Excerpt from *Antoine of Gommiers*

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Translated by Nathan H. Dize

In a country full of adversity where it is said ‘dèyè mòn, gen mòn, beyond mountains there are mountains,’ another particular feature of Gommiers is its vast plain that leads to the sea. It is a restless sea that does not necessarily spark the urge to take a dip. The so-called sons of the first and second secretaries of the master agreed, however, on one thing. Antoine of Gommiers, was hardly a well-built man or an athlete. He would set out sometimes at dawn, and after a long walk punctuated by stops to greet the acacias and the eucalyptuses—his preferred trees, apart from the soursop trees—he reached the coast, took off his clothing, and plunged into these waters, known for being too strong for the likes of man. This oracle of wisdom, whose knowledge foretold the dangers of obsession and excess, dared an act that only senseless children had attempted before. A few had given their lives to the sea, consumed by the currents, their bodies never to be recovered. The luckiest among them had been rescued by fishing boats. Taken back to their parents by the seafaring fishermen, the children fell into a delirium for months, swearing that beneath the sea they had witnessed a myriad of colors and encountered fantastical creatures that they could not even describe. Nightmares invaded their dreams, and after having tried every possible remedy, potions and prayers, their parents finally took them to see the master. He locked himself with the rescued child for a moment in the room of treasures as the son of the first secretary called it, or the workshop according to the son of the second secretary. The worried parents, gathered in the courtyard, overheard the laughter of children, voices full of youth, as though there were two kids having fun inside. Then the sick child emerged, perky and grinning, with the slightly less smiling master in tow. Antoine of Gommiers greeted the grateful family with a wave of his hat. Before the family’s departure, the child and the seer exchanged one final glance, and it felt like their eyes shared a vigor and a complicity of old friends who had seen their way through many of life’s challenges and pitfalls together. He confided
in his secretaries the secret he shared with the children: it’s not what you see that matters most, but what you make of what you see.

The parents of the children rescued from the point of Gommiers tried everything, from idle threats to gifts, exhausting the repertoire of ruses parents use to betray a child’s vigilance. Not a single child revealed the content of the conversation they held with the master. And every one of them, those who left to make a life for themselves either in the capital or abroad, excelling in their professions to the point of notoriety, just like those content to live the life of a small-time farmer, never leaving their natal Grande Anse, returned to find the master at regular intervals, their hands overflowing with seashells.

**Antoine of Gommiers knew how to be old with the elders, and youthful with the youngsters.** One thing was for certain, nobody had ever seen such a swimmer in a region where there was nothing metaphoric about the expression “like a fish in water.” The wild beaches of Gommiers were the most dangerous part of the coast, they only attracted lunatics. But for dozens of kilometers, the people of Grande Anse were people of the sea. Swimming was a part of everyday life, and all along the peninsular coastline, there were numerous swimmers whose prowess remained engrained in peoples’ memories. Everyone remembered the poet who claimed to be a sea bass. Abandoning the composition of an ode to the sea, he dove from his tiny pleasure boat to save a military officer who was sent to quell yet another imaginary uprising from the currents. The powers-that-be felt that the region was too quiet. Some threat must be brewing. Repression is the best weapon of prevention. Repression was the best weapon of prevention. A brutal, high-ranking officer was needed to conduct such a mission. The members of the death squad had witnessed their leader, a scoundrel and author of many bloodthirsty crimes under the influence of a higher power, turn his back on the mission and wade into the sea with a robotic cadence. Soon, he became nothing more than a little dot, barely larger than the boat of the seafaring poet. Many opinions changed hands: did he do the right thing by saving this man, a rapist and torturer? Was this person’s life worth suspending the composition of a poem and risking his own life in exchange? But everyone recognized that the seafaring poet, while he was not necessarily a master wordsmith or navigator, was one hell of a swimmer. He spent two whole hours dragging a body weighed down by crimes and heavy metal to the shore. The rescued man then resigned from the army, begged for his victims’ forgiveness, avoided the
sea, and visited every holy site he could in search of repentance. The seafaring poet sold his boat and gave up his pursuit of the muse’s call, contenting himself with giving swimming lessons.

The folks of Grand Anse also remembered the Mombin brothers, whose skiff was battered and overturned by a hurricane. The Mombin twins did everything together. They got married on the same day to two of the most beautiful women in the region, women who were coveted by the young men of the bourgeoisie and the local representatives of the public administration. The women refused everyone’s proposals to wed the Mombin brothers. The twins boasted nothing more than a dilapidated house, a small-time fishing business, and a reputation as fighters. The two couples lived in the same house, they ate lunch together beneath the veranda, and they accompanied one another to the evening ball at the local harvest festival, where the wives danced in a manner the jealous locals judged too lascivious for one’s husband as well as for one’s brother-in-law. Rumor has it that the four secretly took turns with one another in their decrepit abode.

