syllabi of plantations, drowning nations.

In the cardinal points of belonging,
Machetes and swords were swung against
The dictum of dominion, but the scarlet of royal
Robes only bled anger. Garroting autonomy.
Millions are surviving with stammering tongues.
Semblance

I had fallen into a camouflaged landscape
As quicksand filled my marital marrow.
No one captured the first injuries, a grain of sand
In the eye, blurred frame, mortified portraiture.
Keeping silent was no longer an art.
Hostilities became neatly packaged snapshots.

My gaze, fixated upon octagonal angles
Was trapped in a web of lust. I was lost
In a veneer, until irritation flickered
And flared. Smiles became as distant
As a crescent moon. We hollered.

After many bouts of words hurled
Against plastered walls, I realized
There was a labyrinth of syntaxes
In her speech. I went on the floor
And the shaggy carpet drank my tears.

I couldn’t walk away from my shadow.
I felt glued; flesh stuck to bones, an unwanted
Self. My blood pumped nightmares.
Choked air, fleas fled sleep.
The house was a univocal universe.

Contained, I wanted to escape the floor.
Light for my weight, I went underground to find
Monk. I slid into the CD player and crawled
Underneath Monk’s right shoe. He kicked,
Stepped, and braked, his fingers walked on

Black and white keys, creating "Ugly Beauty."
I am kicked from the scene, the floor welcomed
Me back. The carpet, dried. But, her mouth
Stayed on into the evening flashing like a firefly.
Once Upon a Searing Ring

I was not born under a confined sky.
Despite nightsticks and door beatings,
Torrential downpours have pound my shoulders.
Ducking & covering is an art
In times of war.
I learned to dodge your daggers
Behind books, hardcovers protecting
My chest against hatchets thrown.

Your wraths no longer can steamroll
Me into a trampling sod mat.
Your landscape of malevolence
Is enclosed with venomous mortar with which
You construct a perilous anthill. Inside,
A gullible son douses his splendor.

Our child languishes in the anthill,
He has not discovered a refuge in books
And raindrops do not sluice down his
Back. Your traps snagged his legs,
Searing his steps like the burned
Groove of my left hand.
I wish I had known you were
Kerosene. Haitian born under Duvalier,
Belgium educated under King Leopold.
Your roads were carved by spikes and spite,
Charred malaise, tarred.
How gullible were my eyes?
Your first nuptial ended with the groom
Drowned in scotch. You were a walking
Scotch bonnet.
Blue Rhinos
For Abner Louima

In the pre-dawn of a humid August heat,  
Lovers and strangers danced slowly  
On a wooden floor. Bodies tightly held  
Defying light in the dim room.  
Hands embraced backs and even buttocks.  
Passion inducing grooves,  
Perhaps someone got jealous and grabbed,  
Or slapped somebody else’s lover.  
A brawl broke out, no guns, just swinging fists.

The music stopped, human screams rang  
Unmercifully. A panicked hand dialed 911.  
Officers in blue, puffing like rhinoceroses,  
Stormed through Rendezvous Night Club,  
Where Haitian immigrants gathered  
To dance under Phantom’s elastic tropical rhythm.  
Black backs met discriminating  
Billy clubs frantically swinging.

More officers rushed out of wailing cars,  
Brandishing Nines and shotguns. Brooklyn’s  
Flatbush Avenue became intoxicated  
By the frenzied footsteps of the city’s  
Gestapoes with rhinoceros-like strength,  
Even the saints stopped marching to gather  
Their unshed tears in prayer. A unit  
Of stars streaked by, wailing.

When Abner Louima, a thin, dark-skinned  
Security guard, tried to reason, his ribs were greeted  
With breath-stopping jabs. Handcuffed, head-locked,  
Canopies of black migrant bodies were canned.  
Blood-stained, had Abner known the reputation  
Of badged-uniforms, he would have avoided Volpe  
The way he sidestepped Duvalier’s bogeymen.  
Dream predators, ecstased by others’ torment.
Behind the prison wall of a Brooklyn precinct,
Volpe concocted a sadistic game of Sodomy.
Dehumanized, the rhinos were inebriated
By their frenzied rhythms of kicks and punches.
They danced around his limp molested body,
His dignity flushed in the silent scream of the bathroom.
Abner’s life hung on a thread of luck. Threads,
Hundreds of yards to stitch him back to life.
The world stared as justice was lost for words.
History of Laments

The ocean twitches in limbs,
Cuts loose shipwrecks in our veins.
Millions entombed.
The clattering clinks of history.
And we cruise the Atlantic, island hopping.
It is not the jangle of the chains,
But the lives scattered, cluttered in clusters
Across a bleeding continent. Work angels linked
To lines of unending fluencies, nourishing
Towers to sphere influence. Algorithms
Brace skyscrapers where gold
And diamonds burn desires of Ponziers.

I sheathe myself with the memories of the
Choctaw, Taïnos, Arawaks and Yorubas⎯
Morphing my abode into a swift bayonet
Of a temple. Our backs cannot remain
A coveted trampoline—lives trampled
Upon for centuries, absent of conscience⎯
Now silence prevails as if the past is vaulted
In the void: unspeakable domes of bones.

Regardless of bible thumping and trumpet
Blaring for a blessed providence, we hear
The clanking chains. Skeletons
Framed structures of success. Crossbeams,
Memories forming transversal recollections.
The genesis of your market, Wall Street,
Is imprinted on our sugar-crushed-backs.
My pen bleeds in a sea of lost
Reminiscences, a bricolage of dead hopes.
Through fragmentary lines, I try to stitch
Patches of poetry from ancestral tongues
Refusing to reveal their succumbed brutalities.
I am committed to un-scab the past with
A fountain pen until Atlantic’s water spirits
Lament in harmonic disemboweling squeals.
The Coffin Maker & The Poet
For Jacques Roche

Together:
We are from a flogging island
Where gusting winds turn dreams
Into dust and tattered houses kneel
Upon rocky hills, imploring
The desolated land. Tomb-like
Abodes stud the city, and nailing
Shut disfigured dreams.
As tyrannical waves flog the island,
We hope for an affable rhythm.

Coffin Maker:
I’ve watched you de-ambulate
With confident steps & wondered about
Your height. I want your dreams to repose
Within a receptacle made of cedar & pine.
You are a peacock in your bearing,
And your exit from this land must pass
Through my workshop. Splendid and
Crafted, witnessed by the nostalgic.
But if I depart first, pen me a poem.

The Poet:
I’ve walked by your shop, drawn to
Fresh scent of poplar, pine & cedar.
The whirring music of your saws hum to
My probing ears. I wonder about the dead trees.
Our mountains are barren; our lives romped
By the riotous orgy of disorder, a macabre dance
Burying hopes in coffin coffers. Ominous hearses,
Funeral-carnivals clamor in the streets.
You have grown muscular from sawing
Trees that beg not to be turned into coffins.
Coffin Maker:
Poet dreamer, you walk among trees
& do you not pen your poems on flesh?
The trees too cried as they turned into paper.
Perhaps the shark-like teeth of my chisel
& whirring sounds of iron slicing through
Wood bleed ears, but your pen is
A blade too. Sharp, unforgiving, a social dagger.
Some in this city burn under your pen’s fire
Refusing to fix their out-of-step dance,
Your piquant lines are the peoples’ tunes.

