

# Living Bones: Reflections on My First Year in Haiti

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## Abstract

In this creative non-fiction account of my first year living as a Canadian expatriate in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, history, first-hand accounts, and re-told narratives are weaved together. Historical anecdotes and literary quotes, interspersed with my memories and experiences, reflect on the value of life and how danger and fear of the unknown have evolved overtime in this beautiful but bedeviled island nation.

“Life was neither something you defended by hiding nor surrendered calmly on other people's terms, but something you lived bravely, out in the open, and that if you had to lose it, you should lose it on your own terms.” Edwidge Danticat, *The Dew Breaker*

“It is surprising not that Haiti exists badly, but that it exists at all.” James Leyburn

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## Reflections on My First Year in Haiti

We are heading to the beach to go scuba diving. Gleams of sweat drip behind my knees and in the crook of my arm. I undo the lock of our front door; it is a steel gate with fortified bars. Our white SUV sits parked underneath the bougainvillea tree. It rained last night, and several pink and purple spots paint the hood and roof of the car. These colourful, feathery flora are not flowers, as is commonly assumed, but leaves. The flowers of the bougainvillea are small and hard to see, dull, white and unassuming. There are no bougainvillea in Canada, where I was born. Here in Haiti, they cover brick houses and concrete stores like weeds, growing every which way. I often imagine the leaves arguing which will be purple or orange or pink. Some must remain green for the bougainvillea to live.

We reverse and wait for our guard, who is armed with a shotgun, to open the gate. He is a new guard. I have seen him before, but I do not know his name. I nod and offer a slight wave as we pull out of the lot. The thick metal door is pushed closed behind us. I do not know the names of any of the guards, even those familiar, and I have never asked. Our first week here we were told to not trust the guards or maids: *don't get too familiar*. In Haiti, employing a full-time maid costs less than two-hundred dollars a month but we decided against one. Instead my husband and I share the cooking and cleaning duties. The sight of his tall frame and sandy brown hair leaning over the sink as he furiously washes dishes, is not unusual for me. I often bake on Sunday mornings, leaving mounds of cookies on the counter only steps away from the guard's station where he sits for twelve-hour shifts with his small radio. I consider making up a plate of fresh cookies for him then hear the whisper: *don't get too familiar*. My skin thickens and I close the curtains.

I've received an e-mail from Global Affairs Canada: "The Government of Canada takes the safety and security of Canadians abroad very seriously... Be aware that many incidents of armed robbery by criminals on motorcycles targeting travellers leaving the Toussaint Louverture International Airport area have been reported..." My eyes scan the e-mail for new information but the advice is the familiar "exercise a high degree of caution... keep windows closed and doors locked when travelling by car... avoid carrying large sums of money and be vigilant when entering or leaving a bank... avoid showing visible signs of affluence, such as expensive jewellery or electronic equipment... do not resist if you are threatened by robbers... keep your valuables and identification on your person... never walk alone and avoid travelling after nightfall."

In 1804 Haiti won independence from France and became the second independent country in the West, after the United States. But what made the American and Haitian Revolutions different was the sheer gall of Haiti: a black slave nation of illiterate plantation workers uniting against their masters. They were led by the former slave Jean-Jacques Dessalines. This revolution set the stage for a transformation of the Haitian identity from slave to master. Jean-Jacques Dessalines knew that independence meant "*Mouche, chire blanc le qui lan drapeau-la*" – he tore out the white from the flag and changed the name of the island from its colonial name Saint-Dominique to the Taino indigenous word Ayiti, "the mountainous lands." From this point on, the Haitian elite promoted

the idea that it was better to die as revolutionaries than to live as slaves under French dominion. The national anthem proclaims: *Pour le Drapeau, pour la Patrie, mourir est beau, mourir est beau, notre passé nous crie: ayez l'âme aguerrie*. “For the flag, for our country, to die is a beautiful thing, our past cries out to us: have a battle-hardened soul.”

My soul is not battle-hardened, it is spoon-fed.

