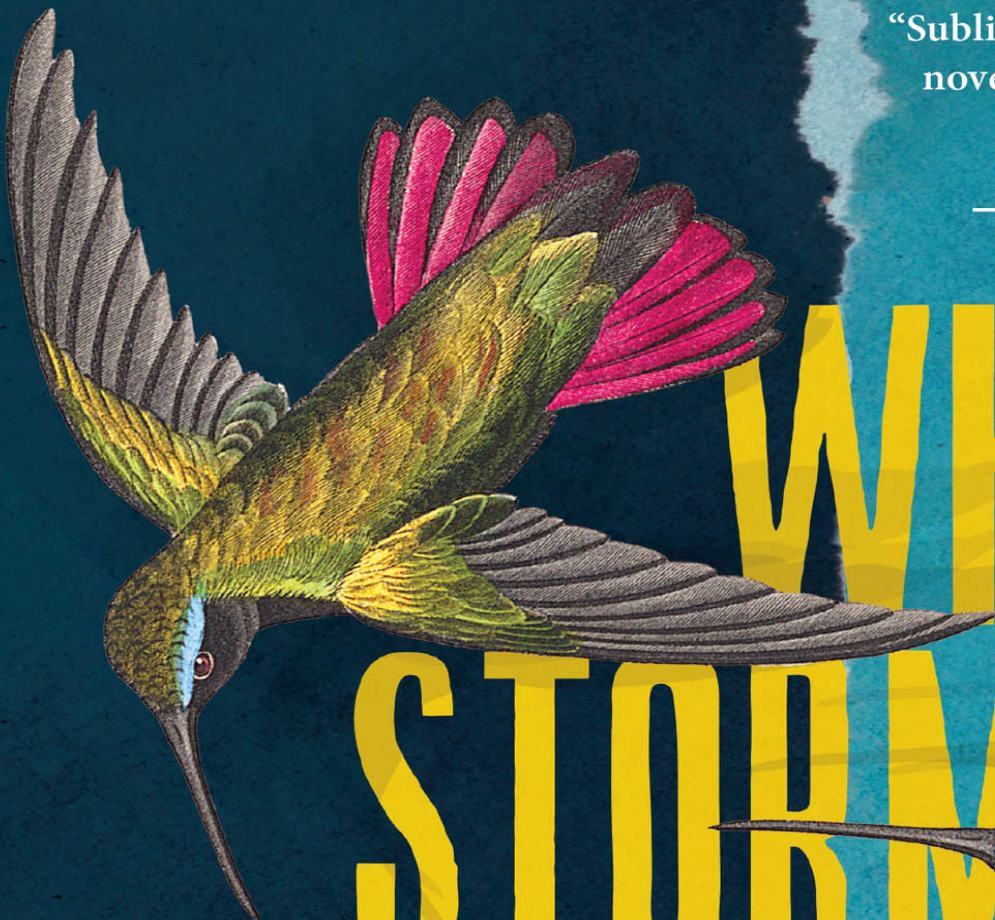


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WHAT STORM

a novel

WHAT THUNDER

MYRIAM J. A. CHANCY



**WHAT STORM,
WHAT THUNDER**

MYRIAM J. A. CHANCY



HARPER PERENNIAL

Note to readers: This is a work of fiction, an invention. As such, any characters, locales, names, incidents, or other aspects relatable to reality are the creation of the author, and any resemblances to persons living or dead, historical events, geographical locations, or other details of fact are entirely and purely coincidental.

Dedication

This novel is dedicated to the 250,000 to 300,000 individuals estimated to have perished in the January 12, 2010, earthquake in Haiti.

It is also dedicated to my mother, (Marie-Carmel) Adeline Lamour Chancy (December 29, 1932–January 5, 2019), in honor of her courage and persistence.

Epigraph

*Atibo Legba, ouvri pòt la pou mwen,
Papa Legba, ouvri pòt la pou mwen,
Ouvri pòt la pou mwen kab entre,
Pou mwen kab tounin.*

[Atibo Legba, open the door for me,
Papa Legba, open the door for me,
Open the door so that I can enter,
So that I can return.]

