

Dark Boat

Canisia Lubrin

"Show yourself," Pap says, "and don't be in no way unclear."

"It's only me. I want to know what you've seen," I said, pushing the red button on the recorder to on, watching the tape make its slow run inside the dark, plastic womb.

Then I hid it all in the universe between Pap's oil lamp and sketchbooks on the mauve side table. When he found the breath to speak, he said, "All I have to give you is fury, anguish, regret, voices, voices, voices." He signals with a whistle that I should come closer. His eyes are smoked grey with cataract; his hands have given up on holding much onto anything.

"Last night I seen children, all of them, faces mature as elderberry, as anything, going up and down guava trees, stuffing guavas, pink and white, deep in their pockets. And I seen fishermen pulling their catch up shore, a single human tangled in they net. I seen light snow, Margaret Thatcher hauling it out from Tiananmen Square."

"Seen anything more today, Pap?" I say.

"None yet. Just don't go to the back of the house," he cautioned, his hands reaching for me but gripping air. "Don't believe the police when they come. Tell them you know not one thing."

"What is in the back of the house?"

"Soldiers. Seven buried there. One under the tree where your navel string is buried."

§

I look like him but some decades in the past on a day when he might have faced down a wide fear and survived. I'm wrinkled around the eyes as he is on his forehead. Across from him, I sit and wonder at the thirty-five degree mid-afternoon that seems his invitation to wear a yellow flared skirt full of white and red hibiscus, two pairs of underwear, and a black shirt beneath his teal Members Only Jacket, now several sizes too small.

"Listen," he says like every hurt in the world is his, "my strength of mind is all mix up in having a grandson who better do more like a carpenter than a dictionary. Do don't say, you hear me?"

I can only stare at this man who'd once been built like a tenement and who is now bent, disturbed, stormed like a ruined place.

"Do don't say," he says, "now, repeat."

I am near him now. I speak softly into his ear because this close to him, I am swallowed up in my own unease in some half-dusty corner of a misbehaving mind, so I mumble my agreement. Unsatisfied, he makes me lay on my back on the floor with my eyes closed. He says "say 'til you believe." I turn off the tape recorder. The greater sad thing is my vast guilt. I disdain Pap's ownership of these stories he keeps telling me. The ones, at the end of the day, I need to forget when the world has stopped watching. When all the spirits have gone back to their sacred tombs, their sacred towers, their putrid pits.

§

Today he is fixed, studying the meadow outside the window. He hasn't responded to any of my questions or compliments since I arrived. The light at the peak of the hill waits like a congregation of fireflies. Apart from the few cocks pecking, the hill pulses with an unsure wind through the low bush hauling a smell like rotten fish into Pap's bedroom.

By the floor creaking down the hallway towards the bedroom, Pap moves his ears up and down.

"Maid, you walking like bull," Pap shouts and laughs airily.

"Well your bad eyes ain't at all left you dull," she says stopping at the door, taking a moment to breathe, to smile at him. She's old, too old to do this work. Her cheeks pour over her jawline nearly choking her teeth. Her grey hairs gather on her head like thunderclouds. "Now, if you don't mind I'm coming in with a cup of custard and sourdough bread soaking in a bowl of warm milk," she says, stopping to breathe incrementally, smiling with all the quickness this side of the hill.

Pap sits without touching me, puts his hand beneath his pillow and flashes a yellow-stained piece of cardboard with wil brek hip fur fod written in what looks like charcoal, the words spilling onto the edges. When she reaches for the sign she knocks the bowl of milky bread over and into the enamel bedpan next to me where I was still laying on the floor at the foot of Pap's bed. Her face stretches low and long like playdough. She is as penitent as they come as Pap turns to the commotion and frowns. Then he flings the sign behind him and says, "You think to fool me, little woman? You never been clumsy no day in your lifes, no?"

"But I would never dream of it. Say you're my man-with-a-boat—save me, Big Man, you know?" She shakes as she kneels next to his bed to wipe up the accident. And then he tosses himself at her, weeping.

