



The
Collected
Poetry

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**AIMÉ
CÉSAIRE**

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Le verbe marronner / à René Depestre, poète haïtien

C'est une nuit de Seine
et moi je me souviens comme ivre
du chant dément de Boukman accouchant ton pays
aux forceps de l'orage

DEPESTRE

Vaillant cavalier du tam-tam
est-il vrai que tu doutes de la forêt natale
de nos voix rauques de nos coeurs qui nous remontent arners
de nos yeux de rhum rouges de nos nuits incendiées
se peut-il
que les pluies de l'exil
aient détendu la peau de tambour de ta voix

marronnerons-nous Depestre marronnerons-nous?
Depestre j'accuse les mauvaises manières de notre sang
est-ce notre faute
si la bourrasque se lève
et nous désapprend tout soudain de compter sur nos doigts
de faire trois tours de saluer

Ou bien encore cela revient au même
le sang est une chose qui va vient et revient
et le nôtre je suppose nous revient après s'être attardé
à quelque macumba. Qu'y faire? En vérité
le sang est un vaudoun puissant

C'est vrai ils arrondissent cette saison des sonnets
pour nous à le faire cela me rappellerait par trop
le jus sucré que bavent là-bas les distilleries des mornes
quand les lents boeufs maigres font leur rond au zonzon
des moustiques

Quichel Depestre le poème n'est pas un moulin à
passer de la canne à sucre ça non
et si les rimes sont mouches sur les mares

sans rimes
toute une saison

loin des mares
moi te faisant raison
rions buvons et marronnons

The Verb "Marronner" / for René Depestre, Haitian poet

It is a Seine night
and as if in drunkenness I recall
the insane song of Boukman delivering your country
with the forceps of the storm

DEPESTRE

Courageous tom-tom rider
is it true that you mistrust the native forest
and our hoarse voices our hearts that come back up on us bitter
our rum red eyes our burned out nights
is it possible
that the rains of exile
have slackened the drum skin of your voice?

shall we escape like slaves Depestre like slaves?
Depestre I indict the bad manners of our blood
is it our fault
if the squall hits
suddenly unteaching us to count on our fingers
to circle three times and bow

Or else it boils down to the same thing
blood is a thing that comes and goes
and ours I suppose comes back on us after having spent time
in some macumba. What can be done about it? Blood
is truly a powerful vodun

Is it true this season that they're polishing up sonnets
for us to do so would remind me too much of the sugary
juice drooled over there by the distilleries on the mornes
when slow skinny oxen make their rounds to the whine
of mosquitoes

Bah! Depestre the poem is not a mill for
grinding sugar cane absolutely not
and if the rhymes are flies on ponds

without rhymes
for a whole season
away from ponds
under my persuasion
let's laugh drink and escape like slaves

Gentil cœur

avec au cou le collier de commandement de la lune
avec autour du bras le rouleau bien lové du lasso du soleil
la poitrine tatouée comme par une des blessures de la nuit
aussi je me souviens

au fait est-ce que Dessalines mignonnait à Vertières

Camarade Depestre

C'est un problème assurément très grave
des rapports de la poésie et de la Révolution
le fond conditionne la forme

et si l'on s'avisait aussi du détour dialectique
par quoi la forme prenant sa revanche
comme un figuier maudit étouffe le poème
mais non

je ne me charge pas du rapport
j'aime mieux regarder le printemps. Justement
c'est la révolution

et les formes qui s'attardent
à nos oreilles bourdonnant
ce sont mangeant le neuf qui lève
mangeant les pousses
de gras hannetons hannetonnant le printemps.

Depestre

de la Seine je t'envoie au Brésil mon salut
à toi à Bahia à tous les saints à tous les diables
Cabritos cantagallo Botafogo
bate
batuque
à ceux des favellas

Depestre

bombaia bombaia

crois-m'en comme jadis bats-nous le bon tam-tam
éclaboussant leur nuit rance
d'un rut sommaire d'astres moudangs.

Gentle heart

the necklace of the Order of the Moon around my neck
the tightly wrapped coil of the sun's lasso around my arm
my chest tattooed as if by one of night's wounds
I too remember

as a matter of fact *did* Dessalines prance about at Vertières

Comrade Depestre

It is undoubtedly a very serious problem
the relation between poetry and Revolution
the content determines the form

and what about keeping in mind as well the dialectical
backlash by which the form taking its revenge
chokes the poems like an accursed fig tree
but no

a report on this is none of my business
I'd rather look at the spring. Precisely,
it is the revolution

and the forms which linger
humming in our ears
are, eating the new which sprouts
eating the shoots,
fat cockchafers cockchafing the spring.

Depestre

from the Seine I send you my greetings in Brazil
to you to Bahia to all saints to all devils
Cabritos cantagallo Botafogo
bate
batuque
to all those in the favellas

Depestre

bombaia bombaia

believe me as in the old days beat the good torn-torn for us
splashing their rancid night
with a succinct rutting of moudang stars.

reference to Yé in the poem comes from a tale in which to get food for his children, Yé clammers up a palm tree and accidentally kills the totem bird.

In another tale, Nanie-Rosette is depicted as a greedy child who spends the night feasting on the Devil's Rock, with the Devil and his entourage dancing about her.

An ajoupa is a Martinican hut made out of branches and leaves.

