

## CONSTELLATIONS

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I.

In the hours between midnight and the dawn, the sea draws down the stars. Not all, but enough to drape the waves with luminescence. The Captain knows this. On nights without sleep, when the wind drops, and rivulets of salt leak through skin to join the ocean's spray, the Captain has marvelled. This is not a phenomenon in the seas off the Captain's home, an island far away to the east, beyond the Cape of Good Hope and lost dreams, in the real Indies—the ones that white men thought they'd reach by going west. It is, instead, a feature of the waters between the great continent of Africa and the other land mass in the direction of the sun's setting, particular to the currents that wash the islands whose old names disappeared with their slaughtered peoples.

The Captain runs guns, trading for them with whites who slit each other once they've ripped the skin off black backs for sugar. The Captain, versatile in many tongues, and charming, never explains where the guns go. For a few days each month, near the full moon, the Captain goes ashore on a windward isle to a small house on a cliff. It is looked after by an old woman, skilled in the healing arts of her Kalinago and Yoruba blood lines. The people are afraid of her. Their distance suits both magician and mapper of the sea.

One night, when the wind is high and clouds mob the moon, there's knocking on the door. The tall figure outside limps in, soles split on serrated rock. While the Old Woman prepares a balm, the Captain cleans the blood with tepid water soft with herbs. The Captain recognizes the other's name. This gunrunner's clients are few—all braiding dreams of freedom, an end to manacles and laboring for others. The guns are gifts towards that vision.

The visitor watches the Captain, the assured yet gentle tending of the wounds, and suddenly awakens: this one's like me.

Under care of the Old Woman the visitor stays until the healing is complete. The Captain and the visitor talk freely, admitting to the guises they both take to do their work in a time when heroes are not women, women are not free, and freedom and dark skin are incompatible.

The visitor leaves with the Captain's promise to deliver cargo to her island, the one the hurricanes shun.

For the first time in this business the Captain is afraid.

For the first time she is afraid of loss.

Because, for the first time, there is another who should watch with her the sea draw down the stars, in the hours between midnight and the dawn.

## II.

People are the stories they leave behind. There are stories that own the Captain and the Captain's own stories about origins. It is said one night a great gale blew an unmarked ship off course and the tired waves spat out the Captain. In island lore, filled with vain sea monsters and ravenous spirits of the deep, *that* was too tame a telling. So the Old Woman cast one about that a beautiful sprite caressing the waves rescued the Captain going down for the third time and would have scored a fine dinner had not the Old Woman been out throwing nets for her supper and snared both sprite and human and the sprite merged with the human to escape, which is why the Captain is a little strange at full moon and needs to drift back to the windward isle.

The Captain's own telling is as bare as fish bones stripped clean by an eagle of the seas. Traveling trade currents along the Indian Ocean and Arabian Sea, an uneventful trip overland after passing up the Gulf of Aden and the Red Sea and then a quiet float across the Mediterranean and a bit of a mishap with weather in the Atlantic and then, yes, there was a rescue.

But the sea eagle, full of fish, knows otherwise.

In the waters of the real Indies, on an island shaped like a tear drop, lived a king. He was not of that land but acquired it through dynastic accident. When he ascended to the throne the land was his and not his. Two waves of marauding white regiments had already stripped the isle of cinnamon, and anchored in its harbors to command the world. The third spread its red plague completely, shipping the wretched king to the diamond in its imperium, sending him home and not home. With the royal entourage went an advisor, his wife, and two children. The advisor drew his genealogies from the People of the Lion, devourers of the island's indigenes, and the clan of the Cholas whose seafaring kings plundered the Garuda archipelagos far to the east.

Of the children it was said that both were sons. On nearing adulthood, with offers of marriage flowing from noble hopefuls, the younger disappeared. A greying ship's captain in Madras, bound for the trading ports of the Arabian peninsula, acquired a brooding youth tongue-loose in five languages and learned in the atlas of the stars. Startled by the youth's ferocious knife-play the old man, used to pliant male flesh, kept his distance, making the youth his protégé instead. The sailor absorbed quickly the tricks of the sea, the turns of the tide, the moods of men, and in each place of stopping, the stories. The sailor found berth on other ships, impressing captains with interpretations, negotiations, and weapons skill, and soon was one of them.

In time, the new captain is in the Atlantic. It is the season of hurricanes, the first days of calm belying the furies to be. A mile out of the windward isles the spectacular blowing and roiling hook the Captain's ship, drag it down, the waves like fearful arms of fabled creatures. The Captain drinks the sea, swinging between known world and the world to be, and awakens bloodied on rocks with the ship's pieces.