Only momentarily, she grips his shoulders and lets go but stays close; he wipes his face on her shirt. I'm struck by the whole exchange and can't think of an appropriate response so I keep to silence like some plantagenet angel.

He reaches over and clenches my arm and pulls me and I am briefly sad that I was close enough for his hands to reach me. I hate not being able to tell whose scent I'm breathing in. The revulsion in me falls off and on the wall appears a woman. She should have wings wide as an altar—by the look of her blade-thin torso, her luminous eyes, her thread-stitched single-draped red robe—but all she is is flesh, bare gleaming flesh, a scaled head for hair, blood veining around her insides at an impossible speed. Most disturbing is the blood rushing down her legs without dripping to the floor. I see no bone in her. She is a smooth, brown translucence on the surface, like some blessed marble. I blink her out of sight as this three-way hug I didn't bargain for sets the sun for good tonight and I can barely feel my legs lift off the floor. But they do. And I demand to be put back down. The wingless woman steps away from the wall toward us and I let her reach me. She is round with light, her pupils black as a donkey's.

"You're worrying," she says, "I'm just here for how this ends."

Then, she walks around me not through me as I had expected. I watch her closely where she now sits, in the corner next to Pap's sketchbooks, not smiling, not speaking, not blinking, simply watching me as I stay unmoving in the fear of my own end.

§

The sharp smell of disinfectant gliding through the window shrinks my lungs as Pap introduces me to the maid, again, as the suit and tie.

Before any of this, I had meandered through several noble professions until settling into the académie. Pap has never since failed to remind me that I wasted my life on a PhD. This is one thing he tells everyone in the few languages he was able to learn in his lifetime. The French, the Spanish, the survival Japanese he'd picked up in Nagasaki.

The maid welcomes his repetitions because she's seen the very old man in him stumbling past sentences with the light in his eyes almost out: *the suit and tie el traje y la corbata*. She's been his help since we moved him to this place ten years ago, but he acts every day like he had only just arrived here. His eyes are slits like he's negotiating how to step onto a lampless road at midnight either nearing the end of his life or searching for its half-sacred, half-wrecked beginning. Finally, Pap points to the corner where ten faded green notebooks are stacked next to a picture of grand manman taken on the London Bridge

sixty years ago. I feel light because now no one can say I had dreamed up the non-winged woman. I know this is Pap confronting her in the best Pap way: with a hoarseness lifting the French from his gut as he stays his blindness with a blinkless stare at the woman. *Je suis d'accord avec l'obscurité.* He is still pointing, tremulous with exasperation.

"Carajo," the nurse says, "you must have looked just like the suit and tie when you was a youngster."

I'm overcome. The world is wrong. I cannot speak about the woman who should have wings with the only people who are likely witnesses and choosing not to speak about the woman without the wings for fear of things similar to things I fear. Surely Pap in his blindness knows to feel a thing come down from heaven.

Pap closes his eyes and opens them. Again and again.

"Thinking that can be some kind trouble," he says to the maid. "Thinking that will only hurt because I don't remember what I look like yesterday. When I was young I wanted who the man was in the mirror. I did wanted to give anything to love him."

Pap curls his lips, pulls some long hairs from his nostrils, and when he is done his expression is the same as before. When, I wonder, did his nose go numb? Maybe it is true that consciousness knows when to abandon one sense for another. He's sitting upright now, clasping his hands, nodding as if to someone who's got important things to say.

"I'll get more of that spilled food," the maid says, "why don't you take off that jacket?" Pap lets her help but then holds his arm, bent halfway out like a wing until he stops her for good. Now I'm sure I'm the only one who's seen the-good-woman-with-no-wings.

"Some days I don't know where here anymore, you know? What time is the milkman coming?" Pap says.

"The milkman doesn't come anymore," I say, keeping my eyes on the woman, "hasn't for a few decades, Pap."

"You're a library full of things people will need forget," he says.

