

SAMPLER

Make Us All Islands

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Richard Georges

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*Make Us
All Islands*

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Restauradora
sinks in shallow water
Anegada

*the clear and calm sea numerous
sharks and barracuta diving in the hold
to tear their share from the bodies*

Robert Schomburgk
German naturalist

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Griot

The African Abednego, tight curls rusting
on his head, cleared his throat and spoke as griots speak.
Gravel shook in his voice like palm fronds rustling.

Every story needs a teller to kindle it,
to keep it burning through light and dark, smouldering
and anointing our heads with the flame's bitterness.

Stories keep light like a fire in the evening,
burning like coal on the tongue of the priestess,
while black saints draped in sargassum sign the old hymns.

The cross of the griot – to speak for the speechless,
to grip the stem of the bone and coral sceptre,
to be mounted, to sing light into the bleakness.

And so, Abednego the griot, the spectre
speaks: *In slav'ry days, the black man's life count for nothing.*
Black limbs fused to the reef praise the breaking slaver,

her wooden cracking cries lost in sea erupting,
her cargo converted by brackish baptism.
The griot drums the ground with his staff. His rusting

head glistens with the sun's anointing. His wisdom
is in long forgotten praise songs, a blank hymnal,
its verses trapped in the holds of divers prisons.

Offering

Wooden ziggurats rot slowly at the bottom
of the columns of this reef.

The slow march of ribbed
barnacles, black tiles in a glittery mosaic,

the cage's rusted lattice, its forgotten aches
are now home to a nervous cloud of silvern fish.

Here Olokun receives his prayers from skeletons,
whether three or three hundred years beside the eels,

in the *Restauradora*, water filled their lungs,
the grey sharks tore red flesh from limbs still
chained their tongues mute from mourning sun and shore.

The ships and their keels are rooted,
their masts like trees planted in the dense sand.

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Birth

The knotted spine of the wreck spat Moses out.
A Spanish basket of oak plank and iron bolt
had held him. The slave ship *Atrevido* boarded,

captured by sword and rifle sprinkled with seasalt.
The black prophet lay below deck with the others,
his destiny tattooed crudely on his forehead,

some greeted these English as their deliverers,
but Moses did not see compassion as they fed
them thin porridge in the boxes they kept them in.

When they gave him to a priest, he knew he was dead.
The old man's heavy cross hung, faith chained
to freedom, slave in all but name.

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In the Moment Freedom Comes

The *Atrevido* heaved, rocking itself against
The cobalt breakers. Ungobo could not stand,
sit up, or roll over in her shackles. Again

she felt the ship rock, hang, then fall. She prayed for land
under her breath, others prayed for death in the deep.
Both broke over the din of the relentless waves

No light crept into the boat's hold. There were no days.
In the blackness, the sailors took as they pleased
but they broke in the night with the ship. She awoke

to the chatter of Spanish in the nothingness –
their tongues excited – then a distant cannon fired.
Iron bolts squealed and rough hands pulled each from below.

Naked and shivering in the dark, Ungobo
could trace another boat in the sea's grey distance.

Night fled like a rising mist, her chains, unbroken,
still hung from her wrists. Standing on the wooden deck
sunlight danced deliriously in the shallows.

The kisses of oars to water came next to her.
The men from the rowboats grunted in gutturals
as they plucked them from the hold like fishermen
clearing their traps. She could taste the salt in the air.

The Talking Stone

for Patricia Turnbull

Consider you

*– all who entertain a serious and reverential regard for the resting
place of the departed –*

land measured in quadrants,

lines on paper –

distinguishing elevation;

boundaries –

where one must and
must not

measuring

how one may –

and by how much –

pass,

rise.

Then consider
raising walls stone
by bloody bleached

stone

within which

you build –

family, life,

village.

Then consider

the arc of the hoe and cutlass,

the upturning of hard earth

into dust

only

watered with

salt and blood.

How then

can the calabash

grow?

With what
do we catch our
blessings?

How does
an entire village

disappear?

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Redemption

1. THE CHURCH OF THE AFRICANS

The view of the channel from here – the rippling waters, the rocks that rise from them, and the boats that sit still as flowers in all this blue loam, sit still as air cut by hazy morning light glimmering through yawning louvers or as songbirds squatting on electric wires. It is striking seeing the ruined church, how the roofless rafters seem like a ship's hull. A wooden hood, capsized and lifeless, set still on glass. A skeleton of brick and sand remains, a spectre in daylight. If I could find in the unroofed cavern the praying shadows prone and ordered solemnly in pedantic pews, I would see the rootless vines in salted shallows, bruised coral wrists reaching upwards. These folk were survivors. Dream them gripping snarling rocks as black sea claimed the broken hulk of their prison. Amidst angry sea-spray coral heads rise in watery light, their minds routeless, home as far as Babylon, their salvation tied to a musket's gaping maw. Nearby, at the shore, the clear waters babble on.