

## When the bones begin to speak<sup>1</sup>

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Niya couldn't sleep her first few nights back in Philly, not because of the jetlag, nor even the acidic prospect of her entire career teeter-tottering on the edge of dissolution. Her insomnia was a result of the paranoia that chained her thoughts to the bones she had stolen from the excavation site in French Guiana during her two-month research trip. Though Niya would prefer the term "rescued," a word she'd dutifully cling to if talk of foul play continued to penetrate the anthropology department at the University where she taught, where she was supposed to be up for tenure.

Niya had been on the front lines of a nation-wide campaign to shake up the persistent colonial-era practice of importing human remains to teaching laboratories in the U.S. without following proper cultural protocols or integrating into scholarly practices the recognition of the actual lost lives the bones represented. Because of this work, a human rights organization had called her in mid-July last year. "We want you on the initial research team in French Guiana." They, like she, had been keeping a close watch on a gradually breaking story. Some months prior, a local historian in Macouria accompanying an orphanage on their trip to the coast happened upon the ruins of an un-archived French colonial prison. It was much smaller in stature than its better-known neighbors, most likely built at the end of the 1850s and destroyed less than half a century later.

Now, not a week into her return, Niya was facing serious allegations. When asked what she had done with the bones she "confiscated," whether or not they were still in her possession, Niya answered no. And it wasn't a complete lie. For it was the bones, not she, that had done the possessing. It was the bones that had found *her* one ominous evening near the end of the research trip, when Niya's colleagues had abandoned her with a stomach bug to head into town. Niya had been lying at the bottom half of her bunk, fully clothed, curled around her stomach pain when the whistle hit her ears like the aggravated genius of a Coltrane riff. Tantalizing. Unbounded. She had never heard anything like it. It was a sound that startled her memories to attention, an embodied noise that rose from the base of her solar plexus, crept into her blood, and gyrated against her veins with such resonant bravado, Niya found her eyes

filling with tears she had trained herself not to let slip throughout the duration of her academic career.

Of course, Niya's first thought as she instinctively plugged her ears with the balls of her index fingers was that she was dreaming. A disturbing symptom of her stomach bug. Or maybe the result of a stealthy emotional phantom that had nestled into her subconscious after weeks of studying the 1785 journal entries of an Enlightenment scientist who had spent a year dissecting cadavers of the enslaved in the very city she was visiting.

It wasn't until Niya felt her body move in a calm, disembodied trance that she realized she was in the grips of a very real experience she had no context for. What was this feeling in her psyche, in her feet, that caused her to exit the hotel room, drift into the streets, down the riverbank, and into the soft bush? About a mile's distance from the camp and another mile from the excavation site, Niya found them, the whistling bones caged by dirt and leaves beneath a tree trunk that was wrinkled and discolored like aged skin. Niya's hands immediately began to move in response to the whistle's pull. She didn't take much, just a cervical vertebra, a fragment of the pelvic bone, a phalanx from the hand, and the heavy ghost of her indiscretion. Back in the hotel, she wrapped the bones in several stolen hotel towels, then Saran Wrap, and stuck them in her check-on bag. "For research," she would say at the airport. And no one stopped her. Not then.

Niya had returned on New Year's Day, a couple of weeks before the start of the University's term, to the meticulous order of her one-bedroom apartment – her categorized books evenly distributed across the living room walls, the stacked color-coded food containers in the kitchen. Her mind, writhing like an unruly cosmos, felt out of place here at home. This sense of extreme order she had gradually built around herself in order to keep the ghosts of her past at bay suddenly seemed like the edifices of another person's world.

When the whistle came again, Niya tried wrapping the bones in her Nana's Jip madras dress and stuffing them behind the large water filter under the sink. When they started speaking a few days later, she exasperatedly moved them to a box in the closet filled with pages of a manuscript on colonial prisons she'd given up writing. But hiding the bones did little to silence the voices or curb the visions that began to intrude upon her curated existence. It did not dull the sensations that disrupted her perception and demanded that she make room for something else, for *someone* else. It didn't matter what Niya did, the girl to whom the bones belonged, both centuries-old *and* a fraction of Niya's thirty-nine years old, found her.

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“You need treatment,” Marcus, her boyfriend, is saying. These are the first words Niya clearly deciphers as she comes to. “These vision-dream-whatever-the-hell-they-are, I don’t like them. It’s not normal.”

It’s the Sunday just before the start of the term. Niya was slated to teach an Intro to Anthropology course entitled *To Whom Does the Past Belong?* in addition to two graduate seminars. But a handful of days after her return, when news surfaced that she was under investigation, the University immediately canceled two courses, and paired her with another instructor for the third. They were giving her “long handled spoon” treatment, no doubt spurred on by the department chair, Roger Duraden, who had never taken a liking to her.

