God, Hold the Sun

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Accessibility
God, Hold the Sun

by Naomi Fedna
Foreword

In my final semester at the Harvard Divinity School (HDS), I enrolled in Stephanie Paulsell’s course titled Contemplative Prayer. Early in the course, she alluded to a writer who was known for their rhythmic practice of meditation and prayer. This writer once said that writing is largely about the practice of returning. In meditation when the practitioner’s mind begins to wander, they simply and gently focus on their breath—the rising and lowering of their chest; or the flowing air through their nostrils and throat—and return their mind to quietness. Similarly, in writing, on somedays the writer might feel intimidated or uninspired by the blank page before them. However, they are to return to the page and continue with their practice. The writer can wander several times from the page. But, if they are to continue on as a practitioner, they must always return.

Throughout writing this thesis, I have wandered. I spent much of my time away thinking about writing and so little time actually doing it. In the fall, I wandered to New York and a secluded cabin in New Hampshire. In the winter, I found my way to Alabama and back home in Massachusetts where I was confronted by the blank pages and some of the filled ones that lacked luster. Eventually, I returned to the page. The more I returned, the more I believed that writing was just like praying.

I was not quite sure where my words would go, but I knew they would find a place to dwell. With each sentence, I had to have faith another would follow. And with each fragmented story, I knew wholeness would eventually come. So much of writing was believing that God was waiting for me behind the next punctuation and that he would love me even when I forgot a period or a question mark; that he would be gracious enough to show up in my grammatical inaccuracies and anemic paragraphs.
Editing was a redemption of sorts—an onerous but important process. Without it, my stories would be fraught with loquaciousness that was bereft of effervescence.

However, the unique aspect about actually praying is that one eventually says “amen”—an ancient word meaning “let it be so”. But as a writer, there is often a tendency to not ever let one’s writing be so; to never utter an amen. It is ridiculously easy to identify an area that can be improved or a phrasing that can be tweaked. But, as I said in the previous paragraph, I knew my writing would have a place to dwell and, as Psalm 91 says, “Whoever dwells in the shelter of the Most High, will rest in the presence of the Almighty...” So, eventually I let my written pieces rest.

I began writing this work when the world was restless for a plethora of reasons. In my stories, I explore the lives of individuals who are living in a world that feels full of insurmountable problems. I have employed fiction as my partner on this quest to illuminate how contemporary Christians engage with Biblical and ancient wisdom amid political violence, love and loss, and other forms of tragedy. This project is a collection of short stories of fiction. These stories press upon eschatological frameworks, offer new ways of imagining alternative realities and, in light of these matters, grapple with what it means to be human in our current global social order.

Throughout my experience at HDS, I have taken courses that have catapulted me into the center of the world’s tension. I enrolled in what feels like a myriad courses dedicated to the art weeping. I have studied issues of organized violence in Germany, the history of British imperialism in India, slavery in the American South, apocalyptic ecology and acute, microcosmic instances of sorrow. I have become an expert in none of these areas. Rather, I have become well-read in the brokenness of humanity. And, I realize that the fall that occurred millennia ago in the Garden of Eden, did not simply
result in humans having more of an aptitude for falsities, thievery and carnality. The fall meant that the global social order that was supposed to be a peaceful world crumbled into the darkest parts of the cosmos.

My stories are not meant to offer resolve to world catastrophes. The purpose of these stories is to help readers see where the triune God is amid the granularities of life. Where is God when wars breakout? Where is He in moments of loss? Does God walk with us in every instance (in this life and beyond)?

I came up with the title of my project (God, Hold the Sun) in 2019, after I attended a sermon given by Professor Ruth Okediji (from the Harvard Law School) where she addressed the topic of radical faith and trusting God to do the unprecedented on your behalf. She preached from Joshua 10 and recounted how Joshua led Israel into battle. During this battle, Joshua realized that there was only one way that he would be able to have victory in the battle: if God held the sun so he and his soldiers would be able to see. He asked God to do the impossible for him! As Okediji expressed, Joshua had never seen God do this! He never heard anyone pray such a prayer, yet he believed that God was not only willing, but able to hold the sun in the sky. Some of the characters of my stories need God to do the unprecedented for them. Other characters, are with God as he is doing the unprecedented.

When the writer of the book of Joshua wrote this story, he assumed that the Sun revolved around the Earth:

*Joshua said to the LORD in the presence of Israel: "O sun, stand still over Gibeon, O moon, over the Valley of Aijalon." So the sun stood still, and the moon stopped, till the nation avenged itself on its enemies, as it is written*
in the Book of Jashar. The sun stopped in the middle of the sky and delayed going down about a full day...(Joshua 10:12)

I believe that this story is true but not exactly factual. As science has it, the Earth orbits the Sun. But in the Biblical rendition of this story, the author understands this fact to be reversed. Either way, the profundity of the story is this: God will thwart time and interrupt astronomical systems for the sake of humanity. He will always do enough for us to see through the darkness.

