

BLAZED AND OTHER POEMS

Written and translated from the Haitian Creole by PATRICK SYLVAIN

BLAZED

With sleeping mountains
Rooted by bayonets and
Vengeful eyes, hungry
Nights turned fighters docile who
Once blazed plantocrats to pulp.

CONSTRAIN

A whirlpool swallowed
My face, whole. My eyes blinded
By thick reams of dust-
Like waves, coercing me to
Prostrate, jaw on the dirt floor.

GREENS

A frosty morning
On Kenscoff hills. Pines whisper
Ancestral desires
To gather together with
Their large families of green.

BOULE

Ak mòn kabicha
 Kote bayonèt bòne
 Epi zye brigade,
 Nuit vant vid dousi sòlda
 Ki boulatcha plantokrat.¹

1. *Plantokrat* =
 zotobre, yon klas
 de moun ki te fè
 richès yo nan plan-
 tasyon esklav te
 kiltive

KONTRENN

Toubiyon vale
 Figi m', nèt. Vegle zye
 M' ak woulo vag
 Tankou pousyè, k'ap fòse
 M' rabese bèk-atè.

VÊTAY

Yon maten glasyal
 Anwo Kenskòf. Pye sapen
 Chichote anvi
 Yo pou tout lafanmi vin
 Rasanble an vèdisyon.

DREAM SEQUENCE 5-8

DREAM 5

At the end of
A long & narrow road over-
Looking Port-au-Prince
Bay, I stood planted, clutching
A shining sharpened cutlass.

DREAM 6

My lingered gaze glued
To thousands of war horses
Mounted by men dressed
In red, propelled from the sea,
Extinguishing tongues of flames.

DREAM 7

Rattle-tailed cobras
Hissed messages in ancient
Languages. Young hands-
Like orchids showering towns
To subdue Lucifer's wrath.

DREAM 8

I bent down and chopped
Weeds around my heavy feet,
An older woman
With stained teeth pointed her thin
Fingers to a maiden sun.

RÈV SEKANS 5-8

RÈV 5

Nan finisman yon
 Wout long epi etwat ki
 Bay sou Pòtoprens,
 M' kanpe doubout ak yon
 Manchèt klere byen file.

RÈV 6

Nawè m' fikse
 Sou milye chwal lagè moun
 Ki veste anwouj
 Sele, sòti nan lanmè
 Pou tenyen gwo lang flanbo.

RÈV 7

Klikètman kobra
 Ke vèt te pran sifle an
 Daki. Jenès men
 Floral zazi lavil pou
 Dousi kòlè Lisifè.

RÈV 8

Mwen bese koupe
 Move zèb bò pye m', pwa-
 Senkant, yon granmoun
 Dan kalili lonje dwèt
 Li sou yon solèy gengenn.

MARGIN

The white of the page
Is the margin where silence
Occupies the space between
The chaos of thoughts and
Words. Ruminating silence.

The margin is also a space
Where misery chokes breath
Into eternal silence where
The chaos of marginality
Muffle words into silence.

Silence is hidden sight,
A site of nakedness until
The margins are shoved into
The main spaces, becoming
Cavities in neat rows of lines.

The chaos of marginal space
Hums out a Babel of hymns
To the gods who have forgotten
How to read marginal space
And the margins of silence.

What is hidden is a site of
An abandoned space, where gazes
Flare to ogle the exuding of
Cavities like blotches on margins
Collapsing words into silence.

Maj

Epas blanch paj la
 Se maj kote silans
 Okipe espas ant
 Kawo panse epi
 Mo. Alimante silans.

Maj se yon espas tou
 Kote lamizè trangle souf
 Nan yon silans etènèl kote
 Kawo espas majinal
 Bayonnen mo jouk silans tabli.

Silans se yon rega kache,
 Yon sit toutouni jouktan
 Maj yo bouskile nan
 Espas prensipal yo tounen
 Kavite liy byen ranje.

Kawo espas majinal yo
 Vonvonnen sòti nan kantik Babel
 Pou dye yo ki bliye
 Kòman pou li espas majinal yo
 Ak maj ki pran silans.

Sa ki kache se yon sit
 De yon espas bandonnen kote rega yo
 Kale louvri-je nan yon degajman
 Kavite tankou tach sou maj yo
 Kote mo dekonstonbre anba silans.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *Unfinished Dreams/Rèv San Bout* is a book-length collection of bilingual poems that investigates the unrealized personal and sociopolitical aspirations of Haitians at home and in the diaspora. This manuscript is as much about the success of the Haitian Revolution (1791–1804) against the French slavocratic system as it is about a bold attack on the global capitalist system that depended on the inhumane exploitation of slaves. But the success of the Haitian Revolution became a dream deferred. More than two hundred years later, Haitian people continue to be punished. My work is haunted by the constant search for that severed and deferred dream. Issues of race, gender, and class are as primary and crucial as freedom, and they cannot be evaded. Marshaling a wide array of poetic conceits and a variety of literary and cultural traditions, I write against enforced and encrusted ideas of prestige and class, in order to show that Haitian

Creole is a language that has great capacities for aesthetic and intellectual production.

Unfinished Dreams, which will be published by JEBCA Editions in Fall 2021, is a collection that uses Japanese Tanka, Haiku, and other literary styles such as free verse to excavate experiences of hurt, exploitation, and hope through irony and symbolism. As a poet, what I most appreciate about Haiku and Tanka is their ability to place the poetic voice within a mathematical restriction that automatically clips excess language. These force me to drive the emotional metaphor with precision, allowing me to double create, and be double conscious of the power of poetry through images and musicality.