Over the past few weeks, Marcus had increasingly found Niya at home in the evenings staring into space and whispering about fires. He thinks it has something to do with the recent rebuilding of Osaga Avenue where she’s lived for the past two years. The MOVE bombing is in the news again. And it’s not as if Niya were a total stranger to mental breakdowns.

They’d been passing a joint in the living room, Marcus on the couch watching the game with a stack of legal documents abandoned on his lap, Niya seated on a stool behind him untangling the roots of her Dieffenbachia (she hated the popular nickname Dumb Cane), when the bones whistled their tune into Niya’s blood. Marcus had been murmuring as he reached for the joint, “for someone with legit OCD, you burn through this shit like it’s nothing.” The experience lasted a little over fifteen minutes. Niya knows, for she glanced at her phone just before it happened and looks again as she comes to. She’s perched on a stool, leaning against the massive organ keyboard she’d agreed to adopt after her Nana left this world on the wings of a broken promise, leaving Niya alone with her unstable mother. The organ, which Niya never took to learning, takes up as much space as her grandmother had in real life.

Niya hears Marcus’s voice distinct among the chaos of her breached senses, made even more confusing by the herb she’s had. The images of torched plantations grow hazy now; the ravaging smoke lifts from her throat; the shouts of a brigade are fading valiantly like dying stars in perpetual explosion. One thing is consistent; both in the world of the bones and in her waking world, she can feel the grittiness of both soils beneath her nails.

There’s an ice pack on the back of Niya’s neck. Marcus is tightly gripping her arm with his hand. His wrinkled forehead is so close that his cologne irritates Niya’s eyes. *Maybe he does care*, she thinks, fully lucid now, glimpsing some orphaned sweetness in his gaze. She pulls away from his steel hold and coughs, the tumors of things unspoken ever present.

“It’s been years since I’ve seen you this scattered, Niya.”

“Didn’t think you noticed,” she says, green banana bitter.

“Of course I notice. It’s reflecting badly on me.”

“God forbid.” Niya straightens. “Don’t be an idiot. The work I do would never tango with yours.”

The muscles in Marcus' face tighten. "You know Niya, you should watch yourself. It's a slippery slope when the grounds of morality are so high up." His words fire like a hand grenade. A recurring, gruesome idea hits her: what would happen if *he* found the bones?

Marcus has on starched gym clothes that go well with his impeccable white sneakers. He enjoys polite banter, inexpensive but good-looking get-ups for his law firm and post-work excursions. He knows his hard liquor but will welcome the pleasure of a sushi dish, as long as it doesn't take too long to come. The way he holds himself gives Niya the same impression of a bruised leopard perched for the kill she's had since they met Freshman year of college. "You need some kinda treatment," Marcus says again. Case closed. His words feel like rigged dice up a sleeve he's been waiting for years to toss her way.

But treatment would mean that what was happening to Niya could be explained by a doctor's diagnosis. It could not. It would mean admitting to breaking all sorts of SAA protocol and the AAA's code of ethics. She would not. Niya had ignored Nana's warning doled out in a flappy creole on occasion when Niya was a child: "If you dig up trauma where it's been buried, it just might break you open, empty you out all over these rugged, raw-boned streets. You be careful what you touch, Yaya." That voice should have taught Niya how to avoid the things that touched *her*, the man in the backyard when Niya was eleven, the mentor who had reached into the crook of her grey leggings during her first college anthro trip abroad, and Marcus.

But it had not.

And now... these bones.

Marcus steps closer. She thinks he might place a hand on her hip, pull her up to him. She misses the days when his touches were gentler. There was a time, once. His trespassing finger brushes a sore spot under Niya's right ear. "What's this? Looks like you were burned."

Niya twists her neck and squints at the mirror hanging above the organ. She sees a jagged impression, clear as an activist's tongue.

"That's always been there," she says, frowning.

"No, it hasn't." Marcus tilts his head with dangerous curiosity. The doubt in Niya's chest he's stirred thunders freely from the dams that held it back. The girl whose bones Niya hid in her home had never left her with anything tangible she could touch and see in her own world.

Until this crooked scar.

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On Wednesday afternoon, Niya's second day back in the classroom, the bones do exactly what she prayed they wouldn't. They catch her during her office hours. Which is strange, for she's recently learned that the bones have to be relatively near to speak. Later, she'll remember how she woke the night before, half-doused in feverish nightmares of her

department head, Duraden, cheering as she was jailed (“with affirmative action and #metoo in your pocket,” he had once told her under the guise of jesting, “imagine the places you could go”). She moved the bones in the middle of the night to the trunk of her car with the intention of getting rid of them after work.

