

L A U R A H O P E - G I L L

Psalm 51

*Have mercy on me, O God,
according to your unfailing love;
according to your great compassion
blot out my transgressions.*

Every night now, Miss Frances sits on the front step. She grips her radio with both hands, a parent bracing a child to tell the truth. Around her, in the garden, the young goat runs to the fence, bats its small horns against the wire. The donkey brays over the news, over the announcer's voice, over the President's. Miss Frances shouts out, "Stop that." Her heavy Jamaican accent. "Get out! Gwan!" she shouts to the stray dog that might as well live with her. Facing her, over the road, over just one more ridge of Blue Mountain, lies the sea. Today the sea is invisible.

*Wash away all my iniquity
and cleanse me from my sin.*

The village I live in is the size of your backyard, if you don't count the houses that run up and down the mountain, down the vale. Miss Blake shouts to me as I hurry up the vale, "Miss, you go uphill the way water come down hill." That accent. That heavy mountain talk. I walk a quarter of a mile from Miss Frances' house to the school I teach at every day. On my way, I pass the shop, the shop which by day is a shop (pick the chicken you want to chop and defeather in the small shed behind Miss Frances' house) and by night is a bar (slam your dominoes down and your brandy back). From the houses and the shop, I hear the radios. When it isn't

music it's talk of the war. When it isn't talk of the war, it's the organ-backed list of funerals happening this week.

*'For I know my transgressions,
and my sin is always before me.*

What you hold onto here, what you want, is forgiveness. You can't explain away your nationality, the strange privilege of being from someplace else. Some place that holds control of memory. You can't explain your politics or otherwise differentiate yourself from where you come from. Here, you are the emissary of your country's war. Where you walk, the mysteries of war walk. Where you lay your head, the war does not fall asleep. There, you must dream your own forgiveness. The mountains will not give it to you. The people of the village will not.

*Against you, you only, have I sinned
and done what is evil in your sight,
so that you are proved right when you speak
and justified when you judge.*

When I walk to school in the morning, past the other houses, blue, yellow, pink on the mountainside, the residents rush out to meet me. "Teachah," Sophie says, "is they gon' ta be war?" The "r" is soft, almost an "h," but it's too there not to be written. "Is they gon' ta be?" It's January 14, 1991. The line in the sand is drawn for January 16th. The villagers think I have access to some information beyond that which comes over Miss Frances' radio. I don't. I have the donkey. I have the goat. And, I tell them, I have my own fear of the war. "I hope not," I say. But my hope is not the same as theirs. I hope not to be the attacker. They hope not to be the forgotten. They are not the victim. No one is going to bomb Jamaica. But they act as though this war will be the end of them. "They gon' ta be war," says Miss Frances, rocking her radio like a baby. "They gon' ta be war and America gon' ta fah-get all about Jamaica."

*Surely I was sinful at birth,
sinful from the time my mother conceived me.*

After I pass the houses and the shop, I pass Mr. Cousins' house, just at the base of the last hill where the schoolhouse sits, and just before the concrete, Mr. Cousins is the only car owner in the village, and he keeps an L-shaped coffee field, L for Lorenzo, his name. The blossoms hang white like snow on spruce boughs. From the depth of the fields, the scent of pimento wood cooking a meter under the soil

drifts into my skin. Mr. Cousins tried to start a co-op of the coffee growers many years ago. Today he insists that the servant mentality has taken over in Richmond Gap. If they don't want to be able to afford to drink the coffee they grow, then that is their choice, he says. Some days he meets me at the road, holding a machete in one hand and a coconut in the other. With one slice, he offers me the milk, for energy when I face the children. He is the village member who trusts me the most.

*Surely you desire truth in the inner parts;
you teach me wisdom in the inmost place.*

In the schoolhouse I teach five-year-olds, six-year-olds, seven-year-olds. Sometimes a three-year-old or two accompany a brother or sister when the parents can't take care of them all day. The children sit three to a desk, a desk for one, and they each have one pencil, which must last them all year. Older boys chuck gunga peas at me through the bars of the window. I teach the alphabet. I teach the numbers. When Tariq brings a bougainvillea branch into the classroom, all the children stick blossoms up their noses, behind their ears. "Which vale you come from?" asked Terrelle my first day. Terrelle's grandfather has one leg and herds goats. He waits for Terrelle at the shop after school, while his goats explore the mountainside off the road. He never smiles or speaks to me when I pass him and his goats. In his heavy eyes, I see myself as such a stranger.

