

CREATE DANGEROUSLY

The Immigrant Artist at Work

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CHAPTER 1

Create Dangerously: The Immigrant Artist at Work

On November 12, 1964, in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, a huge crowd gathered to witness an execution. The president of Haiti at that time was the dictator François “Papa Doc” Duvalier, who was seven years into what would be a fifteen-year term. On the day of the execution, he decreed that government offices be closed so that hundreds of state employees could be in the crowd. Schools were shut down and principals ordered to bring their students. Hundreds of people from outside the capital were bused in to watch.

The two men to be executed were Marcel Numa and Louis Drouin. Marcel Numa was a tall, dark-skinned twenty-one-year-old. He was from a family of coffee planters in a beautiful southern Haitian town called Jérémie, which is often dubbed the “city of poets.” Numa had studied engineering at the Bronx Merchant Academy in New York and had worked for an American shipping company.

Louis Drouin, nicknamed Milou, was a thirty-one-year-old light-skinned man who was also from Jérémie. He had served in the U.S. army—at Fort Knox, and then at Fort Dix in New Jersey—and had studied finance before working for French,

Swiss, and American banks in New York. Marcel Numa and Louis Drouin had been childhood friends in Jérémie.

The men had remained friends when they'd both moved to New York in the 1950s, after François Duvalier came to power. There they had joined a group called Jeune Haiti, or Young Haiti, and were two of thirteen Haitians who left the United States for Haiti in 1964 to engage in a guerrilla war that they hoped would eventually topple the Duvalier dictatorship.

The men of Jeune Haiti spent three months fighting in the hills and mountains of southern Haiti and eventually most of them died in battle. Marcel Numa was captured by members of Duvalier's army while he was shopping for food in an open market, dressed as a peasant. Louis Drouin was wounded in battle and asked his friends to leave him behind in the woods.

"According to our principles I should have committed suicide in that situation," Drouin reportedly declared in a final statement at his secret military trial. "Chandler and Guerdès [two other Jeune Haiti members] were wounded . . . the first one asked . . . his best friend to finish him off; the second committed suicide after destroying a case of ammunition and all the documents. That did not affect me. I reacted only after the disappearance of Marcel Numa, who had been sent to look for food and for some means of escape by sea. We were very close and our parents were friends."

After months of attempting to capture the men of Jeune Haiti and after imprisoning and murdering hundreds of their relatives, Papa Doc Duvalier wanted to make a spectacle of Numa and Drouin's deaths.

So on November 12, 1964, two pine poles are erected outside the national cemetery. A captive audience is gathered.

Radio, print, and television journalists are summoned. Numa and Drouin are dressed in what on old black-and-white film seems to be the clothes in which they'd been captured—khakis for Drouin and a modest white shirt and denim-looking pants for Numa. They are both marched from the edge of the crowd toward the poles. Their hands are tied behind their backs by two of Duvalier's private henchmen, Tonton Macoutes in dark glasses and civilian dress. The Tonton Macoutes then tie the ropes around the men's biceps to bind them to the poles and keep them upright.

Numa, the taller and thinner of the two, stands erect, in perfect profile, barely leaning against the square piece of wood behind him. Drouin, who wears brow-line eyeglasses, looks down into the film camera that is taping his final moments. Drouin looks as though he is fighting back tears as he stands there, strapped to the pole, slightly slanted. Drouin's arms are shorter than Numa's and the rope appears looser on Drouin. While Numa looks straight ahead, Drouin pushes his head back now and then to rest it on the pole.

Time is slightly compressed on the copy of the film I have and in some places the images skip. There is no sound. A large crowd stretches out far beyond the cement wall behind the bound Numa and Drouin. To the side is a balcony filled with schoolchildren. Some time elapses, it seems, as the schoolchildren and others mill around. The soldiers shift their guns from one hand to the other. Some audience members shield their faces from the sun by raising their hands to their foreheads. Some sit idly on a low stone wall.

