THERE ARE NO ISLANDS WITHOUT THE SEA

BEING A COMPENDIUM OF FACTS, FICTIONS, NAMES, ETYMOLOGIES, LYRICS, AND QUESTIONS, IN THE FORM OF A BROKEN-UP ARCHIPELAGO

NICHOLAS LAUGHLIN

Full of islands, but with the incredible difference that these islands were very small, mere designs or ideas for islands, which had accumulated here just as models, sketches and empty casts accumulate in a sculptor's studio. Not one of these islands resembled its neighbor, nor were any two constituted of the same material. Some seemed to be made of white marble, and were perfectly sterile, monolithic and smooth, rather like Roman busts, buried up to their shoulders in the water; others were piles of schist, in parallel striations, to whose desolate upper terraces two or three trees, with very old, withered branches, grappled with their multiple roots. . . . Some had been so hollowed out by the action of the waves that they seemed to float without any visible point of support; others had been eaten away by thistles, or crumbled by landslides. . . . Esteban marveled when he realized that this Magic Gulf was like an earlier version of the Antilles, a blue-print which contained, in miniature, everything that could be seen on a larger scale in the Archipelago.

—Alejo Carpentier, *Explosion in a Cathedral*[1]

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As a matter of etymology, the sea came first. *Archipelago*, a word borrowed from Italian and, before that, from Greek: *arkhi* "chief" + *pelagos* "sea." The chief sea for the Greeks was, of course, the Aegean, a sea that happens to be full of islands. Archipelago: another name for the Aegean Sea, now used to describe scatterings and clusterings and chains of islands everywhere else in the world.

When Derek Walcott calls the Caribbean the New Aegean, it is not merely a classical affectation, but a nearly literal definition of the archipelago.

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As a matter of etymology, perhaps it started like this: It is the year 714, and the Muslim armies of the Umayyad Caliphate have overrun the kingdom of Hispania. Fleeing this conquest, seven Christian bishops and their respective flocks abandon their cities and sail westward into the Atlantic. Led by the archbishop of Porto and guided by Providence, they find a previously unknown island, which they call Antillia.

The island is roughly rectangular, on an axis from north to south, eighty-seven leagues long and twenty-eight leagues wide, or approximately equal in size to Portugal. It has seven bays, where the seven bishops found seven new cities. The migrants burn the ships that brought them here to eliminate the temptation to return to their former homelands. "The people live here in the most Christian manner, replete with all the riches of this century."[2]

Many years pass. The people of Antillia remain cut off from Europe, but the memory of their exodus, or the legend, lingers. In 1447, it is said, a Portuguese ship

blown off course sights the island on the horizon. Coming ashore, the sailors find the people of Antillia's Seven Cities speak comprehensible Portuguese, and they ask if Hispania is still occupied by the Muslims.

Some say the name "Antillia" is a corruption of Atlantis, the lost island that gave its name to an ocean. Others say "Antillia" derives from the Portuguese *ante-ilha*: the "opposite" or "other" island.

Perhaps Antillia appeared on older maps that are now lost. It is certainly depicted in a navigational map drawn in 1424 by the Venetian cartographer Zuane Pizzigano. Painted bright red, Antillia is the largest of four *insulae de novo repertae*, or "islands newly discovered," due west of the Azores. For seventy subsequent years, the Antillia archipelago appears on Atlantic maps and charts created all over Europe.

Then, in March of 1493, Christopher Columbus returns from his first voyage across the Atlantic and reports no sign of Antillia, but instead a bigger archipelago: "the islands of India beyond the Ganges," inhabited by docile "Indians" and prodigiously full of gold.[3]

It may be another Italian in service at the Spanish court, the historian Peter Martyr d'Anghiera, who suggests that Antillia is one of the islands in these "West Indies"—perhaps Puerto Rico. However it happens, the imaginary archipelago of Antillia lends its name to the real archipelago of the Antilles, Greater and Lesser. Though no one ever does claim to have rediscovered the lost Seven Cities.

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As a matter of etymology, the English words "island" and "isle," which look so similar, have completely different origins.

Island: from the Old English *ieg*, derived from a Proto-Germanic word for "thing on the water."

Isle: from the Old French *ile*, derived from the Latin *insula*.

Insula lent itself twice again to English, on occasions two centuries apart. In the early sixteenth century: *insulate*, to make something like an island, to separate it from its surroundings. In the eighteenth century: *isolate*, from the Italian *isolato*, derived from the Latin verb to make into an island.

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Arc: from the Old French *arc*, a bow or arch, derived from the Latin *arcus*, a bow or curve, as of an arrow, as of the sun's path from the eastern to western horizon.

So although the Lesser and Greater Antilles form a nearly perfect curve from the Orinoco Delta to the Yucatán, and although there is a pleasing and appropriate resemblance to the ear between "arc" and "archipelago," as a matter of etymology, one has nothing in particular to do with the other.

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Island: at its Proto-Germanic root, a "thing on the water." Like a boat, a floating branch, a mass of seaweed, a seabird? The head of a swimmer? A sealed bottle, with a message inside? A cloud on the horizon?

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More sargassum seaweed is expected on the Windward and Leeward sides of Tobago this weekend. Communities, beach goers and fishermen are being asked to exercise care near areas most affected.

Masses of the reddish-brown seaweed have been observed floating and banked on several shorelines on the Atlantic side of the island, including Hope, Blenheim, and Kendall, as well as Speyside, in the vicinity of Manta Lodge and Blue Waters Inn.

