

un santo a la vez

a prayer in motion

1. Somehow, before a witnessing world, Caribbean people still became a climate-threatened species.

To outpace this starving grief, which overtakes me
some days and sets the sun before its natural hour, I
take solace in examples of how to die out.

It renders this procedural.

Instead of a lonely end, I join in a chorus of
extinction, many goodbyes whispered from under
an indifferent boot heel.

2. Earth is an insouciant engine. Thinking things lift
like steam and leave it all the time.

Mammoth. Dodo. Puerto-Rican Sloth. Caribbean
Monk Seal.

Is it ego that steps in and demands I vow a different
fate for my islands?

Oldest of thinkers, banded by yellow and mangrove
and cliff-face and natural harbor. Whose children
are flighted, crawling, walking, talking, howling,
and stinging their way into life each day. These are

islands that outsurvived some of the cruelest of human inventions, the land should be red for the blood it's absorbed.

Has ease not been earned?

3. An island's protection is its undoing. Barricaded, in and out.

4. This book was conceived in motion.

On those days when climate grief forced me out of my life and onto my feet.

It wanted my time and attention. A walking partner. So, I followed where it led, backtracking through self-pity and apathy, dovetailing down newly cut paths toward an emptying sorrow, and finally, ascending with fired legs toward a generative rage.

The way beyond grief, with grief.

5. I write that with such unearned confidence. Leaf doubt between every word.

Backtrack. Dovetail.

6. I rail against what I pledge to learn.

7. This very paper is inked with dye made from avocado pits and peels. Gut the fruit and boil its discard for forty minutes or so, until the color deposits in water. This is a process of consumption

and imprinting. What disappears leaves traces in the world, this time a reddish pink.

The avocado tree evolved alongside giant mammalian herbivores, like the Lestodon. This ground sloth could swallow the whole fruit, and manage the toxins in its dense pit. There existed a mutual relationship, sacred and, at the time, imagined to be permanent. The tree could not conceive of a world beyond this animal, and it is a stretch to imbue the Lestodon with millenarian obsessions.

Fruit and animal co-thrived. Until humans hunted the Lestodon into oblivion and onto the unpigmented pages of history books.

Now, the avocado, like the squash, relies on our cultivation. Our whims. Our tastes. Smeared on toast.

This is the only story I know of where ruination and salvation both arrive on two legs. Still, I cannot eat an avocado without thinking: this did not evolve for me.

8. It is not enough, anymore, to draw consolation from a vanished web of awaiting life. The Lestodon is but one out of seven hundred and seventy-seven species humans have driven extinct since the 1500s.

We will not be celebrated on arrival.

No chorus.

9. Grief without memory is a sensory deprivation bath. A way to slip into an unquestioning, preternatural dark, where 777 extinctions tips into 778. Unnoticed.

There are other living things caught in the human-hurt web: from other humans, to turkey vultures, to parrot fish, to coral, to thorned silk cotton trees, and a kingdom of mycelium.

No being benefits if we disassociate from the society of still-living things.

10. There is a Tibetan Buddhist teaching called Maranasati, a meditation on the moment of one's death, the death of all loved ones, and all living beings. It is a difficult practice that can include visualization techniques of the decaying body. It is not intended to be macabre but life-oriented. To call into right-thinking the moment of death is to hold, on the bridge of your nose, its inevitability. When death is accepted, life begins. The practice of Maranasati is intended to liberate us from the fear of what will come.

I want to think of this grief in a similar way. It is an ocean wandering up the backstep. It is on the bridge of my nose. To accept it is to wade out beyond apathy and fear, into something other.

11. Leaf doubt between every word.
This walking prayer has no path. Labyrinthian.

12. In November 1799, an idealistic young Alexander Von Humboldt, not yet a world-renowned naturalist, arrived in Cumaná. The sight of the market for enslaved people, a grotesquery, made

him a lifelong abolitionist. He also noted that the first colonists had, "impudently destroyed the forest." These observations led him to understand the interconnectedness of all life systems and all death systems.

Everywhere he saw imminent disaster, in the monoculture cropping of sugar in Cuba, the soil-leeching indigo around Lago de Valencia, the Spanish crown's ownership over fresh snow on Quito for elites to make sorbet.