The Poet:
We are the people my friend. You build
Our wooden boxes of permanent dormancy;
I scribble the whaling sounds of the land
That burn my pen into an amber metal,
Glowing on our charred roads. Ravaged
Memories implode in the trappings of needs.
Time is unforgiving in this cramped island
Where blood-binging tyrants make the coffin
Makers consume more trees than poets.
Your sawdust will not obstruct my voice.

Coffin Maker:
My sawdust will not filch the beaming aura
Of your gaze, nor suffuse the morning dew
Of your voice. You must recite your poem
About the dog that gulped poverty while dreaming
Of his old broth plate. We escape through your words,
And our eardrums make us dance to your rhythm.
Swaying as if in a meditative state, we hang to the edges
Of your words. In this terrestrial darkness
You are a sunbeam & no dust can cloud your light.
The Poet:
I dreamt I was swaddled in one of your coffins.
Mourners gathered in front of your shop like
A chapel. Twisted cotton meshes burned
In orange-peel halves filled with palm oil,
As mass was said by a disfigured priest holding
A black book. He took elliptical breaths between
The lines, disrupting the cadences. Fire sputtered
Through eyes carving my name on lacquered Cedar. Our crying forest has been ditched by tyrannical Waves. Hacked planks beg in this saw buzzing kingdom.

Coffin Maker:
In this kingdom, this barren land of bones, convulsion
Is the rhythm. Dust gags dreams. Rags gag poets.
Crying becomes ritual as poetry is to eulogy,
& coffins are to funerals. I chisel my art on coffers
of last rites, a planetarium of one’s own, so dignity,
The last possession can be protected from maggots.
I apologize for the trees, but death is the rhythm
Of tyrants & its racket pervades disconsolate borders.
Lives are unhinged doors & broken twigs. Sound-proof
Coffins are sealants for gutted & mutilated humanities.

The Poet:
In a kingdom of chaos where rocks & bullets are
Shooting stars, the poet’s pen is not the magic wand
That will stop the eternal unraveling of lives. I’ve tried
To pen dreams into structures, but my ink bled. This
Is the avalanche of despair where ribs crack as twigs
Under the weight of boots. Broken, unhinged, crumpled.
In this terrestrial darkness, my friend, you bequeathed
Me a sunbeam & now no dust can cloud my light. I am
The moving target of advancing dictators. I fear my dreams.
Newly constructed doors become stretchers. Bloodied,
Cadavers pass through crowded streets without sirens.
Together:
We are from a flogging island where gusting winds
Turn dreams into dust and tattered houses kneel
Upon rocky hills, imploring the desolated land.
Tomb-like abodes stud the city, and nailing shut
Disfigured dreams. As tyrannical waves flog the island,
And like whales, we moan for this land.

Coffin Maker:
In the shadow of a moonless July night, a star was netted,
Chained & handcuffed to a chair. We waited four days
In the dark until we knew your eyes would no longer reflect
The sun. My poet friend, my orbit is now unbalanced
In this chaotic kingdom. They left you without
Your rhythmical tongue & shackled with a rusted chain.
Your hand swelled behind your back as you were dumped
Shirtless & shoeless on the hot pavement. Your blue
Shorts glistened beside a pool, as an island of blood
Trailed from your head. The earth convulsed.
Canonized Token

Remember, you are not of the canon
So powder your tongue to be known,
And walk lightly on wooden planks.
For, splinters can destabilize a swagger.
Admire the halls with a blithe smile,
Swallow your edgy adjectives with courtesy
And at the tabernacle, be proud
To display your canonized verbiage,
A local oddity.
You will be embraced
And placed on a bantam altar
As the token with a swagger.
Blue Blood

I am a biped moving beyond silence
Straining a scanty existence in the foliage
Of the mind, crafting a collage of syntax
That names the breathing world of my skin.

Highbrow vocabularies cannot be used.
Here, one’s tongue will be waxed blue blood.
Oh! Cowboys still blaze the world with a simple

What is free with feeding the air acid rain
And dumping nuclear waste onto countries
Where skins do not reflect the snow? Cold.
I care not for concave and buffed sentiments.

I bite with multisyllabic bats—chasing vampires
Of empires—Straight, no chaser while shuffling.
The world grieves from simple utterances,
Waterboarding. I gag from an inventory of rags.

Cowboys with simple ropes fling dictators across
Jungle thick skies where natives are unarmed
Storytellers. Blue blood gained from chained labor,
My umbilical cord is still linked to Cain’s canes.
Part Three
Congestion

The city of my birth is drowned
With drunken footsteps spattering
Their existence in clumps of flames.
Barrage of hunger and anger tearing

In the fuselage of benevolence. We fly
On fear, parking streets with caskets
Begging for compassions as commerce
Fortified their inertia raining distress.

Lives congested in rows of poverty,
Snarled progress to a century of hoes
And machetes where tattered selves
Cried laughingly at gated gates gazing

Coldly. The city of my birth is drowned
In fear of the impoverished, deprived
Of the iota of being. Life is congested,
Infested with beings dying to be beings.

Their insolvent bodies lined heartless
Municipalities congested with greased
Palms. Mollusk politicians haughtily volute
Themselves under the footstools of moguls.
Convulsion

Darkness resonated beyond the coastline
Pulsating in waves releasing moanful
Rhythms as battered bodies set adrift
On the ocean, desperate and tattered.

Paradise is a shipwreck of eternity
With waves of survivors convulsing
Sugarcane blues into the sacristies
Of militarized vaults. We are cramped

In chaos. Debris of the past piled into
Ensembles where dreams are trapped
In the threshold of heavens, clasped
Hands plagued by buoyant assonance

Clapped until wrecked beneath the stars.
Hard-won happiness returned to darkness
As melancholy treacherously scuttled
Throughout the island in paroxysm waves.

Just at the seaside, generations of children
Moaned the ingested splinters from the
Santa-Maria and markets encrusted sugarcanes
That pressed the buoyancy of souls into pulp.
Centuries of Ashes

The shard-like anger of Port-au-Prince
Will slice through social veins
And harvest life with a Machete.

Two centuries of ashes and blind privilege
Hoarding in palaces, suffusing fetidness
With extraneous air-freshners.

Two centuries of ashes and cruelty
Has been mastered with a surgeon’s
Precision. We laugh as we bleed.

Despite drunken drums
And frolicsome hips,
Shard-like anger will rankle

And stream through peasant fields,
Shanty towns and regal abodes the way
Red ants march on pressed sugarcanes.

Despite drunken drums and frolicsome hips,
Drifting angels will wing themselves away
The way bats flock out of dark caves.
Cocoon of Poverty
For P. Laraque, N. Roc & in memory of J. Roche

Bullets pelt my swollen lids
As I watch a wounded nation
Writhe like a starved caterpillar.
Death angels patiently await
The terminal moaning of weeping mountains,
As prostitute-politicians bootlick Atlantic States
With self-serving cupped hands.
My mouth is a rain-gutter.

In the center of my chest,
Where the rain has flooded,
Muffled words crowd my breast
Like caged doves cooing unmet desires.
Clouds roam in this mortal corpus,
So poetry will cease to weep for a dying nation.

We were burnt by molasses and the tropic’s cancer
When green eyes, gluttonous for coffee and cacao,
Brought the mountains to our backs.
We have become backward & destitute.

When words flap and jab in my chest,
My metered compass is nudged to the line.
My nation is a caterpillar trying to escape
The cocoon of poverty.
I watched with guttered mouth and flaming eyes.

