

In Search of God, Dirt or Ecstasy

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“I ask that we consider sand as a repository both of feeling and of experience, of affect and of history, in the Caribbean region. Here sand links us unswervingly to place, to a particular landscape that bears traces of both connection and loss. I imagine it to be “saturated” with the presence of people who have walked on and carried it, but simultaneously “empty” of the archaeological and forensic traces that would testify to that presence. If water is the romantic metaphor that has irredeemably made its place in Caribbean and African diasporic studies, sand is the less embraced referent that returns us to the body’s messy realities. Water washes, makes clean.¹ Sand gets inside our bodies, our things, in ways at once inconvenient and intrusive. It smoothes rough edges but also irritates, sticking to our bodies’ folds and fissures.”

- Vanessa Agard-Jones (2012), *What the Sands Remember*

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“You will learn how His Majesty ratifies these espousals; probably this is done when He ravishes the soul by ecstasies, thus depriving it of its faculties; if the use of these were retained, I think the sight of its close vicinity to so mighty a Sovereign would probably deprive the body of life. (...)

By the commands of the Bridegroom, the doors of the mansions and even those of the keep and of the whole castle are closed; for when He intends ravishing the soul He takes away the power of speech, and although occasionally the other faculties are retained rather longer, no word can be uttered.²⁷⁹ Sometimes the person is at once deprived of all the senses, the hands and body becoming as cold as if the soul had fled; occasionally no breathing can be detected. (280...) This supreme state of ecstasy never lasts long, but although it ceases, it leaves the will so inebriated,²⁸² and the mind so transported out of itself that for a day, or sometimes for several days, such a person is incapable of attending to anything but what excites the will to the love of God; although wide awake enough to this, she seems asleep as regards all earthly matters.

Oh, when the soul wholly returns to itself, how abashed does it feel at having received this favour and how passionate are its desires of serving God in any way He asks of it! (...)

She considers it a great favour when God sends her this rapture in secret, for when others see it the shame and confusion she feels are so great as somewhat to diminish her transport. Knowing the malice of the world, she fears her ecstasy will not be attributed to its proper cause but may give rise to rash judgment instead of the praise due for it to God. Although this pain and distress are unavoidable, they seem to me to show a certain want of humility, for if she wished to be despised, what would she care? (286...)”

— Saint Teresa d’Avila (1515-1582), *Treats of how God suspends the soul in prayer by a trance, ecstasy or rapture, which I believe are all the same thing. Great courage required to receive extraordinary favours from Hi Majesty.*

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“Create no images of God. Accept the images that God has provided. They are everywhere, in everything. God is Change— Seed to tree, tree to forest; Rain to river, river to sea; Grubs to bees, bees to swarm. From one, many; from many, one; Forever uniting, growing, dissolving— forever Changing. The universe is God’s self-portrait.”

— Octavia E. Butler (1993), *Parable of the Sower*

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The rivers carried our blood. Our bodies. Our sex. Our faith.

And our magic.

Because life was treated so flippantly, the soul too found itself sleuthed off without ceremony, falling between the planks of the decks all matted up with flesh and hair and blood and juices, saliva, screams, nails, excrement and dust. Clinging on to something that used to mean sacred. Life. Sentience. Ecology. So that dust travelled in the rains and thus the rivers and thus the oceans and thus the shores and thus the dust and thus the air and thus the rains. Over and over we cycled.

Down Cachuara, to the plantations and the houses, and the graves, to the auction block and the road, and the dust and sand. To the Good Death Sisterhood. Down the Gambia, the Volta, into Naa Korle, River Densu, the Niger; the Congo; the Liesbeeck; the Limpopo; the Vaal; the Orinoco; Essequibo; Casiquiare; Rio Negro; Cataniapo; Amazon; Rio Escondido; Rio Osama; Rio Grande; Mississippi; Ohio; Missouri; Illinois; Alabama; Thames; Mersey; Clyde; Ebro; Tagus; Douro; Rhone; Louire.

Yemaya takes our dust, the spongy remains of our ancestors and makes a mud, thick with vengeance and pain, and it was the mud that made us whole again.

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Although the Thames was muddy, polluted and rich with faeces, old boot leather, distended bodies large and small, mould, moss, silt, feathers and all other manner of waste in which new life thrived, the vine found it's way into the convent. It had come a long way, across the Atlantic, adapting to a far from traditional meal of plankton, kelp and fish droppings, so that the vine that arose now was quite a different being to the one that had departed, so many moons ago. It swayed, questing side to side and up and up from the sludge of water to the sludge of the rivers bank it coursed, and then cracks of the imperfect wall, and on and up. Following the feel of faith. It found a damp slit, through which light might penetrate like a poker. The vine slunk into her room, keeping to the shadows, undulating in time with the inhalation's and exhalations of her fitfully sleeping breath.

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The stench of devotion was palpable in the air, so thick it could taste her already. And it had been so long since it had dined with a lover.

Slowly but with certainty, savouring every intensification in air density the closer it got to the sleeping woman whose face was covered with an old dusty bible, pages fluttering slightly with each breath. Contact. Just the slightest hint of touch: tendril to flesh, ankle already blooming with goose bumps, anticipating the sensations to come.

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From the rocks our bodies. And the ocean and the salts and the sand. And the seaweed our hair. And our hands clasped in prayer, and our breasts bare and beckoning for blessings. Forearms caressed in anxious expectation. A thousand orgasms at our lips, erupting tides from the rivers of our thighs and our fears, bodies returning to rocks, to wood and leaf, pool and crustacean. My sister braids umbilical cords to the next life unbound. And the musk of her sex and her sweat and her menstrual blood fill my amniotic sack, so that I might not forget where I came from, might not forget this is just one life of many, that I might remember I am never alone.