In the New Testament, the Book of Revelation (chapter 21, verse 23) tells us that one day the sun will become obsolete, and God’s glory will take its place. The brilliance of his glory will burst into the crevices of the world’s brokenness. In this futuristic world, night will never fall, and darkness will have nowhere to roam.
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Lastly, this project is dedicated to my niece, Anaelle Azor, who awoke a new dimension of my love.
Pink

When the ambulance arrived at the emergency wing of Massachusetts General Hospital, the EMT hurriedly and vigorously swung open the double doors of the back of the truck. The rain of that August afternoon made it hard to see which of the EMTs were explaining the patient’s condition to the hospital’s medical team.

“I found her ID in her wallet. Her name is Ophelie Mondesire and she is a 72 year-old female, 5 feet 7 inches. She was hit by a bus on Tremont Street after deboarding. She’s in critical condition.”

The woman on the stretcher laid open mouthed. She adorned a monochromatic pink ensemble. Her short sleeve chiffon hot pink top and pleated baby pink floor-length skirt laid disheveled on her body. As Martine examined her, she wondered if Ophelie had even thought for a second that Mass General would be a stop on her day’s adventure.

“Does she have any family with her?”
“No. But, her phone is in her purse, so keep an ear out for a phone call. Maybe you can speak to whoever calls her next.”
“Ok! Thank you. We’ll take it from here.”

The hospital’s medical team transported Ophelie to the emergency room and then to the ICU. Martine, a palliative care resident, worked with a nurse to prepare Ophelie for the attending physician. When they disrobed her, Martine felt bad that she
had to cut off Ophelie’s pretty blouse with scissors in order to avoid furthering her injuries. They managed to keep Ophelie’s skirt intact as it had an elastic waist that made it easy to slide off her thighs and over her ankles.

Martine took the liberty of taking all of Ophelie’s belongings and putting them into a plastic bag. When she picked up Ophelie’s purse that the nurse must have placed on the chair in the left corner of the room, she felt it vibrating and rummaged through it to find Ophelie’s phone.

“Hello,” Martine picked up the phone in hopes it was a family member of her patient. The screen said it was Justine.

“Um, hello? Who’s this?” the voice on the other responded with an understandable suspicion.

“Hi, my name is Doctor Martine and I am currently caring for Ophelie at Mass General. I’m sorry to tell you but she was in an accident today. Are you by any chance related to her or know how I can get into contact with someone who is?”

“How is she? Yes, I can. I mean, I’m her daughter.” Justine was clearly in shock. “What happened to her? What accident did she get into? She doesn’t even drive.”

“She was hit by a bus this morning on Tremont Street and she’s in critical condition. If possible, it would be good for you to come to the hospital as soon as you can.”

Martine hated these kinds of conversations. They always made her feel so heartless and inappropriately forthright. She would have preferred to embrace her patients’ loved ones before she broke the news and offer them a cup of tea. When her grandfather had died suddenly when she was eleven, her mother made her drink *te asosi*
because it was good for *sezisman* (shock). It prevented those taken aback by the suddenness of death from dying themselves from a broken heart. But *te asosi* was not a part of her medical training.

When Ophelie arrived at the hospital, upon looking at her, Martine immediately knew that Ophelie would not be returning home that night. It made her want to weep. It wasn’t often that Martine felt such grief for her patients. But it was something about Ophelie’s monochromatic outfit that unsettled her.

That morning, Martine imagined, Ophelie must have combed through her closet in search of an outfit that would contradict the gray sky. The pleats on her skirt looked as if they had been ironed to sharpen the creases and corners of the pleats. The blouse, given its delicate fabric, must have been steamed so as to not damage its quality. Ophelie’s nails were painted a metallic gold and there was no ring on her left finger. Her toes were pedicured with a clear lacquer.

When the attending doctor walked into the room, Martine updated her with concision as she examined Ophelie’s body. “The patient is a 72 year old female, she is experiencing internal bleeding and has a collapsed lung. Her medical records indicate that she has a history of high blood pressure and underwent a hysterectomy in 2011. She has a daughter who is currently on her way to the hospital.”

“We should put her on a ventilator and have her daughter make a final decision as to how she wants to move forward.” The attending sighed. Martine wondered how many patients the attending had seen that day.

“Move forward.” Martine repeated silently to herself as the doctor walked out and then updated Ophelie’s medical chart.
Movement often became more pronounced when someone was dying. Her patients in the ICU “moved on”, “passed away” and “transitioned”. They were never said to stop breathing or their existence was never said to come to a halt. They proceeded beyond this place into another that no one ever bothered to identify.

Even though Martine had applied to medical school, squealed with glee when she got accepted to Emory University and lost sleep due to the excitement of her first day of class, she had her qualms with the medical field’s tendency to skirt around the fact that people die—everyday, actually. She worked in the ICU, so it was not a shock when her patients died. It was quite common that she would begin a shift with a patient in critical condition and by the end of the night, head home as the patient headed somewhere else. After about her second year as a resident, she stopped ducking into the nearest bathroom to muffle her cry when she lost a patient.