This bilingual collection is unique in its presentation and poetic scope, as it traverses a rich linguistic and cultural terrain to shine a needed light on the Haitian experience via dream motifs. This work is also the first of its kind: while

some Haitians or Haitian-American writers have used the Haiku, no one to my knowledge has used both the Haiku and Tanka in a bilingual presentation. My writing and educational journey in the United States have exposed me to a variety of literary styles and aesthetics, and those exposures have shaped my creative vision and compelled me to bring a new aesthetic into Haitian literature. As a cosmopolitan writer, turning to the Japanese Haiku and the Tanka, I intend to also demonstrate that Haitian “Creole,” as a derivative of coloniality, can also participate in the global poetic parlance. Haitian must be seen as an international and formidable literary language which is inherently capable of embracing forms associated with extensive written poetic tradition. I am implicitly moving into the realm of literature with a language that is associated with folklore, music, and oraliture (orality), while French has long been the language of Haiti’s intellectual

class. But French is not the language of reason and of beauty. All languages are. My hope is to broaden the readership of Haitian literature beyond the scope of traditional Haitian language learners, or literary students/scholars of Haiti.

I have sustained a life-long commitment to bringing the diverse stories of Haitians and those of Haitian descent to the wider world through my literary craft. One example of this is my publication of the first historical novel written in the Haitian language (*Anba Bòt Kwokodil*, 2015). I wanted to bring a modern novel into the Haitian literary context, a novel that was not simply a “peasant” novel of the 1930s, in which the characters often had no real interiority. My literary vision is broad, and it is cemented within a political tradition that sees the arts as a teaching tool and not simply as an aesthetic artifact. Poetry is a second skin. It interacts with the environment and it is shaped by the conditions within

the environment. This set of poems alerts us to the fact that each linguistic culture has its own literary phrases and aesthetic, which obliges me to not only think bilingually, but bi-culturally. The poems bring to the surface the potentiated complexities associated with feelings, images, and cultural literacies.

Translation, regardless of linguistic directionality, is hard. Adding to that difficulty is the complexity of poetry. In a sense, one is working with a literary language (genre) within a national language (linguistic community), and then within a poetic modality, which is foreign (Japanese Haiku and Tanka). Fortunately, my fluency in both English and Haitian, along with the experience of having produced original work in each individual language, allows me to dabble in cultural idiomatic possibilities in order to transport amorphous verses and metaphors. This project, albeit exciting, does have a *casse-tête*.

For each translation, I try to

remain very close to the original poem, and in this selection, there are an equal number of poems that were initially written in English as in Haitian. My intention in writing and translating my own work is not only to keep the language fresh so that each line can sing its tune without losing its musicality, but it is also to avoid losing the intentionality of the content. I think of Adrienne Rich, who writes in *Arts of the Possible* that certain poetry becomes "more than music and images; it [is] also revelation, information, a kind of teaching" (2001: 43). I am aware that so much can be lost or fragmented in translation, and that disunity can be created in the syntactical relations to fall short from being revelatory. Poetry is more than just a nice gesture; it must be a discovery within the content and through the form.

The difficulty in translating from English into Haitian Creole is due largely to the abundance of synonymous words that exist in

English. Often times, when translating, I feel limited when using technical words by default, but I am also reluctant to sound “too French.” The inverse aspect of translation presents its own set of problems as well. Haitian Creole is a “nature-grounded” metaphorical language that is laden with double entendre, making translation extremely difficult, and at times impossible. Quite often, I have had to approximate the intended metaphor in order to maintain meaning, cadence, and imagery. In other instances, I simply tossed out sets of poems that proved to be too challenging for translation. For example, a four-syllabic simple statement such as “my belly aches” cannot be rendered to a four-syllabic statement in Haitian without changing the semantic structure and creating a new metaphor that provides the same meaning. “*Vant mwèn ap fè m’ mal*” is too long at six syllables; and doing a reverse translation will read as “my bel-

ly is hurting me.” Whereas, by looking at the polysemic nature of the action verb “to ache,” one arrives at: boil = *bouyi*; hurt = *fè mal*; tense = *entans*; tender = *delika*, *dous*, *sansib*. So, depending on the context of the utterance “my belly aches,” one would have to choose the proper metaphor. However, if it is simply to achieve a four-syllabic structure, then the translation would be “*vant mwèn bouyi*.” A word of caution: “*vant bouyi*” (a churned stomach, or an upset stomach), signals a sickness, a forthcoming diarrhea.

As a poet who is concerned about quality of life with an equitable rhythm, a balanced rhythm, I must use my metered language to enter into “conversation” with the world about the structures of human life, the imposed parameters, that are oppressive. I cannot enter into the realm of poetic music with just happy feet, a happy tongue—wagging tongue. For me the rhythm of poetry must under-

stand and be responsive to the beats of struggles, the poundings for existence. The liberty to dream, dreaming of achieving the real.

Although writers do have poetic license, I always try to respect the norms of culture and rules of language when creating new words. Writing in a very different poetic and social environment can disallow any or all literary genetic connections, not only in style and tone, but also in formal disposition. In a sense, I write within a hybrid world of placement and displacement that informs my overall aesthetic sensibility and vitality. What this project translates or reveals to me is that the human being's world is essentially and fundamentally linguistic in character. One cannot escape language; one exists in language and one produces culture. As a hybrid, my reading selection is very inclusive and pushes against boundaries so that I can interact with the world of letters. My compass is well-written and socially en-

gaged texts that seek to explore the limits of language and imagination. To dream dreams within language. For, poetry, fundamentally, allows me to dwell and remain in the realm of language.

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