

A MOMENT OF DEFIANCE

Mattie stands on the early morning Georgia shore waiting for the consignment to be unloaded. She stares out into the horizon summoning memories of warm sunrises, ecru earth, and verdant trees to warm her. Pungent odors, wafting from the bowels of a nearby ship, shoot up her nostrils dissipating her reverie. She pulls a vanilla soaked handkerchief from her sweater pocket, then deeply inhales the sweet scent to staunch the nausea and dizziness threatening to pitch her forward into the undulating dark sea.

Kicks and curses drill the air as the crew pushes human cargo up into daylight. She watches as they appear on deck with urine and feces caked skin. Colorless men bark orders at the bound formation moving in stolid rhythm. Mattie shields her eyes from the intensity of the ascending sun to look at the work ahead of her.

It is her charge to return gray eyes to a vibrant brown. It is her duty to put sheen on ashen bellies to highlight future produce. It is her responsibility to teach cramped and swollen legs to walk straight into a horror even greater than they're capture. This has been her reoccurring nightmare for the past three years.

She looks away from the ship towards the makeshift slave pens on the road above the sandy shore. Already, keen eyed buyers wait to check teeth, separate legs and feel breast to ensure a quality purchase. Mattie pulls her sweater closer to her chest, as she feels the surge of futility. There is nothing she can do.

A booming command to sing brings forth a mournful dirge. With each note, confusion and fear rise to the heavens, as if the singers are trying to reach God's ear. This is the part that Mattie hates the most. She'd been forced to sing when her ship landed ten years past. Different

languages merging into a unified plea for home, for God, for freedom cause her to stumble as she walks towards her beckoning master. He is impatient for his parcels to disembark. Impatient to see how much his riches and status will swell at the sale of this herd of human chattel.

Suddenly, there is chaos. Startling screams and frenzied movements stop Mattie in her tracks. The repeated clink of collapsing shackles smacking the water, permeate the air. It all happens so fast. With surprised eyes, they stand in awe as the flow of willing bodies drop into the churning ocean. It is the unstoppable chained forward motion. It is the unity of spirit saying no to someone else's definition of life. It is the desire to go home by any means necessary that sends Mattie to her knees.

In those seconds of no recovery, stunned quiet pierces the atmosphere. Mattie begins to sing, "Wadin' in the water. Wadin' in the water. Wadin' in the water. God's a gonna trouble the water". She rises smiling. Her gaze is as strong as the bark of the sacred Marula tree in her homeland. The sweet taste of the tree's yellow fruit fills her mouth as she walks towards the water's edge.

Mattie unravels her white head wrap and cast it into the sky. The wind scoops it up into the soaring path of squawking seabirds. With each step, she discards a piece of her clothing, each representing the tortures she's suffered. Repeated rapes. Repeated beatings. Repeated children sold. Two fingers gone, from her disobedience of being unable to pick cotton with bloody hands. Unheeded cries for her mama, for her father, for her home. She stands naked with sea water lapping at her feet.

No one sees her dissipating steps into the watery abyss, now, full of ancestral bodies already melding into a cradle of welcoming reprieve. Mattie opens her mouth to accelerate her

descent. The rush of water, like the Boali Falls, thunderous and consuming, fills her lungs as she plunges towards the ocean floor. Inside each surrounding water bubble she sees the embracing images of crushed peanuts inside a pot of ground nut stew, her mother stirring the aromatic ingredients, her father waiting to eat, and her grandmother smiling. Her grandfather is playing ceremonial drums when the arms of the newly dead begin to touch and hug her, together they will journey home.