There was a tremendous amount of guilt in the beginning. After college, she worked on a national healthcare campaign that worked to improve the health insurance for unemployed Americans. Her job sent her on a twelve-city tour where she would meet with individuals who were burdened with thousands of dollars in medical debt. She remembered knocking on a door of small house in a rural town in Alabama.

“Hello! Hi, my name is Martine and I’m here on behalf of Healing Nation. I spoke to Bernadine about a week ago and she said it would be OK for me to stop by and interview her about her experience within the medical system.” Martine wondered if she spoke too fast. A Bostonian, she often sped through her sentences and panted for air after speaking. The man at the door simply stared at her for a moment and yelled over his shoulder while keeping eye contact with Martine.
“Bernadine! Someone is here to see you! She says her name is Martin.”

“Martine,” Martine said as the man stepped to the right of the doorway and gestured for her to come into the house.

A woman who must have been Bernadine walked through the kitchen, into the living room with a cane and a limp. The cane juxtaposed the youthfulness of her face. She could not have been more than sixty. She wore a hot pink skirt and walked with a pronounced limp.

“Hi, you must be Ms. Bernadine. My name is Martine. It’s very nice to meet you and thank you, again, for welcoming me into your home to talk.”

“Hello, Martine. It’s sure nice to meet you. Please, please, have a seat.”

The two women spoke for hours. It was as if they had been old friends catching up on the woes of life and finding room to laugh and place a hand atop the other’s. Bernadine had developed type 2 diabetes seven years prior. She was prescribed insulin and expected to administer it to herself every day for the rest of her life. However, three years prior she was laid off at her job and lost her health insurance. Unable to find a reasonably priced insurer, she no longer had the means to purchase her insulin. Eventually this led to her blood glucose spiking and her pinky toe had to be amputated. “I know it’s just a toe. The smallest toe at that. But there’s something haunting about being mutilated because you’re poor.”
On her way back from Alabama to Boston, Martine decided to pursue medicine and advocate for people like Bernadine. She wanted to work within the healthcare system in hopes that she would possibly make a change on the inside. However, when she arrived on the inside, she realized that the quotidian life of a healthcare provider was not concerned about how the system was failing the poor. It was bombarded by the endless amount of patients coming through the hospital doors and the tedious paperwork at the end of a long day.

Now, as a resident physician, it frustrated her even more Martine every day that people weren’t simply dying because they were sick, they were dying because they were impoverished and there was no penicillin for that.

Ophelie’s daughter arrived to the ICU unit rushing past the clinicians’ counter and looking left and right for her mother’s room. She must have been weeping on her way to the hospital. What should have been the whites of her eyeball were red. The swelling of her eyes made her squint and appear as if she could not quite see. When Martine, sitting behind the desk in the center of the ICU ward realized that Ophelie’s daughter was unable to locate her mother’s room she approached her with a gentleness.

“Excuse me, are you looking for Ms. Mondesire?” Martine said.

“Yes, yes, I am. I’m her daughter.”

“She’s in room 51B.” Martine pointed to the room in the further corner of the unit as she walked in the direction of her pointing. Realizing that it would be polite to escort the sorrow-stricken daughter, she walked with her to 51B.
Ophelie’s daughter eyes welled with tears upon seeing her sedated mother. She knew. Martine knew she knew that this would be the last moments she would ever see her mother alive and because of this Martine was both glad and saddened that she had the honor of escorting her to say goodbye to her beloved.

“Have you spoken to the doctor?” Martine broke the silence.

“Yes. She told me I should say my goodbyes.”

“I really am sorry for your loss. Please let me and the staff know how we can make this experience any easier for you.” Martine paused, “Well, I’ll leave you two alone.”

“Thank you.” She bunched her lips together attempting a smile and Martine left the mother and daughter together. One wept and the other slept and slipped away somewhere beyond what any of us can see.

Martine parted for her lunch break and decided to eat her packed lunch by the Charles River and watch the ducks land atop of the water and float by. For some reason, the interaction with Ophelie and her daughter sparked a grief that sat in the pit of her belly like a rock. She was glad she made a goat stew the night before. The broth wouldn’t weigh her stomach down even more and it would probably give her an extra burst of energy to make it through the rest of her twelve-hour shift.

Ophelie’s pink pleated skirt must have caught the wind of the bus before Ophelie felt the brunt of its impact. Martine tightly squeezed her eyes together, attempting to remove the thought of the fear that must have plastered Ophelie’s face when she realized she was about to die. Was she afraid of the pain? Or, was she afraid of dying? Or, both? Martine had patients in the past who had told her they were not afraid to die and did not
want the medical team to go to extenuating measures in order to save their lives. They were quite alright with the fact that their life was meant to end. They were more so afraid of the pain that came with intubations, amputations, operations and all the other -ations. On the other hand, many of her patients did not want to even entertain the thought that dying was a grim potential reality of their circumstance. They would endure excruciating pain if that meant that the next day’s sun would expect them to rise with it. Getting to another day was everything to them.

