

Ayiti

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In anticipation of travel,
you watch your children
splash watercolor

on white paper,
try to remember
—in anticipation of travel—

what you will leave.

Caribbean

The dark mountains seem to float on the light blue sea.
They don't.

They're attached to and the product of unseen pressure: the colliding forces of the North, South, and Central American tectonic plates. This pressure has helped produce some seven hundred islands scattered in a series of arcs between Florida and Venezuela.

This one—with its thick highlands feeding muddy rivers that end at tropical beaches—stayed nameless for millions of years. Then the Taíno and the Carib Indians arrived and, for three centuries, called it Ayiti: Land of Mountains.

In 1492 after his ship sank nearby, Christopher Columbus came ashore and established the first European settlement in the New World. The Spanish cleared land and built sugar plantations. For the next two centuries, the island was called Hispaniola: Little Spain.

In the 1600s, the French took control of the island's western third. They imported African slaves, exported coffee and sugar, and created the richest colony in the world: Saint-Domingue.

In 1791, there was an uprising. It's said to have begun with a ceremony honoring a new religion that combined African, European, and native Caribbean beliefs: a system called *Vodou*. After more than a dozen years, the slaves defeated Napoleon's armies and named their republic Haiti: the Caribbean's first independent nation.

It wasn't. It couldn't be.

Like the surrounding islands, like South America, Haiti remained attached to and the product of unseen pressure. Through the nineteenth century, a series of presidents, emperors, and kings oversaw a subsistence economy, as the new nation tried to pay off the debt France had imposed on it in return for recognizing the sovereign republic. By the twentieth century, the island had become a tourist destination, falling under what's been called the "colossal shadow" of the United States.

At the start of World War I, US Marines landed and stayed for almost twenty years. They established an elite, light-skinned ruling

class. François Duvalier was elected head of state in 1957 and soon declared himself President for Life. Fourteen years later, when Papa Doc died, the title passed to his son. Fifteen years after that, protests drove Baby Doc from the island. The US-backed Haitian military took control, promising fair and open elections.

Four years later, the overwhelming majority of Haitians chose as president a former Catholic priest, community organizer, and anti-Duvalierist, Jean-Bertrand Aristide. “We must end this regime,” Aristide declared, “where the donkeys do all the work and horses prance in the sunshine.” He proposed a national literacy program, a higher minimum wage, and a redistribution of land. The military rejected the election and attempted to re-seize power, but President Aristide was inaugurated in February 1991.

Six months later, he delivered a speech calling on the elite—a half-dozen families—to pay the back taxes they owed. “You who have money. . . That money in your possession, it is not really yours. You earned it in thievery. . . under an evil regime, an evil system. . . .” A few days later, there was a military coup.

Aristide fled to Venezuela, and over a thousand of his supporters were killed. During the next three years, another five thousand were murdered, their bodies often displayed on the street as a warning. Some forty thousand tried to leave the island, many by open boat, many aimed at the coast of Florida.

In September 1994, the United States decided to return Aristide to power. Twenty-thousand troops landed at the Port-au-Prince airport, threw down sand bags, aimed their rifles—and found no resistance. Most Haitians greeted them with cheers, while sullen police and army officers handed over their weapons.

Under pressure to negotiate his return, President Aristide had signed an agreement with American and European representatives to back off raising the minimum wage, to privatize state-owned businesses, and to encourage multinational corporate development. Haitians described him as coming back *de pye nan youn gren soulye*: both feet in a single shoe.

He delivered his return speech from behind a bullet-proof bubble in front of the National Palace. “No to violence!” he declared. “No to vengeance! Yes to reconciliation!” Then he released a white dove: the Catholic symbol of the Holy Spirit and the *Vodou* symbol of sacrifice.

That was three weeks ago.

The illusion of Haiti
is the illusion
of dark mountains
that can be pried off a blue sea.
As if a stamp underneath
read, "PROPERTY OF."

Look from above
at what relief
buys: dust slopes, sludge rivers,
piles of debris
that turn out to be
shelters.

Now, step into the heat.
Take a quick breath.
Is the taste of death
(sweet)
another illusion,
a trick?

Voodoo economics
is a term coined by a nation
rich enough for its citizens to say,
"You can only keep
what you give away."
The opposite of illusion is sleep.

Sightseeing

An eight-year-old taps on the car window. His black skin has gone white at the corners of his mouth. "One dollar. Just one dollar."

You've been trained to smile and say no.

And if he won't go away? You know how to make him disappear: beyond his face are other faces.

And beyond them? Billboards selling beer.

If we saw and heard, that's all we'd do. The news would never change:

"Today is Tuesday: people who don't have enough to eat are asking people with more than enough to share. . . . Today is Wednesday: people who don't have enough to eat. . . . Today is Thursday: . . ."

We come for the sights, taught not to see.

Look past the people.
You're driving
towards a mountain—a kind of steeple—
but keep arriving
at dust.
The trees have all been lost to charcoal.
You must
not turn back. You must drive past the beautiful
straight-backed woman, past her baby,
past the man's arms slashed across
his strong chest. Yes, the topsoil's gone, and maybe
the road's washed
out. But nothing erases desire.
You're driving towards fire.

Backtrack

First was the airport: like an army base, an army base in the American South, with blocks of green camouflage tents and mustard-brown jeeps, troops with silver weapons, radar spinning in the tropical sky.

It's being called an intervention, not an invasion. Or as some say, an inter-vasion. Its official goal is to provide temporary support for the return of democracy.

An historic moment. Not only because it's never happened before, but because it's happened again and again: historic return/the return of history. How long will the United States occupy this time? What is it whispering in the president's ear? How much will the island give up in order to stay independent? Variations on these questions are older than the republic. State Department attachés chopper into the guarded airport like the ghosts of Napoleon's commanders.

After the airport, there was the bay. Signs along its beaches said, in English: "DANGER: WATER TURNS BACK ON ITSELF. . . ."

After the beaches, in an empty field, an old wrought-iron scale. It stood as high as a man standing on top of a man. It had a claw to weigh how much sugarcane had been cut, how much profit would be made. It was rusted solid.

After the airport, the beaches, the iron scale, downtown Port-au-Prince is alive with people. They press against each other, everybody busy. Markets are open with piles of goods. Workers are re-lettering signs; masons re-build walls; painters freshen pink houses.

The white dome of the National Palace, built by the occupying Marines in 1920, looks like a slightly off copy of the US White House—which looks like a slightly off copy of an eighteenth-century French baroque dome—which looks like a slightly off copy of a Greek temple. Three weeks after his return, the President is still inside, has yet to leave this building.

In a narrow alley near the Palace, you catch a glimpse of a child's body tip-toeing over a sewage-filled ditch. Is this your job: to take what you feel for your family and transpose it here? Do we call that

journalism? Or poetry? Or tourism? And when does it become an occupation?

You drive past Port-au-Prince, up into the hills, to a wealthy area called Pétionville. Its hotels—the blue eyes of its swimming pools—look west past Cuba to Miami. What happens down in the city amounts to a low-level distraction.

They say that after twenty-seven years in prison, when Nelson Mandela was released, he built a room to the exact dimensions of his former cell. Not to re-live the suffering, he explained, but to be able to find the bathroom at night.