The Trinidad and Tobago Meteorological Service has also reported that it expects a further influx of the seaweed at some Tobago beaches on the weekend, on both the Windward and Leeward sides. This trend may continue over the next three weeks. The Met Office stated that it will continue to monitor the sargassum movement in the southern Caribbean until it returns to normal levels.

—"The Seaweed is Coming . . . Tobago Braces," *Trinidad Express,* September 9, 2016[4]

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But really, it started like this:

Tens of millions of years ago, a series of volcanic eruptions filled part of the eastern Pacific basin with an immense layer of basalt lava. As the landmasses of North and South America drifted apart, this basalt crust drifted eastward, into the resulting gap, at a speed so slow it is almost impossible to imagine. Colliding with the edges of the North and South American Plates, this Caribbean Plate—as geologists now call it—created a subduction zone; a heavier part of the earth's crust sank below a lighter part, the rock of the sinking crust melted, and the spurts of resulting magma made an arc of volcanoes, which eventually poked their heads above the sea.

Over unimaginably long durations, these creeping tectonic forces—the birth of volcanoes, their erosion, and the birth of new successors—along with the rise and fall of the sea, sometimes created a land bridge along the edges of the Caribbean Plate. Ancient species of sloths and armadillos from South America and pangolins from North America crossed the Antillean bridge in different directions more than fifty million years ago—long before Nature dreamed of that other bridge between South and North, the Isthmus of Panama.

At its eastern edge, the Caribbean Plate continues to press against the South American. To this vast, slow collision we owe the seventeen active volcanoes of the Lesser Antilles, the oilfields of Venezuela and Trinidad, and the earthquakes that almost constantly vibrate beneath our islands, usually, but not always, too gentle for us to notice.

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Placid and friendly to whoever approached them from the south, the islands of this inaccessible archipelago were steep, rugged, and eroded by the high waves that broke in sheets of spray on the side which towered up against the north winds. A whole mythology of shipwrecks, of sunken treasure, buried without epitaph, of treacherous lights burning on stormy nights, of portentous births . . . was associated with these islands, whose names Esteban would repeat to himself in a whisper, delighting in the euphony of the sounds: Tórtola, Santa Ursula, the Fat Virgin, Anegada, the Grenadines, Jerusalem Caida.

—Carpentier, *Explosion in a Cathedral*[5]

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"What happened," I asked her after a pause, "in the end?"

"How do you mean, 'in the end'?" she asked.

"After the island had disappeared?"

"Oh," her voice sounded very tired. "It's not very interesting. We sailed on in the dark. There was a great wind and at last, though it cannot have been above an hour after the last flame had disappeared, dawn began to break. It was a crimson and violet blur in the east, brightening through the falling soot and cinders into all the colours of the spectrum, though the light was as dim as that in mid winter in northern Europe. The sea was discoloured with soot and mud and afloat with branches and debris and Sargasso weed and with hundreds of dead fish and dead or tired birds. . . ."

The horizon where Saint-Jacques had been the nearest landmark was now an empty sweep of sea disfigured by an enormous clay-coloured smear.

—Patrick Leigh Fermor,
The Violins of Saint-Jacques[6]

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How do you lose an island? To volcanic explosions, to upheavals of the sea, to hurricanes, to fog, to mildew on a map, to absentmindedness.

How do you find an island? By luck, by accident, by being blown off course, by staring too long at horizons, by believing certain stories, by growing restless.

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you can start then,

to know how the vise
of horizon tightens
the throat

—Derek Walcott, *Another Life*[7]

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Long after the sea rose and the Antillean land bridge was broken up by straits and passages, the proximities of these islands—each one visible from the last—made a different kind of bridge for those intrepid enough to venture out from the shore. Thus a labyrinth of islands connected the Amazon to the Yucatan, as objects, ideas, and legends journeyed with the first men and women to claim these "things on the water" as possible homes.

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Banwari Trace: an archaeological site in southwest Trinidad, atop a small hill near the Oropouche Lagoon, where the most ancient evidence of human presence in the Antilles—as old as seven thousand years—has been preserved. In 1969, archaeologists found a human skeleton dated to 3400 BC here, buried in a shell midden. The so-called Banwari Man is the oldest known human resident of the Antilles—though during his lifetime, there may still have been a land bridge between Trinidad and the South American mainland. It's therefore impossible to say if the Banwari Man truly was the first-known Antillean or the last-known continental in the northward migration of people into the archipelago.

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The First People had always travelled by boat—in canoes hollowed from the trunks of massive forest trees—but now they exchanged the highways of the continental rivers and the intricate cartography of tributaries, currents, cataracts, and portages for a geography made almost entirely of horizons.

