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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, SAN DIEGO

Without Blood, A Looseleaf Memoir

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree Master in Fine Arts

in

Writing

by

Cathiana Sylne

Committee in charge:

Professor Anna Joy Springer, Chair
Professor Amy Adler
Professor Amelia Glaser
Professor Winifred Woodhull

2013

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The Thesis of Cathiana Sylne is approved, and it is acceptable in quality and form for publication on microfilm and electronically:

Chair

University of California, San Diego

2013

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The following Audio-Visual Recordings are available at Mandeville Special Collections Library:

1. “Myèl”
<https://vimeo.com/67597042>
2. “Kite”
<https://vimeo.com/67597311>
3. “Regret”
<https://vimeo.com/67600243>
4. “Winter Letter”
<https://vimeo.com/67597312>
5. “Window”
<https://vimeo.com/67604057>
6. “Forgiving”
<https://vimeo.com/67604022>
7. “Pooling”
<https://vimeo.com/67597314>
8. “Adapted”
<https://vimeo.com/67597313>

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Without Blood, A Looseleaf Memoir

by

Cathiana Sylne

Master in Fine Arts in Writing

University of California, San Diego

Professor Anna Joy Springer, Chair

Without Blood is a memoir-based poetry and prose collection that engages with conflict in culture, identity, and translation. The various poetry and prose pieces presented here evolved from the heart of a conflicted identity (mine). The final body of work invites many instances of language, identity, and culture (written, unwritten, photographed, spoken, unheard) to conflict and interlace.

without blood, *A looseleaf memoir*

by Cathiana Sylne

Foreword

Dear reader,

My vision is for parts of this book to be small enough to lose.

With all my heart,
CS

*With an East wind, we lose everything. At first. And then we begin [].
Exchanging our loss for words.*



Image 1

This is not a butterfly.

Prologue

It is tempting to make this romantic. A musical. The story of a dim girl who rose to the occasion. She had a sailboat, which she'd made herself from random scraps of leftover. Pieces of dry wood washed up on shore. A plastic bag with dropped tears inside of it. Planks from injured sailboats of a lost time. And that's how she managed across. She put the pieces together. She got into the sailboat. With willpower and ancestors interred inside. She rocked the boat forward. She set it off shore. Past her first horizon, she climbed. And the sun fisted in the sky. And the sun cried to the deepest night clouds. *See [who] is departing! See [who]'s back on a boat.*

And the sun fisted inside the clouds. And the clouds grew winded and angry. Together they assembled terrible things from all parts of history to fling and lash at the boat.



Image 2

But the girl begged the suns and reasoned with the others, placating the tall winds, the clouds. She prayed to her ancestors (somewhere) buried deep down inside. She asked them to help her rise to the occasion, to conquer the clouds, and vanquish the fist of the sun, to quiet the sobs of falling stars, hurled at night in her boat. The girl commanded and plowed and prayed through the tides and the white infringement entangling the air all about.

At long last, the girl haunted—comes slow through a muddled sunset.

She finishes her departure through a glen of huge, hunchbacked mountains. Begging her, *please* not to go.

That night, with the help of a compass she'd swallowed—the stars agreed abundantly not to come out at night:

That night, our girl creeps from the Caribbean.

Part I

*breathing
without[†] evidence
of breath.*

[†] In Haitian Kreyol *san*, the word for *without*, also means *blood*.

*The first story unspools near the San Diego skyline where reflections of
the citiscape pool violetly behind my glass.*

CITY OF THE SON



Image 3

The son,
sleeping.

...



Image 4

Chak samdi,⁺

the doors open at one.

Children walk in
straight as teeth,
sporting sponge
flip flops from America.

Reds, greens,
a canary yellow,
smacking the tight back
of white heels.

Vye Sodye!⁺⁺
Where's Vye Sodye?
The priest is a pursed lip.

The clock strikes.

He's here! Kaliko calls,
pointing to a place
behind her.

And hanging,
Vye Sodye's head.

Vye Sodye, come!
Vye Sodye comes.

⁺ Every Saturday

⁺⁺ Old Pots

The priest bends
into the milk of
his eyes.

That's your name boy?
Vye Sodye?
That's your Christian name?
Does your mother
call you that?

No. My aunt does.

Jacqueline does too.

Ok.
What does your mother
call you?

My mother?

Yes.
The priest is a wreck-
ed brow.

Your mother. What does
she call you?

My mother calls—

Uh-uh!
Kaliko singsongs,
back of the line.

He's the one
calls his mother.

Manman, oui.
Whoah, manman. He cries.
—She never answers

once.

Kaliko's body tips farther
into the aisle.

All night,
I hear him crying.

You're Fénande's boy?
Vye Sodye nods.

...



Image 5

I see.

The rains have stopped
now.

A light wind

trapped in
pirouette,

eddies on a pile
of junk.

...



Image 6

Chaq fwa,[†]

a warm breeze collects
glass droplets from
a sheet of river water
teeming with mosquitoes,

death piles
sparkling kisses
on a black person's brow.

The forehead,
sinewy and dark,

draws colorwork
from African ancestors,

the blue skinned
Tuerags,

clay-bodied
Aka-ha-noes,

and very fierce,
fierce, deep blacks,
with tree-like shadows

wobbling on
skinny legs.

[†] Every time

Today,
the boy's forehead
is soil for
a misty Braille,

domes line up, beady and gray
trembling on his brow.

Kaliko, beside him,
surveys his scalding forehead.

Moist buttons shred
into streams,

trickling warmth
into chinks of
his eyes and mouth.

Kaliko meets the rivers
halfway,

riding a wet
wet rag,

up and down
his face.