"What about you tell me something from your life, then, your childhood?" I say. "What would you want to remember?"

"See," he says to the maid, "he like asking questions in two part. Me and him, both."

I nod to her to suggest she is excused. She leaves as though her exit were rooted in a madness, one of those unreasonable looks furrowing her brows. There was something in her eyes that was foretelling, a future—maybe a

sooner battle—waiting for me, but whatever hint of something I should have understood by now pulled away from me, still tethered to her and I do not care to follow. For a moment I begin to doubt my own memories, myself in an awful silence, too visible to my faults.

“Okay, so I’ll start,” I say. “When I was a child my father and his father took me fishing and as we came to a beach at Anse Cochon, we saw rabbits—fifteen, maybe—and their does dashing into the mangrove and my father was convinced that they had been set off by some colonial mania and decided that we should rescue them. But my grandfather, no more than fifty at the time, was a suspicious man, if at his best, only surreptitious about signs. He said that what we were witnessing was a kind of rage, the rabbit kind, and it wasn’t contagious, that it was only people who went mad while the rest of the animals went on as they should. Then he ran ahead of us yelling the foot of the stoop the foot of the stoop.”

I stop and look at him, hoping the story could conjure a drop of familiarity.

“Who you talking to? You afraid?” Pap asks.

“I am,” I begin, and become mute at the sudden disappearance of the woman who looks like she had lost her wings. I ask Pap what he remembers about rabbits or the foot of the stoop but he is not with me anymore. He is looking through the wall, silent and chewing on air as his dentures drum for want of anything to bite. I wait, knowing that some things are slow-coming like suns after the big bang, like a hard ghost in a see-through town.

§

By the skin of his forehead pulling up he looks as though he’s suddenly resumed consciousness.

But do I ask what the surprise is? I do not ask.

He stares like most fading people do proudly baring teeth and anguish. He gets up and walks.

“I remember pulling you out of the mud. You were sinking well fast,” he says, “and I had tell you that you done fell into that mangrove because of that time you exchange all the—”

“—rhymes in ‘Jingle Bells’ for dirty words. Yes!” I say. Though I should know better, my heart was doing the Macarena.

“Well, son, you listen good. On the day you find yourself smoking cigars with padnas,” Pap says, getting up and slapping his knee, “remember that close behind it you close-close to singing ‘Adios Amigos.’ Is one thing to be

out there, but in here”—he taps on his temple—“in here all restaurants, big hotels, fancy boardwalks kissing this sea shining black-black with nighttime, virgin beach after virgin bitch, museums the world done put up there—all full of people you know all fighting like hells for happinesses—and you?—mad as that atomic blast, got your eyes on them all wishing that the scene wasn’t blocking in endless fogs.”

It takes me a minute to realize he is waiting for me to say something. It is too hot and too late to have anything to say.

§

Of course not all our visits went that way. Last week he wanted to go for a walk and on that walk I took him up to Masqué Hill to show me where he felt the first pull of his hand towards paint and its dealings. “This where I draw *Man and the Baby*,” he said. “That painting done bring me your grand manman. Now, wait, before you fling your hand up like that crazy Austrian, it done give me to your grand manman too. I was looking out at that pasture and the sun was just coming up. There was big man slapping his sheep in the clearing and as he do that, you know, a mist-up come thick-thick by the fresh sunlight. Then every sheep and big man himself dissolve in the mist.” Pap stopped talking.

“Will you go on?” I ask.

“On?”

“With the story about *Man and the Baby*.”

“Hm,” he said, breaking phlegm in his throat. “Well, I had a small notebook in my pocket, you know, a gentleman always carry some paper on him—you don’t want any seed of badness to find you without a way to remember yourself of the lesson. So, anyway, in that little book I sketch *Blackman and Baby*, I call it then. It was dark that day, but the darkness was soft, a rainstorm kind of day. Like my darkness. And then I went and painted it and put it on your grand manman doorstep with a note about going for food and ice tea and long walk. I find a boldness, you see? It fling me over the six-months of footsie I was been stick in about her. God, she was a beauty and a goodness you never think earth deserve. And that painting is why you here, son. Don’t believe the people who tell you that only music make people. Painting, that’s the river that bring your father into the world,” he said.