"Coming from the flat river banks and delta region it was the volcanic peaks, rising out of the sea in a gently curving arc along their route northwards, which became the main symbol in their mythic geography once they reached the islands," writes the historian Lennox Honychurch of Dominica.[8]

These new islanders made three-pointed *zemis*, devotional objects, in the form of a stylized volcanic peak, using stone, shell, coral, or clay. Then they noticed that the pointed shell of the queen conch, *Lobatus gigas*—common in the seagrass beds off the shores of the islands—not only resembles the profile of a volcano, but "if studied carefully, the entire shell provides a rough three-dimensional map of the volcanic island cones of the Lesser Antilles. . . . With the peaks on the conch representing the peaks of the islands, then the giant opening of the mouth of the conch may have been interpreted as the *bocas* of the Orinoco River from which successive groups of indigenous islanders had come."[9]

"The three-pointer volcano zemi represented the spirit that gave fertility to the land. It made things grow, it brought rain just as the mountain peaks caused rain to fall. It balanced the dry season with the wet. It was in effect the whole bounty of the island."[10]

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In the Carib sky:

Constellation of the Agouti
Constellation of the Otter
Constellation of the One-Legged Hunter

Constellation of the Jaguar
Constellation of the Sea Turtle
Constellation of the Scarlet Macaw
Constellation of the Sloth
Constellation of the Parrots
Constellation of the Canoe
Constellation of the Crab
Constellation of the Black Vulture
Constellation of the Scorpion
Constellation of the Water Boa
Constellation of the Iguana

Moving from the Guiana Highlands and Orinoco Delta to their new world of the archipelago, the First People needed new names for an ocean geography, new recipes for the different edible or inedible flora and fauna of islands, new stories and songs for a landscape of volcanic peaks and sandy shores, new metaphors. Perhaps even some of the familiar star clusters in the night sky above needed new names, when astronomy migrated from a continent where capybaras and tapirs are common, to islands where such creatures are unknown.

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There are so many islands!
As many islands as the stars at night
on that branched tree from which meteors are shaken
like falling fruit

—Derek Walcott, "The Schooner *Flight*"[11]

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If someone needed a visual explanation, a graphic picture of what the Caribbean is, I would refer him to the spiral chaos of the Milky Way, the unpredictable flux of transformative plasma that spins calmly in our globe's firmament, the sketches in an "other" shape that keeps changing, with some objects born to light while others disappear into the womb of darkness.

—Antonio Benítez-Rojo, *The Repeating Island: The Caribbean and the Postmodern Perspective*[12]

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Esteban marveled to realize how the language of these islands had made use of agglutination, verbal amalgams and metaphors to convey the formal ambiguity of things which participated in several essences at once. Just as certain trees were called "acacia-bracelets", "pineapple-porcelain", "wood-rib", "ten o'clock broom", "cousin clover", "pitcher-pine-kernel", "tisane-cloud", and "iguana-stick", many marine creatures had received names which established verbal equivocations in order to describe them accurately. Thus a fantastic bestiary had arisen of dog-fish, oxen-fish, tiger-fish, snorers, blowers, flying fish; of striped, tattooed, and tawny fish; fish with their mouths on top of their heads, or their gills in the middle of their stomachs; white-bellies, swordfish, and mackerel; a fish which bit off testicles—cases had been known—another that was herbivorous; the red-speckled sand-eel; a fish which became poisonous after eating manchineel apples—not forgetting the vieja-fish, the captain-fish, with its gleaming throat of golden-scales; or the woman-fish—the mysterious and elusive manatees, glimpsed in the mouths of rivers where the salt water mingled with the fresh.

—Carpentier, *Explosion in a Cathedral*[13]

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What are the flora most typical of these islands? The coconut palms that fringe our beaches? The mango tree, whose fruit inspires love poems? The fluttering bamboos that line every mountain stream? The banana trees, whose groves fill certain valleys? Or the plant that, more than any other species, has shaped the destiny of the Caribbean, the sugar cane?

Cocos nucifera, native to Melanesia or the Indian Ocean
Mangifera indica, native to the Indian subcontinent
Bambusa vulgaris, native to southern China
Musa acuminata, native to Southeast Asia
Saccharum officinarum, native to Southeast Asia

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A catalogue of small islands:

Kairi	also known as Trinidad
Tobago	
Camerhogne	also known as Grenada
Carriacou	
Canouan	

Becouya	also known as Bequia
Hairoun	also known as Saint Vincent
Hewanorra	also known as Saint Lucia
Ichirouganaim	also known as Barbados
Madinina	also known as Martinique
Waitukubuli	also known as Dominica
Aichi	also known as Marie Galante
Karukera	also known as Guadeloupe
Alliouagana	also known as Montserrat
Wadadli	also known as Antigua
Waomoni	also known as Barbuda
Oualie	also known as Nevis
Liamuiga	also known as Saint Kitts
Aloi	also known as Saint Eustatius
Amonhana	also known as Saba
Ouanalao	also known as Saint Barthélemy
Soualiga	also known as Saint Martin
Malliouhana	also known as Anguilla
Ay Ay	also known as Saint Croix

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You know the story:

The Italian sea captain has unexpectedly returned from his voyage across the great ocean, not having got himself lost, shipwrecked, or murdered by natives or his own men.

Thin, graying, sun beaten, but with an air of calm vindication, he has arrived at the court of the mighty queen whose benevolent coffers paid for the captain's ships and sailors and soldiers and guns.

In the throne room, the moment is grave, triumphant, epoch-making; the captain bows deeply—once, twice, thrice—and prepares to deliver to the queen the news that an unexpected world exists and belongs to her. The queen is a shrewd, stern questioner. She must be shown journals, logbooks, maps, specimens. She asks for minute details of chronology. She asks for certain descriptions to be repeated, listens for inconsistencies. For the captain, the interrogation is almost as grueling as the long journey from which he has just returned.

