Myriam J. A. Chancy

Nomad*

My house says to me, "Do not leave me, for here dwells your past." And the road says to me, "Come and follow me, for I am your future." And I say to both my house and the road, "I have no past, nor have I a future. If I stay here, there is a going in my staying; and if I go there is a staying in my going. Only love and death change all things."

(Khalil Gibran, *Sand and Foam*)

I remember the white nights of excitement as we awaited the hour of departure, the ride to the airport, getting on the plane to return home.

I remember, looking for my aunts upon arrival, both in their early twenties, both counter personnel for Air France, greeting us with expectant smiles.

Later, I remember my uncle who would get us through customs and passport control, past armed guards, and the swarm of people in need of a job, who descended upon the luggage as if these were precious means to an end, some easy money. But it was never easy, among the weary tourists, the men with the guns, and the sweltering heat of the terminal.

I remember my great-grandmother, already over 100 years old, sitting on the porch of her infinitely miniscule house, which had been moved from the countryside to the yard of one of her children, who instructed us in a Kreyol I have never heard since, how to pick and eat the *quenêpes* fallen from her tree.

For years, I remembered every moment of these returns in infinite, glorious details. Indeed, they were glory days: filled with a kind of immeasurable bounty of love that is perhaps only proper to childhood, and recoverable only through the annals of nostalgia. I did not realize that they would, one day, come to an end. I did not realize that one day I would have to rely on those details to reconstruct my life. Or, perhaps, I did know. Perhaps this was why I, acting like an archivist who catalogues rare documents, accumulated impressions, gestures and events, filing them away for less glorious days, which, inevitably, arrived.

Only love and death change things. Love can also, at times, lead to certain kinds of death, or renunciation, while death can liberate, bring peace, and, with it, a certain rebirth. George Lamming once wrote that exile could bring with it an uncertain joy, that the pain and pleasure of exile were to be found in the reality that home could become wherever he found himself. There are forms of death that are simply abeyances, like plants in the sleep of winter feigning mortality only to sprout new growth and wake up in spring. Exile is like that: one travels like a tortoise in the shell.

* This piece has been reprinted and edited from a previous version entitled, "Walking Sadness: Haitian Returns", which appeared in the *Trinidad & Tobago Review* (October 2012). Republished with permission of the author. All accompanying photos ©MJA Chancy, Summer 2012.

My exile from Haiti is many decades long. By the time I found myself in Haiti post-earthquake, I had long abandoned any nostalgic sense or need for return. In the late nineteen-nineties, I had already seen Port-au-Prince drastically altered from the city of my birth, with rural Haitians making their way to the capital in desperate search of a better life. I had already seen the quiet streets of Pétion-Ville turn into market places. I had already seen the countless homeless in the historic district near the port, sleeping beneath their makeshift stalls, boarded-up buildings looming behind them. Since then, what people knew about Haiti and the Haitians has deteriorated, just like the capital, to the point that a year ago, visiting a group of women artisans in LaGonav, I overheard two American friends quietly positing they had observed great brutality in the Haitian countryside. That had to be 'cultural' since the Kreyol language, as they thought, did not have any word for 'love', and that Haitians seldom said 'I love you' to each other. They argued that if there was great tension and violence in rural areas, like the one where we found ourselves, it must have been because Haitians had developed an ability to be less empathic, less concerned with others. I believe they were wrong. Great despair and poverty feed violence, but violence does not necessarily serve as an indicator of lack of love.