“*Blackman and the Baby*, which one is that?” I joked.

He looked insulted but permitted me some ignobility.

Back in his room, we are eating rice pudding scented with star anise.

"By the way," Pap said, "is me as a young man hitchhiking on the coast, wearing a two-toned—brown and beige—fedora, a black trench coat, croc-skin shoe, carrying a naked crying baby on my shoulder. The whole scene is scratched in, as though a cat had did it, you see?" Hearing him describe the painting brought on such a daydream that I stumbled into his notebooks. I laughed about how the books felt like thorn bushes.

"It is coming, sonny boy," he said, laughing as though he'd understood something severe.

"Oh, nothing's coming, grand papa," I said. This felt like a moment to be defensive.

"Well, you just wait. First you stumble into bushes. Then you stumble into diapers."

"I am telling you this is different. I was—"

"—different how?" Pap asked stiffly.

"Different in that...well," I said, "I was sucked in your world just now. That's all."

"Exact. And lose sight of yours."

I stood there withholding the weight of something that, I bet, had us both thinking: here's something true and strange between us lacking a name, and we turned around at the same time and looked back at each other.

"Is alright," he said, "most people does like you. They afraid they gone catch it from me. Or that something bad will happen."

In truth, that was it. I was that intractable man, weary of being touched, of remembering too little. Conscious of being tough and afraid of living long enough to lose my mind someday.

§

It never happens when you're thinking about it. Like those people who expect you to know something just because a horde of people in their own world know it. They'll throw that thing about, no problem. Like Dostoevsky.

Only a decade ago, we are sitting on the bench outside Pap's old greenhouse. There's some gurgling coming from near the stone oven on the right flank of the pea lot. On the far side of the driveway to our left, his neighbour is watering the garden: frangipani, pink and white oleanders, spearmint, eggplant. I describe his neighbour as having the appearance of a character in a Dostoevsky novel. "Okay, so you know Dostoevsky and a million other people know Dostoevsky. But do I know Dostoevsky? I do not know Dostoevsky," he offers.

"Dejected, miserable looking is all," I say, remembering that on my fifteenth

birthday he gave me a signed copy of *Poor Folk* saying seamstresses make the world go round. Soon he'd begin to funnel about the near-sterile hallway between his bedroom and the living room searching for something big and important where there is only carpet. Six weeks later, he'd detour a diagnosis of early-onset Alzheimer's to only six years later start losing his vision and blame even that on his muddling mind.

§

On Friday, as I was leaving, he called to me. I laid my satchel in the hallway next to his door.

"How come you don't have your tape recorder today?"

"Switched bags and left it in the other."

"Well I have story for you today. Here," he said, handing me one of the notebooks in the corner. I flipped through the first ten pages. Early sketches of some of his finest watercolour paintings. He must have read hesitation into my silence and the slowly turning pages.

"Flip all the way to back. Is all stick in here so I don't need working eyes." He bounced his index on his temple and before I could protest, he continued:

2011. I in Nagasaki. I had just got off the phone with your father when the ground beneath me, still, just a moment before, started doing things that a ground in an upright world should never do. It shake then stop then bob and shake and stop. Four times in all. I had a conversation with the mayor of Tokyo the day before and wanted your father to know all about it. He had tell me in his best trivia voices that the Pacific Plate under Japan do hits the mainland at 8.9 centimeters every year. The San Andreas Fault so slips below California at a quarter that speed. And there I find myself witnessing the everything of a seismic trivias. The only thing that gone through my mind at that moment was the world is tips, the world is tipping. Little boy, do you suppose the mind, as it age, finding restlessness more easy because it change the speed at which it moves the body?