She hums--

The boy cries out,

Manman, oui! Whoa!
Manman.

His face

scrunches
into a bowl.

No kidding,
Kaliko tells him.

There's a small bed of roses
dying

the back
of your tongue.

The wet rag,

red
on its way
back up,

silences
a new lock of tears.

Kaliko tries hard

to remember
a song.

...



Image 7

At the trefoiled gates of
Levants-ne,

five nuns
in civilian attire,

start crying.

We are tasked with
a world beyond
our reach!

(Their chorus
sounds badly.)

The one touch
of a human hand—

is a sandstorm
of dust!

It is better,

if our souls
should rot here.

We had better
rot here,

than to go back
to the boy with
no answer.

At a leg in their prayer,
a groggy head

(big as an
angel's)

peeks out
of a sore in the
Levants-ne,



Image 8

its marble hand

slips a fiery thing
into theirs.

*It's been three months in San Diego and I'm losing my vocabulary
(though not my memory). Memory is fragile, not forgiving. In one dream,
I am holding a black[†] man:*

He is my falsetto, I am his rococo...

[†] For lack of a better word, I will use black.

*In my mother's dream, I walk the streets of Port-au-Prince naked, alone.
My mother does not call often. When she does, she and I talk about
not having called.*



Image 9

*Regret,
triggered
by night*

falling

Last night, or two ago, or three, my father called in the middle of my study time. He asked me to hold on. He had a customer in his cab. He asked me to hold. I comforted him with my sincere willingness to hold. He hung up and called back.

How was Haiti? I asked him. How was your time there?

My father's laughter sounds shaky but slips tidily across our line. Well, you know how these things are. Sweet. He tells me. Sweet like it was myèl[†]. Sweet like it was both honey and bee.

[†] In Haitian Kreyol, myèl is both honey and bee.



Image 10

I comforted him with my sincere willingness to hold.

HERDING BONES

△△△

The breaking of bones sears through the night like the mighty teeth of scissors on linen. It sinks into the eardrums of villagers. It shakes their dreams, settling on their skins like salt on the sand of dunes.

At the mouth of a lush, green hill, with its head in the clouds, there is the small house of a goat herder. A goat herder with cheeks stark as tombs. His gray beard hangs from his dark chin like smoke rising from an upside down chimney chute. There's not much this man can say that his beard hasn't said already. It steals answers from his lips. The gray beard announces:

This man is stubborn, hungry, and old.

At about sunset, as clouds convene, a vivid darkness settles on the town. There is faint but precise howling, whispers creeping from the grave, shadows lurking in the spaces between things. This is the time of day when everyone hurries home. This is the time of day when the goat herder heads out.

△△△

“How many more left?” Egg white eyes stare from behind a netted doorframe. A netted frame to keep the company of mosquitoes out.

“I can’t imagine,” the goat herder’s rough whisper swallows the quiet night. Mosquitoes buzz in and out of his ear.

“Well imagine. For once old man, imagine.”

“I think maybe five. Maybe more.” The goat herder just wants to go home.

A hand reaches to push a sloppy note outside the netted door. The money lands at the goat herder’s feet, clinging to his muddy toes. A door slams shut.

The goat herder bends to swallow the thin, feeble note. Swallows it with a gnarled, grimy hand. He turns to face the walk home.

△△△

The moon is shining in full brilliance, casting a white glow on everything it sees. Tall coconut trees and stout, green bushes shiver in the coldness of night. There is no romance in this moonlight, only severe whiteness, like pearls polished from the pit of the sea.

The goat herder makes his way across a dirt road and through a thicket of bush and garbage. Treading lightly on the heads of mushrooms and dew-drinking weeds, he arrives to face the sea. With a shallow huff, the goat herder kicks the sliced head of a coconut shell.

This entire day, he has been full of a sudden restlessness, an overwhelming angst, as if his soul no longer fit. He felt it had dwindled to live in the pit of his stomach, swirling in the mush of yams and onion he'd eaten that day. Worries clinked inside his head like frantic dragonflies locked inside a jar. Everything felt cracked inside splintered sadly, snapped in uneven halves.

It was the end of a night's work, and he was on his way home after giving numbers to the man. Every last day of the week, he would tell the man how many bones had been unburied, broken, and shelved. Then the goat herder would take his pay and walk home.

But tonight, the journey home was dragging its feet. It felt twice as long pulling a wiry finger through the length of his white beard. It felt twice as long expiring a breath.

As the goat herder shuffles home, the sea sighs, grazing his cheek with wet lips. He almost wishes the water would swallow him whole. He would be swept suddenly. Into the arms of a beautiful mermaid. At the peek of dawn, he'd steal away from her. Stealthily, quietly, he'd leave his soul to rust at sea.

The goat herder almost wishes. But he doesn't.

△△△

Most people think the nighttime is an area cleared for dreaming. A place for emptying colorful thoughts treasured deep in our chests all day. Night descends and out tumbles sunsets with blue skies blooming underneath.

But the goat herder is no dreamer. Dreaming is for fools, or worse, for the faint-hearted. The goat herder is built strong. He was born on one of the hottest days, right in the middle of a drought. In fact, his mother died just minutes after giving him birth.

If that doesn't make a case, fast-forward eleven years, when a raging flood sweeps the goat herder's home away, his father encapsuled inside. As a young boy, the goat herder would search for his father's body for days. He would trek alone, eating his fingernails until he had none. And when he found his father's body, tangled in the broken grasp of a cherimoya tree, he would separate his father from fruit, clear the ground of dark brown seeds, and dig a hole for his father to lie.

This one story, of the many untold, should tell you why this goat herder is stubborn not to dream. It should make clear to you why he moved his house to a hill with a head full of clouds.

