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Four Poems by Dieurat Clervoyant

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Cover Page Footnote

Clervoyant, Dieurat. *Haiti: Entre beauté et blessures*. Langa, 2012. *Les Douleurs de la plume noire du Cameroun anglophone à Haiti*. Eds. Bill F. Ndi and Dieurat Clervoyant. Langa, 2010, p. 93.

Correspondence with the author. With thanks to Robert Clark and Claire Dehon.

Elizabeth Dodd
Four Poems

Dieurat Clervoyant

Inaudible Voice

Voix inaudible

Haiti
you are the deaf song
which resonates
in nature's closed heart

You are the mute
tambourine
which reverberates
through God's deaf heart

Impassible Nature

Impassible nature

I gather your silence
Like a ripe fruit
That will end up in the grave of my mouth
In the opalescence of that bleached tomb
Its remains will lie just like the bodies
Of those three hundred thousand brothers
Sadistically uprooted from the light
And thrown into the hell of eternal night
My pen will avenge them
And raise a monument
Engraved with their names
I gather your complicit silence
Like a ripe fruit
That will end up between

The assassin teeth
Of my rebellious fingers
Dangerous nature

Blank Dreams

Chimère blanche

Stretched out, lounging on the blue shores
Of our flowering youth
We lived in our pipe dreams
We would dream of three lovely petals
In our own budding garden
Some of us dreamed of flowerbeds where
Blossoming girls stretched, as far as the eye could see
Some dreamed of odes and villanelles
Some of pink or black Porsches
Some of white stalks and black or green earth
Some of explorations, some of regalia, some of holy orders—
You and I, we would imagine three petals
Three lovely flowers in our garden
Contented, we would dream up three stars
Gracefully, charmingly placed
In our full basket of happiness
You and I, we spent years dreaming—remember—
Of tomorrow and red-marble, jasper dreams
But we got nothing but white smoke, blank dreams.

The Blood of One Heart

Le sang d'un coeur

More than once my heart's blood
Has overflowed the urn holding my soul.
It bleeds, giving far too much
When it's received so little.
The dagger of grudging
Hearts and hands—those that count—
Has jerked its criminal blade
A thousand times through my life.
And yet my heart has burned
A thousand bright fires
And a thousand volcanoes
Have spewed billions of maggots
Like swift eighth-notes,
Quavering, in this hearth
That has forged nothing, ever,
Except sweetness and gentle roses.
You see how it is: I wasn't made
To know those moments
Where joy is most profound.

Commentary

Dieurat Clervoyant is a Haitian writer (born in 1965 in Dessalines) who has lived in exile in France for thirty-one years. As a young man he was active first in the struggle to overthrow Jean-Claude Duvalier and then to resist the military's concentration of power in dictatorship; he then fled to France and was granted refugee status. Later, he gave up the official status of refugee; he now considers himself a stateless person. He has published one collection of poems, *Haïti: Entre Beauté et Blessures* (2012) and he appears in the anthology *Les Douleurs de la Plume Noire: Du Camaroun Anglophone à Haïti* (2010). A new volume, *L'Étoile Poignardée*, is forthcoming. He regards his writing as a continued form of militancy on behalf of Haitian people. "Even though I am not present on the ground," he explains, "I continue to extend what I call my offering to the country through my writing. I hope that my voice, mingled among others, will be heard by the population throughout their setbacks, in their search for well-being."¹

Throughout his work he expresses rage and regret over the course of events in his homeland, feelings offered most succinctly and directly in "Inaudible Voice." Elsewhere he explains,

After seeing the government collapse, we were totally euphoric. We all thought that once having finished with Duvalier himself, we would be done completely with his regime. But it didn't take long to disillusion us and we realized that the military that had succeeded him was even worse, because they were the very core of the system.²

The poems convey the extreme emotions of the young activists, filled with the Romantic language of idealism together with adult

¹ Personal correspondence. 3 April 2019. "Bien que je ne sois pas présent sur le terrain, je continue d'apporter ce que j'appelle ma contribution au pays, à travers mes écrits. J'espère que ma voix, entre autres confondue, sera entendue par la population en déboires et à la recherche d'un mieux-être."