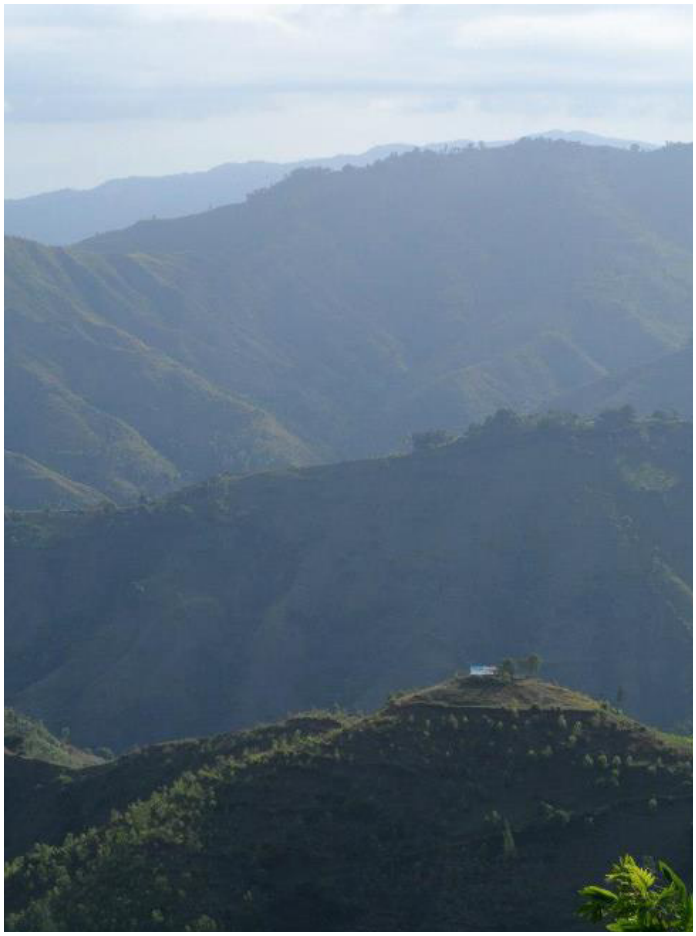

Fig. 1: View from "Rue de l'amitié", Jacmel 2012 © MJA Chancy. Courtesy of the artist.

In Kreyol there is a language for 'love'; one can, of course, use the French *je t'aime*, which translates in Haitian as *m'rimmin ou*. When speaking generally to loved ones, the Haitians say *Pote ou byen* (Take care of yourself), *Ke Dye beni ou* (May God bless you) or *Kenbe la* (Stay strong or stay close). I responded to my friends that this was no different than, in Italian, saying *Sta' bene* (Stay well) or, frequently, especially among family members and close friends, *Ti voglio bene* (I wish the best for you), which is often said instead of 'I love you'. What's more, Haitians, like Italians, demonstrate their love through actions, gestures, diminutives and expressions of affection: *cheri/e* or 'dear' in Haiti; *tesoro* or 'treasure' in Italy.

I was not sure of what motivated my friends to think that violence in Haiti was somehow natural, intrinsic, rather than cultivated through power structures that made a currency of violence (in the same way as violence proliferated both familiarly and anonymously in the US and in Italy, especially through organized crime). Violence is a human phenomenon, as is love. Where one is rewarded, the other still continues.

In communities where the most basic of needs are not met, where despair seems to rain without end, there is love of the deepest kind, the one that makes mothers (and aunts and grandmothers) and fathers sacrifice themselves for

their children, so as to provide them with a better life than their own. The kind of desperate love that runs through the *lakou-foumi* (*ant'yards* or slums) and up through the working-middle-classes is the same love eternalized in *Rue Cases-Negres* by the Guadeloupean writer Joseph Zobel, and immortalized in the film by Euzhan Palcy bearing the same title. It is no wonder that some parents give up their children to strangers, Haitian and foreigners alike, in the hope that they will be better served, to find out that, often, these strangers unwittingly abandon them as *restaveks* or child-servants, abused, neglected, overworked and, even, trafficked. Even among those who 'rescue' children, there often resides a misunderstanding of the poor who sacrifice their families in baseless hope. The rescuers pick the children they think will be the most 'successful' in North America, vilifying the families of birth as if they know nothing of love. There is no attempt to reunify broken families, to provide services and securities that may keep them together, beyond any need to banish their young into the hands of strangers. The rescuers, rationalizing that Haitian culture bears no evidence of love, can sometimes decide to rescue those they perceive as the 'tenth' talented children in Haiti, who are not *restaveks* at all, but children who simply happen to be poor, working to help their families, or doing chores to help those working outside the home.

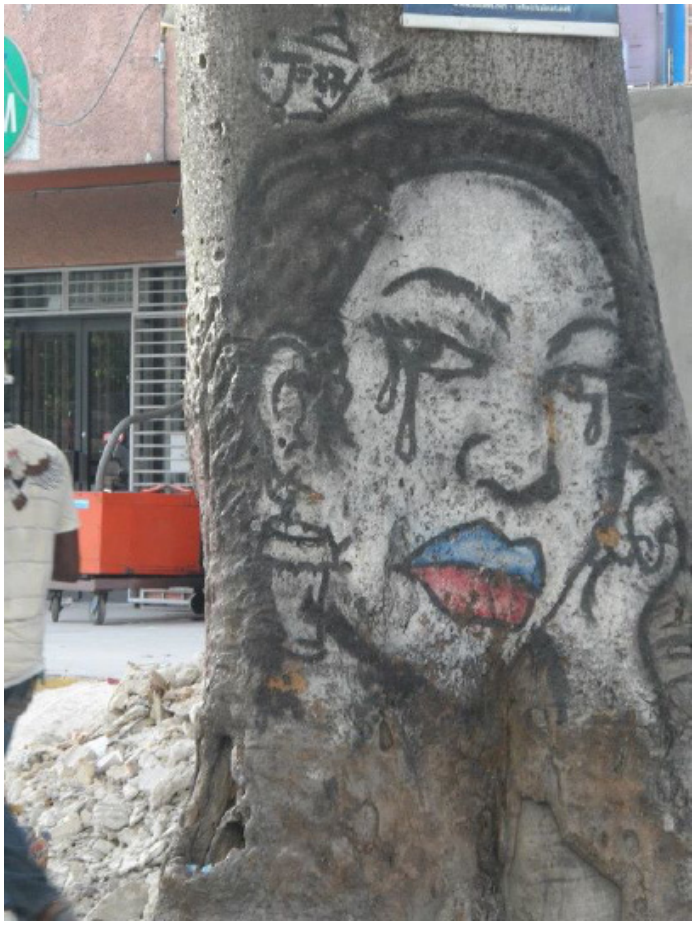

Fig. 2: Graffiti, Port-au-Prince: Haiti in Tears, 2012 © MJA Chancy
Courtesy of the artist.

After the earthquake, I heard the word 'resilient' being used, again and again, to describe Haitians moving forward with their lives. The NPR, National Public Radio in the US, runs what can only be described as 'happy' pieces about entrepreneurs in IDP (internally-displaced camps), opening up barber and hair shops, selling Digicel phone cards and other more basic staples. Actually, the merchants, to make a living, move where the people are, and those who have lost their jobs have to make-do with what they have left. I am not sure if this means 'resilience' or, rather, 'tenacity'. Resilience implies a return to a previous and better state; tenacity is the characteristic of defiantly persevering. For most post-earthquake people, there is no going back, only going on.

As a result of these depictions, many non-Haitians think that the Haitians lack sensitivity: after all, 300,000 died beneath the rubble – shouldn't there have been a longer period of mourning? They seem to forget that, despite the dead, over 1.5 million found themselves, overnight, without a roof over their heads. Today, close to half a million are still without lodging, while it is safe to

say that a good half a million and more must live in what can be described as 'sub-standard' in all possible ways. How would any of us keep on in the midst of a similar tragedy? Love has many faces. One of them is perseverance against all odds, holding in one's personal grief so as to put on a brave face for others, and survive hand in hand.

I watch people ask questions only to be greeted by a dismissive nod of the head, like a clam snapping down its shell for protection. One night, my uncle wants to show me the photos of a villa by the sea on his camera. He is stopped short by the hundreds, if not thousands, of images that he has yet to download, one year later after the earthquake, onto the hard-drive of his computer. "Look," he says, "here's a dead person," and pointing, "here's another. Dead everywhere." He is showing me, photo after photo, what he witnessed as he barreled through the streets. "See," he continues, "Look," witnessing along with him. "There, and there," one tumbled building after another, one nameless corpse after another. "Look," he says, and what he really means is, "don't look away, don't look away. Look what I am showing you." And I don't. He doesn't cry. He doesn't explain. He just turns an image after the other, for what seems an eternity, as if showing me the film that makes up the memory in his mind, indelible images of the implausible.

When I am in Haiti, parts of my family that never converge visit one another. Some have not seen each other for years, even though they live close by, all in the capital. Over dinner, over drinks, gradually, and in the absence of questions, the stories emerge, describing where each of them was when the thundering sound started. Many begin by speaking of a sound they could not identify, like a cannon or a deployed academic weapon. They describe how, a few seconds later, the ground buckled beneath them, how the solid ground suddenly became undulating like an ocean wave, how their bodies shook, what they held on to, if there was anything to hold to. Some prayed while literally holding up the beams of a door jamb. They all thought it would never end.

In my post-earthquake returns, what I have learned is that it is in these moments, freed from the pressure of voyeuristic expectations, that the stories emerge, spill out, are told and retold in intimate details. There are, of course, exceptions, or unexpected confessions. My elderly uncle who found himself at ground zero in the capital, and who returned to Berthé to find the apartment building he had himself designed and built, intact, refuses to engage in any conversation about the earthquake. He only says that he doesn't believe that things are as bad as they say, while his best friend, twenty years younger than him, a baker, spends every day distributing bread wherever needed. This uncle has suddenly turned conservative, blaming those who perished and those struggling under the tents for their lack of foresight. His mental and physical health is deteriorating; yet no one suggests that his sudden shift in point of view is a reaction to what he lived and witnessed during those few seconds and that first night of which he never speaks, at least, not to me – a post-traumatic response of denial and dissemblance.

A story circulates of a cousin who seems to have lost touch with reality. Every morning he dresses for work, descends into the worse hit areas of the city, and returns home every evening. No one knows what he is doing. Why bother dress for work in these days? A year ago, that cousin gave me a tour of the city, pointing out at various sites, going by the disassembled sprawl of the tent city that used to sit facing the broken presidential palace. It turned out that this cousin, a Haitian engineer whose constructions did not fall during the quake, was being hired by the government and by private enterprises to conduct surveys of fallen buildings. He was crawling through the debris, across the bodies of individuals who had been crushed or died in other ways, whom no rescue reached, for whom there would be no sanctified burial. He, too, does not speak of what he feels; he only describes how things were and how they are now, his finger pointing at this or that site.

A year later, an acquaintance in Jacmel who lived in the capital at the time of the earthquake, offered me a small glass of old-fashioned homemade liqueur at the end of a visit. As we sat, he spontaneously described how his two-story house fell into the ground so that he and his family found themselves eye to eye with the patio two stories below. His children were encrusted in the debris; he eventually got them out, two with severe injuries, and the group traveled on foot to Jacmel to find it similarly devastated. There is no end to the stories. Most surprising, perhaps, are the stories of those refusing to leave or leaving and returning. Despite, or because of, the post-traumatic stress the majority of people now live with, most find that the community of survivors created by the earthquake provides them with a safety net, the reassurance of not having to explain when, again and again, the physical memory of the tremors and of the shifting ground recurs, like the experience of the phantom limb. There is no escape from the past. Living with it is an uneasy accommodation – unfortunately, this is nothing new for Haitians.

To be Haitian in these times, even when one retains the memory of parents and families, even when one can remember a Haiti less despairing, is to live with the sadness of immeasurable intensity that defines one's life. It is not a lack of care or of empathy; it is like the air we breathe in daily. We carry a backward glance with which we must live. In moments of culpability, many of us would throw everything away, only to be stopped by the stern glance of a great-grandparent, in a photograph she took great pains to have taken, whose gaze speaks of the immense sacrifices undertaken to allow us to be where we are; perhaps she would not have imagined we might be outside, but at least alive, more than comfortable, with a future before us. No, that gaze cannot be betrayed. It would be the worst of betrayals.