The Mombin twins were setting out to catch sea turtles. Despite the portending signs of an oncoming hurricane, nobody thought to discourage them. The Mombin brothers always did as they pleased anyway. And their eventual disappearance did not exactly bother the chivalrous locals already primed to go on the prowl for their widows. The furious winds lasted an entire day. When the calm was restored, all there was left to account for was the devastation, the destroyed plantations, the trees torn from their roots, the roofs blown off, and to count the dead and those who had disappeared. The Mombin brothers were the first to be listed among the disappeared. Their wives were beautiful, and full of youth. The prefect, the mayor, the district commander, the local bureaucrats, and the important clerks rushed to the widows’ house, their eyes overflowing with a desire hardly commensurate with a visit to express their condolences. The awkward coterie even went so far as to advise the women allow themselves a brief period of mourning followed by a rapid return, accompanied by the mundane joys of life. Three days after the passage of the hurricane, the Mombin brothers emerged from the water, exhausted, and covered in scrapes and bruises, their skin burned by the sun, the two of them carrying an enormous sea turtle. They walked peacefully towards their house where their wives welcomed them home like heroes. The night of their return, the two
Mafalda Mondestin, *This World Can Be a Scary Place, But it is Home*, 2018, Mixed Media on canvas, 8” x 10”. Courtesy of the Artist.
Their fathers, men who never told a lie, admitted they had never seen a better, more gorgeous swimmer than Antoine of Gommiers. Couples invited the local elite and the victims of the storm to join them and share in a turtle stew.

Grande Anse had no shortage of great swimmers. But the peasants claiming to be the sons of the first and second secretaries of the master were blunt. Their fathers, men who never told a lie, admitted they had never seen a better, more gorgeous swimmer than Antoine of Gommiers. He moved through the water with complete and utter grace, calming the waves with his strokes, escorted by the flight of the blue herons and kingfishers. As soon as he turned around, the birds, which fled the commerce of mankind by instinct, stood on the beach to wait for him. After putting his clothing back on and regaining the appearance of an ordinary man, he started on his return home, walking at a gentle pace, so softly that he did not disturb the agouti and the mabouya. The peasants he encountered along the way greeted him, saying “Bonjour, master.” He replied using his right index finger to tip his hat, and sometimes he stopped long enough to have a coffee or a tea in the tiny house of a peasant family to bring them the news, but only if the news was good.

The sea. A load of shit. I recalled the lyrics from one of the singers Franky invited to the viewing, foaming at the mouth like a rabid dog. “Lanmè Pòtòprens yon lanmè fatra anba pye. M ta fout li on kout tanbou raboday nan bounda l, pou ofinal li pote non lanmè. The sea of Port-au-Prince, a sea of trash beneath your feet. I’d give it a swift kick of the raboday drum in the ass, so that when it’s all said and done, she bears the name of the sea.” I could’ve told him, the singer, given him some real information he could use to improve his couplet. I could’ve told him that even if you’re already angry with the sea, there’s no use in kicking it. Beneath the surface, there’s something solid that scrapes the skin and fractures the bone. Franky and me, we tried it out when we were fourteen years old. We were a little embarrassed we’d never set foot in this place that everyone talked about. Drugs. Clandestine departures. The drowned. The haunted looks on the faces of survivors forcefully repatriated by the American Coast Guard. Day trips organized by the neighborhood. Even the Église de la Dernière Chance organized an outing every year, supervised by the deacons and the pastor. Bikinis were prohibited, and compulsory prayers before swimming. Forbidden also were those couples and their escapades on private beaches along the road to the south. The girls always returned full of melancholy. And the boys, their heads held high like a cock, declared that in the sea you
could have sex without protection because salt was even better than citrus at protecting against viruses and microbes. The sea was something you had to get to know. The fact that we had never waded into its waters was one of our greatest flaws. Antoinette never had the money for the planned day trips. Or, if she did have it, she hated to imagine us so far away from her. Walking was her way of life. Her trademark. Not ours. To her, the only place we were allowed to go without running any risk was nowhere at all. This is also probably why she preferred Franky. Apart from running off to his conference presentations and this madness of going to Gommiers, Franky prefers to take walks in his head. For that matter, he doesn’t exactly give the impression that he’s suffering by staying glued to his seat. He has the old books that Savior brings him, his pencils, his notebooks, Antoine’s life story that he works on every day from morning to night. I notice him laughing as he writes and, without telling him, I’m happy to know that writing brings him a little bit of joy. As for his chair, I’m not so sure. Even if he doesn’t let anything on, along with his asthma, it must torture him to suffer from these legs that no longer have any use, having to ask for help to move from one place to another. The silence between us has become its own activity, one of those everyday acts to which we devote our energy to complete the façade. These are tricks you use to better portray a character, a version of us fit for others. To avoid boring everyone, sometimes you provide a summary, a few details, an appearance. And everyone’s delighted to be able to say to themselves, “Look, there’s whatshisname!” before moving on to something else.