My cheeks burn as drenched eyes gaze at the sea__
Thousands of paper boats wafting their way westward.
Underwater bodies are turned into vessels,
Laden with conches & bells signaling the wind
To grant passage so we may return with flowers
To our carrion-birthplace.
Boulevard Jean Jacques Dessalines

Again, I’ve been insulted at the common market. July, Boulevard Dessalines reeking with human Sweat, burnt oil and a carnival of shouting vendors. I captured images onto magnetic tapes. Frenzied hands tugging used American blue jeans, Weary feet slipping into used leather shoes. I shouldered my camera steadily as rivers of sweat Streamed past beaming yellow eyes.

Jean Jacques Dessalines has gathered his chopped Remains and remounted his horse. Vexed By the polluted soil and dingy urchins begging Underneath broken storefronts. Dessalines Boulevard Is a chaotic heap where hips violently sway To navigate busied feet that rid of goods so children Will not go hungry. I zoomed in on frenzied hands, Grabbing worn foreign goods. I panned and framed Pouting lips, a desperate buyer noticed my invading lens. Our misery is a splintered cross with protruding nails.

July, as my memory chokes on dust and filth, I finally dare to write down what I witnessed On Jean Jacques Dessalines Boulevard. Port-au-Prince has been assassinated, Cut into wanton pieces waiting to be buried Underneath a universe of garbage. I can’t erase The carnival of vendors with their cacophonous Sounds and lurid gazes, nor the fat woman In a deep purple dress sweating, spread-legged, Wearing a fake gold chain around her thick black neck As she meticulously places bundles Of dirty Gourdes into her brassiere.
A Palace of Mourners

I sought to shield and suppress
Memories from surfacing,
Houdinies escaped
From opaque brain cells that harbored
A palace of mourners. In the country of my birth,
Nightsticks have swung from Columbus
To modern leaders, while nefarious
Passions have cooked fear into our psyche.

After nights of memories poking needles in my sleep,
Floods of images breached the silence of my pen.
Joseph, a 26 year-old journalist, arrested in August of ’92,
Demanded to speak. My head became an echo chamber
Where tales of the dead and brutalized reverberated.
Their screams, exploding the corral of memories,
Formed a tapestry: Joseph’s blistered backside,
Broken right knee, and cicatrized head.

The army wanted to teach him
The language of silence.
Thin, glowing wires
Turned his tongue into an eel,
Slapping words to incomprehension.
Still, he did not swallow fear or confess.
He trumpeted justice despite his scars
And inability to move bowels.

Even with this carnival of nightsticks
And stench, I’ve desperately tried to write
About the movement of clouds and pastoral images,
But screams and agonies of a valley of Haitians
Ferociously migrating to the center
Of my pastoral scenes have torn up
The white lilies and the dandelions.
Instead of flowers, my pen bled an agonizing nation.
Catacomb

Like china plates, my country is shattered, and millions
Of seagulls’ cries rise from dust to break silence.
With one undulation and grinding of plates, lovers took
Their final embraces underneath slabs. We are burrowed,
Buried in buckled earth and decapitated in numbers.

Millions of seagulls’ cries rise from dust to break silence.
Cracked lips, crushed chests, metallic birds survey
Concrete tombs, catacombs. Bare hands comb decembre
Like collectors. Bloodhounds, developing a mania,
Saving lives trapped. For a moment, the banality of class, gone.

With one undulation and grinding plates, the city of my birth
Became china plates with shards forming for miles and lives
Transforming into worms as metallic birds and rescuing hands
Favored Montana, an elite hotel. Class is back. I remounted
The horse of tears as polemics play on the tarmac.

Another house has fallen, this time my 51 year old cousin
Is consumed by concrete. Memories press against slabs
And bodies turn into leaves begging to be chronicled.
My grieving eyes are punctured by cascades of crushed limbs.
I ration memories to avoid gaps, saving his laughter for rainy days.

My umbilical cord is buried in the city of my birth, flattened.
My childhood memories play in quick frames, knowing my tongue
Will no longer taste communion. My Sacre-Coeur and Cathedral
Hosts crumbled to dust. Dust, a gathering of dust overtakes
The city into an eclipse and the cathedral saints become homeless.

I remember my mother, radiant, on her knees praying
At the National Cathedral. White sleeveless dress, black shoes,
Pressed hair, vigorously thanking the high-pedestaled Virgin
For her stamped passport. I was ten, and not yet aware,
But felt the weight of flapping wings, the migration of love.
Now, stitched with pain I watch a migration of loaded hunchbacks,
Dusty hair and desolate eyes retaking the bare mountains
Hopes scattering like shards of china plates in heaps and rubbles
Of despair. The city of my birth is a catacomb, catapulted back
Through time as we are still recovering the dead.

The ghostly silence of not knowing, bruises the mind
of the living with rage, no obituary pages to flip,
To calm the thousand wailing mouths, and empty arms
Await a last embrace. Flames crackle inside tender heads
Trying to cage in nerves as tears lap cheeks.

The city of my birth is a catacomb and I pull words through fissures,
Honeycomb-like stanzas of fragmented lives to stitch poetry
So dusty eyes can witness a new dawn and form new memories.
Perhaps this is the aphasia of a feathery existence and the beginning
Of a friendly sun, a friendlier eagle and a new L’ouverture.

As a poet, haunted by transfixed gazes, bloodied faces and sooty hair,
I am also shattered and in need of a makeover. With shifting plates
Smashing my ribs, bitterly awakened by the taste of acrid tears,
I shift all excess weight to couplets, quatrains and metrical feet.
Prosodically, I count my own dead as I refuse the hemlock.
Early January afternoon, I stand in my own port of pain
Intertwined with my wife as we moan death-like an incision
To the core. Barbed notes in a soprano’s throat.

Port-au-Prince has become an archipelago of open tombs
Consumed slowly by the sun and forming an ever lasting covenant.
This unrelenting port is a cup of their blood. May the sins
Of the prince be forgiven and forgive those who have trespassed
Against the wretched of this earth.

The port of prince is a mausoleum of dirt-embroidered bodies,
A quarry of dried tongues begging for holy water and bread.
No bread was ever broken and the disciples feared the masses.

Port-au-Prince has neither port nor prince,
But satellites beam our misery as we line up,
Wounded, broken, seeking shelter anywhere but home.
There is no anchor for anger, and no anchor for despair.
The prince departed centuries ago with our coffer, leaving
Broken chariots and cobwebbed treasuries.

The port of prince is a mausoleum of dirt-embroidered bodies,
I wake at night shuddering and intertwined with my wife
In our own port of pain. The clock does not stop at our will,
And how I wish to turn the hand of time, changing the prince’s
Morbid cloak, but our ill-constructed port mimicked our timid steps
And breath. The departed last gulp of air is its breath, the relay of life.

Port-au-Prince has neither port nor prince,
As tempests incessantly sweep through,
1804’s bright filament becomes faint and sad,
Dimming like a dying firefly. Life mocks us
With sadistic laughter. I feel congested with death,
Losses and corpses swarming in my chest.
I need a stronger port to anchor their souls.
Stanzas to a Silent Executive

The January 12th Caribbean sky in the Apostolical year
Two thousand & ten did not cry bloody tears,
But was instead canvassed by dust while borderless
Angels descended like a ravenous swarm of bees.