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The earth split to birth the shoot from nothing but nutrients and intention. Plant life for miles around had strained and strove and laboured to birth this one green shoot. One middle finger reaching to the stars. Stars where it might one day take root. The shoot came to life hungry, for earth and fluids, light and warmth and it quested about surreptitiously, unsure of predators that might be lurking, but driven out of under by a lust and thirst for which it could not at first account.

It started with invertebrates, a-gender though not a-sexual. They sucked and fucked and ate and shat from all orifices top to bottom and the vine first experienced a joining with slime for lubrication and more slime ejaculated and it found it tepid and bland, tenuous and intriguing. The shoot did not reach vinehood, until it experienced complex communion with the Densu. After seeking blessings from the river deity Ayensu and her husband Kweku Monyi of the Western Simpa lagoon, the two welcomed the shoot into the their riverbed and taught it how to truly pleasure a woman, and thus to truly worship their waters.

The vine learned how to travel by water, exchanging nutrients and knowledge from the river weeds and finally their cousins the weeds of the sea. At open sea they invited the vine to join their amorphous floating cities, rich and packed and peculiar orgies of inter-species ululation and ecstatic conflagrations of mulch. Yet vine had a mission. A message born of blood and unbearable memory, a knowing that had forced it from thought, from intention, from soil and red dust. A message of knives that contained a thousand generations of screaming, eclipsed by a single text book and once again vine hungered. It followed that hunger to a mouth, and upriver to a city and by night it found a wall and by morning it feasted anew.

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The devotee-in-waiting woke drenched in her own sin. She had in fact climaxed so many times that the mattress was soaked through. She had no memory of what transpired, or from whence the ecstasy had come, she knew only that she had been ravished, and been taken and gifted anew, left open and weeping with strange words on her tongue – a tongue familiar yet unknown – memories her bones had tried so hard to forget.

They would say she was a heathen, she panicked, panting and hysterical. They would say they always knew a negro could not be a holy woman, wholly impure in her manner and her being. Her aesthetic, her very skin drenched in blackest sin.

Yet she found no culprit in her chambers, nor any evidence of entry. Naught but a pile of earth upon her crisp white pillow, rich and dark as her fleshful immorality. She whimpered and wept, whilst inside her a seed took root, and in her mouth the taste of home.

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Heads wrapped in iridescent futures we called. Our wombs afire with drumming, responding to the call. We ached and bled and the sinewy life leaked down our calves muscled and scarred and ancient. It had been generations since we bled and our achilles almost forgot the sensation of hot stickyness; of earth and life

incarnate kissing the backs of our heels. Not too much now, not too much. Save enough for the contouring. Our heads are wrapped in iridescent futures that whip and crack and chatter catching sun and sea and visions. And our sister quakes in fear surrounded by white cotton our fingers have known since bud, surrounded by a purity wholly insincere. We call and we quake and we cum just a little, so that our lover's seed might set course and bring the message back to us.

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The vineling trembled a little as it fought gastric acids for survival, as it craved light, air and water and sites to behold. But it knew it had to wait. Wait until the waters inside her were echoed by the waters all around. So it sent shocks of scotch bonnets up her oesophagus at regular intervals to spur her on towards the ships. To follow blood trails, which never dissipate; and dust trails, which only sediment and transform; and bone trails who join the clans of the mighty as trophies and totems until they are called home.

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The devotee booked passage using coins she had repatriated from the the prayer box. She knew this mission to be of holy intent and so left no word of her departure. In the days she was plagued with roiling nausea and vomited frequent prayers into the Atlantic, and finally the Sargasso Sea. At night she was overcome with ecstasies pungent and all-encompassing, they brooked no argument and she woke feeling cleansed, light and malleable. So that whilst her body bloated as though with child, it also evanesced a little, and when the ship was caught in storms and thrust deep down to the belly of the swell, she floated a few inches above the deck floor and felt no impact, nor any fear. For she knew now her sisters waited, bleeding and cumming in perfect synchronicity, as she carried the message home.

The night the waters turned translucent and so warm they steamed in the darkness emitting a throbbing glow that could only mean God was watching and wished not to miss a moment to shadows, the devotee propelled her body onto the deck. Her fingernails were broken and bloody from clinging on to bits of splintering ship for she could no longer walk it's halls aground. Rather she floated, her hair loose and self-assured, swaying only a little in the cross-currently of night air, as though the entire ship had sunk without her notice and now they swam in place of breathing.

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The glow of the corals beckoned her topside, and she paid no mind to the night crew who stared and crossed themselves and crossed their hearts against the fey and the message, and the memories their own bodies worked so hard to forget even as they scrubbed the decks of ships whose conscience could never come clean.

She looked into the darkness and saw a treeline beyond human site, and a beach and a reef. So she overflowed the bough and starfish rose to caress her heels and to imbibe the blood and cum that had already started flowing as the drumming rocked her womb and her breasts grew heavy with potential, and even her buttocks spread invitingly, anticipation leaking just a little. The devotee bit her lip to hold it back and moved faster across the waves.

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Ancestors and descendants alike gathered to greet the new arrival. And they held her as she birthed the vine. And they held each other as it supped and worshiped. And then they held the dirt as it trembled with the message so long awaited. The message of memories. The message of futures. The message of home.

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The oceans carried our blood. Our memories. Our agony. Our sap. Our salve. Our ecstasy.

And our becoming.

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