—*Vodou invocation to Legba, opener of doors*

* * *

At a time like this, scorching irony, not convincing argument, is needed. O! had I the ability, and could reach the nation's ear, I would, today, pour out a fiery stream of biting ridicule, blasting reproach, withering sarcasm, and stern rebuke. For it is not light that is needed, but fire; it is not the gentle shower, but thunder. We need the storm, the whirlwind, and the earthquake.

—*Frederick Douglass (1852)*

* * *

If you don't speak for the dead, who will?

—*Concussion (2015)*

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Ma Lou

*Ezili, o! M san zo, ey!
Ezili m san zo!
M san zo lan tout kòm!
Ezili, o! M san zo, ey!
M san zo lan tout kòm!
Ezili o! M san zo.*

Oh Ezili! Hey, I have no bones!
Ezili I have no bones!
I have no bones in my entire body!
Oh Ezili! Hey, I have no bones!
I have no bones in my entire body!
Oh Ezili! I have no bones.

—*Vodou traditional for Grann Ezili*

Port-au-Prince, November 25, 2014

“Oh. Oh ye, oh ye. Manman’mwèn. Oh ye, oh ye, oye. M’pa gen zo ankò!”
My old mama used to say these words when she grew too old to draw water from her own well. I remember. When I made my way back to see her in her last days—standing in the tap-tap truck for long hours as we traveled the serpentine road leading out of the capital to the villages of the coast, all the way to Saint Marc, where I was born, and my mother was born, and her mother before her—I was troubled to see her diminished frame in her bed. I could see her bones through the frail, wrinkled skin that lay limply across them. I could see the bones, but still she moaned to the goddess plaintively: “I have no bones; I have no bones.”

Now that I am old like her, I understand the moaning of her last hours. Yes, Mama, you had no bones, and I did not understand you. I did not understand. She complained of cold during the hot days and of heat in the coolness of night. I rubbed a cloth dipped in river water over her flaccid skin, slowly, slowly, in circular motions, to warm her, to cool her. She sighed as I did this, sighed for the temporary relief, without a sense of hope, as a soldier of war would after being shot, waiting in the trenches to be

found by enemy or kin, hoping not to be found by an enemy. At night, I lay beside her and put my arms around her, two blankets covering us. She shivered in the night even when it was still hot. She died July 15, the day that the devotees climb the waterfalls in Saut d'Eau, seeking penance from Metrès Dlo, seeking healing and renewal. "No bones," she said, her eyes wide open, looking through me. "No bones."

But, in the end, all that remained was skin and bones. When she died, the wick of light in her eyes flickered, then disappeared, a lifetime of misery extinguished, very slowly. Just a heap of bones.

A month ago, the dictator's son died. I wonder who mourned his lifeless body. What the gods had to say. Whether his passing meant that we would be delivered of whatever curse his father, the god of death, had set upon us. Thinking about it, I realized that he was a man like other men. A heap of bones like my mother.

I thought about going to Saut d'Eau for a long time after Douz, to bury my mother's bones. I had never been but had always wanted to go. I thought about the stories that my husband, Lou, told me about the place. He went there just before we met, on the feast day in July. He asked the gods to bring him to someone like me. Not someone, he corrected himself, you. A soul mate. You, he said emphatically. Lou was a *vodouisant* all his days, made altars, offerings, participated in the feast days. I watched him without saying anything. I was a Catholic, and that was that. We never discussed our difference. Had he been here after what happened, happened, he would have danced with the mourners. I would have watched him. Lou's memories were my own. That's why it didn't bother me that once we were married, everyone took to calling me Ma Lou, echoing my constant references to him in my speech ("my Lou," "my Lou," I always said, as I still do, as if everything he told me were sacred and true; I wanted to believe that this was so). Everyone still calls me by his name, though Lou is long gone. After what happened, happened, it seemed to me then that it would be best to believe in gods that had not harmed me. Lou's gods. My mother's gods. Being sent to Catholic school early on severed me from them, even if I was only to become a market woman. At least I could read, count, and pray the catechism. I thought this made me lucky, but in other ways, it made me poor, like a pocket turned inside out, empty of coins.