Finally, the queen smiles. The captain's replies have pleased her. The royal coffers were not unlocked in vain. The queen's eyes fix on one of the captain's specimens—let us say it is a parrot, bright green, playing with an unfamiliar walnut, or a young woman with reddish-brown skin and long black hair, shivering and glaring. For a moment, the queen seems lost in a reverie. Then, so quickly that no one notices, a flash of grief passes over her eyes. After all, this new world across the great ocean may belong to her, but she will never see it.

Now she looks at the captain, her stern manner softened into something wistful.

"Describe to me again," she says, "these islands that you say rise so suddenly from the sea, their lofty mountains."

"Your Majesty," starts the captain—then he turns around, opens his journal, tears out a blank page. He crumples it, flings it to the floor.

Thus did Columbus try to describe to Isabella the vertiginous landscape of Montserrat.

Unless it was Dominica.

Or Hispaniola.

No, Saint Vincent.

Surely Saint Lucia?

Unless it was another captain and another queen, or a friar and a king, or a naturalist and an emperor. Unless it is just a story, dreamed up by some fabulist, and too good not to become true.

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Overabundance of wood, over one hundred rivers, food, and fat pastures for Spanish horses, men, and cattle; and yes, your majesty, there were some people.

—Lorna Goodison, "Reporting Back to Queen Isabella"[14]

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How do you escape from an island?

Sauteurs: a French word, meaning "leapers"; a town on the north coast of Grenada; its chief landmark is a cliff called Caribs' Leap. In 1651—153 years after the Italian sea captain saw Grenada on the horizon and renamed the island for Europe's new maps—a group of the island's indigenous Kalinago, cornered by a military force dispatched by the French governor, leaped to their deaths here rather than surrender.

Another group of Kalinago guerillas rendezvoused in the mountains and prepared to send word to their neighbors in Saint Vincent. But the French soldiers found the Kalinago canoes and boats hidden along the coast and destroyed them. The loss of these boats "made French victory complete."[15]

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Guabancex: Taíno deity of storms, volcanoes, earthquakes, and chaos, she whose fury destroys all; prone to tantrums and liable to reject even the most proper offerings of the caciques. In her forays of rage, Guabancex is preceded by her heralds, Guataubá, marshalling clouds and lightning, and Coatrisquie, unleashing the waters of the sky and ocean. Guabancex herself appears as a terrible rotating spiral in the stormy heavens, in a cataclysm called a *juracán*, as she jealously tries to drown the islands of the archipelago, return them to the depths of the sea.

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fear nothing prepare your high waters
that sweep away the bank of mirrors

they have put mud over my eyes
and I see I see terribly I see
of all the mountains of all the islands
nothing is left save the few rotted tooth stumps
of the impenitent saliva of the sea

—Aimé Césaire, "Among Other Massacres"[16]

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Trade: a Middle English word for "path," derived from Middle Low German, and related to *tread*.

The Trade Winds: the prevailing easterly winds in the tropics around the earth's equator and, for centuries, essential to navigation between Europe and the Americas. The Portuguese first mastered the trade winds via a navigational technique called the *volta do mar*, or "turn of the sea." Determining viable routes in the Age of Sail, the trade winds also influenced the situation of ports and the most efficient paths for the transport of peoples and goods. From the Iberian Peninsula—the westernmost part of the European continent—and from the west coast of Africa, the trade winds carried sailing ships directly to the Antilles.

In the archipelago, weather almost always comes from the east.

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Going from surprise to surprise, Esteban discovered a plurality of beaches, where the sea, three centuries after the Discovery, was beginning to deposit its first pieces of polished glass—glass invented in Europe and strange to America; glass from bottles, from flasks, from demijohns, in shapes hitherto unknown on the New Continent; green glass, with opacities and bubbles; delicate glass, destined for embryonic cathedrals, whose hagiography had been effaced by the water; glass fallen from ships or saved from shipwrecks, polished by the waves with the skill of a turner or a goldsmith till the light was restored to its extenuated colours, and cast up as a mysterious novelty on this ocean shore.

—Carpentier, *Explosion in a Cathedral*[17]

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HMS *Diamond Rock:* a sloop-of-war of the Royal Navy, commissioned in February 1804 by Commodore Sir Samuel Hood during his campaign to blockade the French ports of Fort-de-France and Saint-Pierre in Martinique. It was placed under the command of

