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## **Mountain**

Mike McNeeley

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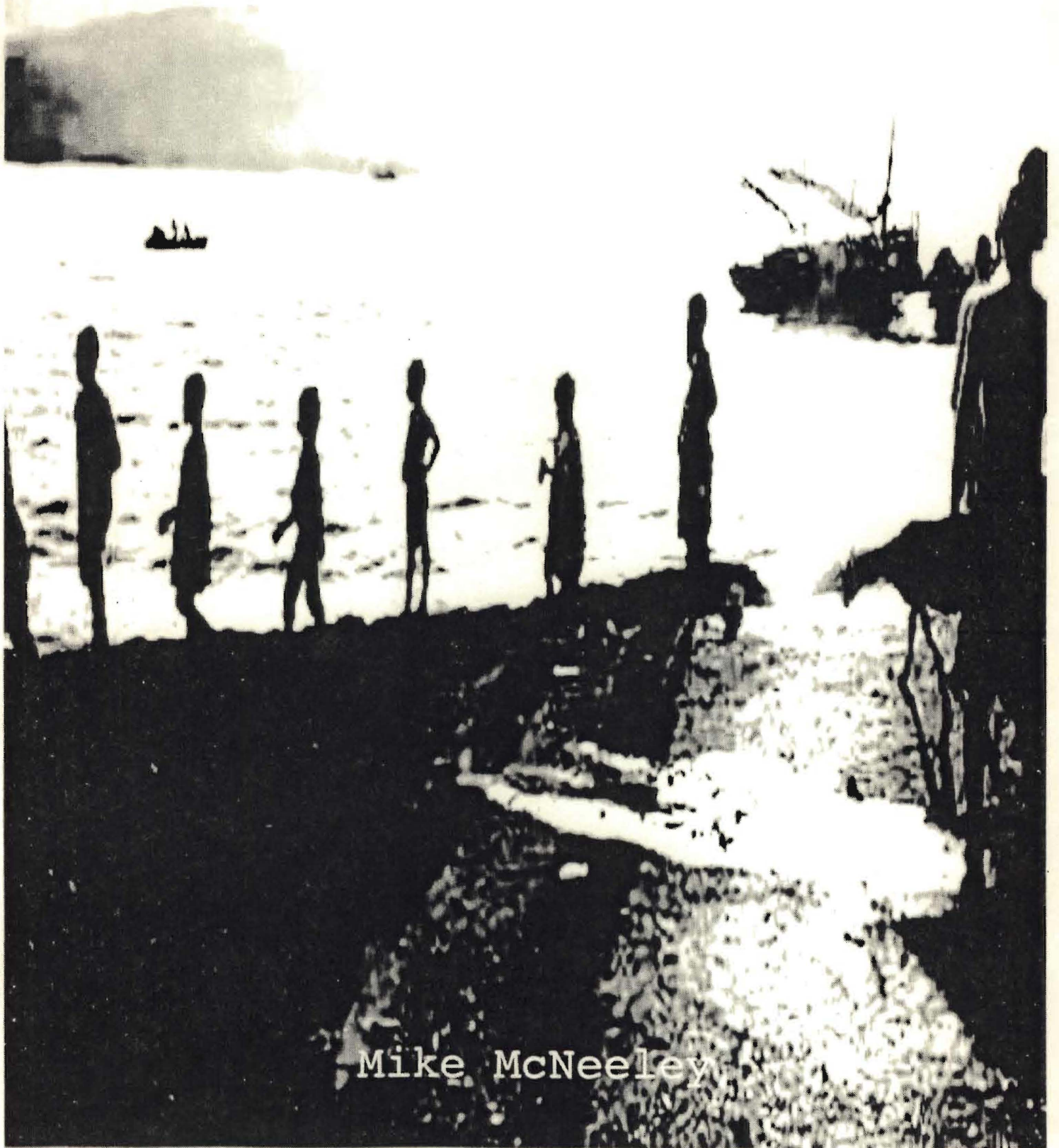
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# Mountain



Mike McNeeley

2001

Foreword

The way life is lived in the city of Port Au Prince—the way things are done—is quintessentially Haitian, and it's impossible not to be enchanted as you walk the streets of the city. Everywhere you look, it seems, there is a child bouncing along with a bucket for water or a market-bound woman with her head loaded with wares. Everyone moves with grace and composure, with elegance and pride. The common gait is a casual but dignified stroll. Even amid this dusty, scummy desolation, nearly everyone is clean, and those who can't be clean are definitely tidy. The men try to own at least one collared shirt, which they will keep immaculately clean and which their wives will press each night with a charcoal iron. The women, who are far too busy to spend as much time on their looks as do the men, are nonetheless neat and economical in their appearance.

As one leaves the central slum basin and enters the surrounding hills, one comes to understand the harsh division between the Haitian elite and the peasantry below. As the shanties grow smaller in the distance, one begins to see stands of trees and lush gardens, cleaner streets, and proper houses cordoned off by concrete walls. On top of these walls, broken bottles and jars are cemented in to keep people out. Bright blossoms of bougainvillea spill over them, hinting at the hidden splendor on the other side. The driveways are gated. The houses not only have windows and doors, but also running water, electricity, telephones, and refrigerators. Some even have luxuries like air conditioning and laundry machines. The money of the elite does not circulate down to the peasantry easily, since manpower is cheaply acquired and that is all that the peasants can offer. Rather, the rich enjoy the things they own while the vast, vast majority scratch out their existences one meal at a time.

But as brutal as the city can be, it is the epicenter of the Haitian spirit. In Port-Au-Prince, one feels all of the vitality and independence and charm and goodwill and pain and resilience of the entire country and its seven million people soaking in from the mountains and into the lap of the oceanfront capital.

There was a time when plant-life abounded in Haiti and living off the land was a simple arrangement. The fertile soils yielded copious harvests of mahogany, indigo, sugar, coffee, cotton, almond, tobacco, cherry, mango, millet, breadfruit, banana, and avocado. It was by far the most productive, and therefore the most coveted, possession of

Colonial France—an island of tropical wonders: dense jungle forests full of colorful animals, exotic vegetables unknown to European palates, and gentle Arawak natives who possessed a rich and secret culture and were ripe for hard labor. But under the French, the pattern of misappropriation, exploitation, and exhaustion of resources was minted and entrenched in Haiti's cognition where it now remains. The proud rain forest has been stripped for charcoal and lumber. The soil has been overworked and now has little left to offer. The tropical landscape, once teeming and efflorescent, is now hollow and nude. The seasonal rains send streams of light brown water into the coast, simultaneously eroding the hillsides and suffocating the shrimp beds.

The island of Gonave is not so densely populated as the mainland, which means that the degree of deforestation is not quite as bad. A good deal of native vegetation still exists, and commerce has not yet sapped her reserves. The deep brown soil and extant jungle groves serve as a testimony to Haiti's natural history. The odors of fresh foliage and well-fed dirt still permeate many areas. But all in all, depletion is still the rule, and foraging gets more difficult for each new generation.

But still, the spirit of the Haitian people remains intact through every hungry night, through each food riot, hurricane, and political upheaval. There is an intangible quality—some beautiful blend of hope and integrity—that permeates their collective attitude and endears them to even the most cynical visitor.

I first saw Haiti in 1988, when I traveled there to see my uncle's hospital in Leogane. Holy Cross Hospital serves a large, impoverished rural area, much like the renowned Albert Schweitzer Hospital founded by Larry Mellon in Deschappelles. It was with Uncle David that I got my first view of how Western medicine is practiced in Haiti and how Haitians respond to Western medical philosophies and practices.

Uncle David never went anywhere without his big black bag. Not only did it carry the medical supplies he needed in the field, but also it was a symbol of expertise—and maybe a little magic—that his patients appreciated. Often, he remarked that most of his patients would listen to anyone who carried that bag, which is why so many of them were apt to patronize the numerous charlatans who worked the city streets,

posing as expert healers while dispensing useless (or harmful) “treatments” for unreasonable prices.

Indeed, often it did seem as though his patients took more interest in the mysterious contents of that bag than in receiving any medical advice. A “pici-pici,” an injection, was considered the ultimate remedy in the physical domain and was, therefore, a routine request. Early in his Haitian career, Uncle David got in the routine of carrying little bottles of a saline-based placebo for these requests.

To understand the real healing potential of such injections, one has to understand the traditional Haitian understanding of diseases and ailment. Rural Haitians, even today, retain a conception of disease that originated in the West African villages from where their ancestors were shipped out centuries ago. For the rural Haitian, health is not merely the proper function of the machine, their body. Instead, it is a state of balance and peace between the physical and spiritual facets of their person. Health is the proper function of the whole person—a holy state of okayness. They don’t have to feel good, necessarily, just *papi mal*—not any worse.

And there are sundry sources of okayness for Haitians. Many do seek out practitioners of Western biomedicine. Others employ the services of streetside herbalists, itinerant, pill-vending charlatans, and/or Christian or Vodoun faith healers. (And many of these healers play multiple roles.) The competition between Western biomedicine and folk healing is subtle, and largely ideological; but the different traditions often overlap, and elements of Vodoun medicine are often borrowed by American and European doctors. Likewise, many “Continental” medical treatments have been adopted by Haitian herbalists and folk healers.

