

RENÉ DEPESTRE

SEVEN PILLARS OF INNOCENCE

TRANSLATED BY COLIN DAYAN

ODE TO MAKANDAL

Ayizan

By power of Ayizan Poumgoué negress-Fréda-Dahomey
Negress-cisa-flower-oodoo by power of my laurels
I bring Makandal¹ back from the bottom of the sea
I make him climb right up in my head
Now he's with us the first in his green progeny
The first poison the first tidal wave
The Black taking more after tree than man
Taking more after lion than royal palm-tree
The first maroon² of his people the first male
To make a sea-use of his seed
Makandal the one-armed with his only arm marring the Whites' power
Ruining their drinking wells with great draughts of violent poison
Marring their sugar cane fields with great strokes of fire
Ruining their religion with great strokes of Voodoo
Makandal among the Blacks of his time
The first volcano to ally himself with
All that conspires against the white colonist
Makandal the all-powerful fire
The first to blow on our fire-brands of hate
The first one to harbor the plots of the storm And the sea's great health
And the poison-will unfolding its neckerchief of farewells in the white man's veins
Splendid Black the first miraculously to plunge white skin into a bath of living leaves!
The first to tan the Whites' insolence!
Among all the men of his race fraternally the first to bleach white pride till its last sob
Now he's again the older brother the first wild beast
The animator of our claws the free Black
Who opens for the first time the great white book of our accounts

Makandal half-tree half-tiger half-torrent
Descending for the first time with virile lava-step the slope of négritude
The firedamp-nigger the poison-nigger
The earthquake-nigger the flail-nigger
The nigger-H-Bomb-announcer
The nigger-poisonous-root in the fierce teeth of the white civiliser
Now he's with us the seed-bearer
The sower of one hundred burning plantations
The sower of entire families suddenly snared by poison's great loving arms
In the jar of Ayizan now he is with us³
In the deep water his eyes smile at our lamps
And his only man-hand shows us from afar
Victory shooting forth from the depths of our innocence!

ODE TO TOUSSAINT LOUVERTURE

Aida Wèdo

I offer you the star of Toussaint on a plate of gold
He is the star-negro of the open sea with a tree-patience in his red globules
He is the ancestor of everything on this earth that walks towards springtime
Look at him on his horse still galloping towards the light
One day the sea broke at his feet and told him:
 “My Toussaint from now on you will see by my eyes
You will hear by my ears
And by the strength of my winds you will emerge from yourself
To give your country all the sun that there is in you.”
So he appeared in the middle of his slave-people
Bearer in his old body of a new beauty
Toussaint arrived as a piercing cry in a house asleep
As the first bells of recovery in a blood about to die
He arrived with chlorophyll-secrets in his head
And those of thunder in each of his steps
One sees him climbing day and night
The great trees of Black suffering
Where he lays down the fresh eggs of revolt
Sometimes his walk is a tortoise carrying on his back an olive branch
Sometimes it's a torrent rolling barrels of powder
And over his passage black arms are starving branches
And suddenly hope shines forth
Human sap rises on fire
From the bodies' depths scars learn
That hands with whip are mortal
That nigger-anger can have giant lungs
Wild-beast pulsations from his wrist

Gestures cyclone-teeming
And germinations as tall as man
Crushing all man's scandals

*"In felling me, you threw down in Santo-Domingo only the trunk of the tree of Black Freedom; it will shoot up again by the roots, because they are deep and numerous!"*⁴

After these words of farewell to his island
General Toussaint spoke no more
He had followed all the sea's counsels
What does the snow matter now that fed on his old bones
What does his great sub-zero sadness matter
On his island far away the whip lost its wings
And for the first time freedom
For the Blacks' hunger
For the Blacks' thirst
For the Blacks' joy
Was planting fruit trees!

ODE TO DESSALINES

Erzili

It's up to me to tell of Dessalines
It's up to Erzili goddess of sweet waters
It's up to me to lift up this torrent of black flames
In the old days of my green leaves
Dessalines carried away my body in his current
One night on this island a night brand new
As was then my woman-blood
Dessalines hurled his running waters under my woman-sun
Dessalines hurled his horse over my woman-paths
Now, it's up to Erzili the black Venus
Fairy of love and beauty
It's up to me to thrust Dessalines toward your veins
It's up to me to parade his blood's most secret gems before your eyes
He arrived body covered with scars
Eyes red from stifling floods of tears under whip and insult
He was all bristly with claws
Like the sea on a stormy day
Rolling wave after wave
Its justice toward our slave-hands
And suddenly this was his voice:
"Stand up earth more mine than my suffering
Earth more mine than my foam stand up
And be an accusing geyser
Be a chopper of exotic heads
Be an incendiary people
Lift up your phosphorus sails
Towards the wood of their houses

We're through licking our wounds
Through digging the earth with our knees
Now is the moment to have a single rendezvous before our steps: fire
A single will: fire at the end of our arm's night!