Taj appears at her door with his copy of *Silencing the Past*. Niya’s glad to have the distraction. It’s always a joy when her students first discover Trouillot, and Taj is one of her favorites, someone who’s seen her transition from her first year as a new professor to her third, just as she’s watched and listened to him talk about his hormonal-assisted shift from the old body into new. For most of her life, the idea of interacting with other bodies left her recoiling, like a student’s sweaty palm in a handshake or the pressing of her skin against her older sister’s newborn at her grandmother’s deathbed. Fatigued and in mourning, Niya had refused when her sister held the plump, wild-haired baby out to her so she could pee. “I thought you wanted a kid, Niya.” “Ya, but –” “So *hold the goddamn baby*,” her sister had shouted, her frizzy locs fanning out with grief.

Niya prefers the touch of her sand sculptures she sells on Etsy, black-brown-beige-white like the colors of her migrating family. And her plants. For nearly two years her *Dieffenbachia* had given her little more than vapid wisps of dying life, like her womb. Until she returned with the bones to see it delightful, blooming. Even *if* Marcus had looked out for it like she had asked, the plant was difficult to grow outside of its natural tropical habitat. The changes were nothing short of miraculous.

Bones, too, had always had a magnetic, comforting pull to Niya. Even as a child, she remembered marveling at the bones displayed in Ripley’s Believe It or Not! and asking for the kid’s version of forensic science kits and disarticulated human skeletons for Christmas so she could learn all about the bones. It was something in their coldness, in their wide-open innocence, in their incapacity to protect against the penetrating fingers of those who sought to uncover their scars, their truths that calmed her.

“Professor, you’re like...bleeding.”

Niya doesn’t catch on until Taj pulls his book away from the desk. She sees the line of smeared blood. “A paper cut.” She lies.

“Kinda deep for a paper cut. And...where’s the paper?”

Niya stands abruptly. The whistling has already begun. “Taj, you should go. We’ll continue next week.”

Taj doesn’t move. “Are you okay?”

“Yes. You should –,”

“Cause like, you seem a little... your voice, it’s–”

“Get out!” She doesn’t mean to yell, but she already sees the girl appearing, as if stepping from behind her office walls. She’ll apologize later.

Niya's transitions always begin with this coaxing whistle that dips into a deep-voiced whisper: *Enter this intelligence with me*. Then, her surroundings fade to memory. The dark around her is the color of fresh blood. In this rude hiccup of space-time, the kid appears. She's nearly five-foot two, slack-shouldered, shifty-eyed and emaciated with ginger-brown skin. The husky whisper gives way to a voice that's dreamy and timid, the kind one would try and imprison in a conch shell. The girl extends her own poetic invitation to Niya, each time a different, convoluted mantra. Like today's:

*Desire's pockets  
don't seem to have  
any more room  
for me.*

What follows is the maddening intrusion, the breaking of her body and psyche into that of another. Each time it happens, Niya wonders how many more of these intrusions she can sustain. Niya can feel her hands trembling as her psyche moves further and further away from her own sense of self, a crude itch deep in the soul, and subsequently glues itself to another, a consciousness that's gone, and yet so very much alive.

When Niya opens her eyes, she and the girl are one.

They, Niya and the kid, Niya as the kid, are in the back room of a seamstress shop. She knows this because of the fabrics splayed across several tables. Sea water hangs in the air, smelling like the same island of Martinique Niya had visited before through the bones. Rivière-Pilote, she remembers. A whale oil lamp burns, but the room is dark still, the air smelling of dust and fabric. There's a vile sting in their ring finger where they, Niya as the girl, had been pinched by a needle. Philomène, with her tiny baby bump, is sitting in front of them wrapping it with a torn piece of her own skirt. "You stick to washing. Stop handling my needles," their friend tells them. They are pregnant, too. But while Philo's pregnancy was a result of a night of passion shared with Sey, her lover, theirs came from a tumble with an unnamed aggressor who found her washing clothes at the ocean's edge. When Philo is done, she settles onto the cot. "Read to me?"

They pick up the yellowing pages of a weeks-old newspaper dated 1870 and read the politics aloud. Philo, who is scooping out the slimy seeds of a reddish-green cocoa pod to suck on, grows agitated and finally interrupts. "*Zanmi m*. We have to act. The planter class has done enough to protect their interests. It's our turn."