On my most recent trip to Haiti, most of my time was spent on the Island of Gonave, in the Bay of Haiti. Gonave is the one of the poorest and most remote areas in Haiti (which, coincidentally, makes it one of the poorest and most remote areas in the Western Hemisphere). It was this island, in its dilapidated splendor, that intrigued and fascinated me the most. Gonave, and its people, provided the lion’s share of inspiration for the novella that follows.

Books I've read, which provided varying degrees of information and inspiration regarding this novella, include:

- Where There Is No Doctor, by David Werner.
- Song of Haiti, by Barry Paris.
- Dr. Mellon of Haiti, by Peter Michelmore.
- Life in a Haitian Valley, by Melville J. Herskovits.
- The Haitian People, by James G. Leyburn.
- The Magic Orange Tree and Other Haitian Folktales, by Diane Wolkstein.
- Tell My Horse, by Zora Neale Hurston.
- As the Cock Crows, by G. Dudley Nelson.
- Voodoo in Haiti, by Alfred Metraux.
- The Neglected and Abused, by Joseph Bentivegna.
- All Souls' Rising, by Madison Smartt Bell.

My sincerest thanks go to:

- My uncle, David McNeeley, doctor, healer, and Episcopal priest.
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Aspect



I left the highway for the winding one-lane through Gooseneck Hollow, deep into Union County and a world away from streetlights and guardrails. I catapulted around tight curves and over blind rises, the familiarity of the road returning even as I slid above it. Like moonlit scalpels, the headlights pierced the darkness, reopening ink-black Appalachia and spilling out the insides.

The township of Eventide awaited me, tucked between these silhouettes, these tall, haggard mountaintops, and these enormous trees. Jesus lives in the belly of a serpent, and in Eventide, tonight, something was uncoiling and open-mouthed.

The Calvary Church of Unified Disciples had been a filling station once, and from all outward appearances, that's still what it was. The gone-dry pumps stood on like sentinels in an abandoned military post. A plywood sandwich board announced the place as the CCUD. Dim light came through the windows and strains of familiar, down-home church filtered through the concrete walls.

As I crossed the blacktop lot, I recognized some of the outmoded muscle cars, pickup trucks, and town cars parked there. I'd helped to keep a few of them running during high school, and they were apparently running still.

I slipped through the glass door, only a few minutes late, judging by the crowd, maybe two dozen strong, which was still getting situated. A few stragglers came in and headed to the center of the room. Organ music played a settling hymn, "How Great Thou Art," in mellow timbres.

I was surprised by how many things were still lacking: pews, crosses, curtains, kneelers. These were things we'd wanted years ago. The floor was still the same cracked avocado green tile, with the same grease stains and dirty grout. Even the crummy folding chairs that lined the walls appeared to be the same ones from before. And though the walls were now painted eggshell white, they were still as bare as I remembered them, sporting only the portrait of Jesus across the room. Through the tightly bunched believers, I wormed my way toward it.

He never did look like the people around me. Jesus was a dark man, with round cheeks, unruly hair, and black eyes that burned from deep in their sockets. He had whiskers—a beard—and woolly eyebrows. I'd been afraid of Him as child, and He had

haunted my dreams from time to time with broken teeth and thin fingers, a bloody forehead and a baritone howl.

I looked at the faces in the room, hard-chiseled and angular, lean and tan, and mostly wrinkled. Some were familiar. Others were not. I was cataloging the new ones when Brother Barry appeared, wading through the crowd, waggling his eyebrows and moustache as he greeted the congregation.

He stopped in front of me and grabbed my shoulder. “Caleb!” he beamed. “Where you been, boy?”

“Memphis,” I replied.

“D’you graduate?”

I nodded.

“Little Doctor Caleb!” he laughed. “Praise the Lord! And how’s Abby?”

“She’s doing fine, I guess,” I said. “She’s still there, living with her parents now.”

“Oh, I see.”

There was an awkward moment between us before he excused himself and continued to the front of the room.

He climbed the little wood riser at the front of the room and spoke into a cheap microphone that was plugged into a two-channel amplifier. He held in his right hand a leather-bound Bible and in his left hand he held the microphone. At his feet lay a wooden box. Jutting his chin and raising his Bible, he welcomed us all to the Calvary Church.

“Tonight, we’ve come together to sing praises to our Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. I can feel it already, honey. The Lord’s gonna’ move us tonight.” He slinked across the tiny riser with the microphone cable coiled around his wrist.

The box itself, which immediately held my attention, was made of deep-stained wood—local wood, I think. It had a mesh screen on top, a big tarnished handle and a little hand painted cross on the side that faced us. Brother Barry moved the box to the corner of the riser.

“I can feel it already, I’m tellin’ you. When the love of the Lord comes down upon us tonight, it’s gonna’ be at full force, I say. Full force. It’s gonna be a hot one, honey!”

And, literally, the cramped room was already getting warm. I could almost feel two dozen or so individual prayers incubating beneath the bare lightbulbs here.

Brother Barry read from his Bible in a halting cadence, trailing the words with a bony finger. After each sentence, he left a tiny, loaded pause for emphasis. The reading was from Luke. Brother Barry called into the microphone, “And the lord said, ‘See, I have given you authority to tread on snakes and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy, and nothing will harm you! You know what that means?’”

He stalked the stage.

“It means, you can do anything you want, but you’ve got to do it through the Lord. It means you have to lay down your life into the hands that bled for you.

“Because God don’t need no chauffeur, now. God wants to *drive*.”

*Amen*, they said.

“God wants to drive your car, brush your teeth, and train your dog. God wants to buy your groceries and walk your children to school.

“And you’ll be loved and protected in the light of the Father as long as you give yourself to Him. So let’s get this service started right. Let’s give ourselves over to God tonight. Give him the keys, honey, ‘cause God’s gonna’ drive our souls up to Heaven! Give it up! Hallelujah! Let the healing light come down!”

The organ player lit into a fiery hymn. Brother Barry seated himself behind the kit, which consisted of a kick drum and an old, loose snare drum. He played a boom-bap rhythm behind the strident bleat of the electric organ and under the voices of the congregation singing a new and unusual hymn:

*Lord, Lord, Lord*

*Oh my Lord, Lord, Lord, Lord, Lord*

*We’ve been aching and we’re weary, give us shelter from the storm*

*Oh, precious Lord please give us shelter from the storm*

*Lord, Lord, Lord*

*Oh my Lord, Lord, Lord, Lord, Lord*

*Give us water when we're thirsty, give us sun to keep us warm*

*Oh precious Lord please give us sun to keep us warm*

It didn't take long for our little crowd to become excited. By the fourth or fifth verse, the tambourines had been broken out and began to ring through the room in brassy waves. Soon after that, people were stomping and clapping. The song went on for over—well over—a dozen verses. Then, Brother Barry left his drums and retook the stage, again coiling the microphone cable around his wrist.

The room was becoming electric. And Brother Barry stood above us like some mother conductor.

“Sweet Jesus! Oh I love it when He comes in fast!”

An old lady was dancing by herself in the corner. I didn't know who she was. The organ player alternated between two tense chords. A few tambourines still rattled through the room.

“Oh, he's in the walls and curtains, honey. He's above the ceiling. Love Him like He loves you, honey! It's only right!”

*Amen*, they said.

“And be prepared to show Him how you feel,” he said. And with that, he moved to the corner of the stage and reached for the flat wooden box with the screen and the cross. The microphone was gripped in his other hand. The Bible lay on the riser.

“Now, I want y'all to think back to Acts, in the second chapter.”

Brother Barry was reciting from memory, now, with the microphone at his lips and the box held out like a lantern. I'd heard this passage read here many, many times, but it seemed strange to me, tonight.

“When the day of Pentecost was fully come, they were all with one accord in one place. And suddenly there came a sound from Heaven as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting. And there appeared unto them cloven

tongues of fire, and it sat upon each of them. And they were filled with the Holy Ghost, and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance.”

*Amen*, they said.

“You’ve got to love the Lord, now. Hear me,” he added, still holding the box aloft.

*Amen*, they said.

“And these signs shall follow them that believe; in my name shall they cast out devils; they shall speak with new tongues; they shall take up serpents; and if they drink any deadly thing, it shall not hurt them; they shall lay hands on the sick, and they shall recover!”

“It will not hurt you, honey. It will not hurt you,” he said as he uncoiled the cable and handed the microphone to the organ player. He moved his free hand to the bottom of the box. He gave it a long, intent look. Suddenly, he gave the box a sudden shake and let it fall heavily into his left hand. His right hand still clutched the tarnished handle. Even over the whine of the organ, the dry rattling that came from within could be heard throughout the little room.

A tuneless voice took up “Will the Circle Be Unbroken” and was soon accompanied by the organ and the rest of the congregation. Brother Barry, with the look of an unfinished businessman, replaced the box on the corner of the stage and took to the drum kit. *Boom-bap*, he played, and the churchgoers danced around the room. The brassy voices of the tambourines echoed the sound that had come from that box. All around me, the members of the Calvary Church of Unified Disciples were spinning and turning with sweaty religion. For some reason, I felt out of place—overdressed. I stood motionless in their middle as if I were the axis of their revelry—a dumbfounded maypole or something. I forced a look over my shoulder and saw an old woman in the corner pounding the avocado tile with her white Sunday shoes. She moved in front of the brooding Jesus print. Her ankle-length, purple, flowery dress bobbed like jellyfish tentacles as she danced before the Lord.