*Cleanse me with hyssop, and I will be clean;
wash me, and I will be whiter than snow.*

On my first day here, two months ago, I arrived in time for a funeral two towns over, an eight-mile walk. Miss Blake was the first person to meet me, crossing herself as Lion stopped the Land Rover, and holding out her free hand to take mine. I told her my name, and she crossed herself. Other children came around us, and they crossed themselves. I told them they didn't have to do that, that I wasn't that kind of a Christian. What kind of Christian I am I am still always learning, but I'm not the kind who crosses herself every time somebody says something or gets out of the back of a car. "I am eighty years old," she said. "My name is Blake. Let's walk."

*Let me hear joy and gladness;
let the bones you have crushed rejoice.*

The funeral was for a Rastafarian named Pretty. He'd driven his tractor off a mountain, crushed to death. People from all the villages in the range were walking

there. A car would pass on the narrow road, and the passengers would open their doors so people could jump on and ride for a while. I rode in a school bus for the final mile, singing along to hymns I didn't know but soon did. "When I leave this world, Lord, I will wave good-bye." The bus had originated in Woburn Lawn and carried the Woburn Lawn Street Band. Passengers sat four across on the seats and eight across on the roof. Some just hung from the windows for as long as they could, then carefully let go, singing the whole time.

*Hide your face from my sins,
and blot out all my iniquity.*

A brown panel station wagon arrived on the main road, eight Rastafarians riding inside and on top. From the back, they pulled Pretty's coffin. Pretty's final resting place was at the end of a long ridge. There must have been a thousand people, not including the Woburn Lawn Street Band, all sharing the road as the band played hymns on trumpets and pots and cymbals and wooden spoons. The Rastafarians lifted the coffin above their heads, then passed it on to everyone else, including me. I hesitated before reaching up to touch it, but an elderly man next to me lifted my arm for me. "We all carry this death." For a few steps, before the coffin moved on, I carried the right edge, at about where Pretty's hand would be.

*Create in me a pure heart, O God,
and renew a steadfast spirit within me.*

At the grave's edge, the Rastafarians from the station wagon and some others from the crowd leapt into the ground and out again, beating the soil with their dreadlocks and their dancing, as though to soften it, make it ready to receive their friend. By this time, the crowd was overcome with a sense of joy. The songs we sang were about dying and what a wonderful thing that is. I lost track of whether I was at a funeral or a birth. And it was both. Pretty's widow, I learned from a Global Volunteer worker named Scott, would host a party now that would last for three days. Scott said she was a teacher. I would be taking her place at the school while she grieved, which she was allowed to do for as long as she wanted.

*Do not cast me from your presence
or take your Holy Spirit from me.*

My classroom is one third of a long, yellow cinder block building partitioned by chalkboards. Behind the schoolhouse, a terrace stretches toward the ridge's edge, then into an expanse of sky and valley. Each morning before class we gather there

to say a morning prayer, the children clasping their hands together, holding God still, and to sing the morning hymn. At recess, we gather there, and the children play ring games, which involves hip movements banned in the United States. Now, a donkey appears at the window, led by a young boy. Across its back, two immense baskets bear juice boxes on one side and buns on the other. Some days the donkey comes up the mountain on its own, no boy.

*Restore to me the joy of your salvation,
and grant me a willing spirit to sustain me.*

I stand with Miss Joseph at the main door to pass out the juice and buns. The children present their ten-cent pieces, one for each item. The buns are made of a sweetened dough, like what comes between the raisins in raisin bread. I could eat three or four of them on the side of a mountain and be happy, but Miss Frances insists I join her at her house for lunch. When the children all have their food and drink, Miss Joseph sends me on my way to Miss Frances.

