Poems

Thomas Reiter
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Abstract
THE OVERLOOK, REEF WORLD, BRETHREN OF SALT (Brigands' Cay, Bahamas)
Elkhard Our Trail Man, they call him at the National Trust. Today he slashes through strangler vines, positions stone against erosion, and brings down deadfall limbs to reach the overlook where the master of a sugar estate and his wife and children are buried under raised marble slabs, the grounds untended for two centuries.

Gathering flower seeds and rootstock for their garden, Elkhard and his wife discovered the tombs. In this plot of Antillean hummingbirds they surprised each other and made love on Willem Leverock, b. 1745 d. 1780, did rubbings of his coat of arms with their bare skin while plumes of the censerbush blessed them.

That night she woke him, gasping from her dream in which a chattel gave birth alone on the master’s vault, her womb flowing over the legend.

Elkhard’s done his reading.

The slaves who rose against Leverock and fired his estate while the family slept were run to this headland by hounds. Each rebel killed himself in turn. The last in the circle broke every weapon but the one he turned on himself. To reward those trackers, planters castrated the dead then pitched their bodies into the sea and hallowed this place with marble.

He drives home a sign warning not to touch the manchineel tree – lean against it and the sap will raise lash welts – then heads down the path,
stops only to pick some horse-tail, a weed
body slaves employed to whisk
their masters and mistresses clean
after bowel movements. The bristles
will lie under glass with cane
cutlasses and talking drums in the new
museum between the duty-free mall
and the Emancipation Memorial.

REEF WORLD

1. Trevor, the patch above his shirt pocket says,
and he has come down the spiral stairway
from the aquarium to the sea floor,
where he’s alone this early hour.

Through the observatory’s window wall
he views geisha fans moving in the current.
Farther, at the limit of vision,
palisades of coral allow a single gap,

a surge channel in which at any moment
the obscurity might darken
and a shark or manta ray or moray eel
come through. On the far side the bottom

falls away to where he once dived
like his Carib and Arawak ancestors,
a depth intense as the blueing
his mother uses to whiten his Sunday shirt.

2. He keeps the pumps running at Reef World,
cleans the tanks and carries out the dead
because a year ago, free-diving
the palisades after lobster for Club Med,

he caught his hand in a keyhole crevice,
felt his intestines twist like
a towel wrung out till at last he could only
stare into the depths at blueness
congealing as it rose to take him.
Divers freed him from those coral teeth,
and the next day he awoke to the man he is now,
 lame in one leg and unable to speak.

3
Above him in the circular aquarium
where placards identify sea life,
fourth-graders in brown and white uniforms
pause at each tank: polyps build upon

their own stony dead – parapet, elkhorn,
brain ... A sea cucumber vacuums the floor,
veering among spiny urchins, extracting
nutrition, then passes the sand in a cloud

of children's giggles ... Macaroni
gliding on splayfeet, anemones uncoil
stingers on their heads ... Look! Teacherfish
frowns as hermit crabs contest a shell ...

Closing the circle, parasite fish rise
from orange coral to pour over a grouper
and for that service live to tell about it
in the placard a child reads aloud.

4.
On the sea floor the only movement's
in fronds and whips and fans ... but now,
sponging handprints off the window, Trevor
wincses as inchlings flare toward him

like sparks from a grinding wheel:
as though viewed through a scrim, something
appears in the reef gap then withdraws. Soon
children will descend the spiral flight

to stand at the glass wall and wait.
BRETHREN OF SALT
(Brigands’ Cay, Bahamas)

On the ridge between tidewrack and abandoned salina, the shapes you can spot from open water – pirate lookouts? – are a few spinebushes bulked up with deposits from the trade wind skimming the salt pan turned catarrhal by a rain squall.

In 1700, English deserters from indenture settled this coral outcropping, piped seawater over the ridge with bilge pumps – what salt is here now comes from storm surges flooding the pan – then let the Tropic of Cancer reduce the brine till they could rake it into dunes Dutchmen needed in the holds of herring fleets, so traded arms for.

“Where is the clause in Adam’s will saying the Caribbean is a Spanish lake?”
A galleon’s captain would be greeted with that challenge because beacons atop the ridge had drawn him from the sealane onto a sand bank.
The Brethren of Salt came aboard tricked out in velvets and leather doublets, with hemp fuses lit for the ship’s magazine and dangling from their beards.

They provisioned sailors in the longboats but every officer got salted with blunderbuss chambers of royal coin: “In the sweet trade, no prey, no pay.”
The loot found under stone ballast? Pearls, conserves, ingots, silver church plate.
Till 1720, when a Spanish fleet cannonaded the island and left grapeshot mementos you can pry from coral.

On the ridge between breakers and salina, where spinebushes stand like coast watchers, the Brethren were tied to stakes, eviscerated and stuffed with salt and with handbills indicting them of “innumerable insolencies, lamentable incendiums.”