POETRY

Quake

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The author offers up reflections on the 10th anniversary of the Haiti earthquake.

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“The past is never dead. It’s not even past.”

William Faulkner

It has been 10 years since the devastating 2010 earthquake in Haiti. These six poems are a meditation on this 100-year cataclysm, its lasting impact on our psyche, and the meaning it still has to Haitians at home or displaced throughout the diaspora. Some five years ago, a Haitian friend and I were remembering a former classmate who perished in the seism. My friend lamented: “He is still under the rubble”.

The past can split into many fractions, like light through a prism, with each fraction moving at a different speed into the present, and expectant future. For many, the earthquake is a past that they still reside in; while the rest of us have gone on with our lives for nearly a decade. Some pasts recede into the horizon; others are the mirrors, the shields or menisci through which we see, or a veil that drops when least expected.

I have written poems that have returned me to the earthquake, independent of their initial trajectories; as if the threads of inspiration were pulled back by the event’s literal and metaphorical gravity. How many of us have found ourselves in dreams, hovering over the rubble hoping to hear the whispers of friends and countless others, unnamed, lost. For this generation, the earthquake has defined us as much as the bicentennial of Haiti’s independence. This earthquake is still in my present, and perhaps the present of many others.

Quake

A crack in the crust

of an apple pie,

subterranean, a microscopic fissure

in the peel of this pomegranate earth.

A city, a dot, an organic fossil

in a geological scab.

Can these souls claim amnesty

in the bosom of Abraham?

Can we ever know the secrets

that belong to the gods?

These colorful retracting ocean waves

These colorful retracting ocean waves
the undulations of time

slowly vibrating strings
sea foam lapping at the moon.

Curves, bends, the hinges
of decades, of centuries.

Then, 200,000 bodies.

History has a way of folding
upon our tragedies.

There, in its cloudy indistinct edges
of yesterdays, is a reverse alchemy:

voices transmuted into molecular fractions,
subatomic particles, running-away light

receding echoes of matter
that soon will no longer be heard.

Memento vivere. Remember.

The Way We Live, 1

We live at times in the eddies
the minute dead spaces

the pin-point penumbra
within the bright flow of days.

We live inside a snake
on this island we stitched

from rags and rafts
kept debris born long ago
of sunken slave boats.

Boukman! Toussaint! Dessalines!
Ashes of glorious days
overfill our bright urns.

We are one and alone
with our tragedies.

We are one and alone
dreaming
in our beloved ruins.

The Way We Live, 2

The rhythmic drum metronome of exigent labor.
Canticles cocooned inside mountains.

Our sweat evaporates, leaving
nothing more than its earthly gift of salt.
Our hands sift and lift the dust
carry it to the shore.

We have brought nothing but psalms
to barter with the ocean

to trade for an overcoat of algae
seaweed and moss

a patch of imagined green
in the baobab's hairy shadow.

Refugee (The Day of the Dead)

1.

In the land of my ancestors' birth
there is dancing in the streets today
Le Jour de Morts, and all day
the living raises the spirits
then drum them back to peaceful sleep.

Today there was dancing in the streets.
And at dusk the drums are left out
in the eucalyptus scented breeze
to soothe and heal their battered skins.

2.

But here, in the fog of night,
the drunken moon has overturned,
bloated belly against the ground.
Here, insomnia unchains its darkest ocean.

So I walk these streets of opalescent glass,
tentacular avenues under stroboscopic lights,
stunned like a revenant, I am the shadow
of a nameless neon angel, worlds away
from my down trodden and quarrelsome tribe.

See me wearing my grandfather's straw hat
A red handkerchief around my neck,
cactus milk on my face, and salt in both hands,
to stave off the leaving-dead.

3.

See me escape the city,
out to bury my recalcitrant love.
I follow a damp and tenebrous trail
littered with decaying leaves of almond trees.

I am the guest of honor
in a gala of gila monsters.

What Remains

We extricate our bones
white elongated pearls

Gemstones from a treasure chest
and leave them out

to whisper their age-old parables
into the frothy ears of conches.

We leave them out
to dry on the sand

offer their marrow
to the hungry tongues of tides.

We leave them among the wrecked ships
and cathedrals for gargantuan birds

blue-bellied bats
to fill their conquering hunger.

Soon we will fold our jellied bodies
into the veil of the ocean's fog

Rest on the coral beds
in our castles of foam.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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