A young white priest in a long robe walks out of the crowd with a prayer book in his hands. It seems that he is the person

everyone has been waiting for. The priest says a few words to Drouin, who slides his body upward in a defiant pose. Drouin motions with his head toward his friend. The priest spends a little more time with Numa, who bobs his head as the priest speaks. If this is Numa's extreme unction, it is an abridged version.

The priest then returns to Drouin and is joined there by a stout Macoute in plain clothes and by two uniformed policemen, who lean in to listen to what the priest is saying to Drouin. It is possible that they are all offering Drouin some type of eye or face cover that he's refusing. Drouin shakes his head as if to say, let's get it over with. No blinders or hoods are placed on either man.

The firing squad, seven helmeted men in khaki military uniforms, stretch out their hands on either side of their bodies. They touch each other's shoulders to position and space themselves. The police and army move the crowd back, perhaps to keep them from being hit by ricocheted bullets. The members of the firing squad pick up their Springfield rifles, load their ammunition, and then place their weapons on their shoulders. Off screen someone probably shouts, "Fire!" and they do. Numa and Drouin's heads slump sideways at the same time, showing that the shots have hit home.

When the men's bodies slide down the poles, Numa's arms end up slightly above his shoulders and Drouin's below his. Their heads return to an upright position above their kneeling bodies, until a soldier in camouflage walks over and delivers the final coup de grace, after which their heads slump forward and their bodies slide further toward the bottom of the pole. Blood spills out of Numa's mouth. Drouin's glasses fall to the

ground, pieces of blood and brain matter clouding the cracked lenses.

The next day, *Le Matin*, one of the country's national newspapers, described the stunned-looking crowd as "feverish, communicating in a mutual patriotic exaltation to curse adventurism and brigandage."

"The government pamphlets circulating in Port-au-Prince last week left little to the imagination," reported the November 27, 1964, edition of the American newsweekly *Time*. "Dr. François Duvalier will fulfill his sacrosanct mission. He has crushed and will always crush the attempts of the opposition. Think well, renegades. Here is the fate awaiting you and your kind."

All artists, writers among them, have several stories—one might call them creation myths—that haunt and obsess them. This is one of mine. I don't even remember when I first heard about it. I feel as though I have always known it, having filled in the curiosity-driven details through photographs, newspaper and magazine articles, books, and films as I have gotten older.

Like many a creation myth, aside from its heartrending clash of life and death, homeland and exile, the execution of Marcel Numa and Louis Drouin involves a disobeyed directive from a higher authority and a brutal punishment as a result. If we think back to the biggest creation myth of all, the world's very first people, Adam and Eve, disobeyed the superior being that fashioned them out of chaos, defying God's order not to eat what must have been the world's most desirable apple. Adam and Eve were then banished from Eden, resulting in everything from our having to punch a clock to spending many long, painful hours giving birth.

The order given to Adam and Eve was not to eat the apple. Their ultimate punishment was banishment, exile from paradise. We, the storytellers of the world, ought to be more grateful than most that banishment, rather than execution, was chosen for Adam and Eve, for had they been executed, there would never have been another story told, no stories to pass on.

In his play *Caligula*, Albert Camus, from whom I borrow part of the title of this essay, has Caligula, the third Roman emperor, declare that it doesn't matter whether one is exiled or executed, but it is much more important that Caligula has the power to choose. Even before they were executed, Marcel Numa and Louis Drouin had already been exiled. As young men, they had fled Haiti with their parents when Papa Doc Duvalier had come to power in 1957 and had immediately targeted for arrest all his detractors and resisters in the city of poets and elsewhere.

Marcel Numa and Louis Drouin had made new lives for themselves, becoming productive young immigrants in the United States. In addition to his army and finance experience, Louis Drouin was said to have been a good writer and the communications director of Jeune Haiti. In the United States, he contributed to a Haitian political journal called *Lambi*. Marcel Numa was from a family of writers. One of his male relatives, Nono Numa, had adapted the seventeenth-century French playwright Pierre Corneille's *Le Cid*, placing it in a Haitian setting. Many of the young men Numa and Drouin joined with to form Jeune Haiti had had fathers killed by Papa Doc Duvalier, and had returned, *Le Cid* and Hamlet-like, to revenge them.