But Ophelie. Martine silently watched the ducks elegantly land atop the water. Poor Ophelie in her monochromatic ensemble on the way to God knows where to do God knows what. God knows, as Martine’s mother would say. God knows why we die and when we die. But why don’t we get to know why we die? We’re the ones doing all the dying. It’s our business and we are the ones who toil to stop the dying, who have to weep over the dead and organize ceremonies to mourn them. If God knows, why won’t he tell us why? Why take Ophelie on a day when she was dressed in pink as if she was on her way to a party or a dainty brunch? What about her daughter, friends and neighbors who were expecting her to arrive home this evening? She sighed at all the questions she knew would go unanswered.

As Martine sat by the river, she noticed sailboats heading north, in the direction of the bridge. Their sails caught the wind and traveled gently upon the ripples of the water. She remembered the morning dew that layered the blades of grass in her backyard that morning. The sun would singe the moisture within minutes of it suspending in the sky. Ophelie, she thought, was like the morning dew. There in the morning and gone by midday. Like the dew, Ophelie returned to where she came from—
a place Martine could not see but knew that it surrounded and dwelt in the atmosphere around her.
Though the knock on the door was unexpected, Ophelie felt as though her visitor arrived on time. She placed the cutting blade on the marble and the golden skinned, diced mango into the glass bowl that sat at the end of the counter. “I’ll be there in a moment,” she called over her shoulder.

Walking down the corridor, she passed the framed photos of people she once knew yet didn’t. At times she would stare endlessly at the faces of selected individuals in the photos. Before she had begun cutting the mango, she found a particular picture curious. It was a photo of her with a young woman with chocolate cherry colored hair and black irises.

The woman’s arms wrapped around Ophelie’s shoulders as Ophelie’s head rested on her hand and her face adorned a gentle yet sincere grin. The chocolate cherry woman’s laughter seemingly echoed through Ophelie as she gazed at the photo. Her laugh, she imagined, must have been lovely. Only thing that would make sense as to why that photo hang on the wall. But what about the other photos? There were photos of Ophelie as a girl with a small boy and another girl where none of them smiled. They adorned scalloped socks and patent leather loafers. Ophelie could not recall who they were. She found this unfamiliarity with the people in the photos quite strange.

When she first moved into the house, she was pleased to find the house fully furnished. But there were stylistic elements of the architectural and interior design that she found peculiar. For example: the sun room that angled towards the lake in the backyard where the flamingos would float. Yet, this place did not seem to have a sun. There was no light hovering in the sky and still there was never any darkness nor was
there an equivalent to nighttime. It was also peculiar how she never grew tired yet there were bedrooms and pillows galore. The strangeness of the house was oddly endearing.

As she was cutting the mangoes she had started contemplating her life. For some reason, she realized she had trouble recalling anything prior to the house. The more she tried to remember her childhood, mid-twenties and even what she ate for breakfast, she realized that she couldn’t remember. She maintained a new found feeling of simply knowing. Ophelie wondered if she was dead. But she didn’t feel dead. Dead people don’t eat mangoes or stare at pictures. As she contemplated her existence, that’s when someone knocked on the door.

The closer she got to the door, the more nervous she grew: what do you even say to someone like that? What do you even do when you meet him? Bow? Hug him? Kiss his hand? She decided she was going to kiss his hand and once she decided to do that, a lump in her throat grew and threatened to pierce through her eyes as tears. She thought about his bronze skin beneath her lips and then on her cheek. For a moment, she felt as though her legs were not going to be able to hold her anymore.

She paused in the hallway, attempting to gather herself. Unable to do so, she sat on the wooden floor that looked as if it had been worn for decades—her aesthetic preference. “One moment!” she called again.

The front door gently swung open and he walked through the door. He lowered himself to the floor next to her and did not attempt to console her. Ophelie’s silent tear grew into a howl and then a wild laughter and then back into a howl. She had yet to look at him and she reached for his knee, rubbed it and began to rock herself back and forth, mustering up the courage to take a glance. When she turned to look at him, she was shocked to see him weeping. Silent tears.
After about an hour of laughing and howling, they embraced and exchanged stern kisses on the cheek. Slowly, they stood up and walked to the living room. Ophelie pulled a chair from the half circle table that stood beneath the window that faced the veranda and placed it in the middle of the living room. She gestured to him to sit.

In the cupboard in the kitchen, Ophelie grabbed a bottle of castor oil and returned with it to the living room. She stood behind him and passed her hands through his head to feel his hair’s thickness and coarseness. Its woolness made it perfect for plating. She parted it and lined each part with the oil: first pouring the oil onto her fingertips and then rubbing her fingers from the crown of his head to the nape of his neck. She braided his hair in seven cornrows and when she finished each braid, she twirled the ends with her fingertips.

Upon completion, she smoothed down his braids with her hands and then squeezed his shoulders to let him know she was finished. He got up and walked to the door.

“Thank you, Ophelie.” He turned as to not get a good look at her but for her to get a good look at him.

“Anything for you. You’re my oldest friend.” She replied.

