

*Patrick Sylvain*



## Rhythms, Memories & Whips

FOR WYNTON MARSALIS

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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.