△△△

The unlit horizon blushes with a red-copper light, kindling the gold of straw roofs. Daylight cracks with the soft busyness of any other day. The lazy ears of cornhusks rustle. Fat flies with rice paper wings sneak artfully past curtains that sway. Old men yawn. Children stir. Grown women iron pale skirts on pristine, white sheets.

A woman with round shoulders and skin darkened to mocha is clearing her backyard of leaves. She swings the broom as her hips rise to the lilt of a childhood tune.

“Madame, have you heard the news yet?”

Her tune dies. She spots a long-limbed boy standing on the cobblestone road. His dark skin glimmers blue, greased from the liquid of sea. As she squints against the white day, she recognizes the rangy figure as the baker’s son.

“Madame, have you heard the news yet?” He asks again, flipping a tanned towel over his shoulder.

“No, I haven’t heard anything.”

“Well, there’s a question floating around, about the goat herder. He hasn’t been seen in these parts for days.”

The mocha-skinned woman grunts with disdain. “And who cares what that man’s done with himself? He’s been a hurt to this town ever since he came.”

“Well I thought should tell you. I thought you should know. People are curious as to where he’s been.”

“Well that information is tumbleweed.” The mocha-skinned woman bristles. “It’s just as useful as that.”

△△△

The goat herder leans into a fading edifice. He stumbles through a shack of mud floors. His hand fumbles with the darkness, searching for a thread of light.

He almost makes it. The cot. The cracked window. A ray of light. But his wreck of a body falters. It collapses just inches from the cot. Dust flurries in a startled gasp. His body crumples into a mass of old clothes.

△△△

There are simple assumptions to make when things are missing. You assume they were taken. You think, maybe they left. You wonder if they were ever really there. Two nights ago, these questions warred inside an inquiring bald head.

The goat herder stood in the stomach of an empty grave. Floored. The hole he'd dug beneath a tombstone inscribed *Bernard Sinclair* revealed a rectangular, wooden casket the size of a small boy. But the only figure inside the casket was a gaping hole, eaten by the passage of time. There was no corpse. No bones to speak of.

Salt from the sweat of his bald head stung the goat herder's eyes. He wondered, is that how it feels to cry?

"Mister, what is it to you?" The words came from a distance, so faint the goat herder questioned if his own words had reached him.

But he looked up, and a reedy shadow stared back down. The shadow's face was bone-thin, without the comfort of flesh.

“Mister, I said what is it to you? Why are you digging this grave?”

The goat herder searched the dark face deeply. His mind drew a blank. The voice carried the raspiness of a maturing boy.

“And what’s it to you?” The goat herder asked. “What hold have you got on these bones?”

Electric white eyes grew round in the shadowy face. There was a pause. Then the dark figure extended a spare hand.

“I’ll help you up sir.”

The goat herder hesitated. It was not out of fear. That would be unusual. No. He experienced suspicion. No one traversed the Sinclair graveyard. Not since the verdict. No one wandered this graveyard alone.

“What are you doing here?” The goat herder persisted once pulled out of the hole he’d dug himself into.

“I’m looking for something.” The answer was pinched from lips dry as twigs. The stranger carried a slight frame draped in a soiled shirt of royal blue. His large forehead prefaced two black, bushy eyebrows stacked precariously above his eyes. Though the boy stood a couple inches taller than the goat herder, his gangly figure betrayed the breadth of his age.

“Well that’s not an answer to the direct question I’m asking.
What are you doing in this haunted place?”

“My business has nothing to do with you sir and everything
to do with the grave you’re robbing.”

The goat herder’s wiry finger tangled in his white beard.
“Then what does that grave mean to you?”

“Well since you’re asking.” The boy of royal blue walked
around the goat herder to stare into the freshly dug grave. “This
grave is proof. It’s solid proof. I may possibly be alive.”

Between fiction and home (on and off) I am writing again, my words petering to loss. The letter I received after winter explains that I have been suffering from writer's block perhaps because I am separated from two places, Haiti and Miami.

Most of the pieces I began this quarter remained unfinished, the letter explains. "Pieces of her while good, would have been better if extended."



Image 11

*Pieces of her while good
would have been better if extended.*

The spot on our block

The past few weeks, our living room space has been bought up by a crowd of noisy *jeunes gens* from around the block who either don't have a television or don't have companions to scream at across the room, or don't have a room to scream across.

To understand the reason for all this getting together, you have to understand the relationship my country, Haiti, has with the rest of the world. There's a big clock ticking over our heads telling us exactly when the *World Cup* comes around. Every four years the spirit of Argentina and Brazil jumps into anyone in the country. We become people from crazy town shouting "*Ajantin!*" "*Brezil!*" First thing in the morning. It's a very serious matter to us. Not convinced?

There's this time a riot almost carried a boy I know right off the map. He was coming from a *boutik* holding a chilled *Kola Couronne* strongly between his fingers when the whole section of his neighborhood erupted. Brazil had won against Argentina. Bodies came flowing out of every block.

Before the boy knew it, this lady was standing between him and his drink.

"She grabbed it out my hand and smashed it till the thing was glossing the floor," he was telling me the next day.

“What’d you do?”

“I didn’t have it in me to scream at her so I just started running from the both of them.”

“From her *and* the chilled *Kola Couronne*?”

“Yeah. And it took all I had. To see the pavement doing what I wanted to do, drinking all that chilled *kola* in one gulp. I think that’s what saved my life in the end. Being jealous of the pavement and all, my feet hit it hard and fast. Soon as the crowd was thickening. And it wasn’t two seconds before I heard a scream and saw this boy falling dead cold right in the spot I’d been standing on.”

“You’re sure that was the spot you’d been standing on?”