We wanted to get to know the sea. We knew that the waters by Port-au-Prince weren’t exactly the ideal place to make its acquaintance. But even the ocean divides us. When you don’t have a boat to reach open water or a sandy path leading to a beach worthy of such a name, you make do with what you have. You’re happy with what’s accessible. Exiting the alley, an accessible beach isn’t far. It smells like gasoline, and to the right, you see the wharf and the big commercial ships. To the left, there’s nothing to see. It’s the same watery expanse, if you can even call it water, extending into infinity. About thirty minutes. All you do is exit the alley onto Grand Rue. Enter the Cité. The Cité, where the real bosses, the real gangs, the real poor people live. There, where you walk without lifting your gaze or looking at the people you pass along the way, I don’t know how they manage to recognize that you’re an outsider. That you live somewhere else. Even when that somewhere else is so
Mafalda Mondestin, Sometimes We Must Take Turns To Rest, 2021, Mixed Media on Paper, 12" x 14". Courtesy of the Artist.
close by. Even when you have nothing, just like them. The people from
the Cité believe, even if you have nothing, if you’re from somewhere
else, it can’t possibly be the same as their nothing. They stick together
and don’t tolerate stares. At the end of the Cité there’s the sea.

There were lots of people there. Boys our age. And one real little
kid. Seven or eight years old, tops. With lumpy inner tubes to float
on. The first disappointment: we were looking for somewhere else,
this was nothing more than an extension of the Cité. We saw more plastic
bottles than water. And the water—it was neither blue nor green. I don’t
even think it was water anymore, but a thick sauce that takes on the dark
colors of the ingredients it’s made of.

The sea of Port-au-Prince, it’s a mixture of water and whatever we throw into it. The second disappoint-
ment, especially for Franky, who by virtue of his belief in fairy tales, got
it into his head that once you’re in the sea all men become brothers.
The group of boys didn’t consider us brothers at all and shot us overtly
threatening looks. Only the little one seemed to have taken sympathy
upon us and came closer toward us. The only one who said hello to us.
The others scanned us from top to bottom like we didn’t belong and
shouted that he shouldn’t sympathize with foreigners. It was the first
time we’d been treated like foreigners. Up to that point, foreigners had
always meant someone else. A lost Blan, looking for an “artist” who lived
in the alley. A young man, dressed too well, sent by a real estate com-
pany to inspect an abandoned building or a set of buildings “for sale”
along Grand Rue. The drivers of luxury cars whizzing by with apologies
and fear in their eyes as we exchanged looks.

“Well, they’re boys just like us.” And the little boy continued to move
toward us, smiling and holding out his hand. If you don’t have any
power, nobody likes to be a foreigner. Foreign can mean two things.
Uninvolved, just passing through, and powerful. Or particularly vul-
nerable and ignorant of the laws of the land. We were in the second
category. It was heartening to see the little boy oppose the older boys’
chess match and treat us like fellow human beings. Small and brave.
He offered to loan us his inner tube for a few minutes. “You’ll see,
once you ignore the trash, it’s kind of nice. You sit in the middle of
the inner tube, and then you let someone move you around.” It was
our first time. We didn’t know how it worked. “I’ll help you.” We took
off our shirts and stepped into the sea made of more than just water.
I had hidden our cash in a plastic bag in the pocket of my shorts. We
never had enough money to be taking any risks. We kept our shoes on.
Together with the little boy, we walked over metal plates, plastic bottles,
Mafalda Mondestin, You Don't See Us, But We See You, 2021, Mixed Media on Paper; 20” x 24”. Courtesy of the Artist.
scrap metal, chunks of concrete. Everything humans could have made use of floated beneath our feet. Then the little boy sat Franky on top of the inner tube and joked: “You look like a king.” The king’s butt was in the water. Me, I had my legs. “Just like me. You’ll serve the king.” The little boy had spirit. Okay, serve the king. I joined him. One hand on the inner tube. Kicking his feet, he pushed us. The further we moved forward—the water up to our waists, our faces—the more I felt that something lying dormant was about to come alive. If he had asked me, I would have told the singer with the enraged voice that he was mistaken. The trash wasn’t under our feet. But all around us. And bits of I don’t even know what floated to the surface and smacked us right in the face. The boy continued to push us. Into the open water. I was already on the tips of my toes, he kept pushing. Then he said: “Alright, I’ll leave you to it.” He made his way to the shore, swimming like a fish, and joined his friends. With his asthma and all the trash floating around the two of us, Franky started to panic. He flailed his hands in every direction and the dirty water he flung around splashed me in the face and got in my mouth. One hand clinging to the inner tube, I searched for the bottom. Something to push against to pull us forward. Seek, and you shall find. Something more powerful than the sole of my shoes punctured the sole of my foot. That’s right, comrade singer, the sea of Port-au-Prince, a sea of metal beneath your feet. Franky was out of breath. I was bleeding. I didn’t notice the blood until later. In the list of ingredients that make up the sea of Port-au-Prince, there are also drops of blood. Being afraid is a feeling that Franky and I have often shared. A fear of the dark. A fear of being caught by Antoinette after we’d done something stupid. A fear of the devil. When we were little and we heard the noise of birds landing on the roof, we thought it was the devil himself coming to get us. The fear of catching a disease in Doriane’s tiny bedroom, our first prostitute and our first lover. A fear of stray bullets when, for some reason or another, the night took Grand Rue by surprise. A fear of Baba, one of Pépé’s associates who threatened to beat the shit out of us because Joanna, his girlfriend, his property, was taking secretarial classes and sometimes came by to have Franky help her with her homework. At fourteen years old, when you live on one of the streets leading to Grand Rue, you think you’re a bigshot, precocious, and in your own mind you’ve already seen all there is to fear. But all our past fears, they were nothing more than hypotheticals. Not death in real time. The sea of Port-au-Prince penetrated our lungs while we sank deeper.