She touched the frame softly with the edge of a weathered hand. Her gray hair, tightly pinned, was becoming unbunned one strand at a time.

I thought the song could last forever.

The old lady's feet stopped moving. She eased the portrait from the wall. No one seemed to notice this but me. She turned to the back of the room, and for a moment I thought the old lady might make a run for it, absconding with the brooding Jesus. We were the two motionless figures in the room, and I swear we were invisible to this crowd.

Then, she looked as though she were losing her balance. She caught herself with a hand on the wall, with Jesus tucked beneath her other arm, like a football. She turned and leaned and slid down the wall and sat on the tile. She held the picture in her lap, with Jesus brooding up at her. She pet His glassed-in face as if it were a housecat. She began to moan and moan. Jesus seemed indifferent. He just kept brooding.

My attention was dragged away by the voices shouting "*Hallelujah*" at the front of the room. The boom-bap rhythm had ceased, and now Brother Barry was whirling in place on the stage, occasionally stopping before the snake box to grin knowingly upon it.

The organ and tambourines stopped. Everything was silent, but for our heavy breathing. Brother Barry bent over the box and unhinged it. Reaching in, he drew out a fat and yellowish canebrake rattlesnake. He held it high for us, and it seemed to become golden in the bare bulb light. At arm's length, he regarded the snake as one might regard a respected opponent. His eyes were tight and his body trembled slightly, slightly.

A thin, forked tongue flicked out, tasting the surroundings. For a long moment, the snake and the pastor were engaged in a mutual appraisal. *I know you*, Barry mouthed.

The snake swiveled toward him, but guardedly. Likewise, Brother Barry extended a cautious left hand and ran it down the snake's curved spine. The snake gave a shudder with its tail and continued to taste the air. I tried to imagine the flavor of this room—old gasoline and grease. I tried to imagine the flavor of salvation, with Heaven in the heat, belief in our sweat, and Jesus in the cradle of our prayer.

Brother Barry held the rattler high above his head, shaking his wiry legs and kicking his feet to an unheard hymn. Was he hearing tambourines?

The organ offered a few soft tones. A chord formed and swelled. It grew around us and held the room like a delicate egg. Slowly, slowly, we were swallowed by the ebbing sound. All around me, the singing and dancing began anew, but I was overdressed and stupefied and I could not move.

Invisible

It was tropical heat and a white sky, in mid-afternoon. We were bound for the little port of Saint Jean, our rickety tap-tap rattling and shaking over the rutted roads and lurching around market-bound peasants, wandering livestock, and scattered rubbish. Despite the rush of air that whistled through the tap-tap's frame, drops of sweat wept from my brow and burned in my eyes.

Tap-taps are brightly painted pickup trucks that shuttle throughout and between the larger cities in Haiti. They're kept running—barely—by freelance mechanic/welders of questionable skill, who operate on curbsides and in alleyways. The truck-beds are outfitted with crude benches and walled in by scrap-wood frames. The passengers cram themselves onto these benches, shoulder to shoulder and hip to hip until the whole space is breathlessly full. When absolutely no more room is available inside, the more athletic men will stand on the rear bumper and lock hands around the frame. Still others will ride atop the frame with the baggage, clinging on for their very lives.

The whole truck swayed top-heavily as our driver negotiated the dogfight ballet. In Haiti, roads are not lined, which doesn't matter, since the lines wouldn't be heeded, anyway. Turn signals are used as rarely as brake pedals. Horns peal continually in the city. Intersections are maneuvered in an exhilarating instant's worth of cavalier recklessness and Euclidean exactness. Pedestrians casually leap out of the way of the careering vehicles. The driver must avoid potholes, large stones, and livestock, but everything else is fair game.

Across the narrow aisle, a large woman, black as Africa, sat asleep. A burning cigarette dangled from her lip and the fallen ash gathered on her skirt. Her head bobbed limply as she slept. Whenever the driver would hit a pothole or stone, the woman would jar awake briefly. Remembering her cigarette, she'd take an unenthusiastic drag, maybe dust the ash to her feet, then nod off again.

She was calm as a well-fed cat. I watched her breathe. A few times, our knees touched.

A cow lowed in the road ahead of us. We veered sharply, immediately. I entertained fleeting, terrifying notions of shoulder-rolling down a steep embankment and being run through with shards of shattered frame. I pictured the roof-riders somersaulting down the mountainside in a hail of suitcases, loose chickens, and brown paper packages.



But the other passengers seemed unruffled. As we clattered down the road, my joints became tighter and my mind increasingly more agitated.

Beside the napping woman, a little, dark child sat in his mother's lap. He wore a threadbare green shirt that was printed with white shamrocks and read, "Kiss Me, I'm Irish." His mother gazed listlessly out the back of the truck at the chalk-yellow dust clouds billowing behind us and swallowing the bustle of the road.

Irish stared at me, transfixed. I stared back for a moment, then cast my gaze down to my duffel bag and the bumpy knees of the napping woman.

Irish mouthed some words at me, speaking imperceptibly. I leaned in to hear. "Geev me dollah," he said quietly.

I uttered a little guffaw and smiled at him. He smiled back with tiny white teeth and repeated, with a little more confidence, "Geev me dollah."

His mother looked at him and hushed him. She offered me a slight smile, then returned her attention to the yellowish haze behind.

The napping woman stirred slightly and muttered something to the child as she crushed her wasted cigarette on the sole of her sandal. She dipped into her knit handbag and procured a pack of cigarettes and a matchbook. The cigarettes were a Haitian brand named *Comme Il Faut*—"How It's Done." Irish's mother took a cigarette, too. They lit from the same match and smoked together. They looked similar. Probably sisters, I thought.

Through the frame, Port-au-Prince's ragged humanity was in full bloom. People, barefoot molecules, were padding around from spot to spot, merely existing among the concrete and tin shanties, in the ruinous roads, amid the flowing foul water and incessant deprivations. Laundry was draped over high wires and blew in the fresh breezes. Engines chortled and buzzed. The air smelled of sweet charcoal primarily, but also of fresh fish, new-slaughtered pig, tobacco and sweat, concrete and excrement.

Cigarettes passed. Irish began to cry aloud. Time was running slowly on this ride. It was too dim and bumpy in the truck to read my Bible, and I could barely enjoy the view through the slats of the frame or through our great trail of dust. I checked my wristwatch. Irish's wails went unabated.

Within the hour, I had become accustomed to the roughness of the road and my panic had waned. I was becoming impatient, though. I wanted to see my Uncle Mavis; and I wanted to see the clinic, too. I wanted to get someplace quiet, and I wanted something cold to drink.

And soon, we arrived at our tiny destination. The tap-tap unloaded like a circus clown car. People stepped gracefully over and around each other and disembarked with their bags and their boxes and chickens and things. Two men were atop the frame, unloading the cargo. I disembarked just in time to see them toss my suitcase and watch it land unceremoniously in the dust. I shouldered my duffel bag, grabbed the suitcase, and took a quick look around me.

There were a dozen-odd vendors sitting behind their tables, stacked with boxes of American toothpaste, French candy bars, bouillon cubes, Afro straightener, and bottles of Barbancourt rum. They liked the looks of me. Immediately, the call went up, "Hey, Blanc! Chip, chip!"

"I don't care how 'chip' it is," I told one, "I don't need any Afro Sheen." At the time, I didn't know how to express this in Creole, but it felt good to say it, anyway.

There was a peristyle beside the little stone pier, and I headed there for the shade and privacy. The vendors and beggars didn't follow me, so I set down my bags and enjoyed the view for a long while. The Isle of Gonave was a faint blue trace on the sun-bleached horizon. The gulf was empty of traffic. The water looked cool and blue and was specked with flotsam and organic debris. On the pier, our little wooden shallop was docked with heavy ropes; ebony men loaded packages, burlap meal sacks, suitcases, and bags of cement into its belly.

The shore was strewn with beached garbage: faded plastic oil containers, aluminum cans and random pieces of Styrofoam. The distant island seemed flat and transparent like blue film. There were some twenty miles of bay between. Bags in hand, I left the peristyle, stepped down the little stone pier, and boarded the boat.

\* \* \* \* \*

From the boat, I could see the island breathing faintly. It was green, predominantly, and furrowed with mountains, recesses, valleys, and more mountains. White houses peppered the scenery, particularly near the coast. A low salt marsh extended into the bed of the foothills. Around us, jet-black fishermen paddled dugout canoes along the shore and into rapid currents, bearing large wicker fish traps and long wooden spears on their backs. The ivory sands lay beneath a few meters of clearest blue Caribbean. Beds of ocean vegetation were underneath as well, and reefs of coral and schools of slim silver fishes.

A fisherman stood in his canoe; waves were lapping, lapping, lapping, and his little boat rocked, but he remained standing, steadily. He cast his nets into the sea.

“I want to believe in this,” I said aloud.