Chop off their heads
Burn their houses

Make one pile of their hates
One big pile of their dogmas
Bring tar, pine-wood
Lamp-oil
And let all that's inflammable
Stop sleeping to guide our actions!

ODE TO ANTONIO MACEO

Caridad del Cobre

Negro burning to carry Cuba in his tide
High-sea negro, river negro
Negro of tenderness, negro of action
Platinum negro, green negro
Negro of peace, negro of revolt
It's up to me to acclaim the resins of his name
Now he awakens, the American woodcutter
Now he mounts an olive-green horse
And a great red cock and new waters
He mounts sugar and bright tobacco
And a crocodile no longer shivering on the map!

He goes forward with the man of seven lamps
He goes forward with the man of seven bells
Then man who has lived seven years under the water
The corn-man of the mountain: Fidel Castro!
Marti is with them and happier than ever
Toussaint and Bolivar, O'Higgins and Juarez
San Martin and Lincoln, John Brown and Peralte
Black heroes, white heroes and indian heroes
Of America here they are bearers of joy
Holding Cuba high and strong in their waves!

Now he's with us Antonio Maceo⁵
He's finally at home, in his own element
His sword is no longer hungry, his bones are no longer thirsty
Wherever he turns his head he sees a Cuba

Giving its black and mulatto sons
Sap to drink that rises with the Revolution
He sees his race without scorn or feet in irons
He sees the negro in bloom and the negro who is no longer
Ashamed of his blood accomplice with the sea
He sees a Cuba liberating for everyone
Dream and wisdom, sugar and beauty!

ODE TO CHARLEMAGNE PERALTE

Guédé Mazaka l'Orage

Once there was a shoreless Black
No one knew where his meteor began
Or where his Haitian root ended
When Haiti's heart opened itself up like a cross
And there was no longer azur in its words
When salt fled from its bread while screaming like a wounded child⁶
When Yankee law appeared on our shores
With its skull and crossbones
When there were no longer birds or butterflies on our hills
When there were no longer creole words
To say we are hungry or sleepy
Can't breathe or are unemployed
Words too havin g been kicked in the belly
Then we saw him coming straight from the sun
We could name the fire sparkling in his eyes
We knew that he was Charlemagne Peralte!⁷

He alone knew words still breathing
Words still holding themselves upright
Very straight grenades in hand
Words which could imitate the sea-wind
And carry away our days in their resounding currents!

O brothers kneaded in darkness
Back against the wall of suffering
Let's face our enemies
Let's welcome as brothers

The savage dogs howling in us
Let us gladly let their rage spill over into our veins
Let us carry hate in us as the ocean
Carries its fiercest fish
Instead of the heart let's have a red-hot iron
Already we no longer have hands only claws
We no longer have lips only preying beaks
We're covered with eagles' feathers
We can fly, creep, roar
Climbing the trees of revolt
Now we change into tigers Oh! look at
The miracle: we have striped skin
Splendid stripes
We are tiger-niggers
We are Yankee-eaters
Let's be crazy with rage and freedom
Let's make one single paw of our gods
To crush their cruel dogmas
Let's fight to our last
Haitian claw let's fight to the
Last blade of grass to
The last raindrop to
The last leaf of our forests
Let's fight to lose forever
This striped coat, these fangs and this hell
This wild beast's fury in us
Let's fight to the last grain of corn
As far as the borders of the ants and the stars!

ODE TO PATRICE LUMUMBA

Simbi

I am the ever young head of water
I am the dazzled belly of water
Who comes to refresh his face right from the source of my hands?
Which other royal palm-tree of our race will rest its thirst for Africa on my knees?
O Africa patient and good under my dew
Africa fighting from Algiers to the Cape
In this time of my nuptials with your revolt
In this time of living weapons in hand
It's Patrice Lumumba whom I plunge into the freshness of our green isles!

Look at him this tempest-cock of the Congo
All Africa's woes are painted on the walls of his soul: a fantastic tattoo of lies and atrocities
Patrice sought beauty for the
Congo's days and nights
He found all kinds of foreign kings
Pouring out in front of their doors
Diamond and copper Congos
Bauxite and uranium Congos
He found threatening numbers
Tiger-numbers panther-Exchanges
Stocks falling or rising accordingly as joy climbs or descends in the Congo's heart
He found the MINING-UNION-OF-UPPER-KATANGA
The fiercest African serpent!
Here he is his mouth opening like an abyss with his unleashed waters his greenish foam
He announces violent death
He is a savage, cruel, obscene god signing his crimes M.U.U.K.
He is a billionaire loa who nourishes himself only with metal sprinkled with black-man-

blood

All that cuts and poisons

All that dries up and kills the sweet chant of man

Is in the power of this great sorcerer of the West!