“Yeah.”

And the next day we went measuring the distance between the bloodstain on the ground and the spot where the pavement was twinkling with shattered glass from the *Kola Couronne*.

*No one
believes
you that
a spirit
can rape
you but
they can
and they
do. When
they're real
scared or in
a bad mood,
they don't
give you
time to
take off
your shoes.*

The Bèl Timoun of La Saline⁺

⁺ Performed at
<http://tabernacleofjoy.wordpress.com/category/bel-timoun/>

The answer is zero, she begins to say—

Ce pa vre! The crowd exclaims. The children start to boil. A group of them rise to swarm Tanne like bottle-flies near opened fruit. Some children jump to tilt their yellowing heads up to sky, lamenting Tanne's answer and filing their complaints to God.

Here is why there are zero eggs. Tanne starts to explain. The children settle but are perched for attack.

Citoyen Kolonèl had four eggs but someone stole two. On the road to his neighbor's house, he glimpses a bag of bones stashed inside tall lemongrass. The Citoyen sees his yellow egg yolk trickling down a wet snout.

The Kolonèl changes direction. He heads home to his outside kitchen at the back of his yard. In a small tin can shining, he adds mandrake roots to the two eggs left behind.

That afternoon, from a not too far distance, Citoyen Kolonèl purses his sun-dried lips to make a sequence of smooching sounds.

Vini non! Citoyen Kolonèl settles the can on the ground. The bag of bones approaches. The Kolonèl gestures toward the can. Ale non, pleading with the dog. Ale non!

The dog looks up with a question, then down into the can. He sniffs with concern but laps the yellow liquid trembling inside.



Image 12

This is not a butterfly.

† Dental x-ray showing excessive bone loss, taken January 6, 2010.

The first guy I hung out and had drinks with here in San Diego, biked a hackney around for a living. He smoked pot heavily and likened me to Lauryn Hills, whom he clarified as being more beautiful—a queen, he explained—though with my wide lips and long braided extensions, in his eyes, I certainly came close.

Quietly to myself, and behind my own eyes, I likened him to Rocky Balboa. (For sure I thought this guy was decent and honest, but he was asking for a knockdown.)

Butterflies[†] vs. Fleas

[†] First captured in 2003.

As night is sunken to day, the sky is a healing bruise to which the smell from bread ovens rise.

At the bottom of clouds, shapes burn into the sky. Reds, paperback yellows, and guava pink when grandma makes the tea. A rooster's silly cackle is my sister, actually, who pulls covers from beneath me, pokes her butt and chin in opposite directions, and cockle-doodle-doos.

"Early risers are hard workers," says Grandma. "They will meet success early in life. They will have more marrow in the bone. More substance to speak of."

But for me, the best gift of waking before the sun, are the things you can be first to find.

Early risers are dew collectors. They can catch wet breezes sitting on cracked windowsills where oceans left them to die. They can cross paths with early-rising sea creatures, heavy-tailed mermaids, shipwrecked ancestors, walking the breadth of the sea. They can hopscotch away or towards the sun. They can jumprope without fleas.

That's if you're from where I'm from.

Here, ocean is our backyard and children float naked for whole parts of the day. When the sun yawns, they lead goats past broken fields, scraped as knees, to grass from the other side.

On ocean and the shore, boats lie. Boats painted with pastel suns and turquoise seas. Boats sleeping in pairs, toppled over, or on their rumps. Boats for the fishermen, and the fishermen are for the wives, and the wives are for flushing out of the cupcake-colored houses perched crookedly by the sea.

“Achete Viande!” Buy meat, these women cry out. Their words scooped in one breath, syllables stretched out and clinging at fingertips.

On top of their heads, buckets and wicker baskets fly. Sardines, dried from the day before. Fresh dead things. The head of lambs, goat feet, and open-mouthed fish.

They wear bright scarves tied at their hips, cheerful fabric around their heads, dark prints across their breast.

Early rising marks our bareback hills with pride. Women and men rocking the streets—spice contenders, shoe shiners, and machan pen with breadbaskets the shape of wombs.

Bread in squares and in the shape of a star winking. Bread, hot and sighing. Bread, their tummies flat open to the world, so soft and newborn, they can wake you from the dead.



Roche-a-Bateau, by the Sea

In Haiti, there are mountains. They call the people on them *moun mòn*, mountain people. They say we are simple, without deep thoughts. I say deep thoughts bring deep trouble. That's why I like my grandma's house on that silly mountain in Roche-a-Bateau. Roche-a-Bateau, by the sea. No sentries. No borders. No questions for entry. Just mountains, land, and sea.

To get to the river in the back, people come through my grandmother's front yard. There are dark bodies, toned, oily, and new. They walk between our pomegranate and mango trees, our tea-leaved bushes, and avocado seeds.

For most people in town, plantains, sweet potatoes, and yams washed down with river water is all that they can afford. My grandmother says that's why their dark skins are toned, oily, and new. I say there's an undiscovered youth fountain in my grandma's backyard and she's secretly charging them fifty cents a jug.

The people coming through our yard bring plastic gallons for water and secret news for my grandmother. When I'm not playing with my sister, I tune in to their broadcast. When Egma is around, I push her head between her knees and command her to

hold still. I bury my breath so grandma won't hear me crouching behind the door.

Many times my sister's mumblings make a big hole in the stories I collect.

"Kati," she is saying. "My legs don't feel right. And there's a rotten smell coming from the floor."

"Shhhh!" I press her head harder into her knees. "I can't hear." But there is unimportant silence.

"Egma!" I am in fury. "The best part of the story is gone!" A knuckle to her head. "Now we'll have to pay Whistler and Dodo to tell us the rest. We'll have to dance like monkeys in their show."