Like most creation myths, this one too exists beyond the scope of my own life, yet it still feels present, even urgent. Marcel Numa and Louis Drouin were patriots who died so that other Haitians could live. They were also immigrants, like me. Yet, they had abandoned comfortable lives in the United States and sacrificed themselves for the homeland. One of the first things the despot Duvalier tried to take away from them was the mythic element of their stories. In the propaganda preceding their execution, he labeled them not Haitian, but foreign rebels, good-for-nothing *blans*.

At the time of the execution of Marcel Numa and Louis Drouin, my recently married, twenty-nine-year-old parents lived in Haiti, in a neighborhood called Bel Air, about a thirty-minute walk from the cemetery. Bel Air had a government-sponsored community center, a *centre d'étude*, where young men and women—but mostly young men—went to study in the evenings, especially if they had no electricity at home. Some of these young people—not my parents, but young people who studied at the center—belonged to a book club, a reading group sponsored by the Alliance Française, the French Institute. The book group was called Le Club de Bonne Humeur, or the Good Humor Club. At the time, Le Club de Bonne Humeur was reading Camus' play *Caligula* with an eye to possibly staging it.

In Camus' version of Caligula's life, when Caligula's sister, who is also his lover, dies, Caligula unleashes his rage and slowly unravels. In a preface to an English translation of the play, Camus wrote, "I look in vain for philosophy in these four acts. . . . I have little regard for an art that deliberately aims to shock because it is unable to convince."

After the executions of Marcel Numa and Louis Drouin, as the images of their deaths played over and over in cinemas and on state-run television, the young men and women of the Club de Bonne Humeur, along with the rest of Haiti, desperately needed art that could convince. They needed art that could convince them that they would not die the same way Numa and Drouin did. They needed to be convinced that words could still be spoken, that stories could still be told and passed on. So, as my father used to tell it, these young people donned white sheets as togas and they tried to stage Camus' play—quietly, quietly—in many of their houses, where they whispered lines like:

Execution relieves and liberates. It is a universal tonic, just in precept as in practice. A man dies because he is guilty. A man is guilty because he is one of Caligula's subjects. Ergo all men are guilty and shall die. It is only a matter of time and patience.

The legend of the underground staging of this and other plays, clandestine readings of pieces of literature, was so strong that years after Papa Doc Duvalier died, every time there was a political murder in Bel Air, one of the young aspiring intellectuals in the neighborhood where I spent the first twelve years of my life might inevitably say that someone should put on a play. And because the uncle who raised me while my parents were in New York for two-thirds of the first twelve years of my life, because that uncle was a minister in Bel Air and had a church and school with some available space, occasionally some of these plays were read and staged, quietly, quietly, in the backyard of his church.

There were many recurrences of this story throughout the country, book and theater clubs secretly cherishing some potentially subversive piece of literature, families burying if not burning their entire libraries, books that might seem innocent but could easily betray them. Novels with the wrong titles. Treatises with the right titles and intentions. Strings of words that, uttered, written, or read, could cause a person's death. Sometimes these words were written by Haitian writers like Marie Vieux-Chauvet and René Depestre, among others. Other times they were written by foreign or *blan* writers, writers like Aimé Césaire, Frantz Fanon, or Albert Camus, who were untouchable because they were either not Haitian or already long dead. The fact that death prevented one from being banished—unlike, say, the English novelist Graham Greene, who was banned from Haiti after writing *The Comedians*—made the “classic” writers all the more appealing. Unlike the country's own citizens, these writers could neither be tortured or murdered themselves nor cause their family members to be tortured or murdered. And no matter how hard he tried, Papa Doc Duvalier could not make their words go away. Their maxims and phrases would keep coming back, buried deep in memories by the rote recitation techniques that the Haitian school system had taught so well. Because those writers who were still in Haiti, not yet exiled or killed, could not freely perform or print their own words outright, many of them turned, or returned, to the Greeks.

When it was a crime to pick up a bloodied body on the street, Haitian writers introduced Haitian readers to Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* and *Antigone*, which had been rewritten in Creole and placed in Haitian settings by the playwright Franck

Fouché and the poet Felix Morisseau Leroy. This is where these writers placed their bets, striking a dangerous balance between silence and art.

How do writers and readers find each other under such dangerous circumstances? Reading, like writing, under these conditions is disobedience to a directive in which the reader, our Eve, already knows the possible consequences of eating that apple but takes a bold bite anyway.

How does that reader find the courage to take this bite, open that book? After an arrest, an execution? Of course he or she may find it in the power of the hushed chorus of other readers, but she can also find it in the writer's courage in having stepped forward, in having written, or rewritten, in the first place.

Create dangerously, for people who read dangerously. This is what I've always thought it meant to be a writer. Writing, knowing in part that no matter how trivial your words may seem, someday, somewhere, someone may risk his or her life to read them. Coming from where I come from, with the history I have—having spent the first twelve years of my life under both dictatorships of Papa Doc and his son, Jean-Claude—this is what I've always seen as the unifying principle among all writers. This is what, among other things, might join Albert Camus and Sophocles to Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Osip Mandelstam, and Ralph Waldo Emerson to Ralph Waldo Ellison. Somewhere, if not now, then maybe years in the future, a future that we may have yet to dream of, someone may risk his or her life to read us. Somewhere, if not now, then maybe years in the future, we may also save someone's life (or mind) because they have given us a passport, making us honorary citizens of their culture.

This is why when I wrote a book called *The Dew Breaker*, a book about a *choukèt lawoze*, or a Duvalier-era torturer, a book that is partly set in the period following the Numa and Drouin executions, I used an epigraph from a poem by Osip Mandelstam, who famously said, "Only in Russia is poetry respected—it gets people killed."

The quotation I used is:

Maybe this is the beginning of madness . . .

Forgive me for what I am saying.

Read it . . . quietly, quietly.

There are many possible interpretations of what it means to create dangerously, and Albert Camus, like the poet Osip Mandelstam, suggests that it is creating as a revolt against silence, creating when both the creation and the reception, the writing and the reading, are dangerous undertakings, disobedience to a directive.

This is a part of my story that I have always wanted to understand better: my family's brief encounters with the pleasures and dangers of reading. I am at a great deficit here because, aside from my much older cousin Maxo, there were not many fanatical readers in my family that I know of, much less people who would risk their lives over a book. Perhaps at a time when one could be shot so easily, assassinated so publicly, not reading or writing was a survival mechanism. Still, sprinkles of other readers' stories continue to intrigue and thrill me. Young men and women who worshipped Euripides and Voltaire, George Sand and Colette and Haiti's own physician novelist, Jacques Stephen Alexis, who in April 1961, three years before Numa and Drouin were executed, had been

ambushed and murdered trying to return from exile, some say, to help topple the Duvalier dictatorship.

No one in my family that I know of had witnessed Numa and Drouin's execution in person. Still they could not help, when it came up, talking about it, even if in the broadest of terms.

"It was a very tragic time," my mother now says.

"It was something that touched a generation," my minister uncle used to say.

They were patriots who died so the rest of us could live, is a line I borrowed from my father. My father was the one who, while lying on his deathbed in early 2005, told me about the banned books and the plays. Only when he mentioned togas and Caesars, and an author with a name that sounds like *cam-ion*, did I manage to find my way, among many other possible choices, to Camus' *Caligula*. I could be wrong about this too, making connections only I believe are there.