*Then I will teach transgressors your ways,
and sinners will turn back to you.*

“Teachah, is they gon’ ta be war?” come the questions as I pass the shop where Sophie and Miss Joseph’s daughter Rose sit on the step sipping Pepsi. I hear it again from Miss Blake, who is smoking a cigarette. When she asks, smoke comes out from behind her perfect teeth. Mr. Cousins has told me that this is the last generation of perfect teeth. The children are eating Cheetos and drinking Pepsi now. When he was a boy, he says with perfectly healthy teeth, they ate “only fruit and sugar cane.” “I’d think sugar cane would rot your teeth,” I said. “Oh, no. It is floss.” And he smiled his perfect smile. Today Mr. Cousins stands in his yard holding a machete but no coconut. In front of him, hanging from a tree, a headless chicken drains and flaps. He does it this way to keep the meat from bruising. He never asks me if there’s going to be war, because he knows I have no idea. But he has taken orders from the people of the village and will head into Kingston to buy their supplies. “I don’t know,” I say, but hurry on so Miss Frances won’t be offended. Along the way, Rouen stands at the side of the road with a dozen goats, and he’s looking down the mountain. He leans on his crutch and calls out to a baby goat that has wandered from the herd. Gathering my skirt in my hand, I step over the fence, retrieve the goat. For an instant, I don’t see myself as a stranger. I am goat-girl now. I am the rescuer of goats.

*Save me from bloodguilt, O God,
the God who saves me,
and my tongue will sing of your righteousness.*

At the house, Miss Frances serves me akee with rice and breadfruit with Pickapeppa sauce. And, also, instant coffee. The radio plays loudly from the kitchen while I eat. It is always on. After school I stop on the shop steps and drink a Lucky Stripe while fielding questions about the war I know absolutely nothing about. Except that I share the hope that it doesn't happen. And that I really don't think America could ever forget about Jamaica. But they did. In Kingston, Mr. Cousins has told me, the Reynolds Factory, the aluminum foil people, went up and gave everybody jobs. People moved from the villages into the city to work for the big new American company. And then Reynolds closed down. And nothing has come in its place. At wartime, the people in the islands will suffer. We don't see them salt the fish, build their stores of coffee and sugar and flour. Fortunately for them, the breadfruit will hang heavy on the breadfruit tree, the mango on its tree, even during times of war. For the people on the islands, though, our memory of them, I've learned, counts for everything. Miss Frances and the rest of Richmond Gap have little faith that the United States will remember. "People always slippin'." On the way to school, Rouen nods to me when I pass the shop. No smile. Just a nod.

*O Lord, open my lips,
and my mouth will declare your praise.*

The night the war starts I can't go to bed. Every house in the village has the radio turned on full volume, as though if turned up loud enough it will speed up and be over faster. "Everything in Jamaica," Miss Frances said to me as I sat with her on the step, "depends upon America." The back hut where we kill and pluck the chickens is now stocked with bags of flour, sugar, and bins of salt fish. "Gwan!" shouts Miss Frances at the dog sniffing around her fishy shoes. To help Mr. Cousins, I spent the afternoon going from home to home asking people what they needed from the city for the next time Mr. Cousins drove in. In one house, I offered to replace a broken window. "No, man," said my host, pointing his fist at the window, showing the break in the glass to be approximately the same size, "air-conditioning." Along the way, I met Scott the Global Volunteer again. "Is they gon' ta be war?" he asked me. I told him what I was up to, and he joined me in visiting three houses up the mountain. Seeing in one house that the roof wasn't bolted onto his house, I offered to fix it, not sure exactly how. "Oh, no," its owner replied. "When the big wind come, it takes this roof." He motioned to the donkey in his yard and pantomimed riding over the ridge. No one wanted anything. They had their instant coffee and

their sugar and their flour. The rain tanks all had rain in them, so it didn't matter that the next village up the mountain had shut the water supply off to influence how Richmond Gap voted in the next election. "It doesn't seem I'm helping much at all," I said to Scott. "No," he answered. "We don't." He wandered off then, back to Woburn Lawn, a five-mile walk. Lying in my bed, I hear the bombs over Kuwait City from six different radios. A reporter is under a table in a hotel. Then nothing. A new feed. I think about what Scott said about not helping. Why is he here then? Why am I here?

*You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it;
you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings.*

Just past Mr. Cousins' house there is a four-foot-high cinder block structure. It is filled at present with fresh-picked coffee, the big red cherry fruits with the small, green special bean inside, beans that the world beyond Richmond Gap will pay 20 dollars for a pound of. Here, in Richmond Gap, they sit in an unfinished concrete hut, waiting for someone to do something with them. The hut was started by the volunteers that came to Richmond Gap before me. I have asked Mr. Cousins if we should finish it. He said it really isn't something they need. Each farmer has his own shed, he said. It's this thing now, some catch all for coffee beans that some farmers think they should haul up to the center of the village, just so it doesn't sit empty. When I walk by, I sometimes nab a bean to suck on during my walk to school. This is, of course, on days Mr. Cousins doesn't hand me the coconut, the smell of the pimento charcoal ripening through the snow blossoming trees.