His observations arrived at a time when most Western thinkers still insisted on classification and separation (of peoples and nature) from the comfort of their metropolises.

It was 1799, the colonial machinery was in full force. Filleting the very world they had so-called found.

13. In the Primeval Forest, I learn to identify the poisonwood tree and its sap which turns grease black at the touch of oxygen. Our guide warns against contact with human skin which threatens a weeks-long allergic reaction. But we are quickly taught that a natural antidote dwells in the sap of the towering gum elemi tree. The two often grow together. Where you find poisonwood, you find gum elemi.

The guide says they are in love.

14. In his personal narrative, Humboldt records seeing Spanish monks over-harvest turtle eggs to illuminate churches with their oil. The missionaries

consumed far beyond need, never leaving enough eggs for a future generation.

Did those churches shimmer with loss?

15. A god smeared in turtle oil does not require my veneration. So much death went into ensuring his shine.

When I say prayer, it is not directed above, but an of-the-world ripple that begs to stay in the world just a little longer.

16. In the 1950s, much of the pine forest on the Abaco Islands was stripped by the Owen-illinois Company for use in pulp making. For every hundred trees, they left one straggler. A concession. A last bite, remaining on the plate to indicate to a waiter that satiety might not yet have been reached.

Now, standing before one of these last giants is like honoring a grandparent burdened with the care of a thousand, thousand younglings.

17. It is a quality of my bipolar mind to always exist in twos. To know that every joy can threaten sweeping despair and that every downslide can be tipped into extrasolar mania. It is not a coin toss, but an everyday understanding that heads purchases tails. Tails earns the inevitability of heads.

When I speak of climate grief, I am already living it. Because now, at this moment, on this unsunken island, I am blessed to know climate joy.

What is coming already exists for me. Already present of mind.

I have earned this heads by the lucky draw of its flipped face.

Grief. Getting out of it. Through it. Around it. I throw words like dice and hope, today, to take the convincing win.

18. For many in this region, this is neither a thought experiment nor even an inevitability.

It is living.

When Hurricane Dorian passed over Grand Bahama in 2019, it stalled overhead for forty consecutive hours. On satellite, blue subsumed green. The island was gone. Undiscovered. Much still unrecovered.

19. The second major storm of the 2024 Atlantic Season was named Beryl. It was a catastrophically rare June Category 5 that wobbled south of Barbados, wiped out our fisheries, and decimated neighboring Union Island. On Barbados, there was no celebration, only a dutiful call to aid our Vincentian siblings, mixed with survivor's guilt and a general sense of confusion.

As the rhyme goes: June too soon.

20. One island's sparing is its sibling's direct hit. This dispassionate, reckless, human-hunger-fuelled Russian roulette that these small islands must play. Having never benefited from the game.

21. “Last October, Social Services Minister Frankie Campbell said 1,208 people were still unaccounted for following Hurricane Dorian. However the next day, National Security Minister Marvin Dames clarified that police have reports of just 282 people still missing.”

— *The Tribune*, Tuesday, September 1st, 2020

22. 926 persons twice missing.

Excluding the state, everyone is haunted by this number.

23. In 2019, then-President Trump held up a cardboard cutout of an altered Dorian trajectory. He obfuscated the storm’s path—endangering his citizens—even as it was stalled out over Grand Bahama. Even as half of that island was still submerged.

24. This book's collaborator teaches me a prayer.
Something goes missing and she repeats,

Ay, San Pascual Bailón

Si tú me amparas lo que estoy buscando

Yo te bailo un son

In the oral tradition, this saint's name transitions from Baylón to Bailón. He becomes verb. Find what is lost and I will dance for you.

It seems the last remaining manageable concession.

25. Discovering the newest model of sea level rise, I slide the scale like a digital dam. Inundate New Providence with 1 foot of water. Then 2 feet. Then 20. The computer model is designed so that developers can decide what land would be useful/profitable in this inevitable future. It is a game, this sliding scale. Move it from island to island. Find

New York. Miami. It is like playing god, drowning a city with enough sea to crack it into a thousand islands.

I cannot stop. Heart races.

The grief is simply too enormous, and these islands are so frail in this digital imagining. It is a map of their unbecoming, like a new colonial document.