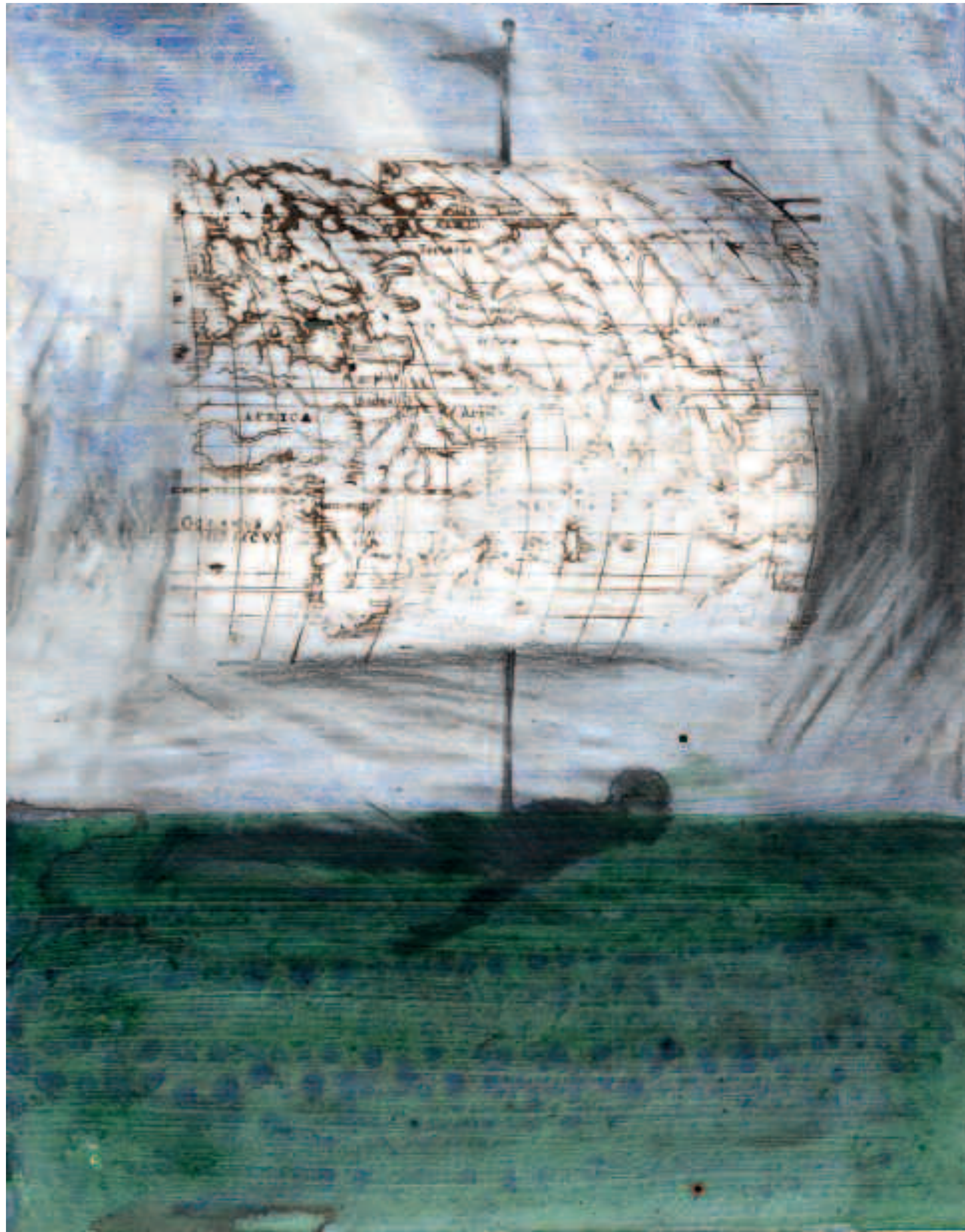

Fig. 1
Christopher Cozier, *The Castaway*, detail from the series *Tropical Night*, 2006–12. Ink, graphite, and stamps on paper, 9 x 7 in. Courtesy of the artist.

Lieutenant James Wilkes Maurice, with a crew of 120 men, and armed with twenty-four- and eighteen-pound cannons. Its strategic position in the Saint Lucia Strait, just off the south coast of Martinique, allowed the crew of the *Diamond Rock* to dominate shipping between the two islands and repel vessels attempting to negotiate the strong currents around Martinique's ports.

In 1805, a French fleet of sixteen ships arrived at Martinique with specific orders from Napoleon to capture the *Diamond Rock*. For two weeks in May, under the command of Captain Julien Cosmao, the French blockaded the sloop-of-war and prevented the delivery of supplies from Saint Lucia. The British men put up a vigorous defense, but with ammunition running low—as well as their water supply, thanks to a cracked cistern—Lieutenant Maurice surrendered on June 3. The British lost two men, the French fifty.

Diamond Rock, also called *rocher du Diamant*, is an uninhabited islet, 574 feet high and just over a mile off the south coast of Martinique. A basalt volcanic plug, it has its own microclimate, and cacti dominate its flora. It is thought to be the last refuge of the extremely rare reptile *Liophis cursor*, Lacépède's ground snake. An underwater cavern in the side of Diamond Rock is famous for its sea fans, though dangerous to access. Diamond Rock was the first of the Royal Navy's "stone frigates," naval establishments located on land. Never officially decommissioned, it technically remains in service. When ships of the Royal Navy sail past the island, crews are thus required to salute.

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Sint Maarten, June 2009

From my hotel in Oyster Pond, on the east coast of Dutch Sint Maarten, to Cove Bay, on the south coast of Anguilla, it is a little over ten miles, as the seagull flies.

It is the last day of my trip, and with the weather perfect for the beach, I decide to nip over one island to the north to have lunch with a friend and a swim. The drive from Oyster Pond to Marigot, the capital of French Saint Martin, takes maybe thirty minutes, skirting the island's central hills. The ferry from there to Anguilla leaves every hour or so, and the crossing lasts a mere eighteen minutes.

I sit on the upper deck of the ferry, the better to enjoy the view and the brilliant sunshine. A young American couple sit across from me—honeymooners, I conclude—and in front of them sprawls a mixed party of twenty-something holidaymakers. I hear American, British, and Australian accents.

My friend meets me at Blowing Point, where the Anguilla ferry docks, and we drive a few minutes down to Cove Bay, where I find a swimming spot that catches my fancy.

The last ferry back to Marigot leaves at 6:15 p.m., and by 7:30, I am at my hotel, with the beginnings of a tan—and with two new stamps in my passport.

