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Rhythms, Memories & Whips

FOR WYNTON MARSALIS

Memory is jolted by musical waves
with pin-pricked notes. Thunderous,
squawking, wailing and hunting sounds
of Wynton Marsalis's "Blood on the Fields"
prompted dormant memories to ride the music
until slaves and exploited farm workers
come dancing with blistered feet
under the angry drum-beating sun.

I've hiked hills in Barbados,
Antigua, Jamaica, Cuba,
and in Haiti where slaves' machetes
sliced through slave-masters' glutton
flesh that oozed molasses and bitter sugar.
And on those hills there are reminders
that bent-back-blacks toiled those lands
until dusk to repose their whip-cracked skins.

On green-lush plantations,
mills with phallic chimneys
visibly stood as a reminder:
the Americas are pregnant
with freedom-gripping countries.
Lands where necks are wrung with iron chains.
I drank my salted tears when I saw
a row of middle-aged women
in Jamaica's blue mountains
picking coffee beans. Absent from his whip,
a mulatto surveyor on horseback kept close watch.
Marsalis's slow-moaning trumpet
resounded in my head like a lingering

cat's call for its lost young. Perhaps it was
an unconscious recalling of ancestral voices
on the auction block. We've tried dancing out
our memory, but the music lingered, tugged
and plucked notes on the umbilical cord.
Generations linked by rhythms.

My memory rode the music, scaling
jagged notes with whips-split-skins beats.
I remember the sound of drums fiercely beating
and the aroma of rum peppering night air
on Haitian hills of Leogâne, where returnees
from the Dominican Republic's cane fields
celebrated their homecoming with freedom's feast.
Men and women danced around a blazing campfire,
with arms scarred by sugar cane's sword-like leaves.

Generations' *blood on the fields*,
Marsalis tried reconnecting memories
through snappy riffs, jumpy and jagged lines,
voicing pain and the blues of a people bruised
on the road to freedom. Music bled memories
as we danced out our anger. Music is coping,
music is history and long gone generations
have clapped and stepped-out cruelties.
On the Caribbean mountains,
or the United States' deep south,
past and present, toiling bodies sang
night-songs to lay down burdens
and strengthen dreams that one day
blistered feet will dance freedom's feast
in a pantheon of reposed souls.