The Hole in the Universe

Outside the clinic at Nouvelle Cité, a little group of little men were laboring in the midday light. On the landing below the cement generator house, they were making cinderblocks for the clinic's new pump house, and quickly, at that. Two of the men were churning the cement with their shovel and spade as a third added water from an old joint-compound bucket. The third would then collect a block's worth of cement and pack it into a die, then bounce the die on the ground, leaving behind a perfect little block. Workers Four, Five, and Six would appear every so often, dragging an old bourette up the mountain. On the bourette (which resembles a large, crude rickshaw) were bags of sand they'd gathered from the years-dry riverbed. They'd heave out the sand into three-bags'-worth piles and they'd disappear, then, down the mountain again.

The newly made cinder blocks were baking under the sun in rows of eleven.

There were very large drums of blue plastic nearby. They held several gallons of old rainwater apiece. When his bucket became empty, Worker Three would fill it again from one of these drums. Dipping it down and retrieving it full, he lifted with a deep grunt and a heavy sigh. His thin arms were ropes of hard muscle and blood. He was impossibly lean. When his bucket was full, or when he bounced the heavy die on the ground, his veins moved just beneath his skin and a careful observer could watch his very tissues at work.

Down the dirt road, men were hand-plowing long garden rows and a bit further down they were gathering stones. Our guys were at the riverbed, or probably somewhere between here and there, hauling our sand on their creaky bourette. Women and children passed the clinic on the road, carrying buckets of spring water on their heads. The men at the cinderblocks shone in the sun.

I stood in the doorway with my uncle. He was propped heavily against the doorframe. I leaned against the concrete wall and swatted idly at the flies.

"So, how are you liking it, so far?" he asked me, eyes to the distant valley.

"It's good. It's really good."

"What you expected?"

"Not really, but just as good—maybe better."

"Why's that?" he asked.

"Don't know."

“Well, it’s hard work down here, Caleb. Very hard, but very rewarding, too, in the long run.”

“Yeah?” I replied, half-listening.

“There’s something special about practicing here that we’ve lost in the States. It used to be an art, medicine. Doctors were more craftsmen than they were scientists. You needed intuition and insight, not just skill with your hands and a brain full of procedures. You had to know your patients, and you had to notice every little thing about them to find out what was wrong: How is he breathing? How is he walking? What words does he use to describe his discomfort? Has he been under stress? How’s the job? The family? It all mattered, before.

“Sick people were humans, then, not broken machines. You knew your patients by name. You knew their wives, their children, what churches they went to. Nowadays, in America, at least, you don’t treat the patient; you just patch up the symptoms. And I can’t work that way, neither can Dr. Guy, and neither can you.”

Peppered griot, tonight? Ham? Chicken? Guinea hen?

“And I can’t spend my life filing paperwork, either. That’s what makes this place such a paradise, as far as I’m concerned. There’s no insurance here. No malpractice, either. There’s nothing to keep you from your patients, really. You wake up and you do your best, then you go home and prepare for the next day’s work. It’s pure service—pure medicine.”

I was distracted by a vision—a holy vision, it seemed—of food: entire sides of beef basted in rich Creole sauces; steaming mountains of brown rice piled high as haystacks; gigantic chunks of melon dripping pints of juice into waiting frosty glasses; god-sized portions of plantain, floured and fried in enormous iron skillet.

“You wouldn’t be satisfied in the States—fixing ugly noses and telling people to lose weight. It’s not real. It’s not important.”

With that, he left the doorway and stepped away toward the landing where the men were making cinderblocks. He drew a folded bandana from the pocket of his white linen trousers and dabbed his brow. I slipped inside the clinic, feeling absolutely hollow.

I surveyed the waiting room and saw everywhere the telltale red-tinted afros of underfed children. Weakened and wasting, patients leaned against the cool concrete

walls or draped themselves on anything sturdier than themselves. Many of our patients were not even sick; they had come in the hopes of receiving a parcel of manioc bread or maybe even a warm bowl of gruel. Many sought pills and prescriptions which, later, they would barter at market for a few heads of cabbage or a basketful of eggs.

Malnutrition was the fundamental cause of most of our clinical cases. Underfed children developed weak immune systems and often came to reveal serious neurological defects. They became sicker easily and took longer to heal. Scratching around in their dusty gardens and subsisting on their measly harvests, the Haitians suffered from hunger above anything else. It complicated every situation and confounded us at nearly every turn.

My American medical training had provided scant details on the pathology and treatment of real malnutrition. My training, then, came from Uncle Mavis and Dr. Guy and from innumerable instances of trial and error. It didn't take long for me to become well versed in the different faces of malnutrition or to discern the most effective treatments for each type; my patients provided me with ample opportunities to hone the art of rebuilding undernourished people, cell by cell by cell by cell by cell.

Kwashiorkor is the type of malnutrition that affects children who suffer from a lack of protein in their diet. Protein holds water in the bloodstream, so children suffering from kwashiorkor lose fluid from their veins to their extravascular spaces. As they swell and swell, ghostly and plump, their muscles and organs are wasting and dying within. They begin to dehydrate, though their bodies are ripe with unusable water.

Anita came in to the clinic one day, cradled in her mother's arms. She lolled there, taking in her clean surroundings and her new *blanc* doctor with only the vaguest sort of interest. Her lips were thoroughly cracked, geometrically, and her watery blood seeped out onto her little chin. Her nappy hair sat like a coppery crown on her head, and her edematous skin was decidedly pale; she was certainly anemic. When I approached her, smiling and cooing, she turned in towards her mother's neck and made an unenthusiastic attempt to squirm away.

I offered the mother a seat. "Bon swa," I said.

"Bon jou," she replied, with a measured smile.

I asked what was wrong with the child, although I already knew. She replied that Anita was becoming large and had developed several ulcers. She drew up the child's dress and, indeed, the little girl was positively covered in them. Each ulcer was round and flat. Their borders were not sharp, but instead blended in with the skin around them. Her condition had sapped her immune system so significantly that there was no pus or scar tissue present at all. These were old ulcers—menacing and saucer-like. They gaped at me in crude defiance.

I took the child from the mother and placed her up on the examination table. Anita wriggled limply when I took her and only managed the feeblest of cries—an unpromising sign. I removed the child's dress and made a quick appraisal. I counted eleven ulcers, including two major erosions between her swollen legs that crept up to her buttocks and labia. The dermis was raw and exposed. I was certain that millions of pathogenic germs and bacteria were working there, breeding and operating, invisibly. There was no sign of inflammation or other immune responses.

Her belly was distended from a condition called ascites—a collection of fluid in the abdomen. Her two-cream-coffee skin was stretched tightly over her bulging stomach and her navel had popped out.

Her hands were like water balloons. I wished that I could just prick them and drain out the fluid. I handled them gently, like they might rupture and spill.

One of the first things that Uncle Mavis had taught me was that malnutrition rarely remains alone for long. It invites a host of other problems, especially in children, so a thorough physical examination is absolutely vital.

With Anita lying flaccid on the table, I checked her ears and mouth without provoking any real reaction from her. I propped her up to listen to her lungs and she obeyed apathetically. Her lungs were clear, and she seemed fine, though her heart was beating more than 150 times per minute. I ran an ungloved finger into her mouth and found it bone dry.

Anita's mother watched me with passive worry as I examined her daughter and attempted to explain, in my broken Creole, her child's situation. I sheared off a patch of Anita's dull, coppery hair and placed an intravenous line in her scalp. The child did not flinch.



I rang the little bell that I kept on my desk. Miss Patrick came in. I asked her to bring in Uncle Mavis as soon as he could spare the time. In the meantime, I initiated a slow IV drip, since she was so malnourished and dehydrated. Each drop took forever, it seemed, but the rate was still too fast. Everything I added was leaking immediately out of her veins and she swelled up even more. I slowed the rate again. Her eyelids swelled shut and thin blood came from the creases of her little balloon hands. She uttered the tiniest groan. Sweat was gathering in my eyebrows and down the small of my back.

Her mother remained nervously silent in her chair. I did not know what to say or what to do—this child was dying of thirst right before us and all that I could seem to do was drown her in more useless fluid. Inside, her veins were struggling to distribute nutrients and hemoglobin throughout her tired little body, but it all kept seeping out.

Uncle Mavis hurried into the room as I was resetting the fluid rate to a practically negligible level. He moved quickly to where Anita lay and offered an immediate and obvious prognosis.

“Caleb, this child is going to die.”

“I know.”

He looked over her lethargically wriggling body. I could see him swallowing every detail about the girl. Softly, almost to himself, he said, “When they’re this far along, it’s almost always fatal. Got to have protein.”

Over the next forty-five minutes, Little Anita’s condition deteriorated rapidly. Her eyes began to swim in opposite directions. Each breath was a little thread that she wound back in at the last possible instant then cast feebly into the air. Her face took on a cold stone pallor, nearly as white as my own. Her mother wept silently in the corner, all too aware of the helpless condition of her child.

Uncle Mavis had returned to his own examination room, and now I was alone with the dying child and her mother. I owed her an explanation. Maybe comfort. But I could find absolutely nothing to offer.

Then, Anita stopped breathing. Hers was a subtle passage, but impossible to miss. My shoulders sagged. The mother began to wail—a high-pitched ululation. She moved past me and stood above her dead child, squealing in distress and shooting her hands into the air.