Earth bitterly bit clumps from limbs as thousands of unnamed
Swallowed their last sun with a gulp of light block clouds.
Our topsy-turvied streets stamped with cutting edge poverty,
Making her mammoth digestion acrid, vile and fetid.

Bodies, abandoned & broken. The landscape is overgrown
With a choir of wailers sleeping on concrete with scaly
And dust-covered bodies. Bodies, bodies, bodies, bodies.
Bodies encumbered by weapons. Our existence is a crossfire.

Thousands of screams flew up to the sky uninterruptedly by a simple
Presidential gasp. Our burdens are the molasses holding
The earth from engulfing us in her tempestuous waves & crest-Fallen peaks. Even near death we titter alongside angels.

I know you are not a wordsmith, but even your tongue is
Baffled by your mouth’s silence. In my own broken existence,
I too wrestled with words. But, your inscrutable silence
Staggered fretful ears that slept under rice paper tents.

The Poet. The poet can either be a well-oiled dream machine
Or an omnipresent hand that knows how to unzip secret pockets,
Letting loose grains of silence. No need for bedtime riddles,
The land is absent of ears, beds, cooking pots & pain killers.

In broad daylight, as bellies ache, and nightmares overflow,
You have granulated silence to perfection, even ignoring
The daunting angels gesturing in the sky like red snappers
Thrashing & flapping against sharp stones—cutting tender flesh.
Thousand of lives scissored to shreds; sole survivors formed kinships
With dogs. With the rainy season upon us, our existence will further drift
Downstream so caves & common graves will eternally hum
Our collective requiem. A guttural protuberance.

The angels must be exhausted from see-sawing the axis of life and death.
Three hundred thousand trips in the dizzying sky
Forming a kaleidoscope of washed-out frames & blurred wings
As memories frenetically burn into nameless mirrors.
Granulated Hopes

_I_
It was still daylight as peddlers' feet hurried
Toward rest where dependent mouths
Awaited meager meals. Desperate.
For laborers, it was near the end of a harsh day,
Tilling the earth shirtless, barefoot, calloused
Hands armed with century old sickles and hoes.

_II_
Unadorned mountains stood linked
In waves like camel humps dominating
Basin-crouched cities and plains.
Stubborn indices of continental drift,
Geographical collisions and bedrock are
testimonies that earth requires her own text,
That she too writes history in blood.

_III_
An orgasm of death entered Port-au-Prince
From the south, conquering a line of feeble towns.
Hopes granulated in an extended corridor
Of crushed bodies as a urinal of despots flushed
Into silence. Innocence is sliced by poverty.
Listen. The great baron’s blades are sharpened.

_IV_
Tumbling and caving rocks brokered bustling
Streets into a morbid stillness. Port-au-Prince gagged
On dust spewed by the encroaching reaper-apocalypse.
Time oozed by as brave Haitians froze upon the sight
Of an instant masquerade and macabre carnival.
Spirits floated as thousands were snatched
By unannounced cherubins train-wrecking the earth.
V.
Basin-filled cities and provinces became
Begging bowls still cuffed to 1804.
Despite hunger and expectations of mayhem,
Thousands of embattled bodies vigorously sang
To the cosmos refusing to partake in a dance
Macabre. Aid delivery charades and dignitary parades.

VI.
We know the roads and we know the ropes,
Still cuffed to the beacon of 1804’s maroons
We are swimming upstream against forceful
Tides of history, calamities and ravenous eagles.
Repeatedly clawed, our bodies, scaled with miseries
And now caught in an NGOs undertow.

VII.
After two hundred and six years of desperate strokes,
Nature broke us. Now, there’s a parade of vultures
Decked in full regalia on our shores. We are meat.
With punctured ribs and collapsed lungs, our gills
Are pried further open as our seasoned substance
Is wheedled and herded onto pristine marble slabs.
Despite resilience, we await the plunging predators’ beak.
Survey at Body #33
For Jean-Marc Paillant (1956-2010)
January 2010 Earthquake, Haiti

His brand new car, metallic blue, waiting
For his return. His quickened steps
To the second floor of his ex-wife’s home
Brought dust in, on his black shoes—
later removed and stolen.

His sealed mouth never revealed
The taste of billowing earth, nor his screams
For mercy. His life evaporated
On the dojo of poverty
The way hot air vaporizes water
On those unmerciful streets.

I’ve walked those streets, once lined
With palms and flowers, now sepulchral
With unwanted bloated bodies.
A bloated nation made junk,
And skunking the air with corruption.
Even microbes and insects grow full.

Cousin Jonas, an angiographic poem is my lament
For the pus-laden bodies ceasing to bleed.
That January afternoon, the earth drum-rolled
A discord underneath innocent feet,
Becoming a macabre marching band cloaking joy,
And choking the national anthem to moans.
The Palace lay gutted and twisted, as you were,
Dumped into a common grave, now sprouting wild grass.
Grieving

We uncovered a basin of stone graves
On the outskirts of a cane plantation,
We silently grieved inside blank pages.
Steady hands once scribed the sizes of shackles,
Leafy scrolls cried the pain of a nation
Still paying for ancestral battalions
That escaped festive portals of lashes.

Now, we are a scattered vineyard of bones
Engulfed by the promise of joyful rain,
But the sweltering sun squelches dreams.
We are without a Moses, without homes.
As centuries of hate crystallize pain
In our beings, we soldier on to fletch.
Prolongation

Clouds of dust mushroomed the city
With every tumbling, crumpled block,
Bearing semblance to Hiroshima.
Cities of ruins, of agonies, of broken bones.

The air sordidly pregnant with corpses
Wore necklaces of flies, saint-less.
A hell of sewage overflowed in the temple
Of existence as the hacked capital cracked.

Lives lacerated by a lack of civility, a gluttony
Of buttressed egos, je ne sais quoi. Charlatans
From the country of L’Ouverture, in cahoots with barons
Of the chained world. Salt and sugar merchants.

What existence can be lived on peanut wages?
Lives morphed inside cocoons of poverty cannot become
Butterflies, only debased caterpillars condemned to crawling
Among the rubbish of catatonic deprecations.

With every tumbling and crumpling block,
A nation denigrated its existence by nailing
Contempt to those whose navels pumped marrow
Into the dorms of opulence and extravagance:

Marseilles, Versailles, Brussels, Luxembourg,
New York, London, Charlotte, Madrid, Liverpool,
And the nightmares coffered on Wall Street
Blow our existence into cavernous dust.
Cracked
For the IDPs

You sat pristine and impervious,
Egg white shades on the crusting margin
Of the sweltering tropical slum, hoping
Your planetarium of mysterious hand shakes
Will prevent the impulse of light from penetrating
Chilled heartbeat chambers and pulsar of might.

Waves of hungry orphans crashed through your gates,
But sheathed by armored tanks you fanned dust off your coat.
Renewed and protected, your trepanned windows stifled voices
As more hands continued their century old gestures
Behind welcomed solid mahogany desks and marble floors.

In the impious world of umpires, empires are never eternal.
Not you, although you were inhabited by two emperors,
You never made it into the digest of empires,
But you’ve been digested and regurgitated like wild grass
In a cow’s entrails; trailing misery to the forefront
Of the manicured lawn and fenced water-sprinklers.

If you knew the penance that awaited you on that sweltering January,
You would have asked for better housekeepers, and guess of honors.
Thirty rumbling seconds broke your pristine shells and slumming you
To the un-pastoral bughouse that cancriod your presence on the stately
Manicured lawn. Million of bodies are now camped at your knees.