The only book my parents and uncle have read more than once is the Bible. I used to fear their reading my books, worried about disappointing them. My stories do not hold a candle to having lived under a dictatorship for most of your adult life, to having your neighbors disappear and not being able even to acknowledge it, to being forced to act as though these neighbors had never existed at all. Reading, and perhaps ultimately writing, is nothing like living in a place and time where two very young men are killed in a way that is treated like entertainment.

Mourir est beau, to die is beautiful, declares the Haitian national anthem. But writing could never attain that kind of beauty. Or could it? Writing is nothing like dying in, for, and possibly with, your country.

When I first started returning as a public person, as an "author," to Haiti, a place where people trace your failures and successes along family lines, I was often asked if there were any writers in my family. If there were, I do not know. But another thing that has always haunted and obsessed me is trying to write the things that have always haunted and obsessed those who came before me.

Bel Air, now a destitute and earthquake-ravaged area overlooking Port-au-Prince harbor, was still a poor neighborhood when I was growing up there. But, along with ideological students, our neighborhood also had its intellectuals. The brilliant Haitian novelist/poet/playwright/painter Frankétienne grew up in Bel Air, as did the younger novelist and poet Louis Phillipe Dalember, who later left for Paris and then Rome. There was also Edner Day, a well-known Macoute, who tried to court one of my young cousins, who tried to court everyone's young cousins. He seemed literary for no other reason than that he was sometimes seen in the afternoons sitting on his balcony reading. But he was also a rumored murderer, one of those who may have shot Numa and Drouin.

In "L'artiste et son temps," translated into English as "Create Dangerously," Camus writes: "Art cannot be a monologue. We are on the high seas. The artist, like everyone else, must bend to his oar, without dying if possible." In many ways, Numa and Drouin shared the destiny of many Haitian artists, particularly that of the physician-novelist Jacques Stephen Alexis, who wrote such beautiful prose that the first time I read his description of freshly baked bread, I raised the book closer to my nose to sniff it. Perhaps there are no writers in my family because they were too busy trying to find bread.

Perhaps there are no writers in my family because they were not allowed to or could barely afford to attend a decrepit village school as children. Perhaps there are no artists in my family because they were silenced by the brutal directives of one dictatorship, or one natural disaster, after another. Perhaps, just as Alice Walker writes of her own forebears in her essay "In Search of Our Mother's Gardens," my blood ancestors—unlike my literary ancestors—were so weather-beaten, terror-stricken, and maimed that they were stifled. As a result, those who somehow managed to create became, in my view, martyrs and saints.

"Instead of being perceived as whole persons," wrote Walker, "their bodies became shrines: what was thought to be their minds became temples suitable for worship. These crazy 'Saints' stared out at the world, wildly, like lunatics—or quietly, like suicides; and the 'God' that was in their gaze was as mute as a great stone."

Of course I could be completely off base. Bel Air's Frankétienne, among others, somehow managed to remain human and alive in Haiti, before, during, and after the Duvalier dictatorship, producing a massive and innovative body of work. Balancing on the metaphorical high seas and bending to their oars without dying is what the majority of Haitians have always done, generation after generation. This legacy of resilience and survival is what had inspired Jacques Stephen Alexis, Marcel Numa and Louis Drouin, and so many others to sacrifice their lives. Their death is possibly among the shocking incidents that eventually motivated so many others, like my parents, for example, to leave. This may be one of the reasons I live in the United States of America today, writing in this lan-

guage that is not mine. This could possibly be why I am an immigrant and hopefully an artist, an immigrant artist at work. Even though there is probably no such thing as an immigrant artist in this globalized age, when Algeria and Haiti and even ancient Greece and Egypt are only a virtual visit away. Even without globalization, the writer bound to the reader, under diabolic, or even joyful, circumstances can possibly become an honorary citizen of the country of his readers.

My friend the Haitian novelist Dany Laferrière, who was a newspaper journalist during the Duvalier regime and was forced to leave for Canada during the dictatorship, has published a novel called *Je suis un écrivain japonais*, or *I Am a Japanese Writer*. In the book, the fictional author, a stand-in for Dany Laferrière, explains his decision to call himself a Japanese writer, concurring with the French literary critic Roland Barthes that "a text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination."