To make this afternoon excursion—far less onerous than, say, driving from my house in Diego Martin to Blanchisseuse on Trinidad's north coast—I must cross two international borders and answer questions from three immigration officers, with the Anguillan customs besides. My wish for an afternoon swim requires me to travel from the Kingdom of the Netherlands via the Republic of France to a British Overseas Territory and back a few hours later.

Am I surprised, on arriving at Blowing Point, to be told by the perfectly pleasant immigration officer that Trinidadians need a visa to stay in Anguilla? Americans don't; British don't; I didn't need a visa for Sint Maarten; I can stay in Britain for six months without one; but not in little Anguilla. Well, I'm not staying, I point out—I am leaving that evening at sunset.

Cautioning me not to miss the 6:15 boat, the nice immigration officer stamps me into Anguilla, with permission to stay no later than that very midnight.

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The Castaway (2006), a drawing by the Trinidadian artist Christopher Cozier, from his *Tropical Night* series: it depicts a dark human figure, submerged except for his eyes in a murky blue-green sea, with a sail in the

Fig. 2
Hew Locke, *For Those in Peril on the Sea*, 2011. Installation with approximately 70 boats, commissioned by the Creative Foundation for the 2nd Folkestone Triennial.
Photo by Thierry Bal. Courtesy of the Creative Foundation.

form of a map sprouting from his back (fig. 1). A castaway is someone fallen or thrown from a ship, now adrift, and with greater or lesser hopes of reaching some shore. The figure's posture and gesture are ambiguous: is he swimming, or is he drowning? His sail bears a map of the Old World: is this his origin, or his destination? Historians estimate two million enslaved Africans died during the Middle Passage, from disease, malnutrition, suicide, or being jettisoned from the ships.

Have you noticed how rare are depictions of swimming in the work of Caribbean artists in proportion to the ubiquity of the sea?

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Saba, June 2009

After a breath-held landing on the world's shortest commercial runway, I stroll through the tiny airport in less than five minutes. My taxi driver is a jolly middle-aged woman, talkative and prone to giggles. Never mind this is a Dutch island—her first language is English, and her accent is like Bajan with the hard edges rubbed away.

As we carefully make our way up the many mountain curves to the village of Windwardside—perched 1,300 feet above the sea, surrounded by thickly forested cliffs—she tells me her story and then those of her parents. She was born in Saba, left as a young woman, returned after a few years to be married. Her parents lived on this small island—merely five square miles—all their lives. They grew up in different villages, and as small children, the road that connects the airport to Hell's Gate, Windwardside, St. Johns, and The Bottom did not yet exist. "The Dutch engineers said it was impossible to build a road here," she says. "The slopes were too steep! The Dutch know how to build canals and dykes, but they can't build on mountains. They don't have any."

Instead, for centuries, the villages of Saba were connected by steps: thousands of uneven steps cut into the volcanic rock, ascending and descending the vertiginous slopes. Villagers visited their neighbors on foot, hiking laboriously, or transported loads by donkey. For Saba is really a single volcanic peak, emerging sudden and sheer from the Caribbean Sea. There is practically no flat land on the island, not even at the coast. That breathtaking airport runway was created by levelling a small hillside—manually, with shovels and wheelbarrows.

Then, in the 1930s, a Saban carpenter by the name of Josephus Lambert Hassell took a correspondence course in engineering and devised a plan for carving an exceptionally winding road from the island's northeast coast to the southwest, along the slopes of Mount Scenery. It took twenty years to build and ended the strange isolation of villages that were barely half a mile apart but could have been on different islands.

"You won't believe this," my driver says, "but my mother tells me when she was younger she could tell a Windwardside accent from a Hell's Gate accent, even though the villages are a stone's throw away.

"But now we have the road. If you marry outside your village, it doesn't feel like you're moving to a different country, like in the old days. And I'm sure it makes grocery shopping a lot easier."

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With its fertile but steep slopes challenging many forms of agriculture, Saba was for hundreds of years a stronghold for pirates. Most of the men of working age became sailors, joining the crews of ships that sailed all the world's seas. Saban cottages were often decorated with exotic souvenirs sent home by these voyagers.

From a certain distance, in a certain light, a fleet of ships may appear to be a cluster of small islands; or a cluster of small islands to be a fleet of ships: stone frigates, stone schooners, stone canoes.

For Those in Peril on the Sea (2011), an assemblage installation by the British-Guyanese artist Hew Locke: it consists of dozens of model boats, found or built by the artist, and suspended in the air to form a floating fleet (fig. 2). Or a floating archipelago. Dimensions variable, but forever becalmed inside the horizons of the room where they hang in the sea of empty space.

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Guano: the droppings of seabirds, which, over time and because of the vast populations of many seabird colonies, form enormous deposits, sometimes the size of hills; rich in phosphates, nitrogen, and potassium, an ideal agricultural fertilizer and excellent source of sodium nitrate, once used to manufacture gunpowder. The word derives from Quechua, and for centuries, the indigenous peoples of the Andes have used guano collected from the Pacific coast and islands thereof to enrich agricultural soil.

Wider knowledge of guano's valuable properties started, like so much else, with Alexander von Humboldt, who observed its use in Peru, in 1802, and wrote extensively on his findings. By the 1840s, guano was a commodity imported by ship into the United States; by the 1850s, there was a booming trade, with over 750,000 tons of seabird droppings imported into the United States each year.

