

THE WHOLE ISLAND (1943)

Virgilio Piñera

trans. Mark Weiss

The violent wave invades the wide hall of genuflections.
No one thinks to beg, thank, be grateful, testify.
Sanctity collapses in a gale of laughter.
Although love's chaotic symbols are the first things touched,
we have the luck to be ignorant of voluptuousness or cunnilingus,
the perfect lover and the octopus woman,
the strategic mirrors,
we don't know how to bear syphilis with a swan-like grace,
unaware that soon enough we'll acquire these fatal refinements.

Bodies in the mysterious tropical drizzle,
in the daily drizzle. The nightly drizzle, always the drizzle,
bodies opening their millions of eyes,
bodies, ruled by light, retreat
before the slaying of skin,
bodies, devouring waves of light, return like sunflowers of flame
at the crest of ecstatic waters,
bodies, afloat, drift seawards like extinguished embers.

Its confusion, terror, abundance,
The imminent loss of virginity.
Rotten mangoes in the riverbed dazzle thought,
and I scale the highest less to fall like a piece of fruit.
There's no restraining this body destined for the hooves of horses,
caught crazily between poetry and sun.

Bravely I escort the pierced heart,
stab the sharpest stiletto into the sleepers' necks.
The tropic erupts and its flow invades my head
pinned fast to the crust of night.
The original piety of gold-bearing sands

resoundingly drowns the Spanish mares,
the whirlwind disorders the best-kept manes.

I can't see through these dilated eyes.
No one knows how to watch, to study, to strip a body.
It's the dreadful confusion of a hand in the greenery,
stranglers travelling at the edge of sight.
We didn't know how to fill the lonely course of love with glances.

I linger over a few old words:
downpour, siesta, cane field, tobacco,
with a simple gesture, scarcely if onomatopoetically,
majestically I step through the crest of their music,
intoning: water, noon, sugar, smoke.

And I combine them:
the downpour sticks to the backs of horses,
siesta binds a horse's tail
the cane field devouring horses
horses stray stealthily
in the shadowy emanation of tobacco,
final gestures of the Siboneys, smoke passing through the pitchfork's
tines
like the cart of death,
final gesture of the Siboneys,
and I dig in this earth for idols and make for myself a history.

Peoples and their histories in the mouths of all the people.

[...]

But noon resolves into twilight and the world takes shape.
In twilight a yagruma leaf arranges its velvet,
its silver underside the first mirror.
The beast sees it with its awful eye.
And at that moment its eye dilates, spreads

until it grants the leaf.

Then the beast scans with his eye the forms strewn across its back
and the men thrown against its chest.

On this earth it's the only hour in which to see reality.

Not woman and man face to face,
but their silhouettes, face to face,
enter, to Newton's embarrassment,
weightlessly into love.

That shriek of a hen announces angelus:
abrus precatorious, anon myristica, anona palustris.

A vegetal litany with no hereafter rises
before the flowery arches of love:
Eugenia aromatica, eugenia fragrans, eugenia plicatula.
Paradise and Hell explode and all that's left is Earth:
Ficus religiosa, ficus nitida, ficus suffocans.

Earth bringing forth for centuries of centuries:
Panicum colonum, panicum sanguinale, panicum maximum.
The memory of a natural, uncoded poetry comes to my lips:
Tree of the poet, tree of love, tree of mind.

A poetry completely of the mouth, like saliva:
milkweed, wax flower, moon flower.

SEE NOW THEN (2013)

Jamaica Kincaid

Oh, and this was the word Mrs. Sweet heard, that poor dear woman, mending socks upstairs. Oh, it was the voice of the monodist, her poor-dear Mr. Sweet. Whack, came a sound from Heracles, as he made a putt, a basket, and a score and yet was under par or over par, Mrs. Sweet could never be sure. The boy's head, free of his body with its entrails, filled up all the empty chairs in the auditorium of Mr. Sweet's youthful recital. Not that, not that, cried the young Mr. Sweet and he made the chairs empty again. The strings of the harp, gut and wire, broke and he bent down and over to make the instrument well again, so ancient was this instrument. The Shirley Jackson house was not known to him then. Never did he imagine then—his youth was his now—that he would live in such a house, so big, so full of empty spaces that were never used, never filled up even in the imagination, the young Heracles with his endless tasks of hitting balls, large and small, into holes of all sizes; the young Heracles, growing in youth, not growing older, growing in his youth, becoming more perfectly youthful, his many tasks to perform, performing them more perfectly, at first performing them awkwardly, not right at all, but then becoming so good he could place any ball of any size in any hole, no matter its width or depth or height. Thwack, was a sound caused by the quick movement of Heracles' hand sweeping a ball through the teeming air; whack, was the sound of his head sliced away from his body. Oh, was the sound that came out of the mouth of the monodist, Mr. Sweet, Mr. Sweet, as he saw Heracles pick his head off the floor and replace it on his neck, which was just above his shoulders, with such deftness, as if he were born to do only that, keep his head in that place just above shoulders.

Young Heracles, his tasks, so many, so many: wash the dishes, put them away, clean the stables, walk the horses, fix the roof, milk the cows, emerge from his mother's womb in the usual way, slay the monster, cross the river, return again, climb up the mountain, descend on the other side, build a castle on the top of a hill, imprison the innocent in a dungeon, lay