An old woman, skilled in the healing arts of her peoples, walks the rocks as she does after every storm—and finds the Captain.

Undressing the Captain to dress the wounds is an undressing.  
The Old Woman smiles, knowing this is a story she will keep.

### III.

People are the stories they make anew. The Captain's visitor releases them a little at a time like a ball of twine knotted at one end to a raft bearing the will to freedom. The Rebel's tales are not borne on neat history bifurcated into white masters and black slaves, sutured with coloured in-betweens. The people on the island that hurricanes shun arrived on waves rolling in the compromises of imperial games played far away—one colonizer drawing from another to counter a third, island hopping island crossing island drowning—white masters, black slaves, free blacks, free coloreds, black slaves of free coloreds, black slaves of free blacks. Owning slaves owning land; a class act even when *déclassé* from whites. A family story, a familiar burden. And the boundaries of class, as of nations, being drawn on the bodies of women.

Against this inheritance the Rebel turns. And falls into favor with the island's new misfortune where any shade of color is reviled.

Slave revolts crisscross these waters. A matter of guns, ordering rage, and carrying secrets. Maroon Wars. Fédon's rebellion. Bussa's revolt. Even on this staid island the plottings. An old man hobbling. A crazy-talking simpleton. Tailor, tinker, sailor, spy; who's that passing the soldiers by?

In the Naparimas one afternoon a peddler dealing gloriously colored cloth visits a plantation one hundred slaves strong and is fed in the main kitchen. In this mess of disdain the exact hue of the peddler's skin is irrelevant—but it is not white. The household's women are smitten with the wares and gracious conversation. No one suspects otherwise. The peddler winks at the houseboy who gestures to the parlor maid who runs to the cook who instructs the kitchen hand. The overseer and guards sleep heavily that night. By dawn there are twenty slaves fewer and a cold hearth in the

great house. Someone talks of seeing a strange ship in a cove past midnight. The soldiers search for a peddler of fine fabric. And find nothing.

In Port of Spain there's a tavern brawl. The Governor's paymaster is found dead. Nobody knows if the man was a regular, or if it was a single night's misfortune. His keys are missing. The troops' payroll is lost. The port's black prostitutes and colored rag pickers dine well for a week. Tailor, tinker, sailor, thief; who's that snatching the soldiers' beef?

The legends grow as long as a ball of twine.

In time the Rebel hears of a sea captain who runs guns at no charge for rebellion, and looks for passage to the next island. The Atlantic surges between. A smooth ride for a sea turtle, for others a question of helmsman's skill and reading the clouds. In the history of navigation the Rebel's crossing scores no mention. But the rocks are unkind on the upward climb.

The Rebel is luck's beloved. The Old Woman binds her feet. There is the promise of guns. And an unintended discovery about the Captain.

The Rebel is luck's beloved. The Captain braids her heart. But this is, as yet, a peripheral knowing.

The Rebel is luck's beloved. The return is uneventful. The ball of twine grows.

#### IV.

People are the stories in their telling. In the caverns of the sea, curl the keepers of memory and guardians of the deep, releasing their tales for offerings: galleys that floundered, caches of gold, bones of explorers, and souls lost in slave ships; long canoes that longing could not draw down playing tag with dragon's mouth and serpent's jaw to row their distances, trading, raiding, settling across the Antilles; Kalinago fury at ravaging white men stewed with Maroon rage and gunpowder familiar as cassava bread in the blood in dawns always fetid with sweat and despair on an

island named for a last Moorish kingdom defying a young empire grasping at its intrepid new world.

Young girl's hopes netted Fédon's dreaming—white running so black and colored could own their own stories. Papa stepping with rebels, burning great houses and sugar mills, tripping troops; Papa hanged in the market square, free black and slave and colored together. And the young girl seeing.

The Old Woman remembers.

Mama working her hands raw in the day, eyes blinding slowly at night to a needle and shadows and solitary candle. The girl sorting cloth scraps for stories, braiding daughter with mother and women before them. And wisdoms of plants and healing following, Yoruba tricks, Kalinago cunning, knowledge of lunar and human faces, love and yearning and the fiction of races.

In time the young woman turns heads in the market square—and not just for her beauty. By day her potions and pouches are prized for women's business and fretting babes, stomach aches and phlegmy chests, and shy boys wanting to be men. By night the desperate knocks on her door of slaves cutting loose, with bullet wounds and dog bites, and she stitching them up to the rhythm of soldiers tramping outside.