Where to find it? On small islands where seabirds nested unmolested in the hundreds of thousands. Where were these islands? In the Pacific, the Caribbean, the Gulf of Mexico. Who did these islands belong to?

The Guano Islands Act of 1856 (still in force): "Whenever any citizen of the United States discovers a deposit of guano on any island, rock, or key, not within the lawful jurisdiction of any other Government, and not occupied by the citizens of any other Government, and takes peaceable possession thereof, and occupies the same, such island, rock, or key may, at the discretion of the President, be considered as appertaining to the United States."[18]

Navassa, also called *La Navasse*: a small coral island, three miles long and one mile wide, lying thirty-five miles off Haiti's southwest peninsula in the Jamaica Passage. Claimed, along with other offshore islands, by Haiti in its Constitution, chapter 2 ("Territory of

Fig. 3
John Stollmeyer, *Caribbean Basin*, 1982. Enameled basin and chewing gum, 15 x 3 in.
Courtesy of the artist.

the Haitian Republic"), article 8; also claimed under the Guano Islands Act in 1857 by the American Captain Peter Duncan; upheld by the executive order of President James Buchanan in 1858.

For thirty-three years, the Navassa Phosphate Company, based in Baltimore, operated mining facilities on the island, using black laborers from Maryland. These men excavated the guano with dynamite, pickaxes, and shovels, and hauled it on a short rail line to the sea. With no natural bay or inlet along the coast, the sacks of guano were lowered over steep cliffs into small boats, for transfer to the company ship, the SS *Romance*.

It was backbreaking work under blistering sun, on a tiny island with nothing but limestone and seabird droppings. In 1889, the black laborers of Navassa revolted against their white supervisors, killing five. Eighteen laborers were charged with murder. Attorneys for the defense argued that US law did not apply on this remote island, but the US Supreme Court (*Jones v. United States*, 1890) found that the Guano Islands Act made Navassa a US territory. When the guano ran out and the Navassa Phosphate Company went bankrupt, the US government built a lighthouse on the island, conveniently positioned along the most direct route between the Eastern Seaboard and the Panama Canal.

In 1997, realizing that the Guano Islands Act had never been repealed, an American businessman attempted to make a claim to Navassa; it was rejected on a technicality.

Amateur radio enthusiasts have given Navassa the call sign prefix KP1, and occasionally try to land on the island to broadcast.

•

Basin: a round, shallow vessel or bowl. In most parts of the English-speaking world, now a slightly old-fashioned word for a household utensil, but still in common use in parts of the Caribbean. A basin for seasoning meat, for picking rice, for washing clothes; a basin for a posey or chamber pot; there are many uses for a sturdy enameled basin.

Caribbean Basin (1982), a sculpture by the Trinidadian John Stollmeyer: an enameled basin with three holes rusted away in its base, so it can no longer hold water; the three holes oddly have the shapes of Cuba, Grenada, Nicaragua (fig. 3).

Caribbean Basin Economic Recovery Act (CBERA): otherwise known as "An Act to promote economic revitalization and facilitate expansion of economic opportunities in the Caribbean Basin region, to provide for backup withholding of tax from interest and dividends, and for other purposes," passed by the US Congress in 1983. "The CBI came into effect on January 1, 1984, and aimed to provide several tariff and trade benefits to many Central American and Caribbean countries. It arose in the context of a U.S. desire to respond with aid and trade to democratic movements that were active in some countries of the region. . . . Provisions in the CBERA prevented the United States from extending preferences to CBI countries that it judged to be contrary to its interests or that had expropriated American property."[19]

•

No sailor am I.
I was farming
till my seed
failed to yield
fell on stony
ground, I cried:

What is harder
than stone?

Never knew
at the time
the answer is:

Water.

—Olive Senior, "Caribbean Basin Initiative"[20]

•

From the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS):

Article 121: Regime of islands

1. An island is a naturally formed area of land, surrounded by water, which is above water at high tide.

2. Except as provided for in paragraph 3, the territorial sea, the contiguous zone, the exclusive economic zone, and the continental shelf of an island are determined in accordance with the provisions of this Convention applicable to other land territory.

3. Rocks which cannot sustain human habitation or economic life of their own shall have no exclusive economic zone or continental shelf.[21]

Isla de Aves, also called Bird Island: a fragment of land, mostly sandbank, 1,230 feet long and 160 feet wide, and naturally eroding; lying 140 miles west of Dominica, 115 miles southwest of Montserrat, and 340 miles north of Venezuela. Maximum elevation: thirteen feet above sea level "on a calm day." Known to European sailors since about 1584; notable as a nesting site for green turtles and seabirds. Almost obliterated by Hurricane Dean in August 2007.

Aves was claimed over the centuries by Britain, Spain, Portugal, and the Netherlands, and then in the nineteenth century by Venezuela. In 1978, the Venezuelan navy built a scientific base near the southern tip of the island—on stilts, so as not to be submerged by high tides—with a permanent crew of soldiers and researchers, thus making tangible Venezuela's claim to the sandbank and perhaps legitimizing its legal status as an island, though Venezuela is not a signatory of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea. Rumor says pregnant Venezuelan women have been taken to Aves to give birth, so there might be Venezuelan citizens who can claim the island as their birthplace.

The claim to Aves permits Venezuela to extend its exclusive economic zone by sixty thousand square miles, to cover most of the eastern Caribbean Sea.

