The
Collected
Poetry

AIME
CÉSAIRE

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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 honest voices our hearts that come back up on us bitter
our true red eyes our burned out nights
is it possible
that the rains of exile
have thickened the drum skin of your voice?

shall we escape like slaves Depestre like slaves?
Depestre I indite 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 even I suppose comes back on us after having spent time
in some macumba. What can be done about it? Blood
is truly a powerful voodoo

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 mousquites

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

Le verbe marronner / à René Depestre, poète haitien

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 cavailer du tan-tan
est-il vrai que tu doutes de la forêt sauvage
de nos voix sauvages de nos esprits qui nous remontent amers
de nos yeux de rhum rouges de nos nuits incendiées
se peut-il
que les plumes de l'esai
alent 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 bourse sa se lève
et nous désapprend tout soudain de compter sur nos doigts
de faire trois tours de saltier

On 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 attaché
t à quelque macumba. Qu'y faire? En vérité
le sang est un vauter puissant

C'est vrai ils arrondissent cette saison des sonnets
pour nous à le faire cela me rappellerait trop
le jeu sauté que bavent là-bas les distilleries des mornes
quand les brouis bruts maigres dont leur rond au sonon
des mousquites

Quechfel Depestre le poème n'est pas un moulin à
passer de la corne à sucre ça non
et si les rhymes sontOUCHUSCHON sur les mares
sous rhymes

toute une saison
loin des mares
moi te faisant raison

rions buvons et marronnons
Gentil cœur

avec au cou le collier de commandement de la lune
avec autour du bas 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 naîgnait à Vertières

Camarade Depetre
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'avisaissait du détours dialectique
par quel la forme prendrait sa revanche
un figuier maudit étouffe le poème
mais non
je ne me charge pas du rapport
je ne me borne pas à regarder la prétention, Justement c'est la révolution
et les formes qui s'attachent
à nos oreilles bourdonnantes
ça sert mangles le neuf qui lève
mangles les pousses
ou gras brûlons hantant le printemps.

de la Seine je t'envoie au Brésil mon salut
tu à Bahia à tous les saluts à tous les diables
Carninés cantagallo Botafogo
bate bateque
à ceux des Favellas

crois-m'en comme jalous harems le bon ton-tam
éclaboussant leur nuit nance
d'un râtel sommaire d'autres moufungs.

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 Depetre
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 takes its revenge
choke 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 cockshavers cockshaving the spring.

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

believe me as in the old days beat the good bon-ton for us
splash their rancid night
with a succinct cutting of mounds and stars.
reference to Yé in the poem comes from a tale in which a god from the forest, Yé, plucks a palm tree and accidentally kills the totem bird.

In another tale, Nanie-Rozette 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 ape is a Martinistan but 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. Kettlescot and Ketchey comment on the allegorical use of the folk tale in the poem in A. G. / Homme et Faune, pp. 58–59.

Page 309: tar-ra-mac an Australian boomerang made out of very hard wood.

Page 321: Cavally: a variant of Cassava and the West Indies that resembles the horse chestnut tree.

Page 323: Pachita: a variation on "Pachirin," a tree from Guinea and the West Indies that resembles the horse chestnut tree.

Page 331: Memorial For Louis Delgrès: General Magloire Péligre 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 Richardon prepared to invade Basse-Terre, Péligre attempted to get Delgrès to surrender. When handed Péligre's message, Delgrès tore it in pieces and denounced Péligre as a traitor.

Page 331: Ignace, one of the black leaders at Basse-Terre, surrendered and then proceeded to kill himself. Cobett, the French general to whom he had surrendered, laid his head cut off and exposed to view. See Shelby T. McClay's The Negro in the French West Indies, (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1960), pp. 106-110. McClay'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 333: une friture de bananes (a kind of crushed mangoes): "friture" is a caloglossia formed by Césaire on "Sp Against," which in Martinique is the word in which the mangoes are boiled. According to Césaire, "friture" is the residue of crushed mangoes emptied of its vital juices.


Page 341: quand mai dure en chabim (when May gills chabim-like): chabim is the European name for a kind of sheep crossed by a cow and a Billygoat. Socially, in the West Indies, it refers to a mixed-race offspring.

Page 345: au carne blanc courer désinfect [in the white heart's tough antibiotic meat]; Césaire confirmed our interpretation of this line. "Carine," a feminine noun, is used as an adjective for an otherwise masculine group of words.

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

voodoo, 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: uatuca: 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 361: Ethiopia . . . : "Tedji" is the tead drink "Injera" is a pancake-like bread made from corn flour.

"Saint-Guiorgos" is the Beta Ghiorgis, the monolithic church at Lalibela.

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

The Galla are a northern Ethiopian people.

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

Page 371: Dassalines: 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: Cabirits . . . : "cabirita" are young goats or kids. "Coutchou" is a town in the state of Rio de Janeiro.

"Botefogo" in Portuguese means "fire-spitting," and is a popular term for a troublemaker. "Batte" in Portuguese means "batting" or "shaking." "Favelas" are shanty towns.

"Bombole" is a Haitian rallying cry associated with Boukman's voodoo ceremonies at Bois Caiman on the eve of the 1791 revolt.

Page 371: monkong: a variation on the word "Mandingos or "Mandengos," an African people living at the Cameron and Chad borders, or possibly a variant of "Mandingos," the large family of peoples in central West Africa (Bamana, Mankub, Soninké, Dyula, Warga, etc.). Hemm comments that in Martinique "moungong" is a very hard wood from which sticks, with magical power to inflict injury, were made. He adds that a Mongoose 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. 171.)

Page 375: Deshaibi: Deshaiches was the name given to the King of Beaus. The Dacian Deshaiches fought the Roman Empire but eventually cooperated with it during the first century. The symbol of the colonization process for Césaire, who uses an adjective derived from the noun.

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

Page 385: tarana: a climbing herb of tropical East Africa, Madagascar, Asia, and Australia, of the Combivolucinae family.