² Personal correspondence. 3 April 2019. "Après avoir vu le gouvernement s'écrouler, nous étions dans les meilleures euphories possibles. Nous pensions tous qu'une fois avoir fini avec Duvalier lui-même, on avait fini totalement avec le régime. Mais il ne fallait pas longtemps pour nous désillusionner et nous rendre compte que les militaires qui lui ont succédé étaient bien pires encore, parce qu'ils étaient l'épicentre même du système."

cynicism that surveys decades of lost opportunity and betrayal. Whether his topic is the government's—and the world's—failed response to the Haitian earthquake of 2010 (which he decries as a “complicit silence” in “Impassible Nature”), or an individual's feelings of betrayal (which he articulates in “The Blood of One Heart,”) Clervoyant presents great amplitude of emotion.

These poems do not employ Creole turns of phrase. Instead, they carry a timbre of French formality, despite the author's anger and energy. Consequently a challenge for the translator lies in combining his rhetoric and conventional symbols along with quirky, individual specifics. In “The Blood of One Heart,” the classical-sounding urn and the romanticized roses and dagger all combine with semi-surreal imagery of maggots or larvae invading the domestic hearth. Further, Clervoyant's syntactic repetition and abstraction, when rendered in English, may detract from the poem's powerful imagery. While Clervoyant relied on syntactic repetition (*et pourtant, a saigné*), I often chose repetition of sound (“overflowed,” “holding,” “soul”). I had some difficulty in particular with the line *A la croche dans ce foyer*. In correspondence, Clervoyant confirmed that here *croche* denotes an eighth note, a musical quaver. He intends many simultaneous meanings: the action of larvae falling on the hearth is quick, taking no more than an eighth-note of time; the larvae wriggle and squirm, a kind of visual quaver; and that his poems themselves, like reverberating music, spew forth from his own volcanic depths. “There is a double desire to materialize actions and to refuse any idea of logic in my poems,” he explains.³

I sought to find a way for that particular line to convey, with subtlety, both the auditory/musical and the physical/motion aspects of *a la croche*. In my translation, I wrote the line “like swift eighth-notes,” a brief run of one-syllable words to interrupt the surrounding multi-syllabic phrases. In the following line, “quavering,” set off by commas, helps broaden the literal eighth-note of music to include the physical possibilities of quavering, since in English the word can apply to objects such as leaves or flags in the wind. Additionally, the assonance of “eighth” and “quaver” present a level of musicality to further engage a reader's attention. *C'est que* is a rhetorical phrase that

³ Personal correspondence. 15 August 2018.

doesn't rely on grammar to implicate the reader in understanding; it could be translated simply, "In truth." But I thought it would be powerful in English to address the reader directly, to demand that she or he feel implicated in the moment of understanding, so I arranged the line to place the poem's reader and speaker both poised on opposite sides of the colon, as if gazing at one another.

Clervoyant's enraged rhetorical style might recall spoken word poetry, but he doesn't rely on the tight, pyrotechnical rhyme and rhythm that often add textured complexity in English. Instead, chez Clervoyant, there's often a more formal, periodic syntax. In translating "Impassible Nature" for U.S. readers, I chose to include a tight, perfect rhyme ("light / night") in the heart of the poem to introduce a bit of spoken-word style energy within the poem's violent imagery.

In "Blank Dreams," Clervoyant combines conventional images and language (blossoming girls and flowering youth) with idiosyncratic details of the young peoples' dreams given as a mixture of surreal imagery ("red-jasper dreams") and a brand-name luxury car. I worked to heighten the wild energy of these shifts. *Jaspe* from the original is simply "jasper"; the adjectival *jaspé* is "marbled." To intensify the surprise of linking the concept of the couple's future with concrete and tactile elements of beauty, I layered literal and figurative translations through imagery and idiom. Idiomatically, *chimère blanche* would be rendered "pipe dream," while literally it translates to "white dream." I chose to render the term with the cognate "blank dreams," not only to avoid the English cliché, but to emphasize the harsh emptiness of the young people's futures. The stakes are high, their disappointment massive. In order to preserve the contrast of vibrant, bright colors with the *blanc* ("white") of the original, I doubled these images—red marble and jasper; blank dreams and white smoke.

Source texts:

Clervoyant, Dieurat. "Voix Inaudible," "Impassible Nature," "Chimère Blanche." *Haïti: Entre Beaute et Blessures*, Langaa RPCIG, 2012, pp. 4, 5, 28.

Ndi, F., and Dieurat Clervoyant. "Le Sang d'un Coeur." *Les Douleurs de la Plume Noire: Du Cameroon Anglophone À Haïti*, Langaa RPCIG, 2010. p. 93.