My Lou had told me about the *mapou* cut down when the priest and a parish official stationed at Saut d'Eau were told that Ezili Wèdo, goddess of

the waters, had made a shimmering apparition. Saut d'Eau was made up of two waterfalls and it was said that the second belonged to Damballah, the serpent god, giver of all life. The priest had the tree cut down, but the gods remained. That priest later lost both his legs in a freak accident. The police captain who had overseen the cutting down of the tree temporarily lost his mind. His faculties returned when he went into the waterfalls and asked for forgiveness. Now, everyone goes to the falls. Even I went, some two years ago, when I could begin to stand on my own two legs, move forward again, to cleanse the bones.

Before going, I thought a long time about the priest who'd lost his legs. Thought about the boy in the camp whose leg they'd cut off, whose mother had lost her hold on reality. Were they being punished for something? For not believing? But I could not believe in gods that would punish the helpless. No. The earth had buckled and, in that movement, all that was not in its place fell upon the earth's children, upon the blameless as well as the guilty, without discrimination. It wasn't the boy who'd lost his leg, who was guilty, it was the rest of us who looked away from people like him, people who could have been us, lame, stumbling, afraid to go out of their houses in the light of day for fear of what could happen next. We'd lost our legs—sea legs, land legs, the ability to stand up for ourselves. I needed to cleanse the bones myself, to put all this behind me, return to the land, to my mother's land, remember everything, and forget the last two years of death begetting death. But, for some time, before going to the waterfalls, I did not know where to start. How to rise again and set out. I am just an old market woman. A relic.

Yes, yes, me, Ma Lou, I admit, finally, that these bones of mine are old, worn out, fragile like the eggs I take to market that everyone wants, even the Dominicans. I never thought I would see the day that Dominicans would want anything we produced for ourselves. But all they *really* want is to sell us their good-for-nothing eggs produced in factories. My eggs are warm from being dropped from the hens' insides. That's how fresh they are. That fresh.

Fresh like Jonas, who used to count his steps all over the market. Counted how many of everything I had to sell, how much I made with every sale. Counted the eggs I had, to see how many his family might purchase. They were five all together. Not the poorest. Not the richest. Just counting their pennies like all of us, counting and putting them away when

there weren't enough to buy what they wanted. "Don't worry," I told him, when he would come to me with his fingers filled with grimy folds of paper, our useless *gouds*. "Don't worry," I'd say. "You save, and one day you'll have enough to purchase the whole dozen! For you, and for your family, the whole carton just for you." He would smile when I said that, be less embarrassed if that day he had been sent to purchase two or three eggs, sometimes only one. He came, that day, to get one egg for his mother, but he never reached home.

He's gone, that boy, along with his sisters, wee things that came to the market only when the mother was there, trailing behind like ducklings, with the same odd waddle of a walk that only winged creatures have. Perhaps this is why they weren't for this earth for very long. The girls five and two, the boy all of eleven in that New Year. She sent the boy, alone sometimes, to run errands for the family, sometimes let me have him run errands so he could make a little of his own money on the side, a few *gouds* to call his own, to make him feel grown, or growing. I knew him well, as did my clients for whom I had him run errands, especially up at the hotel on the mountain, perched above the city. He was quick, quick, and mostly reliable. He reminded me of my own son, Richard, at that age, except that I had a presentiment that unlike mine, he would grow up to be a fine man. I had been wrong concerning them both. My son grew to be a wealthy, respected man, though I no longer knew him by then. Jonas would never become the man I could see hovering already in the shadows of his eyes and vanishing smiles.

The girls were crushed beneath a house over there, not far from the market. Playing in the streets. Darting in and out of the houses, nothing unusual. I watched them do this daily from my seat low to the ground. Watched the boy count his steps from his stoop to the market, then to my stall, backward, forward, as if he could solve a mystery with his calculations—so much like his father, the accountant with hardly a cent to his name, but rich in other ways: his family, for one. Anyone could see that he had married the love of his life, ran to her like a man runs to water in a desert. No wonder it would be fire we would have to save her from, in the end, months after the disaster. The boy had left my stall with his one egg for his mother in hand, then gone down the street and into a house with a television on, turned out to face the street so that everyone could gather inside and outside to watch the *futbòl* games or, that day, a soap opera. The

woman who owned the house was a childless woman, a widow or a divorcée. She, too, would not survive.