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*You stare from behind car windows and locked doors, closed gates with armed guards as you eat lunch under palm trees. There is barbed wire on top of every walled house and broken glass shards cemented into ledges. You drive home from work alone, anxiety pressing like a lead apron at the dentist. Narrow streets and sidewalks overflow with life, edging in and out of uncontrolled intersections. There are puppies crowded into a small cage on the sidewalk. A crippled man weaves through traffic selling windshield wipers and other accessories. You are slowly edging along when a woman with one arm holding a baby leans against your window. She is wearing a crinkled blue shirt and her hair is wrapped in a tight scarf. Her lips are dry and cracked. You want to look into her eyes, so why don't you? Your hands grip the wheel. You stare blankly at the car in front of you, avoiding her gaze and the thickness of her pain. You are inches and worlds apart.*

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After independence, social distinctions deepened, and the class divide between the bourgeois and the masses solidified. James Leyburn saw them “as different as day from night, as nobleman from peasant... separate as oil and water.” The masses teem on the streets of Port-au-Prince, the sidewalks are lined with women carrying bundles of fruit on their heads and men with gallon jugs of water on their shoulders, peddlers selling everything from cell phone chargers to peacocks. The women carry such great weights their cranial bones are often flattened, their spines bent and organs strained. They balance their heavy loads gently with their hands, hips swaying. Sometimes hand-painted tap taps—trucks outfitted to serve as public transportation—are filled with vegetables that a single woman has loaded and unloaded by herself. One thing is sure: no one is idle.

Michael Dash comments that in modern Haiti “there is so much creativity..., when you walk through Haiti, nobody is sitting around. People are always doing things – whether it is one orange they are trying to sell, or one tire they are trying to recycle to make sandals, people are always doing things”. Of course, not everyone is doing something. Inside air-conditioned SUVs and gated houses, the white-collar bourgeois rarely get their hands dirty: they have their maids, yard boys, cooks and drivers for that.

My husband and I are seated for dinner. He’s been experimenting with various forms of fried rice, and tonight the rich smell of coconut oil steams up from the bowl. We chat about our day. He tells me a second-hand story about a friend’s apartment. Apparently, two men have been digging a deep, skinny hole to find water. They drop down into the hole and use an air-conditioner jimmy-rigged with a hose to keep themselves oxygenated. They can only use a small shovel because the width of the hole does not allow for full arm movement. They’ve been working for three weeks already and the hole is tall. If they stood on each other’s shoulders they would still be underground. They have only a small rope to climb out. My husband shakes his head as he says they will not be paid if they do not find water. And most wells are more than fifteen metres deep, he tells me as he collects our empty bowls.

During the Eighteenth century Haiti was the most profitable French colony: slaves from Africa’s Gold Coast were worked rigorously on coffee and sugarcane plantations. Rich in forests and mining, the island of Quisqueya was then called the Pearl of the Antilles. Then the unimaginable happened. A nation of slaves took Europeans’ ideas vigorously espoused in the French Revolution to heart and fought for their freedom. After a violent revolt for independence, Dessalines ordered more than three thousand French men, women and children to be killed with hatchets, sabres and swords. Newly freed slaves swept across the nation in a wave of silent steel, killing any French they came across. Blood will have blood. Avenging the atrocities of slavery, Dessalines said he had, “Rendered to these true cannibals, war for war, crime for crime, outrage for outrage” (Dayan 1995, p.4). This meant that Haiti was now impenetrable for the French, a “red spot on the surface of the globe” (Dayan 1995, p.4). In 1848, Faustin Soulouque, later proclaimed emperor of Haiti, ordered a massacre of mulattoes who he accused of being French conspirators. Later still, in 1991,

an estimated five thousand people died in a violent military coup against Haiti's first democratically elected government. In 1995, former President Jean-Bertrand Aristide stated, "We are still living in misery, and trying to move from misery to poverty with dignity." In 2010, a 7.0 magnitude earthquake struck just west of the capital of Port-au-Prince, killing anywhere from one-hundred thousand to two-hundred and twenty thousand people, displacing millions. In 2016, Hurricane Matthew destroyed more than two-hundred thousand homes. Two-hundred years after independence, Haiti is considered a failed state, the poorest country in the West.