My sister leaves me with a big hole in my story. I leave her ashamed and cramped on the floor.

Whistler and Dodo sell the fillings for the stories I collect. They are tall, lanky, boys with oval stomachs behind their shirts.

When the sun is falling behind the horizon, Whistler gives me his terms in a golden cornfield growing on the side of the house.

"Five mangos, a *bon bon*, plus a kiss on my lips."

Fruit. Cookies. Kisses. That's the price. I've never kissed a boy before. At least my kisses are worth something.

“No—three kisses.” Whistler is the type to change his mind. “Two for me and one for Dodo. He’s my best friend.”

My sister is twisting knots in her pink, metallic skirt. I owned that skirt before she did.

“Who is first?” I ask bravely. “Line up in single-file please.”

Now, we are top secret. If grandma looks outside her window, she will see the gold of her cornfield leaving with the sun. Maybe she will catch a twinkle from the metallic skirt I owned before my sister did. But she won’t see Whistler. He pushes past tall cornstalks to press his dark lips against mine.

Sweet potatoes and burnt plantains on his breath and that oval stomach pressed into my ribs.

My sister counts for us.

“One.” She is looking at her fingers instead of the jaw-breaking kiss happening right in front of her.

“Two.”

Whistler pulls his lips away. His face is all lines and a frown, his lips chapped and peeling.

I look behind him to Dodo and the boy is not smiling.

“Next,” I say boldly.

Whistler smacks his lips distastefully. Dodo gapes from behind. Suddenly, both boys leap from the kissing line. Their black limbs slice across a blond cornfield.

I look back at Egma and she is bent over, her flat chest bursting with laughter as the dense-headed boys flee the scene.

That's what my kisses are worth.



Camille Bush of the George Bushes

Most of the time there is nothing exciting happening in this town unless you make it from scratch. You'll pull a needle from inside a camel before something new shows up on this side of the world. There's a lot of time to spin here, a lot of soul-searching going on, and a lot of crazy people doing it.

Camille is a friend of a friend of the family. A distant cousin, or maybe, I heard, he is my uncle's godfather. But somehow he's connected to my family, and he is given privilege to our front yard anytime he likes.

The first time you meet Camille, you will snap your fingers sideways and forward, trying to remember where you saw him first or who he reminds you of. It will be on your tongue's tip—honey, ginger, new years—touches of things you've assembled here and there reaching out the moment you see him.

Camille is an old nutshell, small and bent forward, his backbones worshipping the ground he walks on. His face is dark like coffee beans after roasting, fine and smoother than men his age. But, at most, what you will take to memory about him is the large smile always banished to the left side of his face.

Camille says he isn't from this backward place in the countryside in a poor, unsparkly part of the world. His connection is with a prestigious family. He is the boyfriend of the Bush daughter. He is Camille Bush of the Bushes, of George Bush, of the presidents of the United States.

He can explain this to you in English, which for him is tripped up Haitian words, strung together by sloppy S's tied at the end of each word. Spun like a drowsy river, the words flow their course so smoothly you will think he's actually mastered the English language.

Even though it doesn't show up most of the time, when Camille's anger happens, it does not cut corners. His words break like water hitting the hot bottom of a greasy pan, striking you in the face, puncturing sight, ear, and nose, so you better take cover and give him some space.

This anger happens mostly at my uncles and at a young man named Mamas. With too much time on their hands, and

nothing to make of it, my uncles and Mamas keep themselves entertained at a cost to Camille.

On one day actually, Mamas comes zipping up past grandma's house, riding the town's one and only motorcycle to Camille's dirt house, stacked farther up the hill. Camille barely woken up from his straw mat, has no time to roll up his bed before Mamas is pushing him out the door.

"Ann ale, monché! Come on man! Your girlfriend is on the phone. We can't have the president of America and his daughter waiting on you to button your shirt holes."

With this pressure on him, Camille worms into a diplomatic white shirt, his warped body as tall as it will ever be.

Then Mamas and Camille, in all speediness and glory, come zooming down the hill on the one and only motorcycle, an entire town clipped to their doorways to watch. Some women are waving handkerchiefs in the air. Some men reach quickly to pat Camille on the back.

Camille, swallowed in the balloon of his sun-pressed, collared shirt, clings to Mamas' taut belly, the wind rippling his coffee roasted skin, and that large smile banished to the left side of his face.

“Mamas *fè vit!*” Hurry up, a woman cries. “We can’t have the President Bush of America waiting.” The entire town, tongue in cheek, lock their smiles inside.

Mamas, swallowing a laughter, rides with his chocolate head thrown back. Camille, with a king’s shoulders, waves here and there at friends when passing by.



Bébé Who Couldn't Scream

I don’t really know his name but we call him Bébé, which means “deaf” in Kreyol. He’s the boy who has no home but lives everywhere, except home.

In my grandma’s backyard we play silly games. We make food with mud, coconut leaves, and mango seeds. Bébé is always hungry. Skinny and brown with rubber legs, he’s the only boy who listens to what I say.

Bébé’s eyes are brown like brand new honeycomb and his ears are perfect sun-kissed rolls. But Bébé has only one smiley-faced shirt and his shorts have holes the size of peanuts.

One day, Egma and I find a tin can, a tin can that smells like rusty coins. Egma picks it up first but I argue that I saw it before she did.

“ But how do you know I didn’t see it first?” she asks.

“Older sisters always see things first,” I tell her. “It’s the way it’s always been.”

She frowns but gives me the can. We run to the big mango tree. I jump over the orange coconut leaves and my sister runs at my side on the lazy, brown path that sleeps between a plot of plantain trees and our cornfield. We take that path to a big, mango sobbing-tree. Visited mostly during the fall when it bears fruit, the tree grows solemn and waves at itself.

