

## RESTAVEK\*

By Janine Harrison

His bike met a taptap  
in Port-au-Prince.  
Your papa met St. Peter.  
You were three.

Your manman sold plantains  
and aubergines  
from a marchés stall  
and after the mudslide,  
from a blanket laid gently  
upon packed gray earth.

Age eight, you returned from  
doing wash in the murky river,  
wet things, tub, upon your head.  
It fell when you found her  
lying on the dusty straw mat  
on his shanty floor.  
He'd fingerpainted her face  
with darkness again—  
for days she barely moved.  
You'd bathe her with rain water,  
dip again into the bucket,  
let her suck on the red red rag.

When she stood up  
started walking toward the village  
without a whisper to you  
you watched her limp and list,  
and wondered,  
*Will she come back?*

She returned before him,  
and her whip spider fingers  
encircled your upper arm,  
yanked you into waning daylight.  
“Chantale,” she began,  
her voice at once  
a whimper,

a plea,  
and a long, flat plank.  
Your arm hair rose,  
though you couldn't catch why.

\*A restavek is a child in Haiti under age 15 who is given away by a poor family to a wealthier family where he or she then becomes a servant or slave in exchange for food and shelter. Such children are often abused, sometimes sexually. Prostitution is a common career path for restaveks once they reach adulthood.