*The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit;
a broken and contrite heart,
O God, you will not despise.*

Through the woods, during a break in the broadcast, I hear singing. I wonder if first I'm dreaming, maybe it was the donkey. I pull on my pants and T-shirt and find my sandals in a slant of moonlight by the window. Once past Miss Frances, who is crying over the radio now, crying and rocking, saying, "and they gon' ta send the black ones first," once I have sat with her for a few minutes, rocking with her, listening to the bombs, I walk up the road, away from the village, toward the singing.

*In your good pleasure make Zion prosper;
build up the walls of Jerusalem.*

The door is open. The church is mostly corrugated aluminum roof bolted onto plywood walls bolted to plywood floor. There are 20 long wooden benches made from the halves of trees and given roughly cut legs. I recognize the minister from the steps of the shop. He is reading from Psalm 51. I know Psalm 51 because back at college we sang Allegri's *Miserere* in chapel choir. I hit the high Gs, felt religion swelling in my head as I did so. It's a piece of music that lifts you as it rises. When I take a step inside, the 30 or so people in there all turn and cross themselves. I cross myself. In the 17th Century, Allegri's *Miserere* became the only piece played during Holy Week in the Sistine Chapel, and no one was allowed to share the music outside the Vatican's walls. A woman named Sophie, who lives in the pink house next to Miss Frances, rises, takes my arm, leads me to the back wall, which features an arc of calendar pictures of a very white, very blue-eyed Jesus with a glowing heart visible through his robes. At age 12, a hundred years later, Mozart heard the music, and, thinking the rule ridiculous, copied out the score from memory. The pictures are up there with plastic thumbtacks, red, blue, yellow. Along the floor there are many hand-sewn pillows made with corduroy, chintz, velvet. But Mozart's score would differ greatly from Allegri's original due to the secret lessons passed from singer to singer, the abillimente, the improvised ornamentation. Sophie coaxes me gently to kneel, and by now everybody else is there with us. The minister stops reading. I think of Mozart deciding some things are too beautiful not to be heard and known by everybody. A hand presses the back of my head, my forehead touches the wall. I smell Lowe's and mold from the pillows.

*Then there will be righteous sacrifices,
whole burnt offerings to delight you;
then bulls will be offered on your altar.*

Sophie starts praying first. It briefly occurs to me to tell these people I'm really not the kind of Christian who pushes her face against a calendar picture of Christ and kneels by force, but her words are, "Lord, bless this child. We know she is afraid tonight. We know she holds the fear of war in her heart—" Another voice, Miss Blake's, takes over. "Oh, Lord, we all have so much fear in the heart this night, we all pray that you will hold this child close to you tonight and—" The voices keep falling over one another, "let her people see that—" and hands are on my shoulders, on my head, pressing down on me, keeping me there on my knees, "let her know that we forgive—" face pressed to the wall, and it seems there are more hands on me than there are people in the room. And the prayers are now all happening at once, and the voices getting higher, getting louder, and the black night outside is roaming through the coffee fields, brushing past the breadfruit, mangoes, the bananas, Mr. Cousins' chicken, wings finally still, the coconut, and down past all of us to the sea

that must be completely blanched by moonlight now, and there is no place I can go but be here. And they are talking in tongues, and they are rocking me, and my face keeps hitting the wooden wall, and I'm hypnotized by the rhythm of their speech which now seems unison, building, building a world of want and a world of hope inside it, raising it up, holding it up for God to see, and now women are wailing, calling out, and men are singing, and then it all stops. I return to my seat with the aid of the congregation. I stay in the church with them. I don't think of leaving. In moments of silence I hear the sound of the bombs. I hear the sound that's coming from all the radios in the world tonight.

LAURA HOPE-GILL was born in Canada. Her father and grandparents were POW's of the Japanese in China during World War II. Her poems, essays on deafness, and memoirs appear in *Cincinnati Review*, *Xavier Review*, *Fugue*, the *North Carolina Literary Review*, and *The Chattahoochee Review*. She lives in Asheville, North Carolina where she is the Executive Director of the Asheville Wordfest Media Outreach Project and also a Fellow of the NCArts Council.