When the earth moved, the houses fell to the ground within seconds, jolted when the ground stopped swaying and crushed everything that had remained. The girls were not the only ones left crying below: the whole street swayed; the earth rippled like a carpet heaving itself of crumbs and dirt that a distracted housekeeper had forgotten to sweep away. I left my stand and all my wares—the piles of mango, the eggs (they would fall, smash against the ground), the packs of Chiclets, the ripe avocados—and made my way toward the voices, not thinking of my own small house up and away in the hills. I was not worried for my own: Anne, my granddaughter, had left for her work, far away in another country, after her mother's funeral, and Richard, her father, my son, well, we had stopped worrying for him long ago, carrying with us solely the memory of him as the small child we had raised, before he left us, leaving behind, carelessly, a stray seed for us to water. We buried our grief in the process, watching Anne grow. Our son, the man, we did not know.

I watched. That's what old market women do: we watch. But this time, the lot of us market women sprang to action, even as our bones creaked for lack of cartilage and oil. Like the others on the street, we used anything in hand we could find. Useless things like spoons and forks, the metal ends of umbrellas, as if our puny things, our fingernails, could move all that. Only the lucky were saved. Being lucky meant simply that you were closer to the surface, or that fewer things blocked the way to being found. We heard people on their cell phones, all up and down the street, begging frantically for help, giving directions to where they thought they were beneath the rubble, within the rooms of their houses. Phones rang and we heard people answer them. Then—fewer and fewer voices. The tinny, persistent ringing of cell phone tones: different songs rising like wind from underground with no answer.

We heard our own voices, screaming at each other, asking for help, not knowing what to do. Faces covered with dust, and sweat, and other things later to be determined. What to do? There was nothing to do but to scream, try anything, flail our hands, scratch at the earth like my chickens when they get confused because their fresh-laid eggs disappear, one by one, and still they lay more. Try anything and still, it's too little. After the earth rose and split open, yes, I saw angels walking, but there had also been dust,

white dust, everywhere, caking all objects and every moving thing. The dust came from the concrete crumbling to pieces as buildings flattened, but there were also other things mixed in, blood and bones. Had I mistaken the walking dead for angels, survivors stumbling through the debris with the same white flakes covering their bodies from head to toe that covered mine?

Eventually, we, the market women, remembered our oil lamps and lit them, one by one, those of us who could. Only part of the market had been crushed, the part against a wall. Still, it was impossible to tell what belonged to whom, and at that point, no one cared. We worked at freeing those we could, said prayers for the others, promising deliverance to those we could not get to, to give them some solace, some hope in their final moments, because salvation would soon be theirs. Then back down the street, darting back and forth. Using the goods from the market to feed those working at rescue. Doing what we could, as we always did, our large bodies moving through the rubble as if we were land whales, made for swimming through dust-laden air, made for parting human waves.

We treated everyone alike. They had become all the same, were always the same. Something we had always known from our low-to-the-ground perches, observing life like budgies, our heads wrapped in colorful scarfs to keep the heat of the sun from roasting our brains, sweat slipping down our necks, draping the half-moon of our chests exposed above the breasts. We fanned ourselves, but it didn't help. *Chalè!* Heat came with the territory. But not this. Not this. A different kind of heat. Sitting here under the hot sun all day, we ripen.

The saints, the crooks, the foreigners, the white saviors, the bleeding hearts, they all need sustenance, and we give it to them. Close my eyes. Look away. It's all the same. The need to shut everything down, slow my breathing, take in what's there to take in, let all the rest go. If only I could get rid of the images, of the smells still clogging my nostrils. *Ha!* You would think that after so many years working in the market, nothing would offend this nose. Look what surrounds us every day: the mounds of smoldering garbage, the spoiling fruits with skins speckled with loitering flies, the leavings of dogs, the runoff of dirty water weaving its way through the alleyways, that dense acrid stink of urine.

A marketplace is a world of colliding senses, not all of it pretty or fruitful, much of it decay, especially at the end of the day, when the best of

what's available is gone and all that remain are castoffs, the leftovers. This is the part of the day when those of us who work the market blend into the dust and the loam, become one with the elements, the odors of sweat and dung, the sweet sap of fleshy fruits ground underfoot, the nothing that we are, the all. We sweep up what's left of the day, knowing that striving toward perfection is beyond our reach.

A little corner of peace. That's all we want. I found mine after the trip to the waterfalls, but it would take some time to get there. Peace is what others want from me, from us, the market women they imagine sit immobile, rooted to the earth but without extensions, no lives and families of our own, waiting patiently for them to come with their grimy dollars, their smiles full of need, to unload money and stories of desire, a desire to be free of worry, to be freed.

A little corner of peace is all they want.

And I give it to them.

Like a sponge, I absorb and grow fat and round. The weight of their words like leaves imprinted into my flesh, hanging heavy from my frail bones, rooting myself to the ground because it is the only thing that I can be sure of, then, now. Who's to say that the red of the earth of this island isn't drawn from the blood of women like me, sitting in the markets, pooling?

A little corner of peace is all that is wanted.

Now I know how to give it to them. I do so freely: I listen.

Little did I know that my work was only beginning.

Sara

Port-au-Prince, IDP Camp, July 2010

It started with a tug on her right elbow as she was sleeping, sometime earlier that spring, after the last of her loves had disappeared, two at once, then the other two, one after the next, over a matter of a few weeks, after she had come to the camp set up beneath the broken cathedral in the middle of the neighborhood. It didn't disturb her at first. She mistook the feeling for her own hand, holding herself close in slumber.

She liked to sleep on her side, with a distinct preference for lying on her left, because everything changed, in a way, once she came to share a marriage bed. It was something that took some time to get used to though she'd never had much room to herself: what she'd had before was a space the narrow width of a military cot, or so Olivier had said the first time he'd been inside the little cement block house she had been living in then, when they'd met, with her aunt, uncle, and five cousins. Being born in scarcity—in a shack by the ocean on a stretch of beach an hour out from the big city, a stretch that had since been privatized for the wealthy, and for the tourists who were given run of the place—had been preparation for a life of gratitude. A lack of personal space had never bothered her because the house had overflowed with laughter and touch, things she missed when she moved away from her grandmother to town, when her grandmother had found it too difficult to take care of her after each of her parents died, also one after the other, like flies, of some mysterious illness one couldn't get from drinking unclean water. Her memories of them wasted away until she couldn't remember them anymore and had to ask every day for some morsel of who they had been or to catch a glimpse of what they might have looked like, or what remnant of themselves they might have left upon her features. Her grandmother understood and pointed out things like the length of her narrow, thin fingers (like her mother's), or the way her cheekbones protruded into the shape of small apples from which hinged a square jaw (unfeminine, she thought, but like her father's face, and so she grew to be proud of it). Gradually, her grandmother started to speak of the things she'd

inherited from her as well—the thickness of her long hair, the arch of her right brow, the way her top lip curled when she smiled—and she understood from these confidences that her grandmother didn't believe herself to be long for their world. So, when Sara was sent away to the city to live with her aunt and uncle, she didn't hold it against her grandmother, but she was deeply sad that she would not see her again, though each of them (grandmother, aunt, uncle, and the chirping cousins who were small, then) kept repeating over and over and over again about how she would come back on vacations to visit, how her grandmother would be fine, how it was all for her “betterment” and so that she could get a real education. She wanted to tell them that she didn't need to be “citified.” She could live like her parents had, off the land, like her grandmother, until a ripe old age, and be perfectly happy. But she didn't say anything, because she recognized that the old life was over, that she would have to get used to seeing her grandmother, and parents, not in person but when she looked at herself in a mirror. This is what her parents' deaths had taught her: there was only one direction for evolution: a lateral movement sideways—like the movement of crabs upon the beach at sunset.

By the time she met Olivier, in an accounting course she had signed up for at a local technical college, after she realized that studying literature (as her aunt and uncle and cousins had all pointed out) would nourish dreams but never reality (she needed a job), she had learned to shift her priorities. Olivier liked expansive and expensive things. She began to acquire a taste for space. She began to expand.

After they married, their house was in a slightly better neighborhood than her aunt and uncle's. It had sidewalks and gutters, even if they overflowed whenever it rained and, sometimes, when there was no rain in sight. The house was no bigger than her aunt and uncle's, but it was only the two of them at first, and Olivier had outfitted the bedroom with a double bed like she had reported seeing in the children's rooms in homes where she had taken part-time work tutoring to make extra money to help pay for her school books and fees. The bed wasn't large, but the pleasure of feeling the warmth of Olivier's body next to hers was both a comfort and a blessing. How could she mind? He was everything she had (not) dreamed of and imagined, more of the world than she could conceive.

It all took some getting used to but she was glad for it even when she could no longer toss and turn at will, or turn on her stomach with arms

spread out along her sides, tips of fingers dangling down to touch the coolness of the tiles below the bed on hot days when not a breeze moved, when a fan was futile (it only called attention to the oppressive heat as it stirred humid, hot air thick as porridge—*acassan*, like her grandmother used to make for her when Sara was still small and wobbly on her feet). Such heat made her think of loss and suffocation, watching her parents gasp for last breaths before they expired. It was a cloying heat, like tentacles reaching up from the depths, from another place. That's what the tug at her elbow reminded her of: warm, suffocating summer heat, not of this world.

When it was that hot, she would lie with her back to Olivier, facing out from the bed, the contrast with the heat emanating from his body giving her an illusion of coolness wafting between bed and tiles, in the open space between the furniture and themselves, the walls and ceilings. At times like these, in the heat, she wondered what such minute freedom might be like, if she could make herself small and disappear. Such thoughts were always brief and fleeting, less than a few seconds in length, because she was happy. Too happy, she thought now, when she allowed herself the luxury of deep thought. It was easier these days to bumble along, not think of anything too much, of what was going to happen in the next hour, and the one after that, and the one after that, until the day was done, and she could lie down and hope only for dreamlessness.

When the children came (three tadpoles, Olivier called them, because every time he asked how it felt to have them growing in her belly, all she could think of was fish, tiny little sardines, or frogs), one after the other as if they had been waiting an eternity for a way into the world, for Olivier and her to find each other, settle down, move into the little brick house with the green shutters and pink, chipped cement stoop. When they were big enough to get out of their cribs and patter through the house (their little footsteps made her think of rain), they would come into her and Olivier's room and tug at the sheets, then at whatever they could grasp, their parents' arms and legs protruding from the bed. This always caused much merriment that sometimes turned into pillow fights or tickling contests as they got older. Sometimes she and Olivier let the children win; sometimes they came up with excuses for why the children had to go back to their rooms and leave them alone, but that never lasted long: they missed the children's faces even when they had already seen them many times in the day. The longing for them became more intense, she found, when each child started preschool,

then elementary school, and had found new preoccupations. She missed the tugging at her after the last one was sent to school, though on weekends the three would remember the old rituals and return, pulling the sheets off her and Olivier, demanding breakfasts in bed (which were never delivered).

It was a happy, boisterous home, something she never dreamed for herself the day she left her grandmother, holding a bag made of rough green fabric tightly against her chest, containing all her worldly possessions: a pair of slacks for working in; two pairs of shoes (one for school, the other for work and leisure); a simple navy-blue dress for school days and a fancier one that her grandmother had a neighbor woman make for her to wear on Sundays and special occasions (of which there were few out in the country: they were pleased to greet the day, as her grandmother always was accustomed to say, and to wave the sun to sleep); two pairs of socks for when shoes were necessary; five pairs of ribbons for her hair; two T-shirts; three pieces of underwear; handmade thong sandals with red leather straps that had been her mother's; a small Bible made for children; and a silver cross on a silver chain she had received at First Communion.

The years with her aunt, uncle, and cousins were fine, but she was always aware of being a guest in the house, someone from the outside, even as they took care to include her in everything and take her everywhere the other children went: some things simply can't be manufactured. This house, with Olivier and the children, was hers.

They both found work as accountants and were happy. Life was simple but good, and Olivier continued to dream of the next steps they should take for a bigger house, a better car, better jobs, vacations abroad. She let him dream since she had all she wanted, for the most part, though, secretly, back then, what she would have liked was a bigger bed, what some people called a "family bed," where they could fit together like on Noah's ark, and she could have a square of space entirely her own and smile to herself because her mind would be empty of worry with all the beings she cared most for in the world (this included a raggedy family cat who liked to scratch at things) around her, suspended as if on a barge floating out to sea, contained, inseparable. She had an image in her mind of each of them sprawled in a different place on the mattress covered in white linens, and how she and Olivier would watch the tadpoles grow into their full size until every inch of the mattress surface was covered up. The image used to make her laugh. She could not imagine her babies with a mustache, or long hair, long-armed,

heavy, thick-limbed. But she imagined them beautiful nonetheless, better reflections of both Olivier and herself, more supple, athletic, smarter, improved versions in every way.