They embraced once more and he left. While he walked away down the dirt road that glimmered with gold-ness, she still felt his nearness. She felt the chocolate cherry girl, the two children who she stood with in the photo. She felt everything, everything and every ounce of herself and beyond herself into the depths of the ones whom she knew and would soon come to know. Her hands tingled with the sensation of his hair
between her fingers. The sensation of their laughter and joyous tears remained prominent. He left but there was no movement, he was still with her and she felt herself go with him by the bayou that was hidden behind the forest of trees whose leaves danced above the water and sang a whispered hallelujah.
Talia

The soot-colored goats that slept outside of Talia’s window religiously rose at dusk. Their bleating mimicked a baby’s wail and during her first few days on the small island, she had mistaken the goats’ cry with a newborn baby who she thought lived in one of the rooms on site. It wasn’t until one day when she rose before the bleating did Talia realize that there were goats in the front yard. That day, she had woken up from a disturbing dream where in it her maternal grandfather wept at a television that blared images of his home island burning. His eyes reflected the fire and when he turned to her, a silent tear slid down his face. She woke up suddenly and decided that she would not dare go back to sleep in fear of reentering that dream.

Today, Talia rose with the goats. She used the bucket and the hard water from the bathroom faucet to quickly bathe, washing all of the “important parts”. When she walked out of her room, onto the balcony and down the veranda, there was an assortment of fruits and berries waiting for her from Maggie: custard apples, papayas, soursop and avocados.

Talia sat in the chair that gave her a good view of the rice paddy across the stony road that was said to be owned by a Taiwanese company. She and the rest of the researchers had been on the island for over two weeks, and they never saw anyone come to or from the concrete house that looked plastered onto the ground about 50 feet in front of the paddy. Every morning and once before the sunset, she would sit on the veranda and gaze out at the Taiwanese’s land, waiting for someone to make an appearance.
“Bonjour, Tali!” Maggie greeted her with a boisterous voice that contradicted her facial expression. Maggie was thirty-one years old and the wife of the owner of the land where Talia and the other researchers stayed. Her skin was a creamy brown with auburn undertones.

“Bonjour, Maggie. Kijan ou ye jodi a?”

“Ou konnen. Mwen la, cherie.”

Talia was the only Haitian in her research group, so the family that owned the property and their maids took a liking to her more quickly than they did to the other researchers who were all blan. The research team had arrived in Haiti two weeks prior to conduct a permaculture project within a small town called Bellabe. Talia, a graduate student studying ecology and epigenetics, was the research assistant and interpreter for the team. Most of her days were spent bridging conversations between the local community and the research groups. Most days she could not tell which group she belonged to.

On Tuesdays and Thursdays, Talia would visit the gated plot next door where the researchers and local farmers studied the soil and prepared it for tilling. One Thursday, as she sat on the skirts of the tilled land, under a tree that offered seven feet of shade, a young man named Sammy who was a budding leader in the community told Talia that he wanted her to strictly speak English to him so he could improve his English-speaking skills.

“I learn how to speak English when I used to live in Port-au-Prince. Yon mesye l’eglise—a missionary man. He taught me how to speak it. But it’s not very good. I want to practice more.”
“E mwen mem? What if I want you to help me practice my Creole? Then what?” The two new friends laughed as they watched a goat and her kid chew the tarp that laid atop a pile of stones.

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At noon, Grun calls us in to surrender our summer afternoon capering. In the midst of us running through the grass, our bellowing laughs and dancing and dancing, my grandmother walks through the kitchen and out the backdoor to call us in. She stands on the porch that stretches over our backyard. A prophetess in her pink blouse and matching pleated skirt, looking down upon us. She calls us by our names: Talia (tahl-ya), Pehpet, Jobert.

“Let’s go! Let’s go! Grun is calling us!” my brother who we call Pehpet says.

We lay down our amateur bird traps, place the tiny ants that we had rested on our fingertips back onto the sidewalk’s sand and reschedule our mingling with the sunflowers and growing tomatoes to a later time. It is mid-July and mid-day, Grun calls us in to pause and meditate on the breath sitting in our lungs; to feel the breath in our bellies and chests, recognize it as a gift that was sent down to us and to send it back up as a sacrifice of thanksgiving. She tells us that we are here—above ground—and for that, we should be grateful.

We race each other. I, the youngest of our trio, make it to the stairs of the porch last. Papa Klebe is still alive so I can’t be any older than ten. I’m about eight years old which means my brother and cousin (Jobert) are thirteen.
The sunflowers that lean against the fence with their yellow petals stretched towards the heavens have been singing hallelujah all morning and Grun wants us to come in to be like the sunflowers. So, we follow her through the backdoor, through the kitchen, through the dining room and into her bedroom.

When she had first moved in with us from Haiti, she, my older sister and I shared one full-sized bed in this room. I would sleep in the middle: my grandmother’s breath on one side and when I flipped onto my other side, my sister’s breath. I was seven when my parents bought me my own twin-sized bed that my mother covered in Black Barbie sheets. Though this meant less space in our bedroom, I relished in the freedom to flail my legs without complaints from my elders.

We do this on most days throughout the summer. Grun, our prophetess and priestess, presenting the Divine before us and us before Him, makes it her duty to invite us to enter the sacred cosmos with her. In her room, she welcomes in Spirit and Kingdom as our minds dwell on the activities of tomatoes, ants and sunflowers. She knows this and gently reminds us that at 12:30 we can resume our fraternizing with summertime. Grun never grows upset nor frustrated with our levity.

Jobert, Pehpet, Grun and I kneel before her bed—Grun and I one side, my brother and cousin on the other. Grun leads us in hymns and the recitation of scripture. We are to recite verses we memorized.

Jobert goes first: “John 11 verse 35: Jesus wept.”

Pehpet elbows him in the rib, “That’s not fair! That’s the one I was gonna say!”
They both “memorized” the shortest passage in the entire Bible and giggle at their cleverness. Grun calms their quarreling and tells Pehpet it’s okay for him to recite the same passage.

“Jesus wept,” he grumbles.

It’s my turn and I’ve memorized Psalm 117 from my royal blue Bible: “Praise the Lord all ye nations, praise Him...”

Grun begins prayer “Gloire au pere, gloire au fis, gloire au saint esprit de Dieu...”

We bow our heads and unknowingly, for only a few moments, reside with her in a realm supernatural. She puts my brother, cousin and I before a throne very much unknown to and misunderstood by our nascency. If her requests are met, we are destined to live long, be blessed and be wise. As she amens, the three of us lift our heads, anticipating her benediction—our queue to run back to the yard.

The tomatoes (green with the gentleness of red that hints at an approaching ripening) and sunflowers (kissing the fence and their yellow beaming songs to the sky) are there waiting for us when we return to summer’s outside. “Tag! You’re it!” I tag my brother who humors me by letting me run ahead of him and makes it seem as though I am too fast for him to make me “it”.

Our game of tag turns into a throwing of a football and then the building of a bird trap. As the sun makes its way down, our spirits fall in line. We’ve grown tired and need to rest for tomorrow we have made plans with the tree that sprouts ruby leaves. The three of us talk about the possibility of constructing a tree house in the morning. We go up the back porch stairs, through the kitchen, passed the dining room and down the
stairs to our basement. The day concludes with cartoons and our grandmother singing her evening Haitian hymns in the background.

I was raised to believe that the sunflowers would always be there waiting for me when I came back out. But, in my twenties when I would come back home to visit from college, I would walk through the dining room, through the kitchen and onto the backdoor and look down upon dry patches of grass. I’d look around to find no sunflowers. The fence had no one kissing it. The songs of hallelujah sung by glowing petals had stopped. So, as my grandmother advised, for quite some time I did as the sunflowers.

***

Talia and Sammy traced the water canal’s path as they walked into the heart of Bellabe. It was an early Wednesday morning, and they were headed to Oxan’s house, the community’s midwife. As they walked to Oxan’s they waved at the elderly who perched in front of their quaint houses.

“Bonjour! Kouman w ye?!?” Talia would acknowledge the old Haitians who would sit in front of their concrete houses that were painted in bright pinks, aquas, yellows and blues.

“Bonjour, Talia!” They would call back, following Talia and Sammy with their eyes as they walked further and further down the road.

Talia had never formerly introduced herself to a lot of the community members, yet many of them knew her by name. In a community so small, it was not surprising how quickly information transmitted. Some had chickens in their front yard that cocked their
necks around as their chicks followed them through the front yards. Others had small pantless children who stood in the doorway and squealed when Talia waved. As the two walked, a cow stopped in the middle of the road with a swarm of flies hovering over it. Soon after, a man with a leather whip nudged it along towards a muddy ground.

“Talia,” Sammy said, interrupting the warm silence the hovered around them.

“Sammy,” Talia said mocking him. He chuckled.

“Do you feel more comfortable speaking English or Creole?”

“English. Why do you ask?” Talia noticed Sammy smile when she offered her response.

“I can tell. You speak English so much faster than you speak Creole.”

“Well, I grew up in America so it’s normal for me to speak English better than I speak Creole.”

“Yeah, but you always say that you’re Haitian. You’re not.”

“Yes, I am. Both my parents were born in Haiti, I grew up speaking Creole, eating Haitian food and going to a Haitian church. I’m Haitian.”

“No, you’re not.” Plastered across Sammy’s face was a pompous smirk that exhibited his satisfaction in deciphering the enigma that he found Talia to be.

“I am Haitian, Sammy.” Talia tried to contain her frustration, but she felt the rage in her chest kindling and Sammy fueled the flame with every askance comment and the smug look he wore.

“Really, you are? What color is your passport? Mine is green. What color is yours?”

“It’s blue.”

“It’s blue, Talia. You’re not Haitian.”

***
By the time I was sixteen, I still slept in the same bed as Grun. Despite the fact that my siblings and cousins all went off to college and there was an empty bedroom that I could have all to myself, Grun insisted that I slept in the same room and bed as her. It is hard to admit, but I resented her for it.

I had waited most of my life to have my own room, change my clothes in private and style my hair without any commentary. My grandmother had other plans for me. Every time night fell, she would come find me and remind me that I was to go sleep with her that night.

It was off to me. Why couldn’t she sleep alone and let me do the same? I had asked her once if she was afraid of the dark? She laughed, said “no” and did not bother to satisfy my curiosity. In my mid-twenties, almost ten years after she died, my mother told me that Grun had had perre. She wasn’t afraid of the dark, turns out she was afraid of being afraid. As a teenager this never occurred to me as a possibility.

One night, I prepared to go to bed. As usual, I washed my faced in the bathroom with an acne cleanser that claimed to “eliminate blemishes” and make my skin look “fresh” and “radiant”. None of that came to pass until I overcame puberty.

My hair was relaxed at the time, so I wrapped as the Dominicans at the hair salon my mom took me to taught me to do. I brushed the front half of my hair forward to cover my face, then I brushed the sides of my hair to cover my ears and brushed the back of my hair down. Then, starting from the dangling hair, I firmly swiped the brush through my hair as to make every strand circle my head. When all my hair wrapped around my head, I tied it with a moushwa.

Grun’s room was right across from the bathroom. I got into bed next to her and quickly fell asleep.
At around two o’clock in the morning, I felt a gentle wobbling of the mattress. In the drunkenness of sleep, I thought nothing of it, it must have been my grandmother shifting to find a more comfortable position. The wobbling continued. Then I felt Grun’s arm and shoulder stiffly flail my back. I turned around and saw her body rocking back and forth.

“Grun?” I said curiously. She didn’t answer so I quickly jumped from the bed and ran to the light switch to get a good look at her face. Her face was contorted, and her wide eyes look beyond on me when I tried to make eye contact with her.

“Mommy! Mommy!” I ran to my parents’ room down the short hall. “Call 911! Something is wrong with Grun!”

In the morning, Grun used to sing a Haitian hymn: Leve nam mwen ak soley la… I used to think she was pleading God to wake her soul with the morning sun. But now I understand that she was really commanding her soul to rise with God’s sun. At night she would sing serem pi pre ou tou pre ke ou. She would look for and find God’s bosom and tell him that he is both her treasure and her savior.

***

Talia and Sammy sat together, drinking Prestige beer on the sand of Port-Salut beach as the rest of the research team sat a few feet behind them at a long wooden table painted in a neon orange. After several weeks of collaborating with the community to tend the land to cultivate a permaculture garden and develop agricultural practices, both the researchers and the community members drove two hours south of Bellab to Port-
Salut. They ate *lanbi boukanen*, grilled red snapper and fried plantains with pikliz on top.

“Do you plan on coming back?” Sammy looked at Talia, squinting as the rays of the sun shone in his eyes.

“I want to, but I don’t know.” As much as Talia wanted to promise that she would come back, she gave an honest answer. She was in her final semester of graduate school and once she graduated, she would no longer be a part of the research team. Her role was contracted and ended soon. “I really do.”

“Why don’t you know?” Sammy could tell she was withholding information.

“Because...” Talia paused to watch a curvy woman with a large, clear growler bottle filled with a thick, green syrupy liquor walk by. “Because I wouldn’t know how to come back here on my own. My aunt and uncle live in the capital and when I visit them, they don’t let me leave the house because the city has too many ‘zenglandou’.”

“Then why don’t you come to the *sud*?”

“Because Sammy. It’s not that easy. I really wish I could. I do. Coming here feels like coming home.”

“Then come home.”

“Sammy, if I came here, where I would I even find a place to live? Where would I work? If I get sick, where would I go?” She went on, “the only reason I can come here so often is because of my school. The professors and researchers can easily build connections here because they’re *blan*. I can’t just wake up one day and come here. I wish I could but that’s not the case.”

“Eskew renmen peyi a?”
“I do.” They sat in silence for a moment. The waves of the ocean frightened Talia and deterred her from going in for a swim.

“You know, I ask myself the same questions too.” Sammy said matter-of-factly.

“What do you mean?”

“Where am I going to live? Where can I get a job? When I get sick, is there somewhere for me to go?” Sammy stared at her, waiting for a response.

“Yeah,” that’s all she could bring herself to say, “so you understand.”

The woman with growler bottle made her way through the beachgoers, asking them if they wanted a taste of her green liquor. Some were tourists and others were Haitians from distant parts of the island who came to the popular beach to see the infinite ocean extend passed the horizon. Trying to make patrons out of beach-bums, she removed the cap from the bottle and gave her potential customers a whiff of the beverage, which caused many to hoot at the pungent scent of cinnamon and rum. A brave few drank some of the liquor and paid her diset goude for a small, seven-ounce cup of the syrupy drink.

When the woman noticed the table where the research team sat, she made her way towards them. She walked by Talia and Sammy, her feet sinking in the sand with every step.

“Bonjour! Bonjour!” the liquor lady said.

“Bonjour!” the white men from the research team reciprocated her jovial greetings with an emphasis on their “R”s.
She looked at the three obvious Haitians who sat next to the white men and asked them to translate for her, “Mande yo si yo vle goute yon ti...bwason.” She chuckled hauntingly and deeply.

One of the researchers, intrigued by the smell of the liquor, obliged to the woman’s offering. His coworkers questioned his ability to hold his liquor and joked about having to carry him back to the car.

The team spent the entire day on the beach drinking liquor, ordering fresh seafood from nearby vendors, exchanging jokes and showing pictures on their phones of their families. After Sammy and Talia joined the team for dinner, they walked towards the shore and watched the sunset turn the sky mauve and indigo.

“You leave tomorrow?” Sammy asked her.
“I do.”
“And you don’t know when you’re coming back?”
“I don’t.” Talia responded.
“I’ll miss you, sister.” Sammy stared into the horizon.
“I’ll miss you too, brother.”
Talia sat quietly and wrestled the frustration, anger, sadness and love—the waves of loves—that flowed through her belly, up her spine and flushed her face. He was her brother, and this island was her land. But would there ever be some way for her to live as if these two things were true?
“Tell them it’s never going to happen!” the drunken professor yelled in a slur.
Sammy asked Talia what the professor meant by that comment. She explained that when a black man and woman are friends, people tend to assume they are secretly in love.

“She’s my sister!” Sammy yelled back in his thick accent. They laughed.

Given that some of the team had grown drunk with liquor and many of the drivers had grown tired, the team decided to stay in a peach-colored hotel on the beach. Talia roomed with a PhD student who did not make fuss when Talia claimed the bed that was closest to the window that overlooked the beach. Talia quickly fell asleep to the sound of the crashing of the waves. That night, she dreamt of her grandfather again. He stood on the beach by the edge of the shore, facing the horizon. She walked down to meet him and when she arrived by his side, he took her hand without looking at her.

“Tali?” He said pleased to see her.

“Wi, Papa.” She responded

“Sa se peyim. Sa se peyiw.”

Suddenly, Talia’s grandmother stood on the other side of her singing, “Leve nanm mwen ak soley la...”

Talia gently opened her eyes, squinting at the rising sun outside of her window.
A Daughter’s Vignette

The mosquitoes show us no mercy. Why would they? There’s no cry of surrender from either of us; simply an exposition of our legs and upper backs that lean against the plastic green chairs on our porch in Randolph. When we first moved here, we were the only ones like us in the neighborhood. Now that they’ve left in droves, we see us in most of the faces that walk by our lawn.

You slap your ear, missing the mosquito completely and leaving a ringing sound in your drums. “We lived at the very bottom of a hill,” you say to me and the pine trees staring back at us in the darkness. “On days when it rained, all the trash that our neighbors had left outside would wash down to the front of our home.” I was never sure if you were reminiscent, resentful or nostalgic. All I knew was that you remembered deeply: the way it once was and how it miraculously is no more. I could see you smell the scent of the trash filling the small room you, your mother and two siblings rented out in Okay. The smell to you is now aromatic in the face of what your life is today.

I could see you wrestle with life in your mind, cursing it for how complicated it poised itself to be. You were a man, and you were brought to your knees. No one had taught you how to get up or at least admit that you were on the ground. No one had the audacity to tell you it was OK to be both: man and down.

You drank your Budweiser, cocking your head back and sighing sharply at the satisfaction of the crisp fizz of the beer contrasting the summer night’s heat.

You say you don’t believe in God anymore, but I suspect that you do and you’re just angry with him. People do that often, you know? Say they don’t believe in God because he is not who they thought he would be. At the same time, within their critique,
they say God’s name as if he was a distant person, an old friend who turned on them.

You know, the demons believe in God, but they just don’t sing his praises.

When you lost your job last fall, I’ll admit that I didn’t understand the repercussions it would have on our family. I was young. I mean, I suspected we would stop ordering Chinese food on Thursdays, but I didn’t anticipate having to leave the heated oven open in the winter because we were behind on our utility bills. I also didn’t realize that when you lost your job, I would lose my father because you had made your job your identity. “Who are you?” I wanted to ask you sometimes. Would you ever be able to answer that?

I watch you as you continued to recount your boyhood to me (though I suspect you are really speaking to yourself). In this moment, you are gentle, giving me a glimpse of the person I knew long ago. The mosquitoes don’t phase you none. Unlike me, your skin doesn’t produce abnormal welts where they bite you. You have Haiti skin and I have kin skin whose body is foreign to her land.

You continue to shell yourself into your past life. Deeper and deeper you go, and I follow you there. I sit by you as a boy. As a boy, you were tender. As a boy, you let me look down at your too-big-shoes and walk with you to school where your instructor taught you cursive. I remember your fullness; the breadth of your boyhood making itself known to me: you were father and friend.

I am not quite sure when I became your foe or what I did to merit your retreatment. But I am your foe for whatever reason. Like the mosquitoes, you rested gently on me, bit me and flew away. I thought for a longtime that you had kissed me. But I look at my upper back and lower calves and I see the welts. Yet, here I am, again,
making an exposition of my legs and my whole self even though I very well know that mosquitoes show no mercy.

But there are many things that show us no mercy: life, layoffs, big shoes, Haiti’s heat and Randolph’s mosquitoes. But why would they? There’s no cry of surrender from either of us.