As the girl, Niya knows Philo's rants can last for hours. When they were seven and Philomène eleven, Philo left school to assist her aunties, first at the coffee plantation, then at the seamstress shop when they discovered that Philo had a gift. To them, Philo's mind was like a fish net dipped in water; nothing school-related held. Still, folded playfully in the slippery coolness of large banana leaves, they would draw Philo's fingers across the pages of children's

primers, tattered third-hand copies from the béké schools, finishing lessons Philo left behind. Even back then, they'd barely get through a sentence without Philo interrupting, "but *why* are their eyes always the same color? Where are the houses that look like ours and the people who do the work we do?" They never had answers for their friend. But they knew even then that Philo's tongue, a thing of violence and beauty, was what they loved most in this world.

These rants have now turned into organized retaliation, particularly with this most recent legal case unraveling, a Black sailor convicted of libel for arguing with a béké. "We have rights and we will fight for them," Philo stutters, spitting out a seed.

"*Sé sa menm.*" They agree.

And yet, they are not prepared when it all comes to a head a month later, even though they'd written manifestos in the dark with Philo and other women and watched, heart tight, the passion in Philo's eyes when she and Sey spoke of the poverty in the rural areas on the island. For four days, Philomène's brigade travel the countryside, demonstrating for the sailor, burning plantations. And for four days, they walk in Philomène's shadow, mimicking her every step. They tell Philo that a handful of protesters get drunk, loot, and, in some instances, kill. "This fight," Philomène replies, "is bigger than the follies of a few." When they are captured, Philomène is declared the lead instigator of the women's brigade. Her verdict arrives. Hard labor in *Guyane française*. "Ship me with her!" they plead, pledging themselves accomplices. And ship them they do. When Philomène dies mysteriously during the voyage, and others are sent back home, the girl of the bones is left to corrode like eclipsed her stories, forgotten.

The rush of time slaps against Niya's cheeks as they're propelled forward to French Guiana. In most of their visions, Niya finds them passing through this silent, devious cell in the prison camp. If they've followed the seasons correctly, it should be 1881. Maybe 1882.

A guard darkens the doorframe, breathing loudly into the humid air. In his hand is a book, a gift in exchange for him emptying himself into her tired flesh. Niya, as the girl, lets the spiked songs of the jungle insects bear witness to their fucking, wishing they could rhyme along too.

*Desire's pockets  
don't seem to have  
any more room  
for me.*

When he is gone, they dream of their fingernails growing long enough to reach inside and scratch the itch in their womb. They bring the book to their chest for comfort. They can't read it; it's in English. But no matter. It helps them remember the years beside Philomène, years that felt like capturing the nectar of the moon in their throat.

When Niya comes to, she is crouched in the corner of her office, trembling. She'll remain there for hours, her own memories scratching at her womb, confounded, confused.

Niya sees her copy of Trouillot open on her desk, remembers the yellowing pages, thinks of Taj, thinks of Philomène, and understands. The connections are not random. The bones are as much aware of her world as she is privy to theirs.

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The pink-purple hues of the morning sky throw intricate shapes against the cityscape. The notes of Lizzo's *Truth Hurts* roll like beaded FireBalls, criminally, against the tongues of the abandoned twins across the street. Construction workers add to this ebullient West Philly soundtrack as they bump fists with the fellows at food stands and work on new floor plans. On these streets, one is reminded of the entanglement of hope with memories of the flames and the deaths. Circa 1985. Osaga might return to what it was, maybe one day a Tulsa pre-race-riot. But one thing this rebuilding cannot bring back is the lives lost. The lives, stolen.

Niya stares at the cityscape from her perch on a lab stool, uneasy, trying her best to avoid the burning arch of her best friend's gaze. She knows she shouldn't have come. The moment Niya walked through Lisanne's office door with her black backpack slung across her shoulders, her best friend shook her head sharply.

"No. No no no you didn't. You couldn't have. Not here, Ni."

Niya had known Lisanne, who was two years her senior, since her elementary school days, had followed Lisanne to college where Niya chose a degree in historical archaeology while Lisanne opted for a more racy career as a forensic scientist. Liz would do anything for Niya, and Niya felt a little ashamed for taking advantage. But not enough to leave.

She quietly set the bag with the bones on the table and nudged it towards Liz, who crossed, uncrossed, then crossed her arms again, before starting in on Niya.

"What game are you playing here, Niya? And why on Earth would you give up everything you've worked so hard for? This project alone would have skyrocketed your career. If you wanted to jump ship, we could've worked out a more... diplomatic method."

"Since when is the dead diplomatic?" Niya had asked with a small smile. Liz let out a dry laugh, and Niya leaned into it with everything she could. She needed laughter; there wasn't enough of it in the world of the bones. She also needed to assert some sort of practicality into the temporal conundrum that had become her life. She had woken up that morning believing that learning about who the bones belonged to in this reality could maybe bring her back to her pen, her paper, her writing, her sanctuary. Maybe it could help her write her way out of this mess.

"Please Liz? I just want to know a little more about who these belonged to."