Had I attempted to replace those proteins and nutrients too rapidly? Had Anita suffered from a lethal miscalculation on my part? Had I overworked her delicate veins? These were unanswerable questions, and I tried to ignore them, but they were unshakable.

The mother continued to erupt with fresh tears and squeals. I watched passively for a few long minutes. Behind me, the door clicked open and Dr. Guy entered. He was a short man, very round. He had a freckled face and a soft voice that described perfectly his keen intellect. His thinning afro and mustache were trimmed very close to the skin, and he wore round, shiny glasses over his bright green eyes.

“Kwashiorkor?”

I nodded, wordlessly.

“Not enough protein.”

“Right,” I replied.

“It’s just one less child for her to feed. She surely has more.”

“Right.”

“Just start slow, next time. A little bit of milk. A little akamil when they’re ready. Not too much, or you’ll induce diarrhea or edema. Then the antibiotics. Then the vitamins. Then the Vermox. You know; patience is the key.”

And he turned me to face him, then, and said, “It’s alright, *Ti Dokte*.”

But I was fine.

The Rope

He was led in by a woman who would not touch him. He refused the chair. He sat in the corner. On the floor.

He was supremely dirty—you could watch fat lice crawling around in his dusty afro. All that he wore was a nasty pair of underwear with sprung elastic and vulgar stains. As he sat in the corner, folded into himself and scratching all over, he issued quiet guttural groans. He eyed me with suspicion; he looked poised to attack, or poised to escape, or poised to implode. Frightened, I stood across the room. His companion excused herself, and did not return.

I took little steps toward him and stretched into some latex gloves. I was silent, even inside my own head. I looked for compassionate words, healing words, but he moaned and he stank. He was covered in scars and lesions and long track scratches down his limbs and his chest. A wide red rash was spread all over him. Many of his lesions and scratches appeared to be infected. There was no way to know how many parasites were living on him: scabies, lice, fleas . . . Hookworms had certainly infiltrated his bare feet at some point, and his intestines were probably packed with them.

His head swiveled up when I came near. He bore horrible, rotten teeth at me and whispered, miserably, “gratel . . .” *Itchiness*. Then his head sank again, into his elbows, and his moaning became even quieter.

The man looked as though he might melt.

The sheer number of scars and the thoroughness of his inflammation suggested a chronic, probably lifelong, scabies infestation. He sat, wretched, taciturn. Thousands of little animals were living beneath his skin. The very thought had my own skin shivering and bristling.

Most likely, he'd been exiled from home and community many years ago, given a few gourdes and told to go and find a doctor. He'd probably spent those years wandering the markets and mountains and streets as a beggar and a nuisance. Now he was here on the floor, unsteadily.

We'd had one tiny bottle of Kwell when I arrived. We'd used the last of it weeks ago. It might be months before we saw more, but I wanted to ease his suffering

somehow. I came toward him with a pair of scissors, to clip away his grubby, louse-ridden hair. He recoiled at my approach and tried to disappear into the walls. He flailed his arms listlessly. I spoke to him softly, trying to calm him down, trying to keep him from touching me.

“Shhh, shhh. M’ap sikou.” *I’m going to help.* “Silans.”

He became quiet and allowed me to cut his hair. I cropped it as close as possible and it came off in lousy threads, snowy with nits. His irregular scalp was slick with old oil and sweat. Totally bald now, he looked even more pathetic than before. His lower lip quivered, and he touched his scalp with shaky fingers. Little, high-pitched noises escaped from his nose and lips.

“It’ll be better, now,” I told him.

I moistened a piece of gauze with rubbing alcohol and rubbed his head with it. I blew gently; he liked the cooling of it. I dusted his shoulders with my gloved hands. He continued scratching his arms and legs as I swept his hair into a nasty pile and dumped it into the trash can to be burned later.

As I trimmed his ragged fingernails down to their quick, I tried to explain that we could treat the scabies, eventually, but he didn’t understand. His Creole was worse than mine.

I resolved to track down some Kwell on the mainland, or even just a cattle dip with lindane in it, whatever, and whatever the cost.

I coaxed him into taking a healthy dose of Vermox, to clear up any worms that might be residing in his body. He eyed me with suspicion, but he drank. Then, the wretched bald patient oozed under the closed door and leaked out into the hallway. I watched his trail evaporate on the slick cement floor. I removed my latex gloves and dropped them into the garbage, on top of his hair and the constellation of tiny eggs.

\* \* \* \* \*

Heavy aromas of warm Haitian cuisine flooded the room. Nuggets of lambi—conch—were steaming in a blue ceramic bowl. Rice was mounded on a matching plate. There was a bowl of griot—goat meat—swimming in a peppery broth.

Pieces of fried plantain were laid out, as well, and slices of avocado lay at the end of the table beneath a paper towel. Our glasses of lemon ice water were slick with condensation.

In his untainted Eventide accent, Uncle Mavis gave a long and eloquent prayer of thanksgiving over the meal. The ceiling fan wafted the warm air around. H  l  ne, Uncle Mavis’s housekeeper, pattered around the table, arranging our silverware and ensuring that everything was ready to be eaten. She shooed a fly from the lambi and covered it with a napkin. Uncle Mavis’s eyes were closed as he prayed. I peeked around the room and said, “Amen.”

I couldn’t bring myself to eat much at all, hungry as I was, but Uncle Mavis had no apparent qualms.

He said to me, as he spooned more griot and sauce onto his rice, “We practice crucial medicine down here, Caleb. If we don’t show up at the clinic, nobody gets better. If we don’t teach people how to take care of themselves, they won’t know how.”

I cut a small bite of plantain and chewed it slowly.

I nodded in agreement. Of course I knew this. That’s why I was here.

His elbows were on the table. He lifted his hands.

“God works with these hands, Caleb. And He works in yours, now, too.”

I stared into my plate.

“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God,” he said; and he nodded his head squarely and took a large drink of water. He wiped his mouth on his napkin and replaced it in his lap.

I could feel him staring at me—thinking things at me.

“They’re really not like us, Caleb,” he said.

I was surprised to hear that.

“Dr. Guy is right. They have no sense. They don’t wash their hands after using the bathroom. They don’t even know *where* they should use the bathroom. I’ve spent years trying to teach them, but they just don’t learn. Even the best ones don’t learn. You’ve got to separate yourself from them, or else they pull you down. Ours is a ministry of service. We’re not here to change anything—because we can’t. This is a gesture, Caleb, a godly gesture.

“You don’t believe me, yet, and that’s fine. You will learn; if you stay long enough, that is. Most don’t. You’re not the first pious Christian to come here, you know.”

I took a long drink of lemon water.

“You run out of compassion quickly here. You burn it up like diesel. There’s just too much death, too much suffering—suffering beyond the pale—to keep on trying to make sense of it. You lose the sweetest children. You orphan them, sometimes, ‘cause you can’t conjure a miracle for a sick parent. You fail and fail and fail. It’s a test of faith, Caleb. Once you realize that, you’re not allowed to abandon it. That’s the price of salvation. ‘For unto whomever much is given, of him shall be much required.’

“Compassion is a dream. Equality is a dream. We’re here to help because it is God’s will that we try. The Haitians are not helpable. They’re far beyond that. Don’t forget that, or you’ll lose faith when you fail to see progress.”

I asked to be excused from the table.

I sat on the porch in the sweltering night. Down below, dozens of kerosene lamps were burning, very faint and distant. Cheerful people were gathered on buildingtops, laughing and singing together, almost inaudibly from here. From the mountains came the wooden knock of Rada Vodoun drums, very faint and distant. Over it all, galaxies and twinkling millions of pinprick lights swirled and blinked through the burgundy-black nighttime sky, very faint and distant.

Where is God, if not here?

Headlights came down the road, with voices coming from the truck and the sounds of a drive over uneven roads echoing off the white block buildings and into my ears. The truck bounded merrily down the hill, toward the harbor, through the chalky bumpy streets.

Yellow Dogs



The dirty blades of the electric fan slowed and quit, leaving the room silent and my ears humming for more noise. I sat in the darkness, with the yellow dogs shuffling outside the open window. No singing tonight, just a quiet night.

I groped across the desktop and found a book of matches. I lit my lamp and oily smoke rose into the room and fell invisibly into dark corners. Not so far away, I could imagine the anonymous multitudes in their mountain shelters, dreaming and dancing and making enthusiastic love on thatched pallets. A live scent of kerosene invaded my lungs. In the mountains tonight, Vodoun gods were descending into living vessels, reeling in large splendid circles around the *poteau mitan* while the drummers pounded ancient African cadences.

\* \* \* \* \*

It is Wednesday morning at Palma. The market is in rhythm and the wind moves brittle stands of acacia and palm. Fleury struts like the prince of peacocks while Emerson holds the pail. Together, they circulate the Byzantine paths of the market lined with merchandise and merchantwomen. Fleury slinks from table to table, corner to corner, with Emerson just behind. He leans against a tree. A table. He adjusts his hat and his sunglasses to appropriate angles. To the shuffling crowds he calls, "Tylenol for your children! Tetracycline for your sick ones! *Li tèlman bon ke yo vle!*"

Quietly, a white-headed woman approaches him. She mumbles low. He pulls her near and displays a sympathetic frown. She gestures to her belly, circling it with her hand. Her chin is round and pitted. Her teeth are very brown. Fleury touches her skin—feels her forehead and her stomach. He oozes a diagnosis. She mutters in return. He oozes a price. She offers her muddy paper money. He rolls it with the others in his pocket.

