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Rèspé ba Matinik and for Aimé Césaire

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This old frail black always man
sits in an airy sunny office *à l'étage*
at the *Hotel de Ville* in Fort de France.
Small behind his desk, wearing farsight glasses,
he appears half already made a monument of,
half ready still to detumesce what French

empirical erections are left around his island.
He sits with his back toward the Morne,
shoring it up by leaning into it, as if
his shoulders sustain all those poor-poor
huts on spindly fowl's legs, chicken legs
of arthritic wood his own porous bones hold up.

Roof of galvanize, his white sun hat for walking.
Once they loved him, then they didn't,
now they do again. We love him too,
african begatter of a negritude without attitude
that would not exclude the meanest indigo black
or the meanest blanched béké planter,

and was human enough to laugh at one
and despise the other and say shame
on the shaman himself for laughing the n-word,
nègre, wanna make something out of it?
out of nothing, that is, but the volcanic
blast of his voice shouting down upon the city

his marrooning poetry of the Morne's
blacker-than-chestnut cream marroons,
moving higher up into the hills, plotting a slow
deluge of jungle green back down into the town,
not Pelée's pyroclastic ashen burial flow
but a creeping rooting rhizomatic zone

that built a creole people. From years of negritude,
through communism and the departmental *outré mer*,
he has lived to see Texaco refined from crude
into an ethersea of shanties lapping untroubled waters
where Morne Martinique meets its Caribbean salvation:
antillanité in fifty gallon fetes of calypso drumming

his words are deeds of gift to his not French people.
They add up to *rèspé ba matinik* scrawled in *chabine* creole
across the plaqued pediment beneath beheaded Josephine,
whose marble bodice, painted bloody, tells the violated torso
of the island, supurations of the sugar lash repaid by machetes
sharp for stone, cane-cuts of a new marrooning revolution

that will fell tyrants and consorts in the martinican mind.
Of course he's heard of the newly-guillotined Josephine.
(Word comes naturally to him over the island's liana vine.)
But he knows the *cou coupé* does not portend a general terror:
iconoclasm is necessary because there are icons,
and if the empress oneday grow a new head

she may finally belong to the island and not the empire:
be a *capresse* to her black and brown lovers, not Buonaparte:
loyal to the Morne, not the Metropole. Then will she
come to spurn the desuetude of Paris,
its langour under glass, the cold white morphine
of its *tristes*, and hum soft love-zouks of her tropic *volontés*.

It may be then that he will love her with his word:
redress her in bright creole colors, madras her bouffant,
take off her shoes and mount upon her *chabine's* head
a square basket with a hundredweight of social goods:
set her off *au bout du petit matin* barefoot on a *porteuse's*
daylong straight-ahead steady climb morneward,

calling as she goes, '*ou 'lè marchanne,*' nodding with her eyes
to folks she meets, who greet her: '*Hello, Josephine!*
How do you do? Do you remember me, baby, like I remember you?'
And she will try to sign, '*I seem to recall, as through*
this mountain mist, where I was and who you were. . .
please give me time as he gives me words, and I shall love you.

When the stone head grows again in flesh, he may die.
Will the mourning make a statue of him to reign
on the Morne, only to be talibaned in its turn? Or will *Matinik*
respect the stature of his *pur-sang* poetry in French, let it
say, uncreoled, what their island place has been, is now,
and by great Cæsar's ghost ever shall be, Word without end?

amen