Stripped and cracked, you are now a planetarium. Kneeling
Beggars and lights traversing through pulsing chambers
Revealed the purse’s might, as hungry orphans’ hands dialed
The old chambers of empires for relief and consolation.
Ancestral victories once colossal, are shrieveled Memories,
As your cracked column morphed into a stooping vertebrae.
Haiti: A Disavowal

Home, the center of intimacy is wilting in its solidity.
Am I fooling myself by shedding tears for that land rocked
By turbulence, where perched cardinals go on feeding
As eagles and other rapacious birds claw through sparrows’
Nests as if their existence was pure dispensable meat?

My enemies have shown themselves. Friends, beasts
With corporate smiles constantly slashing handshakes
For sugar, cacao as if nature is not fierce enough. Lunacy.
The lunatics are behind glass walls howling like wolves
For the pearl of the moon. The sparrows already consumed.

I feel naked, breached by hate for my nocturnal skin
As names, affixed to a collective, became settlements.
When my feathers are plucked, the bayonet of my beak
Knows the history of steel, clacking, and gashing through
Flesh avowing dignity. Centuries of my disavowed liberty.

The blood of my ancestors is no longer in the marrow,
And cardinal concords are signed where lives latched to capital
Exist on the margins with the stench of skins drenched
In centuries of field labor. Drudgers in tatters eating dust.
Under the eagle’s claw, home is a nest of dead sparrows.

We’ve been on our knees since the viperous cross was planted,
And I’ve been naked underneath an oak’s mistletoe, genuflecting.
I had no white bulls, no white cloak, just my blackness bonding
With the moon. I heard a choir versing the nation of the heart:
Home is the intimate abode even when cardinals are not sanguine.

The place of my birth is an irritant and its cardinals are moles.
Liberty aborted, and Louverturean sparrows are eaten by wolves.
I do not have drinking horns, but my lunar pendant is a gift
From Sulis Minerva, descendant of the Black Madonna.
Madre de la tierra, I am earth of the earth and my inheritance is earth.
Sacred Light  
For Jalene

Stars framed your being as you emerged  
From an ocean womb and surfed toward me.  
We saw the radiance and gradations of colors  
As we warmly claimed each other’s ethereal lights.

Light can be a blues-doctor, and a measurer of time.  
It seems that lightning conjured us into our own orbs,  
Sparking into trances the sweet rhythm of love, while  
Weeding out memories of wrath and alkaline tears.

We’ve watched and felt the petrifying crumbling of walls,  
The dissembling of fields, and the spikes of resentment,  
Yet the royal sky cured blues with an ember of light,  
As a reminder of what is promised, and what was harvested.

I’m mesmerized by lights and colors, the radiance of life  
In the acrid presence of death that engorges hopes.  
With you, I have a constant firmament that enshrouds  
Bitterness and enraptures the soul into a new beginning.

Light can be a blues-doctor, and a measurer of time.  
One measures the essence of life in terms of light  
And simply clocks darkness like a metronome,  
A passage of time before light rekindles longing.

From the ocean’s womb you surfed toward me with stars  
Perched upon you as if in a reverie. Radiant and effervescent,  
The ethereal lights of our sky warmly claimed us. We swam.  
Back on land, our light brought forth robins and butterflies as we horseback  
The steep and enchanted mountains of the Sleeping Indian;

Climbing past field of cloves, peppers and coffee. We were inhabited  
By an eternal spring, the soft light guided us through the green foliage  
Of the mountain. We trotted along rocky narrow paths and cool waterbeds.  
We heard the waltz of sounds in the forest. There, in the volcanic  
Valley, we re-enlivened our light as a heavenly chronicler of life.
Confluence

Between us, there were never any hallucinations.
In the firmament of our destiny, iridescent haloes
Bridged our unity. We boarded a ferry
Leaving behind bitterly crusted hearts.

Our inadvertent encounter became
An immaculate capturing of our souls,
Streaming to a placid cove of rebirth.
Life chimed in with spellbound connections.

At the wee hour of despair, our hearts sought
Solace in rays where cosmic tears propelled
My fortified being to reveal its structures,
And you unveiled your innermost sanctity.

The anatomy of words bound by flesh,
We began to construct with a surgeon’s
Precision, as hopes reconstructed particles
Of our hearts. The turbulent past quieted,

We transformed each other’s double helices.
Valves with red blood cells shot up
With plasma-perfect similitude of our beings.
Awaited offspring’s arrival solidified our berth.
Menelik

At 4:00 p.m. that October you were extracted
Wailing into light from a balled posture
With tightened fists, right arm extended, and the left
Tucked firmly to your side. A fighting stance.
Muscular, you entered this world determined
Not to be expelled by the subserosal fibroids
That prevented your sister from growing to term.
From burning tears to gleeful tears, you gave us
Our singing throats. That first night, I sang you
To sleep as mommy hummed her pain to her own sleep.
You, blood of our blood, an ocean of ancestral
Plasma swimming through your veins, were made taut:
No ataxia, no angioplasty. Just wailing
That kept us from sleep. You are as
Commanding as your namesake.
Your eyes knowing, lucid,
A star on the altar of our unhappiness.
Secret of La Sirène
For the water spirits

Five brown fingers grip each side of the sink
Like tarantulas awaiting prey.
Gaped mouth, spine stooped.
Violent waves churn inside my stomach
Discharging disagreeable legumes.
I hear forks clinking against plates,
And interspersed between laughter are the rolling
Waves of Negril where Reggae skank down worries.
A flash, fog forms in the bathroom.
I am in between worlds.
Who is this glazed-eyed man in the mirror?
I splash water on my face,
Trying to steady my gaze
As your figure, swathed in blue silk, floats across
The dome of my imagination. I thought.
You touch the suture on my left shoulder
The way a fairy would revive dead flowers.
My existence is in your sanctity.
You, shape-shifter, mother of all realms
No imagination could have produced the soft,
And yet piercing pitch of your voice:
“Invisibility is a way of migrating,” you said.
I almost piss in my white linen pants.
Our sacred covenant was sealed
Before my birth; you hemmed
Yourself into my christening gown
To purify the ablutions of Christianity.
Water is your abode, La Sirène, the element of life:
You bond, you brake, you transform,
But you always maintain. You’ve maintained
Me in the archipelago of survival
Where swords and machine guns
Force spines to sow crops for citizens
Of a street walled off to us. Tonight,
You prevented the food poisoning from lodging
Into my system. Re-booted and refreshed,
I walk back into the enlivened dining room, erected
And knowing that I am rooted with my own siren.
Polarization

I am re-entering the past through constricted valves,
Memories of heavy palpitations that rushed me
To my physician’s office, then to the cardiac unit.
I was wired. Thorough auscultation; strong heart,
Surpassing my male cohort, but the constriction was
Like a Buddha planted on my chest had sprung from
The stubborn divide that persisted between us. After
Our teeth-grinding divorce, you swore to terminate me,
And I vowed to remain unbroken. With Each blow,
Tears morphed into poetry, my unbending spine
Became a target for your vile plots. I bolted down.