Emerson searches the pail for the pertinent remedy. He produces a needle, which is dirty and old, and possibly filled with water, and hands it to Fleury, who delivers the *pici-pici* to the woman. She is pleased, and presently fades into the passing parade of buyers, sellers, and traders. Fleury smiles to the open air: ivory, broad, clean, and satisfied.

\* \* \* \* \*

I cornered him in the market, that morning, with a friendly grin that proper etiquette would not permit him to ignore.

“*Bon swa, Fleury,*” I said.

“*B’swa, Ti Dokte,*” he replied, as Emerson slipped away into the circus. “How is your family, your uncle?”

“*Bien. Ka sa yé?*”

“*M byen wi, mèzi. Qu’est-ce que tu fais ici?*”

“Just browsing,” I replied, looking around for Emerson. “How’s business?”

“Better than you would like, I suppose. Busy. And yours?”

“*Toujours.*”

Those dark sunglasses masked his eyes, but discomfort could be read in his posture, his hands, the way he held his mouth. His pink tongue ran over his teeth and gums and his thin smile expanded into something brilliant and profane. To him, I must have seemed an absurd character: sunburned and sweaty, voluntarily absent from the land of electric light and cold Coca Cola.

He was leaning nonchalantly against a crooked ficus, dappled in early blue shade from its baby leaves. The chatter of the market hushed between us.

“Nice offering of mangos, over there,” he said, with a little nod.

“We had another infant come in with powder burns on his stomach.”

“Nice and plump, and straight from the tree. I nearly bought a few myself.”

“His mother said she had purchased a colic treatment from a local dokte-feuilles.”

“Long season.” He removed his sunglasses and began to polish them on his shirt.

Then, after a pause, he added, “Ask the local *houngan*. They sell powders.”

“You do, too. Was it one of yours?”

“Ask the local *houngan*, Ti Dokte.”

“Which?”

“*Kisa Bondye ki konnen*, and I don’t care.”

“My uncle—“

“Your uncle should mind his own affairs, just as I do, and just as you should,” he interrupted, with maddening calm.

“The health of this village *is* our affair.”

He remained unapologetic. “You have your remedies. We have ours. Neither is perfect.” He shrugged and replaced his sunglasses over heavy-lidded eyes. “There is much that you will never understand, Blanc, about Haiti and about Haitians. Only we rats can understand our souls and our bodies. We have our problems and we will provide our solutions. Today, the rats provide. Tomorrow, the rats consume. *Ou vwè jòdi, ou poko wè démen.*”

A tug came at my sleeve. A young boy with twisted ankles offered me his brightest grin and cupped his hands for a donation. “Geev me?” he peeped.

Fleury chuckled and slinked away, nimble and pretty as a tropical lizard.

\* \* \* \* \*

His lips barely moved, so that he seemed to speak from his lime green eyes. We sat across the table from each other, with a plate of steaming rice between us.

“Procedures exist for almost everything. Keep your diagnoses and treatments simple, and you will be in success, most of the time.”

I nodded in reply, as Uncle Mavis entered the room and took his seat at the head of the table.

“Good evening, doctors,” he said, situating himself.

“Good evening,” we responded.

“Delightful day. Big rains coming,” he said.

“That’s true,” said Dr. Guy. “The clouds are right for rain.”

“I can feel it,” he replied, happily.

I surveyed the table and solemnly admired the spread. Hélène did harbor formidable talents.

“Did you make Palma, today, Caleb?” asked Dr. Guy, through his spectacles.

I nodded. “Found a few fresh batteries and some cassette tapes.”

“Any pens?”

“None with ink in them. I’ll get some at the store, when it opens again.”

Uncle Mavis gave brief but sincere thanks over the meal, which we proceeded to demolish.

“I spoke to Fleury in the market, today,” I said between mouthfuls.

They looked at me, curiously.

“At length?”

“No.”

“About what?”

“Nothing, really.”

“Well, then,” said Uncle Mavis. “Well enough.”

“Such a scoundrel, that one,” added Dr. Guy.

“He did say that we should talk to some the local houngan about those powder burns.”

Uncle Mavis inspected his glass. “He’s in with the voodoo cults around here, though he claims to be Catholic, which isn’t much better. Damned rascal. Just protecting his own agenda, I’m sure.”

“Surely,” Dr. Guy chimed in.

I inspected my own glass. “I suppose.”

“Did you speak with Emerson, as well?” Dr. Guy asked me. “He’s the one you should have spoken with.”

Uncle Mavis watched him, sideways. “You shouldn’t have spoken with him at all.”

“Why not? Haven’t you?” I asked.

“It doesn’t pay to meddle with that side of things, son. It’s a mess, and it’s none of our business how he conducts his.”

“He’s a waste of time,” said Dr. Guy, “a heathen and a charlatan.”

Uncle Mavis cocked his head slightly. “Well, maybe not entirely, but it just doesn’t pay to involve yourself with those operations.”

Dr. Guy was taken slightly aback. “Not entirely?” he replied. “Of course he is. Peddling flowers and roots and expired medications to naïve villagers? Not a charlatan?”

“Dr. Guy, you know that some of those treatments work perfectly well. They overcharge, usually, but what the market will bear . . .”

“Nonsense.”

A slight flush was coming to Dr. Guy’s golden complexion. He reoriented his glasses and smoothed his hands across his afro.

Uncle Mavis shrugged and took a large forkful of rice into his mouth.

Dr. Guy skewered a slice of plantain and brought it to his plate. Carving into it as only a surgeon would, he took a few deep breaths.

I helped myself to more white rice and speckled beans. Our dinner went by without conversation for a few heavy moments, until Uncle Mavis pointed out that giromon tea, in fact, was a marvelous remedy for the flu. And papaya was good for digestion, and all the mints, too, and lantana and herbe à cornette for pneumonia. And that one time he’d seen a houngan bandage a wound with a piece of moldy bread, and that the wound had healed very quickly.

“It’s ridiculous,” Dr. Guy responded, “for you defend these charlatans while we are surrounded by results of their failures. How many poorly set bones have we seen? How many powder burns? And near-poisonings?”

“Don’t be sore, Michel. I’m not defending them; I just don’t agree that they’re entirely bad.”

“Say what you want. They are thieves.”

“Rats?” I offered.

Guy turned to me. “What do you know about rats, Ti Dokte?”

I felt much younger, in that moment. “Not anything.”

“Right,” he said, then repeated for emphasis, “Right.”

“Caleb, excuse us, please,” asked Uncle Mavis.

I left them in the dining room, where they were speaking too softly to hear. I went outside for air but didn’t find any. On the patio, then on the roof (where I did my best thinking), the wind blew too hot and too stale. There was a vague tension inside—what was it? Frustrated and ornery, I went back inside and into my room. I slid my books to the end of my desk and placed my head on the warm wood. The electric fan flapped at my hair and random papers fluttered. I threw a hand on them, and then

weighted them with a copy of *Gray's*, which I began to flip through, idly admiring the diagrams and familiar explanations. With everything laid out like that, tendons, joints, and tissues, I found a fragile comfort.

After awhile, I marked the page with a scrap of paper and reclined. There had been times when things weren't unglued, and that's what I was thinking about. Abby's thin, unpretty lips were the focus of this reverie. Those lips and her jutting teeth, which would occasionally slip through her sleeping smile and catch the light like old china. She was a tender girl and I had treated her badly towards the end, but it was her mouth that I remembered as often as anything, and with the most regret.

I was eager for the abuses of the world, open to it all. I prayed for true distress to come raining down into my open palms. I wanted to be arms-out and quaking. Penny-thin and sun-bright.

Dulcinea

Through the doorway, at the edge of the crowd, a dusty woman removed a handful of petals from her rake and dropped them idly into a pile.

I turned back to face the room and a little boy looked up, timidly, toothbrush in hand. “Hold it *comme-ça*” I said, as I wrapped his tiny fingers around the handle and dabbed toothpaste on the bristles.

“Back and forth,” I explained, miming the process.

Behind him, several other children were watching, some with looks of real enchantment, others with only a vague, cynical interest. They were dressed in their blue and white checked shirts—little boys in blue shorts, little girls in blue skirts. Mathurin, their schoolteacher, stood across the room, handing toothbrushes to them one by one.

“Back and forth. That’s right. *Comme-ça. Byen.*”

Pale blue foam dribbled from the corners of the boy’s mouth. His eyes were squinted in earnest concentration as he zigzagged the bristles over his teeth.

Across the open room, Dr. Guy held a baby in his arms, gently rocking. He placed it in the hanging scale and its slim shaky hand dipped downward. He made brief notes on the back of an orange folder, which he handed to Miss Patrick, who stacked it with dozens more. He lifted the baby from the sling of the scale and the hand flipped back up to near-zero. The smiling mother took the child and laughed her thank you’s to Dr. Guy, who replied with a pleasant nod.

“Go spit,” I told my brusher, and he danced to the doorway and released a frothy blue jet into the dust.