Liz rolled her eyes. "Well, at least tell me why. Why'd you take them? How do you break your own moral obligation to the land and its people?"



That's when Niya had sighed and turned to gaze at the skyline. She had a nagging headache that felt very much like the pulsating emotional remnants of another person trapped in her uncanny mind. Niya didn't know how much longer she could sustain this breaking back and forth. Deep down, she was beginning to suspect that the bones were a gift from the dead offering her deep medicine that would coax her away from this world, a direction she had tried and failed to move in years ago.

Niya turns back to Liz, now, with no more of an answer than she started with and rummages through her bag for her bottle of Duloxetine.

"And when did your medication make it from your bathroom into your purse?" Liz probes.

"Please don't start with me, Liz. Not today."

"I'm just saying. You don't look good, sweetie. Is it the University business? Something else?"

Definitely something else. True, the University had fully suspended Niya until the case was resolved. Though Niya suspects that this had more to do with the real toll the bones had taken on her mental state than with the case. Not to mention the small scratches and aches that the vision-dreams left her with every time she came to. Breaking into the psyche of the girl, Niya could feel in the deepest part of her something undiagnosed, something unacknowledged, like – what is the enslaved and post-enslaved version of neurosis or PTSD? Where were the psychology textbooks that made sense out of the impossible state of mind and state of being linked to the institution of slavery and its damning aftermath? Niya was experiencing, in tiny doses, a psychic trauma that never had the luxury of being named. The psychic red of the girl's experiences now commingled with Niya's own mental health challenges, and feigning coherence was becoming more challenging. She had been diagnosed after Nana died with a mild version of obsessive-compulsive disorder. Her freshman year in college, Liz and Marcus, who at the time was just a boy she had slept with once or twice, had found her with a stomach full of pills the hospital had to pump. Fast forward to now, Niya suspected that she was disintegrating. Each and every time the girl from the past barged into her life, her body, something in her, chipped away just a little more.

How could she explain this to Liz? She couldn't. Not yet. Not then. So, she chose to pivot. Towards an age-old scandal she knew would set Liz off long enough to distract her into complying.

"It's just Marcus. He's cheating again. I just... I didn't want to say anything."

Liz scoffs and turns away from Niya, while Niya prepares for the onslaught of Liz's biting criticism and demands. Instead, Liz says, "I don't give a rat's ass about that man. I wanna know, now, about the bones."

Niya closes her eyes and massages her temples, then throws her hands up in submission. "Fine. Something happened, alright. An... an ancestral call? I don't know, Liz, but

the bones, they... they felt like they had a mind of their own when I found them. I don't know what possessed me to take them. But they had me deeply thinking about the stories Nana used to tell. About the islands. About my family. You remember those stories?"

Liz nods.

"Nana had a great grandfather, a migrant from Martinique who, in the mid-1880s, worked on an early, failed iteration of what became the Panama Canal, then traveled to Louisiana in the service of a Frenchman at the turn of the twentieth century. There was talk, Nana used to say, of a mystery of a woman, a whiff in the archive, his mother? his auntie? a cousin? maybe an older sister? who was sent to one of the colonial prisons – we don't know which – after one of the island's post-slavery rebellions. This woman, she's like a shooting star in the archive, a neglected footnote of our oral histories, there one moment, gone the next. And I guess I just... I don't know."

"You fell into the trap of historical romance and traded your career for a waltz with the fantasy of naming ancestors we will never be able to name."

Niya swallows and feels tears gathering in her eyes. She wants to tell Liz the truth of what she's been going through, let her friend sort out the fantasy from reality. But something catches in her throat, perhaps the fear that her mind had gone neurotic once again and she had lost control.

"I'm just saying, Liz. I was there. Day in and day out with this mass grave. So, sure, I had a little imagination fever. It happens."

"It shouldn't have."

"But it did! And what? A little help, please!"

Liz contemplates her friend for a beat. "Fine. But after today, I need you to give them the sending-off ceremony they deserve and be done with this."

"Yes I will."

"Promise?"

"I said I will."

For the next few hours, the two of them study the bones in silence, broken only by the crescendos of murmurs and grunts. They find a stress fracture in the finger and possible craters on the pubic bone that indicated pregnancy. Niya finds herself daring the bones to whistle, to speak, to call out, to break her again in the presence of her friend so she could open up and pour the weight of it into Liz's waiting arms. But they remain deceptively quiet.

It's well into the afternoon when Lisanne finally stops humoring Niya.

"Get rid of these, Ni. Get rid of them now. Or they'll send you over that cliff. And I can't have that happening, not on my watch." Lisanne's eyes are piercing and prophetic like Nana's had always been.

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But Niya couldn't do it.