We drive the twisted, uneven roads. They have built a new speed bump and are starting to paint it with thick yellow lines. An old man, half asleep in his folding chair, sits next to a generator that fuels the paint line. There are cones covering the freshly painted side of the speed bump, but cars drive over the wet lines. Several thin lines of white and yellow run down the road. Further on, we circumnavigate a large tree in the middle of the road with concrete poured around it. Despite deforestation, Haiti is vibrant and green: thick trees lean over walled houses.

It's early Sunday morning when I meet Jen for the first time outside the scuba shop. We are getting ready for a dive.

"It was one of those things... you know?" She says, pulling on her wetsuit. "My driver—he's the closest thing to a Haitian friend I have—anyway, my driver takes me to a voodoo funeral. I think it's gonna be a cool cultural experience."

She zips up and pauses to sip some water. "Starts off seeming like a Christian funeral and then things get weird. His bones were thrown in the outhouse! Wait, let me go back. The family goes to put the body in the family grave and sees that some of the bones are missing. They all start screaming at the gravedigger guy in Creole and I'm like, 'What is happening?' My driver explains that the gravedigger says he put some of the bones down the hole in the outhouse, and they scream until he digs down and gets them. He brings up this filthy bag and the family opens it and there are still bones missing. Now they're grilling the gravedigger and he admits that he sold some of the bones to a bad man in a neighbouring village. 'He's a bad man, he's a bad man,' my driver keeps repeating. Then, like a film, there's a whole posse of them wandering down the dirt road to

the village right over the hill. It's a cartoon or a western, swear to god, I can see their tiny shapes going through the village and coming back. They're dragging this guy, all beaten and bloodied, and someone is holding the skull of the guy whose funeral it is. And everyone is riled up, screaming in Creole and I think, 'Shit they are going to kill this guy right in front of me.'"

Our gear is loaded and we migrate towards the dock as Jen continues, "And I'm like trying to get out of there, but what do I do? I don't have the car keys and I'm in a tiny town in the middle of nowhere and my driver is right in the fray, kicking this guy in the side. It's so loud. Then finally they drag him off. Not even normally, no. They hog tie him and pull him behind them. He's filthy and scraping against the ground. They tell me he's going to the police station. He's a bad man and everyone knows, they tell me, but every time he gets arrested he disappears. Not like, escapes, but physically disappears. This is the depth of shit I am in right now."

We hand over our sandals and step down onto the boat. I hold the handrail as Jen stares at the crystal water. She turns to me and finishes, "There's a weird silence and they return the bones and say some words and sing and then I'm back in my apartment just thinking: what the fuck did I just witness?" The sound of the motor overtakes her as we leave the dock.

"My driver tells me they would have killed him if I hadn't been there."

I shrug my shoulders and shake my head, unable to say anything meaningful. I feel bile in my throat and spit overboard.

Underwater, the rhythm of the oxygen in my regulator is the only sound. They would have killed him if I hadn't been there. I kick my fins gently and float forward. The gravedigger says he put some of the bones down the hole in the outhouse. My jaw is clenched around my regulator. *But every time he gets arrested he disappears... physically disappears.*

My hair is stiff against the headrest; dried salt is forming a thick layer on my skin. My husband and I drive home. Next week Carnivale begins. Already small towns outside of Port-au-Prince have started to drape painted plastic bottles across the street in colourful celebration. Giant hand-painted wooden signs on street corners announce parties and concerts. Carnivale was the one day

a year slaves had free from their masters. It has evolved into an elaborate multi-day party with floats, rara bands, dances, costumes and mind-numbing bass.

In 2015, a power line came down on a float in the early morning hours, electrocuting a performing musician and setting the float on fire. The mob panicked and in the ensuing stampede between sixteen and twenty people died and more than seventy-eight were injured. Carnivale was cancelled that year, as Prime Minister Evans Paul said, “We cannot dance, we cannot celebrate on their corpses.” I read that in Vodun (Voodoo) when someone dies their loa, which acts as their guardian angel in life, is removed from their head so that their soul may go to God. They treat the corpse according to the death. If you are struck by lightning, there is no ceremony because God has struck you down.