My sister and I sit around our hole near the mango tree. We start making a drink. Mud, green leaves, brown leaves, rotten seeds, water, and fake berries. Then we shake it well, like it says on the can. We shake the tin can that my sister found first but I saw before she did. Bébé comes skipping down the lazy, brown path that ends at the mango tree. We give him the drink.

“It’s good,” I say.

He smiles and giggles.

“Go ‘head,” we plead. “We call it *C’est Si Bon!*”

Bébé drinks rotten seeds, brown leaves, green leaves, and water with mud from our hole in grandma’s backyard. Bébé is calm. We wait for a comment, a scream, a word. But Bébé can’t speak.

I know it's wrong to trick Bébé. But then I remember that Bébé is a boy. It's okay to trick boys. I look at Egma but she is on the floor, digging another hole with a stick from the branch of the lonely mango tree.

"Get up," I say. "You know it's bad to dig holes alone. You know that it's always wrong."

Egma drops the tired stick to stand. Bébé still has the rusty can in his hands. Now he is smiling. He is trying to be in on our secret.

I hear music from the other side of the mango tree. It's music from grandma's river. Between the mango tree and a needle bush is a path for people to come through.

"Let's go to the river." I grab at Egma's hand. She pulls away.

"The river bites." Egma is looking at me with a flushed face.

That's my sister. She has a flushed face when I try to bring her to a river that sings.

"It won't bite this time," I promise her. "Rivers can't bite the same person twice."

Bébé is making a sound. I look at him and he is waving his hand, the hand without the can. He is talking to us in his own way. I ignore him.

“Let’s go before the sun is out.” I take Egma’s hand and we walk between the bush and mango tree. I hear the mango tree crying. I think Bébé is crying too.

Behind the bush we see the river. There are a few girls dipped in it, their breasts out to the public. They forget the clothes they brought for washing. Instead they begin a rhythm, hitting the top of the water with the palm of their hand. The music starts like the sound a jug makes when swallowing water. It breaks into a million pieces by the time it reaches our ears.

Egma and I stand on a big, uneven rock, listening. The girls are laughing and beating harder. I pull Egma to the river. She pulls back. I look at her. She is shaking her head.

I am in fury. “You never grow up!” I tell her. “You’re always the same.”

I walk past her in the direction of home.

The ground stutters and I hear a swift sound. Egma zings past me through the space between the mango tree and needle bush. Her thin legs fly high and by.

I sigh, I settle, I run. I am faster than my sister because my legs are longer. Soon, I am ahead, laughing in a broken song.

My sister's tempo behind me is like the fall of graceless coconuts. Poor girl has no rhythm. But she's the only sister I've got.

We race to grandma's red house. My chest pumps out hot breath and laughter. Egma's giggles arrive scattered in between. The girl is happy, no matter that I am winning the race.

As the sun settles into a glow, I push myself to make it home. I can't wait for night to break in. In a darkness peppered with fireflies, I'll tell grandma of Egma's fear of a singing river and Bèbè's imitation of a crying tree.



Shadows, Hands, Wall, and Sea

It is only in the day that we play games in my grandmother's backyard. The day is blue ocean with white fluffs. It is salty air and sand. It is brown kites, yellow kites, square kites, and diamonds. It is happy air and light songs from old guitars.

But night brings *rara* music, sad dancing, and hungry graves. The nighttime is unapproachable. There are no kites but full clouds. I hear heavy drums and see shadows dancing.

"Shadows are dangerous and silly to dance with. If you play with them, they will visit you at night." That's what my grandmother says.

But avoiding your shadow is like soul searching. It takes time.

Late one night, my sister and I stand with our backs to a granite wall, hands flat against the surface with the moon to our face. Granite wall, dirty palms pressed to gray cement, and the shadows sandwiched in between. I glance back to make sure my shadow is behind me. It is slipping to my side. I flatten my body against the hard cement and squeeze my eyes tightly shut.

That night, as I sleep, I hear the waves of the ocean. Blue tides and green horizons. My shadow rises from the water. It walks through my yard, up the shaky wooden steps that lead to the back porch, and into my room, a room with no door and three walls. The shadow takes me by the hand and leads me back to the water. Mango trees, avocado seeds, grapevines, *cachiman*, and *corossol*, all in my backyard. Now I float with my shadow to the ocean, ocean with blue waves, white tides, and a green horizon. Shadows sandwiched against a granite wall. Dirty palms pressed to a cement surface. Dark shadows dancing, chattering, chasing.



Butterflies vs. Fleas

To everyone in Roche-a-Bateau my sister and I are the city girls. We are the Haitian slash Americans. We are *diasporas*.

On open nights, Dodo and Whistler come by and I stuff their bellies with the cornmeal supper my grandmother wants me to eat. In their happy mouths, my leftover food is splendid. It is first-class debris.

If time is not pressing, and my grandmother falls asleep rocking in her chair, we lie belly-side-up on her cement porch facing the stars.

My yellow nightgown is a contrast to my sister in pink. Whistler and Dodo, paired on my right side, are wearing dirty colors. If the stars are looking up at us, Egma and I are bright-colored butterflies. Whistler and Dodo are brown-colored fleas.

I look at my sister and her eyelashes are two hairy black caterpillars settling against her cheeks. She is leaving me to face the nighttime alone. I bulldoze through her dreams.

“Egma!”

She snaps into a sitting position.

“We are playing a game,” I dictate. “I am Jean-Bertrand, Aristide. You are a poor Haitian *machan* who sells peanuts for a living. Whistler and Dodo are the evil *macoutes*, my enemies.”