It's 4 a.m. on a Wednesday morning and Niya wanders aimlessly through the streets. Like the girl from the bones, she's feeling marked, insane, unhinged. She's packed the smaller of the bones in her backpack next to the first pages of her resuscitated manuscript. She'll start it anew. With the bones as her accompaniment. She wants to sit somewhere quiet, study the bones' impressions on her psyche, and write down details from the visions if they allow it. She'll write about how sometimes, in prison, the people stare through rock crevices at the ships docking, or listen to the constant beating of tools against brick on the men's side, or befriend locals who teach them where to find aborticides, leaves for a cough, sap for a scratch, or pull yucca to their mouth in the courtyard, nodding at each *Sa a fè boug mwen?* flung their way.

And here it comes again... twenty-four, twenty-five, twenty-six seconds, and the girl is appearing, her voice ringing in Niya's ears just before they merge:

*Partus*

*Sequitur*

*Ventrem.*

The streets of Philly become the steps of a local jail in Martinique. Before the prison, before French Guinea, before Philo is murdered on that boat, they're back in Martinique. The bones like to do this, to break sequence, flare and then sputter, like memory's true anti-narrative.

It's weeks after the insurrection's termination, and Niya, as the girl, is in labor. The guards have let them go long enough to give birth. They will be back for her in a few days. Some folks pass them by, others stop to look. One woman puts down her basket and rushes over to help. The woman with the basket drops to her knees, pulls them into a hug. *Tante Félicité* they whisper, breathing into the familiar scent. Auntie is late. Too late to move her now. But at least she's here.

Legs spread, blood seeping, they do not scream. They push, they grunt, they feel their heart tearing as their vagina does the same. A little boy bumps against the sickly linings of their body, dirties their knees, lands in *Tante Félicité's* outstretched hands. The baby shrieks as if knowing his mother will soon be repatriated. They grab the knife *Tante Félicité* used to separate the baby from their mother, pull the slippery body into their lap, and turn him flat on his stomach.

"No, you will not!" *Tante Félicité* screams, but she doesn't interfere. It's one of her *sage-femmes* rules. On the baby boy's back, they carve the letters *L I B R E*. It's a slow process, and he wails, how he wails. They persist, pressing lightly just enough for the blood to bubble and the letters to form clearly. They're thinking, in the slim chance that he lives, he won't ever

look to others to tell him what he is. And if he dies, at least his mother marked him before the world could.

The guards saunter out, grab the newborn and whisk him off into the jail. The tips of their well-worn boots dig into her hips. When the doors slam, and their baby disappears, they wonder with tears in their eyes if Philomène would have done something differently and where she is just then. The spring has gone from Tante Félicité's demeanor as she stands. But she takes them by the hand, anyway, pulls them up, and beckons for another man to help. They lean against the two bodies, into their curves, their protection, their rhythmic love as they walk with her. In a moment's time, they're swarmed by the community, who help feed them and comfort them with stories of how they'll get the child back. The love is so overwhelming, so foreign, that they curl away from it and into themselves. The people help patch them up and tell them it's not good down there where the baby came from. It's not good at all inside. It's something Tante Félicité cannot fix.

When Niya comes to, she hears wailing and recognizes it as her own.

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Marcus had been the one to find her that day. He told her he had come home to the front door sitting ajar and immediately hopped into his car and searched for her. Found her in an ally, lying prostrate beneath a large mural of a brown woman's face, eyes staring at the sky, the word ICE-stories sprayed in green across her forehead. On her left cheek, the tiny faces of children break from iron bars. On the right, the names of several imprisoned MOVE mothers and pictures of children killed in 1985 coalesce. The bones had led her here and then had knocked her out.

And this time, Niya didn't bounce back as readily as she had before.

Niya is seated on her couch trying to focus on the shapes Lianne's mouth is making as she screams at Marcus.

"This has been happening for over two months, and *now* you tell me? You're shit, Marcus, you know that? But of course, you know that." Marcus spits obscenities back.

Feverish, Niya slips, despite it all, into a sleep that seems to last for days. When she wakes, Marcus is gone, but Lianne is still there, sitting crossed legged in front of her, reading aloud Niya's favorite book, *Temple of My Familiar*. As the birthing fever of the girl in her vision begins to wear off in Niya's own body, she starts to recount in brutal detail every vision she can recall as Lianne sits stoically and listens. Lianne blinks at the right times, nods in the right places, and holds true to the calm disposition she has been known to master when she wants to. But she doesn't speak.

“I never know what I’ll see, Liz. I’m always afraid it’ll be her death. It feels like punishment, sometimes.” Niya doesn’t even think it matters if Liz believes her. She just needs her to be here.

