

MOROSE, BY ANY OTHER NAME

Morose Leonard

When I was about 12 years old, I was running an errand for my mother when the Pastor of a church we used to attend called me from the balcony of his house.

“Mozart,” he called, his beard turning white in the sun, “how’s your brother doing in Miami?”

Mozart was actually my brother’s name. My mother had sent him to America in hope that he’d do better in school there—he could not handle the rigors of the Haitian school system. When the pastor called me by my brother’s name, I did not rectify his error. To me, it was a simple confusion of our names.

“Do you know who you are named after, Mozart?” he asked after a moment.

I nodded sheepishly, and said that Mozart was a great composer. He smiled, thought for a moment, and then intimated that with such a name I would surely become a great man. “God,” he explained, “often secured a man’s future in his name.” He cited the apostles Paul and Peter, both of whom God had changed their names to shape their destinies.

Leaving the old man with a vision of me that God ought to have bestowed on my brother, I ran home straight to my French Larousse dictionary, eager for the truth behind my own name. Adjective: chagrine. So much for that. Perhaps in English my name might bear more good fortune than in French. Adjective: gloomy or sullenly ill-humored, as a person or mood. I’m an adjective. So much for that.

Yet something gave me pause. If I was not Mozart, why was I the one in love with the pen? Why was I the one insisting to compose, not music, but poetry?

Tracing back my aspirations to become a writer, I begin with my name. It must begin there, not simply because introductions begin with one’s name, but because the story implied by my name demands it. If there is meaning in a name such that parents agonize over finding one suitable for their children, the story behind mine necessitates my starting there.

I don't know who named me. My mother said it must have been my father. I'll never know. One thing is sure: whoever it was, either by design or by neglect, named me Morose—a name that would steer me toward the lonely world of the writer.

I was born in Brooklyn, New York in 1976, but grew up along with my brother and two sisters, one adopted, in a small, half-built, cinderblock-and-concrete house in Haiti. My mother's marriage was failing, and being a young, single mother of four, she sought that proverbial village to help raise us. So, at age three I and my siblings were sent to Haiti to the small village of Cap-Haitien. My struggles there fostered my need to write.

The injustices of Haitian life announced themselves early. My schoolmates envied my having been born in America—that made me an American, they said. But I did not know exactly what that meant. I thought I was Haitian. Also, my siblings did poorly in school. I fared better; so it grew clear to me that, although I was the baby of the family, I was its hope.

It wasn't long until the country itself began to experience the pangs of political instability. On February 7, 1986, with President Duvalier—Baby Doc—ousted, the idyllic country life we sought fell into darkness overnight. No more electricity, no more water—I could not understand the world around me. I turned to writing, writing poems, mostly, and in French, because that was the language I had been taught to write in.

Soon, even going to school tested our courage, for the specter of death was palpable in the streets. I saw homes riddled with bullet holes and faint traces of blood, and wondered who, good or bad, had been savagely killed so? I saw children wracked with hunger, their faces coated with filth, with dust, with fear, wandering aimlessly in the streets, and crying. I saw the mountains in their naked misery, wasting away one deracinated tree at a time, until rocks bared their teeth in the searing sun.

The world grew dark and menacing, and I could not find my way in it. Writing helped me create new life, new ways to frame the peace I sought.

In the summer of 1990, the destabilization in Haiti forced us to

return to the United States. In January 1991, I attended Springfield Gardens High School, in Queens, New York. There, I learned that I was Haitian, which meant something unwelcoming, something soiled, something crude. I was accused of having brought AIDS to America. I did not know how; I did not have AIDS.

I had to validate myself, and the only way I felt confident enough to do that was through writing. But first, I had to learn English. And being placed in the tenth grade, mid-year, I had thirty-six months to learn English, and then I'd be off to college.

To practice then, I refused to talk Creole or French at home. I spoke only in English—in whatever English I could weave together. I stopped writing in French. Instead, I wrestled with television news, and read English grammar books. I leafed through dictionaries; I sat at my window and eavesdropped on people's idle chatter.

In my English classes, I struggled with Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, and agonized over Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. And slowly, I learned, and with the encouragements of many teachers, I began to write. Through persistence, I improved.

It was at Ramapo College of New Jersey, however, that my name became the affirmation of my commitment to become a writer. Until then, I was a young man who took refuge in writing, nothing more. When I met people and the peculiarity of my name raised those expected questions like: "Who named you?" or "Do you know what your name means?" or "Is it a typical French name?" my abashed uncertainty would prompt most to reassure me that I was in no way morose, that, in fact, I was a wonderful, gregarious young man. I got used to that.

That afternoon at Ramapo College, though, while I registered for classes, an advisor, having read the name on the schedule I gave her, looked up at me and asked what my major was.

"Literature," I said.

She smiled, nodded, and keyed the classes in the computer, then returned my request sheet. As I proceeded through the faceless crowd of waiting students, she called me back.

"With a name like that, you should be a writer," she said.

It was like a pronouncement from God, a revelation of what my name had in store for me—like Paul, like Peter. Like them, I had

been allowed a glimpse of the future stored in my name. It was all there. I did not need to tell her that I wrote; it was in my name. I did not have to tell her my dream; that too was in my name.

As I turned to leave, on that fateful spring semester of 1999, I smiled back at her, and said: “We’ll see, then,” and made my way through the crowd.