IMAGINARY SAILORS, POLYNESIA

Abstract
Steering by starpath and the flight of birds, by ocean swell and cross-current and changing winds they guided their canoes to distant landfalls, the voyage lacing sea to land as nets lace space to markers.

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Atoll-dwellers, poised to challenge ocean’s absolute,
forsaking islands with sweet-sounding names,
where ceremony’s stones sing with the tongues of temple bells
propitiating tapu-tapu ocean-island gods,
and dance rhythms are rhythms of the reef, resisting change,
and souls of stars approach the earth as seabirds,
and life is chanting, chanting names and ways,
with incantation they commenced their course,
invoking names of stars to give the energy of light
invoking, in the names of birds, the energy of flight
invoking, in the winds and waves,
vast forces wondered at and feared.

Sometimes off Samoa in cloudy dawns
you seem to hear their voices intermingled with the breeze
but everywhere you look the sea is clear -
the singers are as transient as air.

With incantation as a means and end
the mariners attuned themselves to rhythms that told where
starpaths and birds’ trajectories and currents intersect,
at no fixed point, upon a moving map,
in navigators’ songs, in puffs of air.