He stopped as though he needed some time to reflect. The last sketch in the book has a title that makes me kneel: "To Remember Everything is a Sudden Wash of the Tides."

He continues: It was over and I was sure of be safe because holding on to the feel of too much danger is a quick way to kill the spirit. So later that day it start again. That house moving like a snake, screams from a little girl outside that I

try to get to, bamboo blinds spilling on the floor, the nonstop begging of the tsunami alarm: move up don't look down don't look down. I rather remember being brave more much else. Like fishing on the edge of a big waterfall. But it could be the Christ coming again and I will still run away now.

If none of this was bravery, I thought listening to Pap, then all of it was madness.

I rotated my wrists and shoulders, slid the pen into my shirt pocket, and held the notebook between my arm and torso as I sat wishing I didn't have to wait another four weeks to see Pap again.

§

"The shack on the shore have a roof made of huge teeth. Brahman is roasting things: lobsters, oysters. The kind of things that leave you feeling brave," Pap says.

"Anything else?"

"What we up to besides catching some breeze?"

"Who is we?"

"I with your father. I with you and your father. I with your grand manman and I with you and your father but we all terrible small."

"Look, there," Pap said, pointing. "Dolphins racing like epileptics in a culvert under bridge. Guatemala."

"Why do you think they're there?" I ask, knowing little of how to respond this time.

"I suppose they just happy. You gone be happy if you never been in drought a day in your life."

§

Another day for wearing his Members Only Jacket.

He shakes soft crumbs off its sleeve, folds his arms and the jacket pulls up showing a penis you did not want to see. Apart from that, you look at him and understand that a person does not need functioning eyes to see through you. This is when I figured it out. Why did it take me this long? Psychiatry can be too close, too loud to make any sense.

I say, "I'm going to tell you about a man named Charles Bonnet."

"He better be worth the few seconds I has left," Pap says.

I told him. I told him hallucinations mostly to do with diminutives and cartoons and things with outrageous teeth and bright colours...

"I stop you right there," he says, "I not gone like him taking my little minutes."

"Very well," I say as darkness creeps in through Pap's window and the woman who'd had her wings stolen appears again, sitting on his windowsill, this time, a shadow of wings spread out large along the wall watered down by the light of a full moon. She does not smile. She does not speak but rests her wingless shoulders against Pap's headboard and puts her hand on Pap's head. Here he chews on nothing and keeps his head dead-leveled with mine.

"Then get outta here," he says, "tell everyone I'm not crazy."

§

Sometimes, when I think someone is with me, I want to run as fast as I can from certainty. Right now, my eyes burn so I reach up to rub them. My hands reach no further than a few centimeters. 8.9 maybe. I open my eyes and the orange-red of an intense sunset fades in dots, white noise and then whiteout. I startle thinking it is the woman in her last, terrible glory coming to tell me her news once and for all. But when my eyes adjust to the light, there's *Blackman and the Baby* sketched like a mural on my wall. Voices rise and fall. The hallway is lit, shadows stretch through a pleating doorway. A grey tray hovers above me. I appear unable to move, to bring my hand up to shield my face, to bring my feet up in self-defense. Some talk of fallouts from people dressed in white. A miniature maze of white dots fall into my mouth but everything from here on out is dim. Someone is holding my head tilted back, my chin slightly upward. Charles Bonnet, I murmur, Charles Bonnet, Charles Bonnet. Water. They've poured water into my mouth. I try not to swallow the maze but the slow drag of mucous down my throat tells me I've failed. The woman hovers above me. I need to breathe. I call out for Pap and the maid. No voice comes back to aid me in my anguish. Is just me in this dark boat. Only me, just I.

The lights go off, a soft spark stays close to the floor. Shadows disappear through the slit beneath the doorway. The world rumbles and turns, mute before a buzz. I am being cradled by a force I cannot see. It is cold. It is damp. I smell marble, wet grass.

"Show yourself," I say, "and don't be in no way unclear."