Patrice goes forward towards his giant lava

All the power of the Congo in his eyes

He goes forward with bare hands, pure heart

His childhood still shines in his words

But suddenly his innocence discovers

The-nigger-extortionist-and-seller-of-niggers

The-nigger-tonton-macoute-the-nigger-attached-to-the-foul-navel-of-the-West

The-nigger-little-hysterical-dog-in-the-salons-of-Europe-and-of-America

The-nigger-cowardice-peddler

The-nigger-struck-with-evil-Tschombé-fever!

It's already too late. Already the groveling species of niggers

Fervently sell stocks in each drop of lumumbian blood

Stocks in his bones, his glands, his gut

Stocks in his voice, his tender looks

And stocks in the green angels

Who were sometimes sobbing in his soul!

So Africa saw him dying

In the smoke of his combat A beacon-negro a star-negro A fruit-tree-negro

Whose foliage towered above

The sea's highest waves

And man's invincible tenderness!

ODE TO MALCOLM X

Grande Brigitte

Once there was a Harlem nigger
He hated liquor and cigarettes
He hated lies, stealing and Whites
His wisdom came from quicklime
His truth shone like a razor
Born to be meek and good he
Preached that hell was the white man
And one night he is all alone with his hatred
With his prophecies and his great sadness
He thinks maybe all Whites
Aren't wolves and snakes
And Malcolm X the Harlem-lamb weeps
Weeping, he walks his childhood streets
And walking still deeper into the past
His tears cross time and lands
They flow with the oldest rivers
They flow over the walls of Jerusalem
And mingle with the oldest legends
They circle Bible and Koran
Which become islands in the depth of his grief
The sun rises over Harlem and Malcolm
Still following where his tears lead him
Dresses, has a glass of milk
And goes out into the street to tell the world's story:
"I accuse the Whites of being sowers of hatred!"
And six bullets quickly fall upon his life...
He was Malcolm X a ray of blackness who
Hated tears, chains and hatred!

NOTES

1. Makandal is a legendary figure in Haitian history. A “marron” chieftan he is regarded as Louverture’s principal forerunner. He conceived a plot to exterminate the Whites and proclaim the independence of the black race. His “poison-plot” was the boldest attempt by the Blacks before the Revolution to throw off the yoke of slavery. “He had thousands of packets of poison distributed among the Negroes of the city, with instructions that on a given day they were to poison any food or beverage the Whites were likely to absorb. When the white population was in the throes of death he would descend from the mountains with his warriors and kill the survivors.” Ralph Korngold, *Citizen Touissant* (London, 1945), pp. 43-44. In March 1758 Makandal was captured and he died at the stake. It is said that he changed himself into a mosquito and flew away.

2. A “maroon” is a fugitive slave. In the days of slavery in Haiti, the “maroons” lived in inaccessible camps in the mountains and attacked lonely plantations, taking the slaves with them. This is known as “marronage” and entails not only escaping from the bonds of slavery, but also attacking and destroying white values and possessions, as an affirmation of this newly attained freedom.

Depestre has played on the words “marron” (runaway slave) and “marronnant” (the act of sabotaging). Thus I have tried to keep this repetition of sounds by translating “marron” as “maroon” and then “marronnant” as alternatively “marring” and “ruining.”

3. “The jar of Ayizan” refers to her “govi,” the container in which her spirit is stored.

4. General Severin, in charge of the prisoners, has testified that when Touissant boarded the frigate that was to take him to his exile at Fort de Joux, near the Swiss frontier, he uttered these prophetic words: “In overthrowing me they have only felled the tree of Negro liberty in St. Domingo. It will shoot up again, for it is deeply rooted and its roots are many.”

5. Antonio Maceo was a black Cuban patriot and general and fought for Cuban independence throughout the Ten Years’ War. Much of the time between 1878 and 1895 he spent in exile in the United States and Central America. After revolt again broke out in Cuba in February 1895, he returned there to assume command of all rebel forces. A daring leader, he won many skillful victories over larger Spanish forces.

6. In Haiti it is thought that there are wizards who have the power to take the life-force out of a

person, so that he exists as a “zombi,” a living corpse. He will remain like this as long as his diet contains no salt, for salt is the vital force of nourishment. Janheinz Jahn, *Muntu: An Outline of the New African Culture* (New York, 1961), p. 130.

7. Charlemagne Péralte, and irreconcilable “caco” chief, organized armed resistance against the American occupation, and by March 1918 the situation had become so serious that marines had to be sent to reinforce the gendarmerie. Charlemagne was killed in October, but his successor, Benoit Battraville, in a last desperate effort, actually penetrated the city of Port-au-Prince before dawn on January 15, 1920. The repulse of this attack virtually ended the revolt.

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