When the tugging started on her right elbow, as she slept folded in on herself as she used to sleep, that image of all of them growing old together had begun to fade. She had begun to forget what each of them looked like. Not because Douz had happened so long ago (was it, now, only a few months ago, six months ago? It seemed so much longer), but because the shock of their sudden disappearance had broken something in her mind, the part that was able to take things in and let them go, that wanted for little more than she had. The violence of this loss was like nothing she had ever experienced before, not like her parents' departures or her grandmother waving goodbye to her as she climbed into the back of her aunt and uncle's four-wheel drive, where she sat between two of the cousins, their sweaty thighs touching stickily together in the heat, forming an unexpected bond in place of the tearing away from all that she had held dear and familiar.

The morning of the Event, she remembered, they were there, eating breakfast, fighting over something that would soon be forgotten; they went off to school, hair combed or plaited, looking smart in their school clothes. They came home from school, washed up, changed into play clothes, did their homework, then asked for permission to go play with their friends as they waited for Olivier to return home and sit down to dinner. She'd said yes, as she almost always did (why had she said yes, why hadn't she been stricter, as Olivier had started to insist that she be?). Out they went, little arms flailing in that smooth, devil-may-care way that only children have—miniature dancers with hidden internal choreographers named happiness and simplicity, love. That's what they were—love in movement, her love, Olivier's, all the world's love wrapped up in their little fists pumping through the air, feet following, drumming the earth for joy.

Jonas, their oldest, she'd sent to get an egg from Ma Lou, the old woman in the market who doted on her son as if he were her own, sent him to and from the market to run errands for other clients when she could spare him. He loved the attention, feeling grown. But the boy had turned eleven, though he had been a brooding ten going on eleven, a ruminator like his father. He was often distracted as he made his way to and from the market, counting his steps in every direction that he went. Televisions and radios caught his attention, other children from school, or the market women

themselves, with their *teledyòl* and tall tales. He listened to it all and sometimes reported back. He loved to tell her about the soap opera named *Frijolito*, or little bean, which everyone liked to watch at a house down the road from them, the house of a woman whose name she didn't know but who had a sullen-looking nephew who had helped her to install a used television in her living room that she turned toward a window so that neighbors could watch, too. She didn't watch telenovelas, didn't have any use for them. And what did romance have to do with "little beans," anyway? That day, she'd told him to come right back with the egg. She needed it to strengthen a thin soup, was already imagining the filaments of egg, beaten and swirled into the broth, thickening it to a lustrous yellow. Why had he not done as she'd asked, that day, come right back with the egg? Why had he dallied and gone to take a peek at the soap opera with the neighborhood children? Why had he entered the house rather than stood outside, like the others (because he was too short, this she knew, so always minced his way through alcoves and doorjambs, but still she asked herself the questions, over and over again, as if the answers might come back differently, though they never did)? Why had he always, like her husband, his father, been so distracted by everything around him? Why couldn't he stay on a straight path? She thought this, now, lying on the cot, knowing that if Olivier, her husband, had stayed on a straight path, one that would have brought him greater wealth, maybe better class standing, they might have never met, never made the children, who, all, were gone. Maybe this was why she asked the question, Why? If they had never met—which would have been better?

The tug, insistent, in the middle of the night: she had turned to the darkness next to her, inches above the ground, and said to it: "Please, please leave." Then turned her head back against the thin mattress she had been given in the camp by some act of grace because she'd come there with nothing more than the stitch of clothes on her back, a headdress, some flat-heeled shoes, a ribbon from one of their daughters' heads (had she come alone?).

Her children came to define her. Not even Olivier had been able to mark her in that way. They taught her who she was and who she wanted to be. Something more than a mother, something of the divine, an intermediary between heaven and earth, the vessel that brought them from over there to here, who'd made flesh out of spirit. They made her believe in holy things,