Liz draws her knees to her chest and sighs. Whatever she’s about to say, Niya knows she isn’t going to like it. “Ni. I’ve been listening to you for hours now. And it seems to me that these talking bones, they’re not leaving you with scars you didn’t already have. They’re bringing them back to the light so you can deal with them properly.” Her words are careful, measured, slow. “In my line of work, I’ve learned that our bodies can carry memories that don’t necessarily correspond to events in our lifetimes. I’m not ruling that out. But the burn on your neck? That’s not new. You told me what happened back in college.”

The memory is suddenly there; that day Niya’s grandmother tried to perm her hair, but instead pulled clumps of it out and left a scar on her neck. Niya was so angry that she went for days without speaking to her, never suspecting that Nana would be the victim of a gunshot wound her ex-husband claims he did not mean to fire. “Karolyn zyé Kokli” her mother had whispered in Niya’s ear at the funeral, conjuring the image of the Martinican carnival figure. It had given Niya terrible nightmares for almost a year of carrying the man who invaded her in her backyard on her back until she suffocated to death.

“How did I forget?”

“You’ve always been the queen of disassociation, love.”

Niya pivots quickly from the memory. “Are you saying that what I’m seeing isn’t real? I had blood dripping out of my finger, Liz! And *nothing happened*. Taj saw it!”

“No, I’m not. To the contrary, I think ancestral memory in its multi-faceted forms is very real. Nor am I saying that the... the girl, the little girl, wasn’t burned on the neck or pricked on the finger or that your body didn’t react when you experienced these things happen to her. I’m *saying* that these kinds of markings are negligible. They’re common.”

“Not following.”

“You had an entire skeleton in front of you in French Guiana, Ni. *You* picked the fragments that held *for you* buried memories you’re too stubborn to unearth. That’s how I’m seeing this.”

“But how would you explain to me knowing where they were?”

“I’m not trying to explain everything. I’m just pointing out one obvious thing / see.”

“So I’m insane.”

“It’s insane that we aren’t all insane, Niya.”

Niya’s thoughts take her back to the pain the girl experienced in her womb, then wrinkles her eyebrows at Liz.

“So... wait...,” Niya glances down, embarrassed for a moment. “The itching she often leaves me with down there. The contaminated womb.” Niya looks up again at Liz’s probing eyes, then straightens.

“Marcus.”

Niya suddenly remembers something intentionally forgotten. A conversation with her doctor not too long ago, so brief (for she hung up as quickly as she had answered the call) that she had convinced herself it didn’t happen. That staccato voice on the other end of the line had explained to her how she had inherited from some sexual partner an STD that had gone untreated long enough for her womb to have suffered irreparably.

What will she do? Lisanne wants to know.

Niya suddenly knows exactly what she’ll do. She’s thinking of the girl dancing in the darkness of her claustrophobic cell to desires hidden deep down in the gut. Niya waits three days for Marcus to leave on his business trip to Atlanta. He’s been very gentle lately after his run-in with Lisanne, doting even. She goes along with it until he’s gone, then moves as if in a psychic dance. She’s *loose* on the inside like her mother would disapprove of, for once unconcerned about pulling blinds to keep intruding eyes from seeing the brokenness, *loose* like the hands of the girl digging into the clay-like soil of her gardens, hands moving *wild, happy, free*. She screams and laughs. She cries and dances. She pulls out every article Marcus owns: his law books, shoes, food and bowties. She buys boxes, throws around rolls of packing tape, and ships it all to his mother’s house.

When Marcus returns, Niya’s certain the neighbors will feel the tremors from the fighting. If they do, they keep their blinds shut as they gossip. It lasts a week. *Your fault for giving it to me*, Niya yells, *my fault for staying*. When Marcus strikes her, she points to the door. *Get out*. And when he’s gone, she moves her Dieffenbachia plant to the bedroom where his dresser had been, then calls the lock company. When she’s left in the silent aftermath, sizing up the storm that’s ravaged her home, it hits her. The bones haven’t spoken for weeks now.

Must be that she’s doing something right.

The thought lasts all of five thrilling minutes. When she goes to gather the bones from where she hid them last in her pink toolkit behind the organ, she realizes that they are gone.

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The email arrives hours later.

*The red devil doesn’t always wear a dress.*

There is no subject heading, no signature. The address is foreign, but Marcus’ prints are all over this semantic weapon. Years ago, when the idea of a stable future was tenable and exciting, they had promised only Stevie songs at their wedding and only Denzel movies for the

honeymoon. Niya thinks about what was at stake for Daphne Monet, if ever her secret were exposed. This heightened paranoia is precisely what Marcus had intended.