Fourteen years after our separation, we still meet in courts.
Split-tongued men in shark suits argued their own interests;
I watched purgatory through your gaze and wondered
If it would have been better to slowly bleed my happiness
Away through a sustained marriage, or endure ceaseless
Proceedings that incised misery into my being. Although
Tattered, I remained a bamboo, knowing that if the brackish
Water of your existence merged into my pond it would
Dissolve my marsh. With new spring rain, the island
Of our flesh became a speck of regrets.
With gritted teeth and chili pepper-eyes, you watched
My boat of desire sail into the horizontal abyss
As your heart pumped sorrow in its own harbor.

What you harbor toward me is an iron oar, cutting.
But our distance is an ocean of silence, and no number
Of oarlocks can clamp me back to your shore.

Years of cavernous pain, forming a grotto of guilt
Inside my skull. How could I go on not penning a mea culpa?
You were once the essence, never cheap sex. A Blue Jay

Beyond the exquisit gift of beauty. You wanted the bonding
Of rings, the cradling of heirs. I was too young for husbandry.
You believed in providence and sortilege was trashing a good love.

I cannot kneel before you, siphon the pus of grief that
Festers your heart, but I can script my regrets into verse
For the song unsung upon the altar of “everlasting.”

We heard the angels sing, and we intoxicated ourselves
With laughter (I remember, you loved cherry Pinot Noir).
But, you were too thin-skinned for my taste.

Instead, my hastened departure, like a rough seaman,
Brought waves of suffering onto your flawless coastline.
I was the first to have taken you to the rough seas.

You wanted for us to remain a tight cluster:
Conico-cylindrical, voluptuous, like the pinot grapes
You loved. That would have been a viticultural hazard.
Testimonial

Swarms of sorrow burst at the seams
Of silence, a code broken; words
Held back become scissored tongues,
As the clamor for truth pits villains
Against walls of stinging tears.
Hand shakes bargain to reduce time—
Granulated words marshaled into ears—
The imminent grammar of violence established
Through testimonial syntax. Axes to grind.

Backroom pains create the mimicry
Of awkward laughter—un-wreathed
Muscles bundled in plastic wrap migrate
Into a space of silence, unmarked, but
Known to some who pledge
On pages and badges not to be mules,
Accomplices, only to accomplish shredding
Of the veil of fear. A cauldron of death
Scalds communities into convulsions.
Theseus’ Shield

When fire ignites the soul, neither Daedalus’
Minotaur, nor the Marathonian
Bulls could slay the shielded Theseus.
In the April labyrinth of violence, bodies were
Sheathed by hands-like-wands untangling limbs.

Minos and Asterion weighed bones on
Scales of framed power blustering pride.
A child fell from the sky, shattered.
Nightingales swallowed their fears and whimpered
Requiems for an assaulted ground.

Inorganic cumulus clouds imbibed
A phantom army of ventriloquists
Were ecstatic by ghostly mayhem,
But armored souls shielded by Theseus
Became new stirring flames of affection.

Wings severed from herons flew with
Memories of lineage, cells of yesteryears.
Amidst flowers, placards and trinkets,
Lazarus roamed the roads as taxon
Without the hope of resurrection.

A town gripped by grief shuffled away
From shards and shattered dreams toward
Gates of liquid faith where communion
Armored souls with a new grammar of hope.
Sorrows are tucked under bold prints.
Underworld Enterprise

Inside the orange jumpsuit is a great-grandfather,
A frail body that harbors unfathomable harm.
I first encountered your name on the streets
Without knowing the height of Winter Hill.
Today, you are my muse as I scribble
In a black notebook over a countertop.
Through large storm windows, I watch
The nakedness of Eastern hemlock
And sycamore, leaves strewn in the streets.

I wonder what you think of African elephants,
The poaching of tusks for the money you lust after?
I imagine you, around a dim-lit harbor, calmly inspecting
Crates of ivory as your crew cashes-in from the slaughter
Of families. Elephants, rhinos, humans…
To you, consciousness is pollution.

Somehow, you are next to me, both in print
And in the softness of the afternoon light, my eyes
Trace the pen’s shadow. Exposed obscurities.
Remembrance of a father, a life parted at the end
Of a gun. Crotches threatened, heads butted, and bodies
Mutilated in shallow graves. In these parts of town,
Ink spilled about you. You are fear and mythology.

Someone calls you a vainglorious bigot
And a Neanderthal. You remain silent,
Knowing where blacks and women belong.
Your supremacy allowed you to bruise the world.
Flesh trafficking is just transaction.
I am looking at your thinning white hair horseshoed
Around a red scalp, where unspeakable mayhem
Are buried beneath your bifocals. White bushy
Eyebrows, terse lips, you’ve become a silent spectacle.

You’ve grown in the belly of barrels, where capital
Is the fire of sustenance: a vile that feeds gluttony
Like wood fire. Through the nozzle, you learned
To lengthen your roots as your climbing vines
Twisted into resisting arteries. Parts of the city
Bulged by the girth of your roots, a sorrow draining
Families onto despair. You became the pipeline,
The smear on the setting sun.
Son of a gun.

Now, grieving hearts eagerly await
The iron cell that will contain your lungs.
All the poaching for the trophy of ivories,
The sharpness of the butchering knife,
Maybe the precision of the guns.
Now silence.
Still, thousands of lives concealed under slabs.

Lost in silence, you furrowed your brow
As voices wept, seeking to enter your mind’s eye
And drift to retrievable memories,
But un-retrievable lives. This is your last shot
In the limelight. Someone burns
With desire to see you pulverized
Like detached elephant tusks.
You shuffle into silence.
Plucking

I was seven
when I first plucked a chicken.
I used to watch older women
wet tiny quills with their lips
and stick the feathered end into their ears.
They sat with their eyes closed,
heads slightly tilted, and gently rolled
a "plume poule" deep inside their ear canal,
they hummed and cleared their throats;
I thought they had the spirit.

At twenty,
When Charles Mingus’ fingers stomped
"Better get it in your soul."
A deep resounding pulse
that responded AH HUM
A pulsating sensation slipping into my ear
the way I felt when saints danced in my sleep,
or perhaps the way my body slowly jerked
when I introduced a wet feather into my ear.
It was then I tried to pluck the bass,
but my fingers were too slow
to thump the groove.

At twenty five,
Newly married, I spotted
a postcard at Vertigo:
five by seven, black and white,
a black man dressed in a tux,
hugging a double bass.
It was 1960, Aaron Bell
of the Duke Ellington band.
The bass rested on his left shoulder,
back arched, head bent forward,
eyes closed, teeth clenched,
biting the music and begging
the instrument for mercy.
At thirty-three,
shaken by divorce’s thump,
I cured my blues through Jazz.
That Spring at the Charles Hotel ballroom,
Dave Holland's left fingers crawled
on four wire strings
the way red spiders dash
back into their holes as his right hand
busy plucking at the belly of the bass.
Sound quivered.

I laughed at the thought
that my Ex tried plucking happiness
out of my soul. I am surrounded
by soul music
of an unbreakable people.
And Holland was playing for saints
while Joe Henderson's tenor manifested
F and C minor inside his red-headed skull.
Plucking and striking chords,
he stomped his right foot,
lifting his bass from the stage
in search of notes. I was in the sanctity
of saints thrilling my own spirit.
Spice-Jack “Buju” Ambroise

*Blues in Red*, the peasants’ blues, they holler as they hoe
Harsh earth. Denim rolled-up calf-high, bare backs
And straw hats, singing working songs since arrival
As they sweat to till the land. Field blues of field hands.
Colonies erected from us. We are blues people
With blazing *rara* rhythm. As we cook, Spice-jack
Ambroise caravans notes and spirits to the spine.