Through the doorway, just outside, Uncle Mavis stood beneath the shade tree, amid a gathering of women and their children. He was portioning and dispensing Akamil—enriched oatmeal we got from France—in plastic bags. His bandana was knotted around his head like the scarf of an old Caribbean pirate and his features were bright and red from this day in the sun. He moved merrily from hand to hand, doling out his heavy bags. He was smiling through his running sweat and cherry cheeks, his deep wrinkles and scruffy whiskers. I took a moment to admire him there before finding my next brusher.



\* \* \* \* \*

I was looking out over the bay, with the mainland in a fog and the water in a million ripples. Far down the mountain, the tiny village of Picmi lay motionless, resting, probably. We had plans for Picmi—plans for the clouds of mosquitos that swarmed there year-round and spread so many diseases. There were fat birds floating above, and a delicate tropical wind scenting the air with ocean brine.

I wandered further from the Palma schoolhouse and down an empty road. Without a certain destination, I stepped slowly, feeling each stone through the soles of my shoes. When I passed the empty market, with its ghosts of recent activity still churning through the pathways, I thought about my return to Grandfather's home up in Eventide.

The Eastern hemlocks had been in pale yellow bloom that week, and the Tennessee oaks were looming as resolutely and darkly as they had in my youth. I recalled the sounds of the bobwhites and crows, and the rattling car-clatter resounding up the streets. The house was unlit, but it maintained a soft glow of vitality even after my grandfather's passing.

Its dark brick and local timber were stained in places where the gutters had slipped into disrepair. I'd followed the old stone path through the weeds and around the house to find the garden self-governing—wild and secretive. Seven autumns' worth of leaves thickened the air with mold and dirt, and a wind-rotted and rotting branch had settled heavily into the tall grass. Jesus lives in those soft places that go untouched. He is hiding there, under the leaves.

I pressed against the streaky windows to look inside. The walls and floors were bare, but anonymous spirits moved through the hollow rooms. I could feel them through the dirty glass, whispering psalms and lamenting the dust.

I slapped a mosquito on my neck and broke from my reverie. In the road, far enough away that I couldn't tell if it was man or woman, or which direction it was

traveling, a dark figure was walking. As the distance between us closed, I noticed that in his hand he carried a yellow pail.

“Emerson,” I called.

He raised a hand in reply.

“*Ban m nouvèl-ou?*” I asked.

“*Byen, mezi.*”

I asked if he was out on business. He showed me his pail, which held a few dozen seeds and a jar of some milky substance.

“*Qu'est-ce que c'est?*”

“Papaya,” he replied. He explained that the seeds could be crushed and added to honey and the papaya milk to cure intestinal worms.

His eyes were recessed in his brow, looking like black beads with a high polish. The missing buttons of his collared shirt revealed a thin chest full of corkscrews of graying hair.

“I’m glad to meet you, finally. I’ve been hoping to talk to you.”

“Everyone likes to talk. I can’t hear a thing.”

“You see, these powders and herbs you sell . . . I wanted . . . I was hoping to see if they really work.”

“Have worms?” he asked, offering the pail and suppressing a smile. He strolled around me, but I followed.

“I’d just like to see. For my sake.”

“You won’t see how these things work,” he said. “You are not a Haitian.”

“Should that matter?” I asked.

“Haitians see a different healing than you do.”

“Dr. Guy is Haitian, and he doesn’t see things the way you do,” I countered.

“His faith is in the wrong place.”

“But maybe I could. I’d like to see. For my sake.”

He leaned his head skyward and stopped walking, but he did not turn around.

“Ti Dokte,” he said. “Haitian miracles are for Haitians. You may see our healing, but you won’t to learn anything. These are special things.”

I opened my mouth to respond, but he cut me off. "Come here tomorrow night," he sighed. "My brother-in-law will meet you."

\* \* \* \* \*

We drove home to Anse-à-Galets in the back of our truck, with little tails of children chasing behind us, shouting, "*Blanc! Blanc! Blanc!* Give me a dollah! Give me something!"

I watched Dr. Guy sitting on the opposite tire well, his head bobbing and his spectacle frames tossing bright reflections at me. His face was passive and his eyes were almost shut. Maybe he was half-napping, or maybe he was planning something elaborate.

Uncle Mavis sat on the lowered tailgate, clutching for dear life with his hands but kicking his feet like a boy. He called out to the children who would come rushing down from their hillside shelters to follow us, and he would toss out bags of vitamins to their feet. I could see him as a sunburned Santa Claus, red and scruffy and fat, bouncing like hell in his battered Toyota pickup through the Haitian countryside, tossing healthful gifts to the good little boys and girls of the island. He may have seen himself that way, too.

Come

We were in her city, in her rented room, in a dilapidated, but handsome house. It was very late at night. The scent of unlit vanilla candles mingled nicely with Abby's perfume. I was awake and thinking. I could tell that she was, too, but she was pretending to sleep. Dim moonlight came in the window. Otherwise, we were alone. My mind was on the door.

I rose from the bed and pulled on my jeans. She curled beneath the covers, but I knew she was awake. I found my socks and pulled them on; and, likewise, my shoes. It was the jangling of my keys, though, that caused her to stir.

"Where are you going?" she asked, which a voice unblurred by sleepiness.

"I've got to run," I replied.

"Why? What's wrong?"

"Nothing, I just need to go," I said.

"What time is it?" she wondered aloud.

"Three-thirty. Go back to sleep."

She sat up. "Why do you always do this?"

"What?"

"You never stay through to morning anymore."

"I don't understand why it matters," I said.

"It matters because if you loved me, you wouldn't want to leave when we're done. It's like you don't want to be here."

I understood, but didn't want to agree. However, I did remove my shoes. And I did remove my socks. And I did remove my jeans. And we lay in a most uncomfortable silence, during which neither of us spoke and neither of us slept.

But she did drift off, eventually. And dutifully, I'd remained beside her through the long night and the still-longer hours of sunless early morning.

Now, the clock showed seven-thirty. The waking sun was sending bright beams through the undraped window. Abby, in the morning, was dreaming in her bed. I stood above her in the doorway, and I filled my lungs with that heavy, dusty, fragrant air. I filled my eyes with the spinning fan, the blinking clock, the ivory blankets, the warm blue

wallpaper, the hardwood floor, the vanilla candles, her spilling hair, the golden light, the swimming motes, and the easy sleep of the girl I'd loved.

She sighed in her repose. The sunlight fell on her uncovered ankles.

I crossed the floor again, and touched her hollow belly. Her cheek was warm on my chin. I pulled the blankets over her feet to keep them warm, and covered the window with a towel to keep the sunlight from rousing her.

The moments passed so slowly that I believed that the clock had stopped blinking, that the fan blades had ceased to spin, and that even the sun-bright points of dust had paused in their wild formation. Abby was beautiful in that sunlight, radiant in that bed. For those long moments, I believed that she would not wake, and that I might not leave.

\* \* \* \* \*

Around the sooty bells of the Wednesday lamps danced an idiot moth. In and out of the darkness it would wobble and jerk, circling the light in crazy and uncharted maneuvers before losing it again and disappearing from view.

Flanked by the lamps on the crudely hewn altar were the offerings to Damballah. There was an uncovered tin of cornmeal on the corner and beside it was a half-carafe of lamp oil. There was a single white egg on a simple white dish, and a bowl of red grapes, as well. These things were tidily arranged—a meager collection of goods, but hopefully enough to satiate the god's appetite this evening.

Above the simple spread stood Moses with his serpentine staff. Someone had smudged his features with charcoal, rendering him black. And beside this portrait there hung a wooden crucifix, with a sculpted Jesus hanging limply by the palms.

On the far side of the hounfort there was a pinewood fire billowing sweet smoke. Around the poteau mitan—the centerpost of the peristyle—there were gathered three drums. And around me, all around me, were impeccably dressed peasants engaged in cheerful conversations.

I was sitting on the dirt floor of the hounfort, with Fleury squatting beside me, watching the ceremony begin.

The batterie took to their drums. An enormously fat man situated himself behind the high-pitched *boulatier* and began to rap it with his knuckles and palms. He was presently joined by an older, bespectacled man on the baritone *sirgon* and a gangly boy on the massive *hounta*. A few at a time, the peasants began to mill about the poteau mitan in a counterclockwise manner.

The gangly boy struck the hounta with padded mallets. As his intensity built, those strolling around the centerpost began to step lively, with the slightest hint of rhythm infiltrating their casual steps. The portly drummer, already in a sweat, began to beat a little harder, veering his tempo away from the drone of the sirgon and the pounding of the hounta.

Dancing began in earnest, then. The growing throng began to pitch around the centerpost slowly, like turbulent dust. There were random peals of laughter from their midst, and flirtatious bumping and touching. And soon, the entire throng was swirling at full tilt. The drums had split into three independent cadences, but there was a strange unity to their disordered beating.

A broad-bellied woman strode heavily into the crowd, which parted around her, respectfully. This was the mambo Zuli, Fleury explained, a veteran priestess from a long line of hereditary mambo. She stood like a granite monolith wrapped in white cotton. Her hair was brushy and thick on her solid head.

To her side came Emerson, wearing a starchy shirt and carrying a large rattle.

“He is the houngan,” I realized aloud.

Fleury nodded with the faintest of grins.

The drums quieted and the dancers settled.

“The oceans are filled with the souls of our ancestors,” called Emerson. “And the oceans are filled with secret truths. There are secrets inside the living, and what is true?”