In all of the untangling of the past few days, amidst the fear and sadness, she had felt a sense of freedom, too. This is now gone. She sees clearly the memorial procession that will follow. Her professional procession will be loud, made for the world to see. There would be a lawsuit, and the research that had begun at the gravesite would slow. When she thinks about the many ways her life will be severed, the French and their guillotines come to mind.

Niya moves her medication from her purse to her pocket.

It's light outside on the day of reckoning. Niya pulls into her driveway and walks past a package on her front stoop. She's too weary to reach for it. Every day, she wakes up with a migraine, staring at the chipping ceiling paint, thinking *today is the day*. The subpoena, an article in the news, something would happen. But there's nothing but endless waiting. She wonders how long the girl from the bones had been waiting for her. She misses the maddening touch of her body, the familiarity of her troubled psyche.

Niya pours herself six shots of *1800*, arranges them in a neat line on her countertop, then stares at the twinkling daggers of sunset. She feels a quick movement in her blood, a whistle? The familiar melody.

*Enter this intelligence with me.*

Her leap into the girl's world and then back again is so quick that Niya doesn't have time to analyze it. The bones speak:

*Time is cyclical like blood can be.*

*You either fall in tow, generations on repeat*

*or you break away, fugitive-free.*

The monologue has Niya thinking of her mother's cervical cancer, her grandmother's death, and her great great great-grandmother's shadowed life, their wombs morphing, caving in on them.

The girl is dying; *they* are dying, an entire planet she is, choking slumped over among the muddy roots of the moutouchi-marécage. They chose this tree because it cradles them like they're back home. In the distance, the air shatters every few seconds with the sounds of gunshots and shouts. Something is happening back at the prison. But no matter, here they are, breaking free. In their sudden recollection, they are very small, playing with brothers and sisters in the saliva of the seaweed-littered sand. The memory of laughter helps their body settle.

They've gathered the milky sap of several *canne-à-gratter*. They've boiled its crushed green and white leaves, added a little sweetener they begged their nighttime companion to provide, mixed it with water and drank three jars full. Their throat swells as the Dumb Cane poison swallows their life. A native Palikuyene woman on the outskirts of the prison once told

them: *Transitions are multiple. And they are frequent. If a plant takes the body away, the spirit might then take on the plant's properties, and stay.*

When Niya comes to, she heads straight to the door. Outside, she sees him on the corner, leaning against the hood of his car. He's pretending to engage their neighbor, Paul, but Niya can feel his attention on the house. He turns and nods her way before revving up the car and driving off. He's written a note on the package:

*Bury these. And let's leave the past where it lies.*

It's not an apology, maybe not even a truce. But it *is* an opening. An opening she has not had, or felt, in a very long time. Maybe not even in this lifetime.

Niya hears the whistle of the bones start up for a brief moment. But then, for the first time, they settle down into a quiet whisper that speaks of a life hidden in the unknown, spreading out before Niya like a blank canvas.

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Standing next to Nana's grave, Niya clutches the vase. Lisanne is beside her. She'd come through for Niya by finding an anonymous "friend" to cremate the bones off-record. They watch the ashes spill into the breeze.

Marcus was wrong. These bones never wanted to be buried.

Niya closes her eyes. She feels a tingling sensation in her fingertips, the broken call of a dying whistle like the flutter of a colibri's wings. In this sensation, she feels scars. But she also feels the birth of a kind of freedom. She folds into this feeling and lets the bones speak if just one last time.

Knowing that a houseplant is waiting for her, blooming.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> My piece creatively engages with Brazilian scholar Denise Ferreira da Silva's critique of one of her three pillars of 'Western Man', the pillar she calls "sequentiality." According to da Silva, sequentiality is a core feature of Enlightenment humanism, inspired and sustained by Newtonian and Einsteinian thought, in which the 'human' we have come to know operates within a determined spatial and temporal frame. Within this continuum, 'Man' can only access what da Silva considers to be a very limited and linear sensory perception of his world. To violate this frame would mean to radically alter and expand this early eighteenth-century script of human *being* determined by conditions of Western spacetime that only tell part of the story. There is a temporal disruption da Silva yearns for in her critique of sequentiality, a disruption she argues can be found in various traditions and thought processes of native and non-white cultures. My piece seeks to explore how specific iterations of Black time, and Black memory in particular, can serve to disarticulate da Silva's notion of sequentiality by offering alternatives to the ways we think, interact with, breathe alongside, remember, and relate to the past and the past's unacknowledged archives. The piece performs a concept I introduce in my PhD dissertation, in dialogue with da Silva's critique of sequentiality, called "Neurotic Memory," a concept that evokes the tricky,



## Notes

tangible entanglement of past and present and the very real traumatic unnamed afterlives of our current brand of humanism.

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