On all the roads I travel, I walk this sadness like others walk their dogs, without complaint, because we have escaped other fates by taking the road out. I am accompanied by my ancestors, the people who always ask me, upon my arrival in

Port-au-Prince, "when are you coming back?" They are already looking at my inevitable departure, expecting me to forge something for all of us, out there, 'elsewhere', even if they will never meet me there. It is for this reason that you will rarely find me smiling in these faraway, unknown, and wandering roads. I keep those smiles for them, the ghosts of the pasts, those ghosts who make up my conscience.

I have left many homes over the course of my life. It often surprises me that this is not what most people do; most people stay within the restricted space of the place they were born, at least in the country of their birth. Moving from one country to another is not *pro forma*. For most people, it is not even within the scope of their imagination, except for short trips out of their comfort zones, for vacations, where comfort is sought, in a resort or a cruise ship offering what they have at home and what they don't want to leave behind, lest they forget who they are, and become someone else, from elsewhere. It never occurs to me to ask others when they left home. I assume they have. It is a rite of passage from which very few of us can escape, even if we don't stray far from home, or if we don't emigrate. Still, it always surprises me to have to justify my departures and my returns from and to Haiti, as if emigrating signaled abandonment and returns, half-hearted attempts at atonement. But if atonement were in any of these movements back and forth, it would be owed not to those asking of me to justify my existence outside of Haiti; it would be owed to those who never ask me when I left Haiti, but only when will I be returning, and for how long. It would be owed to those who say, "that's right, you never left," and who are always glad to see me again.

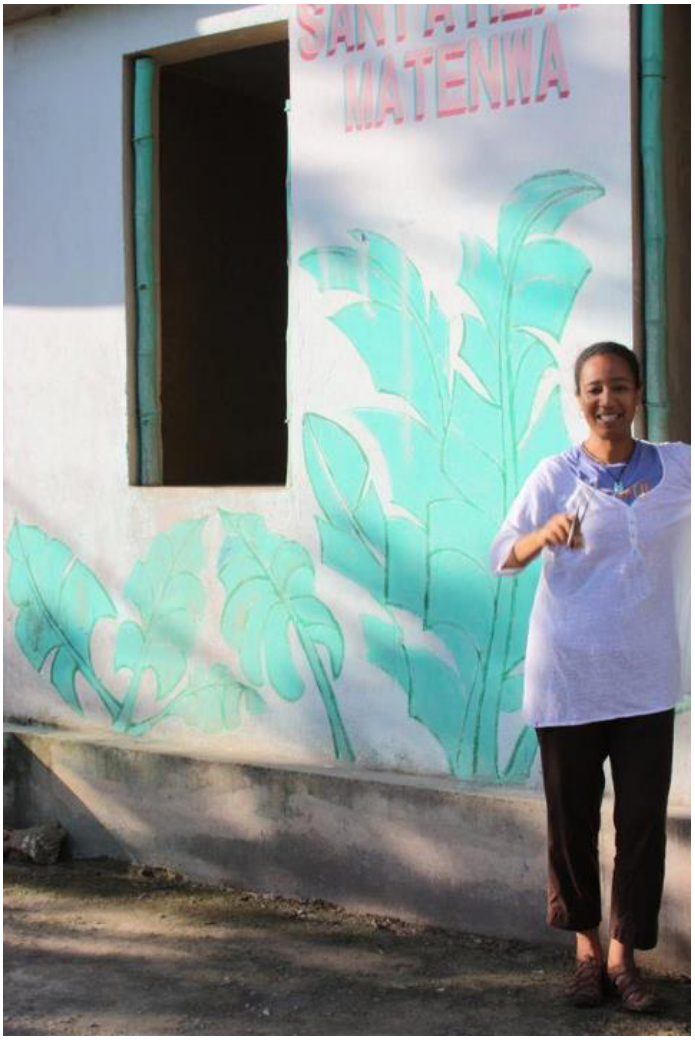

Fig. 3: In Matenwa, La Gonav, 2012 © MJA Chancy. Courtesy of the artist.