I cannot stop.

Slide the scale until there is no Bahamas. No Barbados. It does not take very long.

26. At the airport, I refuse to board a flight to the Abaco Islands with Hurricane Milton about to puncture the tender belly of Florida. On the drive home, I cannot stop thinking that I have outrun fate. For isn't it the destiny of all island people to submerge themselves freely, under the watchful tutelage of a hurricane?

If I am to go under, why delay the inevitable?

Anyone accusing this response of being overblown has yet to accept the gravity of what comes next. When super-escalated storms step, one after another, over our islands like the backyard to the first world. Tossing our lives like so much rubbish.

27. I must turn, anew, and anew, from the easiest out—apathy. The point of prayer, in its fundamental form, is to offer up to the inexplicable what else cannot be explained. To return to sender.

Get this gone.

28. In this meditation, I cannot will myself to visualize the decaying body of my dead island.

29. I conquered my fear of flying by listening, on repeat, to a song about the splitting apart of a space shuttle. I would descend, so prepared for doom, that when doom never manifested I was left disappointed.

The song's outro is a doleful repetition, repeated seven times.

The crew compartment's breaking up.

By the third, it becomes a kind of prayer. A call with no response, to accept what is now, at this trajectory, irreversible.

Miles high, I used that song as a deprivation tank.

30. That song now fills me with rage.

I do not want to numb, even if it gets me to touchdown. Tomorrow. Day after.

31. The endangered leatherback sea turtle drinks ocean water to stay hydrated, but its reptilian kidneys have not evolved to excrete that amount of saline. It relies on specialty glands in its eyes to return to the ocean the saltiest part of what it has been gifted.

The turtle weeps eight liters of tears every hour. Only in the human imagination is this some kind of unending grief display.

32. On a ferry ride from Marsh Harbor in the Abacos, I conduct an impromptu interview with a builder who tells me he came out from Nassau after Hurricane Dorian. Work pulled him. He lays bare what he heard, and how he lost. He talks of a door swinging open and a father's hand being sliced off. Two children gone with the ocean's coming. If husband not gone, wife gone, if not wife gone, kids gone. But then he summarizes it with a sigh that seems to gather to him all remaining optimism. He talks of governmental indifference to finding the true death count, saying simply,

How can they tell now? Who dead, dead.

He is of Haitian descent and grows emotional, speaking about what happened to the largely undocumented Haitian community that lived in Marsh Harbor. Survivors went crazy, naked in the street with loss.

It was a man-made calamity. A systemic refusal to grant papers, to insist on building codes, to imbue a community with a feeling of trust enough to safely evacuate. His final words are biblical. *Haiti will rise and someone must fall*. It is not said with any wrath but as an inevitability.

He is powered by this prayer for justice.

33. The builder wants me to understand that when his Haitian parents first came to The Bahamas they were praised as heroes of a revolution.

Now the luckiest few pay extortionate amounts, through backchannels, for the privilege to

precariously stay and work.

Everywhere in Abaco, Haitian Creole.

Everywhere in Nassau, in English, threats of deportation.

34. A radio report plays. The Bahamian Prime Minister alleges that a Commission of Inquiry into the deaths of undocumented persons on the Abaco Islands is "no longer necessary." It is the 9th of October, 2024. The time is 6:15 p.m. It takes about four years for the gone to stay permanently gone. For the machinery of institutional mass forgetting to set in.

35. *Who dead, dead.*

36. The Haitian builder kept coming back to those first few days after the hurricane. His words: *people—Black, white, purple, yellow, all together.*

I asked him how long this lasted.

Few days. He said. *Few days.*

37. Humboldt found no turtles because the men of god needed to crack open the light, and smear it across the walls so the anxiety of a foreign jungle never intruded.

When we are scared, we rarely caress the world.

38. Barbadians warn that the ocean has no backdoor.

When you have come into the water's house, over its front threshold, there is only one way out again. With good reason, we were never forged a water-trusting people.

I have been taught foremost to pray for a peaceful exit and gentle waters.

Faith in either has grown tenuous.

