

## TWO POEMS



*Jean Métellus*

HAITI, HAITI

Turtle Island licked all round by the sea  
Burns like a windless beach, like a shadeless shore  
The sun's tongue strokes its landscapes with a dry caress  
The history of the country is one great cataract  
Cows decimated by famine  
Pastureland burned by the drought of these torrid times  
Turtle Island, empty, is naked  
Stripped by the bloated and the parvenus  
Sea-water replaces milk in ruminants  
I think of Port de Paix in the north-east  
Ravaged by famine, nibbled by speculators,  
Of that deputation of women bruised by suffering  
Of those lines of cripples crossing the town  
Of those who steal and those who beg  
I have seen you Port de Paix stretching your arms out on a cross  
Your hair caught by the wind, your hands clutching a root  
Your breasts were hanging like dead leaves cradled by a spider  
I have seen you delirious with hunger  
I recall the magical magnificence of your soil over centuries and  
centuries  
That long line of bandits on your nourishing flesh  
Those solemn avenues of sapodillas  
Those lilac caïmitier trees with their luminous globular fruit  
Your water-melons bursting, fascinating  
Port de Paix, land without bread,  
Your hills as sterile as glass  
For lack of rain, of dew, clasp our dead bodies  
By way of manure for next season  
And those bodies burnt alive rot on the cobbles  
Where the soles of our virile feet have bled a thousand times  
  
What is the use from now on of this pointless armature

Since enlarging the hill I would find nothing but my shadow  
Since planting a field of yams I waste my sweat and blood  
Since rising early to impregnate the day  
I harvest in the end only the fruits of night  
Since preceding the sun to clear its path  
It persists in burning everything I have sown  
Since bruising my whole body and silencing my dream  
I encounter on my way only shadows and monsters  
Since searching for life and light, I find only ghosts  
Since walking in the valley I encounter only tombs  
Since unravelling my memory I find a labyrinth

A labyrinth where even Baron-Samedi could not find his way  
A labyrinth of family vaults with neither name nor date nor place  
Vaults where recollections mix with the dead and the dead with  
legend

*from* UNTITLED

Jacmel the great city, Jacmel robed in beaches  
Jacmel alive like the sea, brotherly and fleshy  
Three hundred and twenty years old, still flourishing and  
fresh-faced  
Jacmel the indefatigable, the womb of giants and gods  
You who housed before your birth the country's great runaway  
slaves  
The stars of independence, Boukman and Mackandal, caress  
you younger sisters  
Something of your breath fertilizes the plains:  
I think of suffering sister Port de Paix, tattooed by misery  
Of St Nicholas's Pier anaemic in its last cloak of drought  
Woven by five centuries of misery  
Columbus's soldiers attracted by silver destroyed the Indians  
(But royal Jacmel was not silver, but gold)  
Look my son they both have the same function  
(Speak louder, Jacmel, do not weaken, let your voice be heard)  
I use as a springboard the rocks of the past  
Words cannot fertilize today's ashes  
I say that everything began at St Nicholas's Pier  
Everything went downhill at the death of the emperor  
Jean-Jacques Dessalines

Outside, inside, strangle the country  
I absolve the drought, the storms, the bad weather  
But men have ransacked Haiti, bereft it of its gods  
No creature drained of its blood can stand upright  
Unless it be a ghost  
Is Haiti deprived of its riches still Haiti?  
As its resources crossed the frontiers  
The same people kneaded the womb  
Massaged, pummelled its belly  
Haiti now emptied of all its blood  
Gazes at the vermilion horizon, promising cataracts and  
accidents  
A land is like a mother  
And I have not yet spoken of the suffering of its gods  
A man without a soul is a zombie  
Haiti without its gods is a grimace

God is still bent on punishing men  
Who want to satisfy their hunger with the feed from suffering  
cattle  
Grubbing up the roots of "turkey manioc"  
Adding to those who have died of the drought a further pile of  
corpses  
The earth itself is beginning to poison its children  
Chairs have been sold to buy corn  
The mat has been exchanged for a little millet  
Our only bed, the dusty soil  
If we lie down, it enfolds us in its flanks  
Our hamlet is not a prison but a tomb  
We have lashed ourselves together to cultivate the uplands  
And the rubble is resplendent  
Let us fly from what is called the earth  
Our appetite is great and it is famished  
Famished for the bodies of men, women, children and old  
people  
Not a cloud or a bird can be seen  
Must we fell all our trees, lay waste the countryside and sell  
charcoal?  
We have wrapped our forebears and offspring in the last banana  
leaves  
To bury them we have torn at the earth  
With the same gestures as those we use to dig up poisonous roots  
But, as our strength failed, we have left them near the surface

A blanket of misery their only shroud  
On my contact with this furious mother, filled with unspeakable  
    rage  
I have rediscovered my stamina for facing time with tyrants  
Before this absolute evil  
In this riddle of the future  
This formidable griddle of fate  
I sift the wrinkles, the distress, the ashes  
Which lay waste our island  
Haiti is burning  
Haiti is aflame  
Smutted by infernal soot  
Stifled by a cloud of ordeals and calamities  
With each generation, explosions of worries  
Carry off and torture wishes  
The passage today dark and narrow  
Excites neither the daring nor the ardour of a people in revolt  
[...]  
Abolish these times of terror  
These days stained with grief and fear  
Set light to the step up to madness  
Undo the crucifixion  
Wash away the insults  
Calm the conversation with unreason, this muttering of fury  
Dispel the clouds of suffering, these shadows of zombies  
Forbid the dances lit with blood

*Translated by Roger Little*