He extended his rattle forward and shook its beads and painted snake bones at the crowd. The boulatier knocked rapidly in accord.

The heat and smoke of the woodfire and the heavy sweat of the believers was causing my head to swim. All around, there was the smell of pine smoke and raw rum.

“What is true?” Emerson repeated.

As if in answer, Mambo Zuli lay on the dirt floor and hitched her cotton dress over her hips, revealing her plump and hairy privates.

“Mother is true,” Emerson declared, and crouching over Mambo Zuli, he pulled open her fleshy labia and kissed her firmly between. Others from the gathering stepped forward and followed suit.

“Creation is true,” he added.

The hounta bounced a rhythm into the air, locking with the light staccato of the boulatier.

The young hounsis, the initiates of the temple, began to dance in their bare feet and head wraps and white dresses. Emerson took a jar of flour and began to trace an elaborate pattern on the ground.

Fleury leaned over and explained that, “first, we must bring Papa Legba. Damballah cannot arrive without the proper escorts. So we write Legba’s name.”

Mambo Zuli had risen and now stepped forward with a bottle of clairin—raw cane rum—which she emptied onto the ground before the sacred scrawl. More rum was poured onto the drums and into the mouths of the drummers as Emerson danced to the throbbing rhythms. His knees were pitching and his shoulders were thrashing. His dance was muscular and fierce, somehow reflecting both the throes of sexual ecstasy and the spasms of a violent death.

“Papa Legba, opener of the gates, come before us! Grant us opportunities!” he called as he whirled and kicked.

The hounsis stomped the dirt around the poteau mitan. Dust was rising around their ankles and blending with the acrid smoke of the woodfire.

Emerson fell to the dirt and began to crawl on all fours. From a nearby table he grabbed a tattered black robe which he threw about himself. He also took a crutch and a straw *macoute*, or shoulder bag. Leaning heavily on the crutch, he hobbled back to the center of the hounfort and began to inspect the crowd.

“I have such a great hunger!” he cried in a creaky, feeble voice. “Bring me my dinner!”



The hounsis stopped their dancing and rushed to fetch Papa Legba his meal, which consisted of peanuts, corn, and bananas, all roasted over the pinewood fire. One brought him a pipe, and another, a bottle of rum and a Diet Pepsi.

“You are good children,” he said to his hounsis. “You are good little girls. I’m glad to see that there are no sluts among you.”

The hounsis doted around him, smoothing his ragged cloak and lighting his pipe.

Mambo Zuli stepped before him with a speckled hen. “Your *poule Zinga, Papa Legba*,” she offered.

Legba quickly appraised the bird, then nodded approval, at which Mambo Zuli grabbed the neck of the hen and twisted it violently. She dropped the bird at his feet and stepped away. It landed with a small thump and lay motionless. Legba prodded it with his cane and smiled. “Place it in my tree, children. I shall consume it later.” The hounsis scurried to comply. As they carried it to the door, the chicken began to thrash in their hands, nearly breaking away, with its head drooping and bouncing flaccidly.

“This is a pleasant affair,” Legba pronounced. With that, he fell to the ground and shook violently, as if in a seizure. When he rose, his posture was straight and his leg was unhobbled. Emerson had returned and was now shedding the robe of Papa Legba.

“Legba has blessed the proceedings,” Fleury told me. “The crossroads are now safe for the others.”

Emerson smoothed his shirt and dusted his elbows. “Loco Atisou, please grant us knowledge,” he called, spreading more flour on the earth. “Show me your healing powers. Teach me the treatments found in nature, so that we may heal ourselves. We have given you many chickens, so please be good to us.”

The crowd began to sing aloud:

*Va, Loco, Loco Valadi’, Va, Loco, Loco Valadi*

*Va, Loco, Loco Valadi’, Va, Loco, Lovo Valadi*

*Man, Jean Valou Loco, Loco Valadi*

And though Loco did not descend into any of our congregation, Emerson assured us that he was present and supportive of our gathering. "We are short on rum, anyway," he added with a smile.

The drummers redoubled their intensity. The crowd erupted in a boisterous dance. Arms and shoulders pumped and hips gyrated. Bodies collided and spun and clothing was torn. The hounsis moved like whirlwinds in the crowd, each one evincing sensual and spiritual bliss.

In the middle of this riotous revelry, the thatched door burst open and a pride of men charged in, dragging a girl on a wooden litter. The rhythm broke and the dancers reeled to the edges of the hounfort. One of the hounsis, lost without the drums, fell to the dirt. Fleury stepped in and scooped her away as the litter was pulled to the center of the room.

The young lady was spilling blood from between her legs. Emerson and Mambo Zuli were immediately upon her, but when I stepped forward to join them, Fleury held me back. I attempted to wrest myself from his grip, but he held me tight. I accepted my place in the ogling periphery. What was the use of a white doctor while such important events were underway?

Emerson passed his left hand over the face of the young lady three times as Mambo Zuli pressed her hands over the girl's swollen belly.

"The baby is dead," Zuli spoke. "And the mother?"

"Dying quickly," Emerson responded.

A hounsi brought a pitcher of water and a lime. Mambo Zuli dipped the lime into the water and rubbed the young mother's forehead with it. "That is comforting, isn't it, child? Soon you will be alright."

The young mother's eyes were rolled back to the whites. Her jaw was clenched and her dress was soaked in blood. Her feet gave little kicks at the litter but soon fell motionless. Emerson and Zuli exchanged a long look.

Emerson placed his hand on the girl's breast. "This is a child of Damballah," he said. "We need to perform the *Courir Zinc*."

Emerson rose and faced the crowd. "A child of Damballah has died," he declared. A round of intense wails resounded throughout the room and rang my ears.

Before the room could become still, Emerson, Zuli, and the young hounsis began to dash throughout the hounfort. The mambo swept away to a corner of the hounfort, gathering tins and stones in the lap of her arm. The hounsis scattered throughout the crowd and into darkened rooms adjacent the peristyle. Emerson himself darted outside altogether and disappeared behind Legba's decorated tree.

To Fleury, I asked in a whisper, "what's happening?"

He replied, "this is the *Manger des Morts*. It is a ceremony to remove the spirit from the head of the girl, so that a new horse may be chosen. Very dangerous."

"A new horse?"

"One to carry the honors and obligations of the loa."

Mambo Zuli came to the center of the room and began to arrange her flat, rounded stones in a ring around the litter. The spectators moved outside the ring as the mambo uttered warnings.

Emerson appeared at the doorway, shirtless and glowing with sweat, dimly. He held his rattle in one hand and a white chicken in the other. His eyes showed something between anger and resolve, and possibly fear. His stance was comfortless and limp. He moved briskly to Damballah's altar, staring into the blackened portrait, and removed the egg from the plate. Whispering invocations, he broke the egg upon his brow, spilling the insides onto his face. He poured the cornmeal onto the empty plate and brought it, with the chickens, before the fire as he chanted:

*Har'au Va Erique Dan, Sobo Dis Vou qui nan*  
*Ce'bon Die qui maitre, Afrique Guinin, tous les morts*  
*Hai' 'am Va erique dan*

The body of the dead girl bolted upright from the waist and stared into me with unseeing eyes before easing down again. The crowd went aflutter and my stomach coiled. Emerson pulled a fishhook from his pocket and dipped it deep into the flame with his bare fist.

A hymn went up among the hounsis. Zuli and the crowd joined in, enthusiastically. The drummers attacked their instruments with unbridled ferocity.

Emerson strode to the poteau mitan and spread the signature of Damballah on the soil. The chicken dangled helplessly in his fist. He backed away from the signature and knelt before it. A knife was handed to him, which he passed above the chicken three times. Bending back its neck, he ran the blade across the animal's throat and cast the blade to the ground. With quick strokes, he broke the wings of the bird and twisted them free. They fell to the earth, rent and unflapping.

Are you there?

I am floating and bewildered. My surroundings are warm and moist. I can open my mouth and taste the proteins.

Is there anybody there?

Membranes are slipping over unblinking eyes. I taste the metal and blood around me. It is thick and airless in here. And dark.

I'm ready to open this up.

The fault lines hatch. Slivers and chips of eggshell splinter and fall and proteins spill free. I am reaching and reaching, and a long snake appears in the distant dimness, slithering slow, but I am not afraid.

My feathers are dripping; and a bell rings faintly for the spirits in the room. The rattling must not stop. Please don't let it stop.

Warm me mother, for I am freezing.

When I awoke, the mambo was squatting above me. Her legs were like massive mahogany trunks, her many years reflected by their very thickness. I was face to face with her holiness, and inches from deliverance. Jesus lives at the bottom of the ocean, where the sea snakes glow.

When the colorful birds of the tropical night turn to fly from their nests, I will be watching. Where the silver fish swarm, I will wait. When the evenings swallow the children of Guinea, I will be watching, unblinking. The yellow dogs are conspiring in the corners. The rats are in the kitchen. And I am awake.

Emerson lifted the dead girl from her litter and scooped her into his arms. Surrounded by us all, he exited the hounfort and turned up the footpath which leads up the mountain. We were singing songs of travel to an underwater paradise. Far above us, through the trees, the cemetery was lit with tiny lanterns.