“Only if me and Dodo get your sweet bananas and buttered bread in the morning.” Whistler proposes.

“Only if you can catch the dirty *machan*,” I dictate.

I grab Egma’s hand. My sister and I spiral from the floor. Already Egma is a giggling spring. Her happiness digs out dimples in her cheeks.

“I am Jean-Bertrand, Aristide, the president of Haiti,” I begin my speech. “I am the only hope for this country. I will save the Haitian people from their poverty. I will make useless fleas into bright-colored butterflies.” That’s my slogan.

Dodo and Whistler come leaping off the ground. Whistler goes for Egma.

At first my sister avoids his clutch. She runs in tight circles, the porch her narrow cage.

But Whistler’s hand snaps to her waist. “I want free peanuts for me and my friends,” Whistler demands. “Peanuts without a fee.”

My sister struggles in Whistler’s arms. “*Vivre Aristide!* Aristide will save me.” She cries.

Whistler warns, “If you are for Aristide, we will kill you.”

“Live Aristide! *Vivre Aristide!*” My sister challenges.

We hear a sharp creak and grandma rising from her chair.

Egma's waist is released and the boys flee the scene.

Grandma grabs Egma and me. She steers us inside.

There's a bolting of the door. Then a double bolting.

Grandma comes to us. She is something we have never seen before. She is crumpled. She is wrinkled, tired, and old.

Grandma bends to find our faces.

"No *Vivre Aristide*." She tells us. "You girls are *bèl tifi*, pretty girls. You are *not* revolutionaries. You are *not* rebels. No more *Vivre Aristide*."

"Grandma, we hear it under your breath—"

"No more *Vivre Aristide*!" Her desperateness leaks.

"Promise me, no more *Vivre Aristide*."



Movies Plaza

If you think for one minute anyplace in the world can be out of date, out of reach of technologies, flat out bare-boned, we are an example that says “not!” Our town, the queen of nobody, the headquarters for nowhere, we have a cinema smack dab in the middle of our dirt road.

Go north, past Cici’s house, she is a woman selling sugar for a living so that I don’t know how she makes one. Plus she sells matches but I’m not sure that is something to boast of.

But right past Cici’s house, not across the street but beside the house, there is a two-story brick building called *Amerie Love Hotel* where you can buy cola, beer, and everything fried, like chicken and plantains.

Inside, there is a large room with a big television screen but no speakers to speak of which can really be a problem on nights with a big crowd.

This is where, for one *gourde*, the price of a pack of *Chiclets* gum, you can watch *Jean-Claude Van Damme* and *Rambo* movies. And not just watch them once, but watch them over and over and over again, until your eyeballs squeak.



Blushing Red

On the surface of dawn, when night clouds are no longer covering and shadows are dragged back to sea, young Haitian girls are being rushed out of their beds to be stored in golden cornfields.

Darkness was just slipping when I heard the voices of sturdy men outside our door.

“Madame Gertrands! *Ouvri!* Open up!”

My grandmother is pressing slippers into my hands.

“Kati! *Ann ale!* Let’s go.” Grandma’s arms are a cocoon with Egma inside.

I am rushed, pushed, bullied out of the back door by a fragile looking grandma. She rushes me to the side of the house where the cornfield sleeps.

With a frizzy, gray mane surrounding her head, she bends to plant Egma in the ground. Then grandma presses her face into mine.

“You and Egma stay in the cornfield until your uncles come for you.”

“Grandma—”

“I have no time to explain,” she says with that silly mane swallowing her head. “I am your grandma. You have to do whatever I say.”

I nod.

“Stay here. Don’t come out, even when the sun does.”

She is standing and moving towards the red house. Then she stops. She returns with kisses for my nose, my eyes, my cheeks.

Then she is gone into her red house with the sturdy men at the door.

I look to my sister. She is leaning into a cornstalk, safely deep in her sleep.

I run across the cornfield to the back door of the house and take my crouching position.

The sturdy men with strong voices are *macoutes* and I know it. I hear them breaking things inside the house, the sound of glass shattering, heavy things falling to the floor. I pray for them not to break my grandma.

“Where are your sons?” They ask.

“What are these flyers?”

“Are you for Aristide? Did you know your children vote Aristide?”

But my grandma's voice is missing. She doesn't say a word.

I hear the footsteps of many boots leaving. I run to the side of the house. From inside the cornfield I watch a procession of men. They are five in number and carry sweaty, brown heads on their shoulders.

A new man comes into my view. There is a fragile body with a frizzy, gray mane, folded in front of him. Red blood is in her silver mane. Red blots her wrinkled cheek. I lose the breath inside of me.

I am running through the cornfield towards my grandmother. I am fast. Faster than my sister because my legs are longer. Faster than bright colored butterflies should be.

Some of the men turn suddenly. They hear my rustling in the field.

But there is a break to my stride. I fall between cornstalks face down. A strong foot presses into my back.

"I hear someone," one of the men says.

Crushed to the ground, I struggle under the pressure on top of me. It is strong. Steady.

I look up and there is a rubber leg. There are eyes the color of brand new honeycomb. There is a smiley-faced shirt and pants with holes the size of peanuts.

“Look, it’s a boy over there,” I hear the *macoutes* say.

Anger returns to me. I struggle under Bèbè’s foot but he is steady.

I growl and Bèbè begins to squeak. He jumps up and down in an off-balance jig. He moans above my sobbing. He groans above my pleas.

His arms are waving outrageously above his head. He smiles with all his teeth. He bobbles his head in all directions. He is a perfect idiot.

“I know that boy,” one man says. “He is the deaf boy who walks the streets. He is crazy. We should kill him and put him out of his misery.”