Page 307: *the bird with feathers*: the last two lines of this poem draw upon the consequences of Yé having killed and shared the totem bird with his family. The enchanted bird revives and demands that the family restore it to its very last feather. Kesteloot and Kotchy comment on the allegorical use of the folk tale in the poem in *A. C. / l'homme et l'oeuvre*, pp. 58–59.

Page 309: *tur-ra-mas*: an Australian boomerang made out of very hard wood.

Page 321: *Cavally Sassandra Bandama*: a series of three rivers which flow south in Ivory Coast into the Atlantic. The Cavally marks the frontier with Liberia.

Page 323: *Pachira*: a variation on "Pachitier," a tree from Guiana and the West Indies that resembles the horse chestnut tree.

Page 331: *Memorial For Louis Delgrès*: General Magloire Pélagé was a Guadeloupan mulatto military leader who overthrew local French rule in 1801. Unlike Toussaint L'Ouverture, however, he took all possible means to demonstrate his loyalty to France, and when Richepanse prepared to invade Basse-Terre, Pélagé attempted to get Delgrès to surrender. When handed Pélagé's message, Delgrès tore it in pieces and denounced Pélagé as a traitor.

Ignace, one of the black leaders at Basse-Terre, surrendered and then proceeded to kill himself. Gobert, the French general to whom he had surrendered, had his head cut off and exposed to view. See Shelby T. McCloy's *The Negro in the French West Indies*, (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1966), pp. 106–110. McCloy's account of the death of Ignace, as well as where it took place, differs from Césaire's account of it in the poem.

Page 335: *une fripuration de bagasses* (a shred of crushed sugarcane): "fripuration" is a neologism formed by Césaire on "friperie," which in Martinique is the shed in which the sugarcane waits to be taken to the mill. According to Césaire, "fripuration" is the residue of crushed sugarcane emptied of its vital juices.

Page 339: *In Memory Of A Black Union Leader*: Albert Cretinoir, who died from natural causes in Martinique in 1952.

Page 341: *quand mai dore en chabin* (when May gilds chabin-like): chabin is the European name for a kind of sheep crossbred by a ewe and a billygoat. Socially, in the West Indies, it refers to a mixed-race offspring.

Page 345: *au carne blanc coeur désinfecté* (in the white heart's tough antiseptic meat): Césaire confirmed our interpretation of this line. "Carne," a feminine noun, is used as an adjective for an otherwise masculine group of words.

Page 361: *cachaça*: in Spanish, "cachaza" is a kind of rum, or the first froth on cane juice when boiled to make sugar. Éxu, elsewhere spelled Eshu, "is one of the names given to the loa who, in

vodoo, and in Brazilian macumba, opens the paths or lifts the barriers between the world of men and the world of spirits." (Arnold, *Modernism and Negritude* p. 221.)

Page 361: *vatapa*: a Brazilian dish made of manioc meal mixed with fish or meat, and seasoned.

Page 361: *azulejo*: in Spanish, glazed tile painted with various colors or plain white.

Page 363: *Ethiopia* . . . : "Tedy" is a mead drink; "injera" is a pancakelike bread made from corn flour.

"Saint-Guiorguis" is the Bieta Chiorghis, the monolithic church at Lalibela.

One of the names for the legendary Queen of Sheba is "Belkis Makeba" which in the context of the poem links her with the contemporary singer Miriam Makeba.

The Galla are a southern Ethiopian people.

Page 369: *Boukman*: a black Haitian slave who became the leader of the ferocious revolts at Noé, Clément, Flaville, Callifet, and Le Normand in 1791.

Page 371: *Dessalines*: Jean-Jacques Dessalines, a lieutenant trained by Toussaint L'Ouverture, who became governor of the South after the 1799 Haitian Revolution. Notorious for his hatred of whites, he commanded the assault in mid-November 1803 on Fort Breda, on Cap Haitien. Vertières was one of the fort's supporting positions.

Page 371: *Cabritos* . . . *bombaia*: in Spanish, "cabritos" are young goats or kids.

"Cantagallo" is a town in the state of Rio de Janeiro.

"Botafogo" in Portuguese means "fire-spitting," and is a popular term for a troublemaker.

"Bate" in Portuguese means "beating" or "shaking."

"Favelas" are shanty slums.

"Bombaia" is a Haitian rallying cry associated with Boukman's vodoo ceremonies at Bois Cayman on the eve of the 1791 revolts.

Page 371: *moudang*: a variation on the word "Mondongue" or "Moudongue," an African people living at the Cameroon and Chad borders, or possibly a variant of "Mandingue," the large family of peoples in central West Africa (Bambara, Malinké, Soninké, Dyula, Wangara, etc.). Hearn comments that in Martinique "moudongue" is a very hard wood from which sticks, with magical power to inflict injury, were made. He adds that a Mondongue slave on a plantation was generally feared by his fellow blacks of other tribes to such an extent that the name became transformed into an adjective to denote anything formidable or terrible. (*Two Years*, p. 173.)

Page 375: *Decebalian*: Decebales was the name given to the King of Dacia. The Dacian Decebales fought the Roman Empire but eventually cooperated with it during the first century A.D. Probably a symbol of the colonization process for Césaire, who uses an adjective derived from the noun.

Page 375: *phlégréennes* (Flegreian): refers to the Campi Flegrei, a volcanic region in Campania, Italy, above the Bay of Naples, with many craters.

Page 385: *porana*: a climbing herb of tropical East Africa, Madagascar, Asia, and Australia, of the Convolvulaceae family.