The sea of Port-au-Prince penetrated our lungs while we sank deeper, drifting into open water. We were going to die. We didn’t dare look at one another.
drifting into open water. We were going to die. We didn’t dare look at one another. Antoine of Gommiers, couldn’t have seen this coming. We couldn’t die and leave Antoinette all alone. Who would accompany her to the bank to buy her lottery tickets? Who would she tell her farfetched stories? And who would she beat on after daring to express doubt? And, what would she tell herself afterwards? That I dragged Franky into this? For Antoinette, one always drags the other into something bad. Danilo drags me into it, and I drag Franky. Danilo told me not to wander into that rotten sea. Wait. He was working on a plan so that, one day, the three of us could go to a real sea. Some ideas occur to Franky and I simultaneously, without any need for discussion. And when it happens, nothing can hold us back. And so, we were going to drown together. In this filthy sea. What’s that element of style in Franky’s repertoire called? The one where you accept both meanings of the word, the literal and the figurative. A filthy sea in every sense of the word. We didn’t think about the meaning. When death is certain, what’s the point in thinking about it! Resurrection being improbable. I heard the boy’s voice calling out to us, waving at us with his hands. His ten fingers spread wide, then his fists closed. Four times in a row. And another gesture with his hand, creasing imaginary bills. I understood. Forty goud. OK. Forty goud in service of the king and his servant. Humor wasn’t all this kid had. He swam towards us. For a few interminable seconds, we wondered if he would get here in time. He did. Perfect timing. He must have calculated the whole thing. He helped Franky sit back on the inner tube correctly. The king’s ass was back in the water, and I clung with both hands to the side of the inner tube. The kid told us to calm down, to quit making useless and chaotic movements and to just let him lead us back. His voice no longer had the softness of a suggestion. The voice of a leader. We obeyed his commands like docile sheep. He took us back ashore, and while we put our shirts back on, he told me the time had come to pay up before his friends got angry. I took the plastic bag out of my shorts, and the money out of the bag. Without rancor. In a world where survival depends on your ability to cope, forty goud is a cheap price to pay for allowing yourself to forget that the appearance of kindness is a slippery slope leading right into a trap. We simply forgot. Forty goud for our naiveté. In my little plastic bag, there was only thirty-seven goud. The little boy’s friends formed a circle around us and wanted to beat the crap out of us over the three missing goud. “It’s alright,” he said, “we’ll let them go.” My foot was still bleeding. He gave me back five goud. “To buy some tetracycline. I don’t know what you cut yourself on: some iron, a nail, an old bone. Anyway, you’ll need a few doses otherwise your whole body could start to rot.” I told him thanks. “Let’s go home, guys.” The others obeyed him, mumbling, and broke apart the circle. A true little leader. And clever to boot. With just a little bit of kindness to spare.
There you go, my songwriter, add that to your inventory. Bones also lie in the sea of Port-au-Prince.

for the antibiotics, nobody forced him to do that. As for the sea, that was our first time, and our last. Still, to this day, I have no idea what I cut myself on. I like to think that it was a piece of iron instead of a bone. There you go, my songwriter, add that to your inventory. Bones also lie in the sea of Port-au-Prince. And I don’t know what scared me more. The fear of abandoning Antoinette. The disapproving words she would have pronounced to my dead body for having dragged her beloved Franky to his death. The feeling that I was going to die. Or the idea of losing my brother. I never saw the little boy again. I tell myself that, in service of some sort of cause, whether good or evil, with the face of an angel and the genius of a trickster, he would make one hell of a leader. ☪