Carrying me across brass mountains as I ride Spice-Jack’s
Hybrid music. African Drums pivoting inside my head,
And I am alighted by colossal *Mapou* trees
Where earthly spirits dwell. I dive inside of an earthen-jar,
To refresh my sore and deprived soul. A caravan
Of spirits encircle me, I meditate on harmony.

Drenched, my body charged, I dwell in music.
Hands on a mother drum beckon
Hips to rise like waves. I must bathe
In sea water, must hearken a drum beat,
And taste spiced salt-fish with plantains.
I am transfixed on a note—
A *rara* rhythm located at the base of the spine.

Ambroise’s climo-chromatics mounted me and
Flapped like the sea against scales. I am scaled.
My ears inundated with waves, ceaseless and visceral.
I libate white rum to *Azaka*, spirit of agriculture,
Around a center post, anointing earth’s elements.
Peasants are the guardians of food, and their venerated
Music feeds the soul. Ambroise, a spice-jack, suffused notes.
Reflection & Improvisation

A bird-like state of soul and I grew wings
To enter “Flamenco Sketches”, salmon sunset
Covered the evening sky and so what if
Miles with roads ahead, or just around the corner
Monk was stomping on notes to find Ugly-Beauty.
This possessed house is my station. I’m on the “A train”
With Ellington, well tailored. There is no wrinkle
In this music, every line is ironed-out.

My nirvana is, listening to jazzologians improvise,
I see the paintings of Picasso, Dodart and Basquiat;
Children holding hands in a circle. Broken and jagged
Lines forming symmetry. A sextet speaking in tongues,
Transcendental scales for the gods. Coltrane
Introspecting and playing himself in rhapsody.

Heaven bound, Cassandra Wilson honey-coated
Lyrics nursed me to happiness through acidic divorce.
In each lock of her brownish dreads,
A rhythmic world. Her phrases, paraphrases
Charmed saints, charming me out of inhibitions.

I’ve danced naked in front of the mirror
And laughed out loud like a tickled-child.
Oh yes! This body is my sanctuary, my sin, a nirvana
Burned by desire. Caught in a field of lush melodies
And invigorating harmonies. Rewind “Flamenco Sketches.”
Paul Chamber’s bass with its stimulating stroke.

I feel divine, bring the drums in be-bop to break in
Temporal axes, and pianos to fill in the contours.
Hold on! I’m inside a congregation of creation,
Baptismal ritual annointed in Jazz,
A suspension of raggedy time, bumping time.
Time is the keeper of cadence, bracing communions.  
The bass is the brace of the rhythm—  
There will not be any doubling of phrases.  
Everything is measured in rib-shaking beats.  
Bop the be and the be will be bopping.  
No bumble bees here, just pure salvation.
Contumelious  
for Nicolas Chauvin

I walk into a world dreaming  
Of blue-jays and turtledoves.  
A mischievous hand plucks a feather  
From my wing, I squawk like a hawk  
And Chauvin becomes my travelling companion.

In pain, I totter my way to the plaza,  
Where a hand bearing white glove  
Hurls a handful of speaking scorpions at me,  
But my ancestors taught me the power of honey.  
I drip golden drops on their claws and watch  
An army of red ants penetrating their shells.

I carry syllables of ghosts,  
Names of soldiers from far continents,  
Prefixes, suffixes, and whole sentences  
Attached to my name.  
I’m never alone in the crossroads of words.  
I climb the tower of Babel,  
A constrictor contuses my corpus  
And Chauvin etches on my chest.

The wind in Academe shifts, I hurry for safety.  
I notice cracked mouths begging for water  
In the courtyard of the queen.  
With jewel hands she offers me a solitary rose,  
Long stemmed and prickly. The tips of my fingers bleed  
A nation, Toussaint walks with Chauvin  
And all the horses neigh in excitement.

As I cross the yard of knowledge,  
The petals from the rose fall in mud,  
A gathering of drunken scholars dance with  
Their own words leaving a black corpse tied  
With guitar strings. They sing ancient anthems  
To the crickets’ philosophers. I feel unsafe  
With Chauvin as my travelling companion.
I remember scrubbing my chest in front of the mirror,
Chauvin stands guard with a pristine Napoléonic
Uniform, smirking. His name brands on my corpus,
I become a tempestuous legionnaire testifying
Against my own masculinity. I am wounded,
Wobbling in academe’s desert,
Where exhaustion constructs mirages.

My father transcended *terra cognita*
Some fifteen years ago, and handed me a dictionary.
His words resonate in my head as a reminder
That: “Poets dissect the world with similes
And they prescribe metaphors.”
From the beyond he shreds Chauvin,
Unseats the queen, and whispers into my ears
The way mothers sing their babies to sleep.

I wax the balcony of my ears
So the queen’s poisonous words
Would not linger in my being.
I walk on to cogitate my craft
In the crossroads of words,
Where a palm tree has grown firm,
Dignified. An Axis.
Thirty-One Years
__(Dec 5, 2012)___

My feet walked another mile.
Thirty-one long winters
And my strides still did not belong.
Sometimes I stumbled upon
Stones, and _nigger or fucking immigrant_
Cut the air like a flight of low
Flying winter birds. Time connived with
History to bind me to the eagle’s back.

I would _rumba, salsa, konpa, reggae, jazz & zouk_
Through ports, remaining a shape shifter.
My strident steps hid the pain from knowing
My soles could not be fully rooted here.
A son who lost his compass & became acrid,
Because his mother wanted to acid
My existence into shreds of nothingness.

But my feet walked another mile.
Despite stumbling embraces here
& there, I never fully belonged.
So I danced around dreams of flight.
Fearing the lashes of dominating red birds,
I enveloped pages of literati in my cocoon.
I hardened, I shape-shifted, I suited,
I enunciated & still I felt the uprooting pain.

Thomas Jefferson hated Toussaint’s boots.
My ancestors took steps in 1804, flinging
Sugar barons over bleeding Carib reefs,
African ribs ripped to plant white gold
Over ossified plantations. Thousands of feet
Hardened by colonial demands for coffee,
Pounding. Our tarsus rooted in the soil
Of our blood. My steps are a geographical
Blueprint of a crisscrossed world, merchants
Vend souls and bent-back field hands breed
Hybridity within the archipelago of Atlantic
Wombs. Wounded, stripped & fatherless
We are cocooned in our own black & red flag
With an erected palm tree, canons & sables.
My spine is a palm & my steps are history.
At a moment of despair, when my feet
Wanted to burn the winter roads behind,
I danced around dreams of flight,
Then a dove entered in my abode and coaxed me
From my cocoon. We floated above the cursed
Ground, only anchored to the currents
That gently reposed our wearied feet.
Thirty-one long gnawing winters treaded
& the abrasive terrain still rejects my roots.

Yet, I am an Atlantic diasporic molded & shaped
By circumstances, constantly shift-shifting
To survive parasitic waves. I may be bruised,
Or even battered by broken branches, but
My tarsus is rooted in the soil. My palm-spine
Is history. I can only take bold steps into destiny.
Now that my cells have split once more to bring
A new joy into my longing steps, I bloom again.
Another son emerges bearing a historical moniker.
His radiant eyes beam angels. I’m home.
Invocation

If you could sit underneath a cotton-silk wood
And grill a snapper to the bones, you would.