And at times of her choosing, the discreet knock of a lover sworn to keep the tales.

As the woman ages, she wants her own space to think and to be. She weaves around her stories of magic and bewilderment. There are sightings of her in meadows coaxing flowers to bloom, on hillsides whispering to birds, and by cemeteries communing with the dead—and sometimes of her feet not touching the ground as she moves.

People let her alone except on days set aside for healing, when they leave their gratitude as fruit or provisions, coin or cloth at her door.

On nights when the moon is full, the Old Woman casts her offerings into the sea—fish and crabs and flowers—and summons

the guardians of the deep. They rise to the surface, their wing spans as wide as billowing sails, and tell her their knowings, the moods of the waves, and the terms of their trade—after shipwrecks the Old Woman will claim the living, and secure in the caverns of the sea are the dead and their tellings.

And so the Old Woman walks the rocks after each storm collecting lives.

And one day finds the Captain.

## V.

On a night when the moon has retired to change faces, at a deserted beach near Point-a-Pierre on the island that hurricanes shun the Captain rows cargo from ship to shore. This is not unusual. The Captain bears risks to shield her crew.

Yet this time it's not just a matter of guns and their seasons.

At dawn on a plantation wreathed in humidity and redolent with sweat and despair the slaves revolt. At first there is no whisper of weapons, only an entreaty to justice, the right to be treated as human. But in this history that right has always been weighted. The master refuses. The soldiers duly approach. The rebels run. Someone fires. The troops respond. Someone falls. Some rebels race into the woods. The soldiers follow. To distract them someone breaks from the encircling. The soldiers fire. The figure stumbles, picks up, and drags limping into the sea. The waves redden. The figure swims. Blood trails. The figure is brave. But the body has its limits. The soldiers watch it sink.

A gift, to be cherished, must be passed on.

The Rebel wakes to gently rocking waves, bandages and instruments bloody in a bowl. The Captain sits by her, watching. The Captain smiles and looks away. The Rebel is confused. As the pain dulled by rum and coca recedes, the Rebel begins to understand. She tells the Captain a story:

In a great house in the Naparimas there lived a girl. She had all a child could desire— loving parents, adoring siblings, a caring

governess. One day when she was six years old she wandered away into the cane fields by her home. She saw a whip in a hand as black as hers. It descended on backs as black as her siblings'. The governess found her frightened but would not answer her whys. The memory was etched like grooves ground in rock by the sea. Her anger grew with her at everyone telling her leave things be. Nearing womanhood, with proposals of marriage circling, a slave girl friend helped her run away. But this was not enough. She bound her breasts and clipped short her hair.

A man always gets away with more than a woman.

In Port of Spain, an accounts clerk in the Governor's employ took on a black assistant. The youth was bright and mischievous, quick to learn and laughter. A sergeant of the Governor's guard, a free black, acquired a drinking buddy in exchange for swordplay and the knowledge of guns. Keeping company with the port's prostitutes and rag pickers the youth collected stories unfit for respectable folk. One day a slave who had rebelled against his master was held in the Governor's prison. Next day his cell was empty. The soldiers were flummoxed. The prostitutes hid a man until he caught ship. He was not their client. Three guards were flogged for being remiss. The youth commiserated with the soldier friend. And went out into the night with a smile.

The ball of twine began to form.

The Captain listens. And touches the Rebel's face.

The Rebel drifts into sleep, her heart anchored.

## VI.

It is said of the old woman that she had two sons. Their growing up is a mystery as none could recall them as children. She put it about that they had gone travelling at a very young age and returned to her as grown men. There is some prior knowledge of the elder as a ship's captain who on days home assists the old woman with her healing work. The younger has a slight limp, the result of misadventure with colonial authority on another island.

In the years following Emancipation, the elder acquires apprentices, girls and boys, to train in the sciences of sailing and reading the night sky. The younger gains repute in town as an educator, and advocate of self-rule. And each weekend returns to the house on the cliff.

The house keeps its secrets.

The Captain watches for evenings when the breeze is gentle and the air without clouds. Then she takes the Rebel out in a small boat.

When the last splinter of sun has conceded to darkness and whorls of distant light mantle the sky, their arms around each other they watch: in the hours between midnight and the dawn the sea draws down the stars; not all, but enough to drape the waves with luminescence.