"I am surprised," the fictional Laferrière writes,

to see how much attention is paid to a writer's origins. . . . I repatriated, without giving it a second thought, all the writers I read as a young man. Flaubert, Goethe, Whitman, Shakespeare, Lope de Vega, Cervantes, Kipling, Senghor, Césaire, Roumain, Amado, Diderot, they all lived in the same village that I did. Otherwise, what were they doing in my room? When, years later I myself became a writer and was asked, "Are you a Haitian writer, a Caribbean writer or a Francophone writer?" I would always answer that I took the nationality of my reader, which means that when a Japanese reader reads my books, I immediately become a Japanese writer.

Is there such a thing as an immigrant reader? he wonders.

I too sometimes wonder if in the intimate, both solitary and solidary, union between writers and readers a border can really exist. Is there a border between Antigone's desire to bury her brother and the Haitian mother of 1964 who desperately wants to take her dead son's body out of the street to give him a proper burial, knowing that if she does this she too may die? So perhaps after those executions when those young men and women were reading *Caligula*, Albert Camus became a Haitian writer. When they were reading *Oedipus Rex* and *Antigone*, Sophocles too became a Haitian writer.

"We, as we read," Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote in an essay on history, "must become Greeks, Romans, Turks, priest and king, martyr and executioner; must fasten these images to some reality in our secret experience, or we shall learn nothing rightly."

The nomad or immigrant who learns something rightly must always ponder travel and movement, just as the grief-stricken must inevitably ponder death. As does the artist who comes from a culture that is as much about harnessing life—joyous, jubilant, resilient life—as it is about avoiding death. Since he'd fashioned his dress and persona—a black suit and hat, nasal voice, and glasses—after Baron Samedi, the Vodou guardian spirit of the cemetery, François Duvalier should have known better than anyone that in Haiti people never really die. This is, after all, a place where heroes who are burned at the stake are said to evaporate into a million fireflies, where widows and widowers are advised to wear their nightgowns and pajamas inside out and wear red undergarments to keep their

dead spouses out of their beds at night. And where grieving mothers are sometimes advised to wear red bras to keep their dead babies from coming back to nurse at their breasts. Like ancient Egyptians, we Haitians, when a catastrophic disaster does not prevent it, recite spells to launch our dead into the next world, all while keeping them close, building elaborate mausoleums for them in our backyards. In another country, in the cold, with no fireflies, no red underwear or backyard mausoleums, the artist immigrant, or immigrant artist, inevitably ponders the deaths that brought her here, along with the deaths that keep her here, the deaths from hunger and executions and cataclysmic devastation at home, the deaths from paralyzing chagrin in exile, and the other small, daily deaths in between.

The immigrant artist ponders death the way they did in Gabriel García Márquez's *Macondo*, at the beginning of *One Hundred Years of Solitude*.

"We have still not had a death," Márquez's Colonel says. "A person does not belong to a place until someone is dead under the ground." And the Colonel's wife's reply might have been the same as many an immigrant artist's parents, guardian, or supporter: "If I have to die for the rest of you to stay here, then I will die."

The immigrant artist, to borrow from Toni Morrison's Nobel lecture knows what it is "to live at the edge of towns that cannot bear" our company, hamlets that need our labor but want our children banned from their schools, villages that want our sick shut out from their hospitals, big cities that want our elderly, after a lifetime of impossible labor, to pack up and go off somewhere else to die.

If I have to die for the rest of you to stay here, says the Colonel's wife, then I will die. Like her, the immigrant artist must

quantify the price of the American dream in flesh and bone. All this while living with the more “regular” fears of any other artist. Do I know enough about where I’ve come from? Will I ever know enough about where I am? Even if somebody has died for me to stay here, will I ever truly belong?

Albert Camus once wrote that a person’s creative work is nothing but a slow trek to rediscover, through the detours of art, those two or three images in whose presence his or her heart first opened. Over the years, I have tried to explore my two or three images in these rather simple essays. In each of these pieces, though, are several cities, a country, two independent republics in the same hemisphere, but obviously with different destinies and goals in the world.

The immigrant artist shares with all other artists the desire to interpret and possibly remake his or her own world. So though we may not be creating as dangerously as our forebears—though we are not risking torture, beatings, execution, though exile does not threaten us into perpetual silence—still, while we are at work bodies are littering the streets somewhere. People are buried under rubble somewhere. Mass graves are being dug somewhere. Survivors are living in makeshift tent cities and refugee camps somewhere, shielding their heads from the rain, closing their eyes, covering their ears, to shut out the sounds of military “aid” helicopters. And still, many are reading, and writing, quietly, quietly.

While I was “at work” at 4:53 p.m., on January 12, 2010, the ground was shaking and killing more than two hundred thousand people in a 7.0 magnitude earthquake in Haiti. And even before the first aftershock, people were calling me asking,

“Edwidge, what are you going to do? When are you going back? Could you tell us how you feel? Could you write us fifteen hundred words or less?”

Perhaps this is why the immigrant artist needs to feel that he or she is creating dangerously even though she is not scribbling on prison walls or counting the days until a fateful date with an executioner. Or a hurricane. Or an earthquake.

Self-doubt is probably one of the stages of acclimation in a new culture. It’s a staple for most artists. As immigrant artists for whom so much has been sacrificed, so many dreams have been deferred, we already doubt so much. It might have been simpler, safer to have become the more helpful doctors, lawyers, engineers our parents wanted us to be. When our worlds are literally crumbling, we tell ourselves how right they may have been, our elders, about our passive careers as distant witnesses.

Who do we think we are?

We think we are people who risked not existing at all. People who might have had a mother and father killed, either by a government or by nature, even before we were born. Some of us think we are accidents of literacy.

I do.

We think we are people who might not have been able to go to school at all, who might never have learned to read and write. We think we are the children of people who have lived in the shadows for too long. We sometimes even think that we are like the ancient Egyptians, whose gods of death demanded documentation of worthiness and acceptance before allowing them entry into the next world. Might we also be a bit like the ancient Egyptians in the way of their artists and their art, the

CHAPTER 1

pyramid and coffin texts, tomb paintings, and hieroglyphic makers?

One of the many ways a sculptor of ancient Egypt was described was as "one who keeps things alive." Before pictures were drawn and amulets were carved for ancient Egyptians tombs, wealthy men and women had their slaves buried with them to keep them company in the next life. The artists who came up with these other types of memorial art, the art that could replace the dead bodies, may also have wanted to save lives. In the face of both external and internal destruction, we are still trying to create as dangerously as they, as though each piece of art were a stand-in for a life, a soul, a future. As the ancient Egyptian sculptors may have suspected, and as Marcel Numa and Louis Drouin surely must have believed, we have no other choice.

CHAPTER 2

Walk Straight

I am not going to make it all the way, I think. We've been walking for four hours and suddenly I have a piercing pain in my side. My cousin Maxo's oldest son, Nick, is about thirty feet ahead, hiking at a steady gait, following my Uncle Joseph, who's been struggling up a steep mound on a borrowed mule. We have been told that the mule knows the way, instinctively, has made the journey several times before, but I haven't, not for a while, not since I was eight years old.

Short and stout and handsome, Nick stops and pulls a pack of menthol Comme Il Faut cigarettes out of his shirt pocket. While lighting up, he turns around to check on me, doubled over, hugging my midsection, where the pain has spread from my abdomen down to my thighs. Nick walks over and puts his nonsmoky hand on my shoulder.

"Tired?" he asks.

I want to tell him that I am more than tired, but I am saving all my strength to ward off the pain.

"I think I'm dying," I finally manage to say.

"No you're not," he answers, chuckling before drawing once more on his cigarette. "I was just like you when I came back