If you could summon God to help you swat flies
From the parched, begging mouths, you would.

If you could chase dandelions with a brush
And paint the setting sun, you would.

If you could smooth out dreams of refugees
Going against the tides of plutocrats, you would.

But, the imagination flaps and falls.
Leaving incessant waves slapping rocks.

An uplifting voice breaks out: “Yes, you can do it.”
You close your eyes and glide.

Only, the blue skies turned into burnt lilies,
The mockingbirds become deafening sirens.

You string your prayers, like kites, and fly them
To the stratosphere, vacant. Shock, you remove your shoes,

And descended into the waiting room of believers
Enduring a cacophony of wishes and dictates.

Then, you spot a French dictator whose scissor-like hands
You avoid shaking. Your eyes scan the room-filled with auctioneers

Flipping verses, you try to remember history as you watch
Flippant redeemers pastorate with the Conquistadors’ swords.

You close your eyes trying to switch channels, frantic.
But the flame of the burning monk forces you to pray.
The Magic of Rhythm
For YK, PL, SH, BD, RP, DW, ME, AS, EB, DRC

I will study you,
Angiograph your arteries
Of imagination like talking drums.
Drum talking my syllables to
The apex of cortices, until ears bleed
Their stubbornness to foreign rhythms—
Since there are no calabash trees in Amherst,
And you “never saw a moor,”
Not even the sea, then you will misread
My temperamental waves that gush
Agonies like moaning whales.

You, rhythmic master, you make sparrows
Dance on naked branches. You, canvas
Painter, heighten the blues of blue jays
And the reds of cardinals. In the pale
Light of gloomy nights, you induce clarity.
I will study by rote the murmur of your breath
As I unpack the cadence of a tailored sorcerer
In this land of Bishop, Dickinson, and Frost
I will not be a scarecrow in a shawl.

I was not baptized by a bishop,
And no deacons ushered in my pulse.
My tropical land is absent of frost.
Green leaves are nutrients for hawk moths.
And in the foliage of synonyms,
I want to be a new leaf, potent, consumable.
I’ve learned, the rhythm of this land
Does not echo in calabash gourds,
But glides on harp strings—hybrid lines, I am.
My rhythm, like the kora, will be a new breath,
A fusion of hearts and lungs until the body no longer
Sustains the flaming fluids of external arteries.
Then, like a Jali, I will walk into the sunlight
Far away from decrepit ghosts, pluck my strings
In ostinato riffs, and dance my genealogy.
Cantor of the Irish Spring
In memory of Seamus Heaney 1939-2013

With keen, incisive sight, you witnessed limbs
Torn from their roots as elements countered
The Crown, and the pecking orders of crows.
You crossed yourself knowing the long searing
Sufferings of the Celts—robbed, split over crossed-bars,
Boundary lines, imported crucifixes; however small—
Soldiered a splintered identity,
A way of cupping, cuffing the land.

Your mind ‘was its own bull-pen’.
Your tongue ploughed the land,
Tilting and harvesting unified syllables,
A state, a mind, a state of mind, a multi-vocal
Irishness that silences spiteful nozzles, muddles through
Your incessant drinking from the brain’s rain, a reign.

You entered a chorus of departed poets,
Their tongues permanently lit for recitals
To the gods. Lucid images and lingering sounds
Planted permanent pews inside us. Language is left
As host for an inexhaustible communion. We praised
Your rhythm of rain through a canopy of poignant syllables.

No starched flag, nor barbwire governed your tongue,
You wintered out the old snows that cracked fertile land,
And with your plough-like pen you dug for verdant
Earth as you squared your lines into ameliorative spaces
Of the field of force. Commodious poet,
Herculean earthen who libated with raindrops,
And comforted Ireland with your tending plough.

Poetry was your religion; you became
A liniment of a poet—constant and astute.
You became a touchable and luminous garden spirit.
You entered history unswaying, unwavering
Leaving us a language of fresh mint.
Patrick Sylvain is an academic, poet, writer, social critic, translator and a photographer. He teaches at Brown University’s Center for Language Studies, and He is also affiliated with the Anthropology Department at UMass/Boston, Rhode Island School of Design (RISD), and the African and African-American Studies Department at Harvard where he earned 5 teaching excellence awards from The Derek Bok Center for Teaching and Learning. Sylvain receives his B.A. in Political Science and Social-Psychology from UMass/Boston; an ED.M. in Human Development and Psychology with a focus on Language and Literacy from Harvard University Graduate School of Education where he was a Conant Fellow. Sylvain is completing an M.F.A. in Creative Writing at Boston University where he was awarded a Robert Pinsky Global Fellowship to conduct research and write in Senegal. **Research Interests:** His main research interest relates to the formation of colonial and neo-colonial subjects in North America and the Caribbean with a particular focus on the intersection between politics and religion. Sylvain has worked on metaphor & political discourse analysis; structural violence; literary criticism; critical political theory; and the politics of language, second language acquisition and national identity. He has been published in numerous anthologies and journals, Including: African American Review, Agni, American Poetry Anthology, American Poetry Review, Caribbean Writers, The Best of Beacon 1999, The Butterfly’s Way, Human Architecture: Journal of Sociology of Self-Knowledge, Massachusetts Review, The Oxford Book of Caribbean Verse, SX Salon, Ploughshares and the West African Research Association “Spring Newsletter 2014”. Sylvain’s work was featured in PBS NewsHour as well as in NPR’s Here and Now; his short story: «Odette» is featured in Edwidge Danticat’s Haiti Noir (Akashic Books, 2011), and recent poems in the collection Poets for Haiti (Yileen Press, 2010). **Published and Forthcoming Book Chapters:** 1- “Haiti: Malversive State and Teetering Nation” in Fixing Haiti: MINUSTAH and Beyond. Edited by Jorge Heine and Andrew Thompson. CIGI Press, 2011. 2- “The Macoutization of Haitian Politics.” In Politics and Power in Haiti. Edited by Paul Sutton and Kate Quinn. Palgrave McMillan, 2013. 3- “Gastronomical Metaphors: Their Sexual and Socio-Political Contexts in the Haitian Culture.” In LATIN AMERICAN STUDIES: Critiques of Contemporary Cinema, Literatures, Politics and Revolution. Edited by David Gallagher. Academica Press, 2011. 4- “The Violence of Executive Silence.” In The Idea of Haiti: Rethinking Crisis and Development. Edited by Millery Polyné. University of Minnesota Press, 2013 5- “Martelly’s Election: Shades of Populism and Authoritarian Rule.” In Tectonic Shifts: Haiti Since the Earthquake. Edited by Mark Schuller. Kumarian Press, 2012. 6- “Vodoun: In the Crossfire of Christian Hegemony.” In Africans, African-Americans and the Abrahamic Religions. Edited by John Thornton & Linda Heywood. 7- “The Price of Poverty and The Ecology of Exploitation.” In The Caribbean: Aesthetics, Ecology and Politics. Edited by Michael Niblett. University of London Press, 2014. Sylvain was also a contributor to CNN.com and a contributing editor to the Boston Haitian Reporter. His bilingual poetry collection is Love, Lust & Loss was published in 2005 by Mémoire D’Encrier, and Masuife, a collection of metered verse written in Haitian, Trilingual Press (Spring 2013). He is currently working on two multidisciplinary books on Haiti entitled “Haiti: Scorched Pearl of the Antilles” and “Framing Discourse: Metaphors, Poetics and Representation.”