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Poems

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Poems

Abstract

THE OVERLOOK, REEF WORLD, BRETHERN OF SALT (Brigands' Cay, Bahamas)

Thomas Reiter

THE OVERLOOK

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
 winces 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."