39. These islands are not perfectly, foreverably reboundable.

40. In this walking prayer, I uplift everything. I praise the anxious days and the coiled grey hurricane on the weather forecast that manifested out of cyan nothingness. I praise the grief lump in my throat that has not shifted in years.

I know no other way.

I no longer believe this grief to be self-oriented or counterproductive to an environmental movement that grows fat off thin hope. Here is the outrunnable grief, in with the tide.

And this grief makes everything more present. It is not an anesthetic, but a demand to care for what is here, knowing it will go.

Without it, we seesaw between apathy and fear. Between a never-fulfilled desire to do something, and the fear of missing out on the last few good days.

41. Leaf doubt between every word.

Consider what that even means. Last. Few. Good. Days.

42. There is a visible line in South Abaco that charts Hurricane Dorian's passing. There are standing, beautiful, green-topped pines running a corridor alongside its stripped and cracked siblings.

The shock of a sudden horizon where none was supposed to have been drawn.

43. At this rate, in this way, of this kind. The last leatherback, silver-dished and salt-weeping, will follow that unspoken demand to return to the beach of its breach. Compassed back like every one of its predecessors who survived predators and the eight hours of frenzied swimming to make it beyond coastal waters.

It will come home. And it will nest. And it will, maybe, in its deep mind and along its spotted back, wonder why it is alone this year in the pilgrimage. Or why, when it is time for its young to be silverslipping through water in the neighborhood of ocean migration—nothing but aloneness.

At this rate, in this way, of this kind. We will engineer this turtle's lastness. As we are engineering our own.

I am too angry to pray.

44. Does that immobilize you with grief?

Or ignite the kind of rage that would have you bite through the neck of a missionary, whose hands are still stained with turtle oil?

45. Grief with no memory is selfish. The dead are angry. Human and non-human. They demand a justice that torches a pine forest and leaves new space for growth. The living, left behind, have to be brave enough to rise to half that fire.

46. *Ay, San Pascual Bailón*

Si tú me amparas lo que estoy buscando

Yo te bailo un son

When we find it, we will burst into silly dance. A signal flare traveling through our bodies, igniting, liberating, forcing action.

47. The Mammoth. The Carribean Monk Seal. The Lestodon. Humboldt in his enlightened-age thinking. Indigo and sugar and blood. And take, and take, and take. Loss, and loss, and more loss, until you finally lose.

This is how it's done. This is what I've learned.

Who dead, dead.

48. No matter what, this grief will not immobilize.

Run the gamut. Swim the labyrinth when the water rises. Rage and rail.

Don't turn away.

Don't dare turn away.

49. After five years of moon-grey, the pines are returning to South Abaco. Tall as my knee. The kind of green that is supposed to signal hope. Still too stunted to see over the horizon line for the next storm.

Poisonwood. Gum elemi. I once believed that the suffering, and its medicine, would always spring from the same landscape.

50. Take stock of my island, and yours. One ongoing archipelago, emerging like the length of a spinal column from this bathwater basin, its knotted vertebrae given different names by all who crossed over. From the Island With White Teeth to Tall Is Her Body, to Land of Hummingbirds, to Land of Fish Oil, to Middle Waters and The People's Distant Waters.

This triumvirate of sea, sky, and Caribbean soil.

These loves of my life.

I will be with you at the end, and miss you long after we go.

Un santo a la vez / a prayer in motion is an after-resilience dos-a-dos artist book made at Poinciana Paper Press in Nassau, The Bahamas, through the Lucayan Archipelago Residency and under the sponsorship of Fresh Milk Barbados and The Panta Rhea Foundation. The text was written by Ark Ramsay from Barbados and designed by Jocmarys Viruet Feliciano from Puerto Rico under the expertise and guidance of Sonia Farmer from The Bahamas.

The title is letterpress printed in hand-set Palatino typeface on cover papers handmade with a mixture of cotton and flax fibers. The kitakata paper endsheets were dyed using avocado skins and pits consumed and gathered during the time of the residency. The imagery of the book, portraying the relationship and imaginary tactility of poison wood and gum elemi, is composed of kitakata and handmade Nagashizuki-style papers that have been dyed with avocado as well as textured and softened using a Korean technique called joomchi.

This book was folded and bound by hand in an edition of six copies. You have copy number: