

Still Life With Orbs

Between the thing
and the name of it,
is a world;
and a world
behind this world.

There is my mask
placed on the table.
There is the wooden
tabletop and the space
beneath it. There
is an orange on the floor
when it should
be on the table

in the yellow basket
meant for oranges
but which contains a cat,
licking one front paw
as if nothing were.

What do cats know
of manners? What do
birds know of water
unless they plunge
their beaks into it
breaking some poor
fish's sleep. What do
fish know of birds
except the slash of bill,
the sudden flash,
the stop.

Lingua Franca with Flora

In spite of all who would renounce petals
the petals come: *chèlbè* some, shy some,
no dirt will hold them back. Planted
in dirt, and drawing from dirt, they explode
hot-pink, burst red. Their dusty outfits
blown clean in the trade winds that sweep
down like a Moorish lover; their dusty outfits
washed clean, dampened and darkened
by Caribbean Sea rain: these creeping
bougainvillea.

And hibiscus flower, still delicate, still fleshy,
returning constantly to the Haitian day
he was stripped like a god of his name:
Rose de Chine. To the day he was brought low
to blacken shoes, made show his black blood
in the shine on the boots of American Marines,
1915. He who, now named *choublak*, spills
his dark tears for tea.

But who can deny the sly *chevalier de nuit*?
Night's knight, who blooms only at night,
unbolting his tiny white flower, perfumed,
redolant. Intoxicant known to those
who travel the night, and the night into day
down the worn trails to town, down the hills
for something, for life; known to those who
cut deals with ominous lords, with the devil
himself. All pinned by his lance.

It is he Dieula picks to sweeten her dress
as she *will* emerge a goddess; in a rinsed
azure shift, after birdbath in alley
with enamel tin cup and tan bucket.
She will go boldly to her love who will
whisper to her in a schoolboy French
learned before he quit school; before life
swallowed him—and to seal their accord
(for there *is* a deal being made), in the gravity
of Creole, *wi cheri, wi—tout sa'm genyen se pou ou*,
yes darling, yes—all I have is yours.

Notes: *chèlbè*, Haitian Creole for *showy* / “of American Marines, 1915,” a reference to 1915-1934 U.S. military occupation of Haiti

“Lingua Franca with Flora” was first published in *Callaloo*, Volume 36, Number 3

A Dominican Poem

If you are born, and you are stateless,
if you are born, and you are homeless,

if your state and home are not
yours—and yet everything you know—

what are you? Who are you? And who
am I without the dark fields I walk upon,

the streets I know, the blue corners
I call mine, the ones you call yours . . .

Who am I to call myself *citizen*, and
human and *free*? And who are you

to call yourself landed and grounded,
and free. And who is judge enough?

And who citizen enough? And who native?
Truly. And who other?

And who are we who move so freely
without accents of identification,

without skin of identification, with
all manner of identification. With

gold seals of approval. With the stamps
of good fortune. With the accident

of blameless birth. Who are we to be
so lucky?

Note: In September 2013, a ruling by the Dominican Republic's Constitutional Court stripped citizenship of Dominican-born persons without a Dominican parent, going back to 1929. The majority of persons affected are Dominicans of Haitian descent.