“Control yourself man.” Says another voice. “We were ordered to take this old woman quickly to the boss.”

Then there is the sound of a car door opening and closing, of tires rolling down the hill.

Bèbè pulls his foot from my back and I crumble. I rub my face into the dirt and press my chest and hips into the ground. I

grind my teeth and hit my fist into sharp rocks. I pull the most spectacular sounds from my throat. I whimper, I babble, I croak.

When I look up, Bèbè is sitting across from me, among broken cornstalks, with Egma hanging lifelessly on his back. My sister still has her sleep.

I pick myself up from the ground and Bèbè stands with Egma piggybacking his body. He wraps my sister's arms around his neck. He juggles her, an arm under her bottom.

Bèbè is looking at me without a smile. It is the first time he has made this face for me. Like he really understands. Like he's been in on my secrets all along.

I'm afraid that butterflies (first captured in 2003) is the last story I will ever have finished. The more I write, the more I forget.

The location is Haiti. This is the story of three young men who are part of a gang that participates in killing and kidnapping. Though these young men are spies and assassins at night, they are musicians in the morning. They have hopes of starting their own music band. They practice every morning in an abandoned building where they watch music videos from America. Two of the boys play instruments and the last one dances and sings occasionally.

The story is centered on the lives of these boys as they practice their music in the morning and commit murder at night.

I will call this story, *Blue Fence Dance Hall*.

In the dark, my mouth is star-shaped and open. A breakthrough moment in the night.

It's Tuesday. I sent emails. My brother called and I spoke to him. I was stuck. I received an email with news of publication (this deserves its own entry). There was good news for my brother. Teresa and I finally got in touch. It was Reema's birthday. Teresa made me confess. I missed her. I thanked God. I watched documentaries about the universe. I read Ryan Lutz's piece. Wrote to him. I read "For Space" Massey, D. I could not write about Danticat. I turned over to rest.

Then, only afterwards, deep in the night, I felt the touch of a thing flowering, a blue story budding inside my mouth. I turned my lamplight on. Off, then on again. Several times into the night.

The night slips out and I'm left with two pages of chaos not a single word for my mother for the moon. This is tougher than dying. At least from my point of view.

Dreams muscle. Shutters clap. A blade of a light. Leaves shattered across the window. A punctuation mark. A wave. A dark gold necklace straddling a cross our knees.

I wrote these stories at night. I think, because I was tormented. Now I am ahead of myself. I was not tormented. I wrote these stories at night.

Children bear (fruit in their souls). Exotic plums. Fearless and urgent. Light and pent up with quandy. Fun souls, and live tummies, placing words in places that don't belong. Let me tell you this one. About one particular child.

His name, Wick. You know, like the hair of candles. Or the woolly yarn that you pull out of glass-bottomed lamps. That's how you know you've found the right name, Wick. If you can think about your lamps and wool in the same breath.

The summer we were there he lived across from us with his mother, who left me with the memory of a red prostitute. It is of course, to call her a prostitute. Her name were clearly now, I see that I had been falsely impressed. There were details missing in the thread. And lots of things I made into general.

Anyhow, Wick. I remember most distinctly about her was her independence. Wick's mother, she was not like all the women I was used to. The ones who made a home for their families even though they were not supposed to.

Part II

*hope
of starting music.*



Image 13

Looking out from the sixth floor of Geisel Library, March 13, 2013.

*In order to write, I began
loaning language from the library.*

“Adapted”⁺
Language loaned from Samuel Beckett’s Molloy

I knew.
 I was bound.
 I stopped, I therefore moved on.

I entered. I understood. I was
 I had known I deemed it
 I suppose.

I was I sometimes I
 took a little.

I suddenly remembered.
 I went and stood.

I hoped.
 (I could not hope.)
 I apologized,
 I think
 I still

I did not grasp.
 I stayed where I was.

I am
 I could therefore puzzle.

I had to
 I was in
 I think
 I was in.

I could.
 I felt.
 I would have.
 Never escaped.

⁺ Lives as a video:
<https://vimeo.com/67597313>

I remember.

When I was seven years old, my family and I moved to the U.S. because of political instability back home. At the first American school I went to, they did not know where to place me so they gave me a test. "Draw a kite," I was told. I drew a home. I was put back an entire grade.

In Haiti, the word kaye means home. In America, the word kite (though it sounds familiar) can mean a black bird, even. But it cannot mean a home.

“Window”⁺
Language loaned from Amos Oz’s The Same Sea

The sea (that is)
 close

seeps through (her window)
 not knowing when to
 give up.

She pleads
 the sea inside her
 (window)

 Let me rest,

But the sea, like a child
 pools at her sleeves.

⁺ Lives as a video:
<https://vimeo.com/67604057>

*Home is a strand of hair
to wind absently around your finger.*

“Forgiving”⁺
Language loaned from Amos Oz’s The Same Sea

Close and breathing
the sea tiptoes in
light, the rain, an empty street and balconies.

It was raining again,

 mountains and dreams
—shadows in a garden,
outside

her window,
where nothing has stirred.

How do you begin to love
now?

How,
and with what,
do you begin

to love?

⁺ Lives as a video:
<https://vimeo.com/67604022>

Kite is not a home.

“Pooling”⁺

Language loaned from Edwidge Danticat’s Brother I’m Dying

It wasn’t difficult (often).
Pooling meant goodbye,
absence or death.

(Eventually)
it wasn’t difficult.
There was almost

no fear
in it.

⁺ Lives as a video:
<https://vimeo.com/67597314>

*The diamondy scarf I borrowed from my mother leaves a trail
mixed of stars and tears stranded on my pillow when I rise.*