We are driving South along the single lane road to Port-au-Prince. On the side of the road ladies wave folded cardboard, selling sweet tablet. We slow down to cross an enormous speed bump in the road and see dark shadows approaching. Covered in black oil, they wear grotesque cardboard masks and grass skirts. There are six of them, dancing, surrounding the vehicle, tapping the glass. Their masks make them brave and they pound on the side of our car, staring. Here in this glass and metal cage, I’m reminded of a childhood nightmare, white eyes peering out of darkness. We slowly inch forward. Ahead, there is another man, dancing like a whirling dervish, grass skirt lifted high. He stops and sits in the middle of the road on the speed bump. I shrink down in my seat. The costumed men move on to the vehicle behind us and we approach the now-still man. Legs forward, he looks like an oversized child, a clownish parody of stubbornness. As we pass the speed bump, he taps the bottom of our car and I imagine him crawling under it—becoming a vine that weaves itself around the entrails and grows up. I don’t want to look back and remember the eyes, but I need to know he has not disappeared into the ether, that I did not imagine him. I turn my head to see him sitting immobile in the road, a cardboard crown around his head.

I’ve seen dead bodies before. The first time I was ten-years old, riding the city bus home from school. I had my Walkman plugged into my ears and was listening to the sounds of 1997. My backpack rested on my lap and I leaned my head against the window. The city bus was passing a small side street when I saw a yellow school bus approach an adjacent intersection. A man wearing

jeans and a hoodie was riding his bicycle right towards it as well. I watched in slow motion. He was hit by the school bus and danced through the air. I craned my head to see the corpse, Picasso-like, painted on the sidewalk. No one on the city bus noticed. My skin grew taut. Should I get off and check to see if he was alright? I'm not sure how, but I just knew he was dead, knew even from the millisecond glance I had of his body on the pavement. I said nothing. I was a coward. I replayed the event over and over in my mind. *How was school? Fine, thanks.* In the morning I checked the daily newspaper. There was nothing about him, not even in the obituaries. Had I imagined it? Couldn't be. I fancied myself Nancy Drew, my favourite literary heroine at the time, and went to the library to read the newspapers after school for a week. To this day I cannot find anything about him, but I know he died, and I know I saw him die.

The second dead body I saw was in Haiti, during my first weekend here. We were heading out to the beach and I sat in a large passenger van nestled between strangers. My husband was in front of me. The sights of Port-au-Prince! Colourful painted signs and wrought iron doors, sidewalks that disappear into marchand stands, women balancing everything from fruit to appliances on their heads, the smell and churn of motos, weaving around traffic, and then, we turned the corner slowly, caught in a crowd. I often hear that accidents are caused by people looking at accidents. I can't speak to that statistical truth, but I know there is something about a crowd that makes you feel compelled to look. Maybe it's the fear of missing an event of great beauty or significance. Maybe we are just inexplicably drawn towards groups of people in hopes of finding something. From my window, as we rounded the corner, I saw him through the legs of the crowd. Hands bent akimbo, fingers splayed out. Brains leaking through his nose, his head cracked open like a bowl of stew. "Don't look," my husband turned to protect me. But I did look. I saw the frailty of the human body, the desperate futility of hanging on to life. I saw the darkness of blood on black skin, the crowd pulling deeper around him, devouring him. I was ten-years old again, riding the bus alone: a witness to something no one would ever write about. This time, I knew it was real. But still, no one wrote about him in the local newspapers. He was gone from the corner when we passed by that afternoon. In his place a shoe-shiner sat on a tin stool, holding an oily rag, waiting for his next customer.

If one day you visit, you won't see the shoe-shiner on that street corner. He will have disappeared. Instead, you will hear a faint whisper in the air singing Bon Dieubon. God is good and, maybe, also inscrutable.

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