•

One morning the Caribbean was cut up
by seven prime ministers who bought the sea in bolts —
one thousand miles of aquamarine with lace trimmings,
one million yards of lime-colored silk,
one mile of violet, leagues of cerulean satin —
who sold it at a markup to the conglomerates,
the same conglomerates who had rented the water spouts
for ninety-nine years in exchange for fifty ships,
who retailed it in turn to the ministers
with only one bank account, who then resold it
in ads for the Caribbean Economic Community,
till everyone owned a little piece of the sea,
from which some made saris, some made bandannas;
the rest was offered on trays to white cruise ships
taller than the post office; then the dogfights
began in the cabinets as to who had first sold
the archipelago for this chain store of islands.

—Derek Walcott, “The Star-Apple Kingdom”[22]

•

Utopia was also an island, but only thanks to human intervention.

As Thomas More describes it, Utopia was an island two hundred miles across and crescent shaped, lying off the coast of South America—the exact location is unclear. Once a peninsula, it was separated from the mainland by the design of King Utopos, who had a fifteen-mile-wide channel excavated.

By strict etymology, *utopia*, derived from Greek, means “no place.” But in English pronunciation, its homonym is *eutopia*, “good place.” Isolated as they are by the irrevocable sea, islands are well-suited candidates for ideal societies—as they are for fortresses and prisons.

•

But my island is a pebble.

—Kamau Brathwaite, “Pebbles”[23]

•

My first memory of being from an island was of watching the distant horizon with longing and extreme curiosity. Wondering about the force of the underlying currents and depths and about where they were going and from where they were coming.

—Christopher Cozier, “In the Caribbean”[24]

•

I’d have
nightmares of other islands
stretching away from mine, infinities
of islands, islands spawning islands,
like frogs’ eggs turning into polliwogs
of islands, knowing that I had to live
on each and every one, eventually

—Elizabeth Bishop, “Crusoe in England”[25]

•

How do you escape from an island? By boat. By airplane. By swimming. By drowning. By crossing a bridge. By falling asleep and waking somewhere else.

•

The Antilleans’ insularity does not impel them towards isolation, but on the contrary, towards travel, towards exploration, towards the search for fluvial and marine routes. One needn’t forget that it was men from the Antilles who constructed the Panama Canal.

—Benítez-Rojo, *The Repeating Island: The Caribbean and the Postmodern Perspective*[26]

•

For many years afterwards in England, falling asleep in bedsitters with the electric fire on I had been awakened by the nightmare that I was back in tropical Trinidad.

—V. S. Naipaul, *The Middle Passage*[27]

Fig. 4
Nadia Huggins, *Fighting the Currents*, from the series *Transformations*, 2015. Digital photographs, variable dimensions. Courtesy of the artist.

•

The people wore little bridges around their necks. And when couples married they hopped over a little bridge. Everything was good.

There was a bridge maker. He made bridges that people put in their earlobes and around their fingers. Tiny little bridges. Decorated and beautiful and perfect. He decided that when he died he would request a thin bridge fixed to his casket helping to connect him to his dead family under the ground.
His living family insisted that he leave a real legacy. He was famous for small things. They wanted him to be known for big things. So he built a real bridge. Paid for by the Yankees—not to honor his memory, but really for their own convenience. Like everything new. Huge and stretching from Guyana—the place in the world most south—to Miami—the place in the world most north. Before allowing the public to walk on the bridge he gathered all his family onto it for a picture. But the bridge was built like his others, the only way he knew how, delicate and pretty but not able to bear weight.

When the picture flashed—a big, beautiful, blinding light—the bridge fell apart. And not only in that spot but in places all over the Caribbean, so that the many families who had gathered to take pictures (without express permission) also went into the ocean. And though they were surrounded by the sea no one in any of the communities had bothered to learn to swim. The water never seemed as important as the land.

—Tiphanie Yanique, “The Bridge Stories”[28]

•

Fighting the Currents (2015), a series of photographs by the Vincentian artist Nadia Huggins (fig. 4): they contemplate her submarine submergences and “the sea as a metaphor for the stages of loss, grief, and acceptance.”[29] Dominated by a deep, luminous, calming but also confining hue of blue.

From the artist’s notes:

“Most people’s experience with the sea occurs at eye level with the horizon and they are oblivious to what is happening below the surface.”[30]

“Underwater, I am alien and unable to survive without gear.”[31]

“Through my journey struggling with a current, I find myself resurfacing in an unfamiliar part of the sea where I am disoriented and unable to determine where I am.”[32]

“This space represents a transient moment where I am regaining buoyancy and separating from the underwater environment to resurface. My intention . . . is to create a lasting breath that defies human limitation.”[33]

•

Remous: from the French word for “whirlpool,” a boisterous current, described as “boiling” or “roaring,” found in the Bocas del Dragón, the narrow sea passages off Trinidad’s northwest peninsula and between the Bocas islands. Sometimes called “the turning of the tide.” Due to the collision of contrary currents in the Gulf of Paria, the Orinoco outflow, and tides in the Caribbean Sea, it occurs approximately every six hours; strongest in the rainy season; dangerous to small boats.

For centuries, travelers to or from Port of Spain, to or from the north, had no choice but to brave the *remous*, slipping through the mouths of a dragon that breathed not fire but the sea.

•

i can’t ask you
to come down please and see me
i don’t know how i even reached
here, islanded on my own life
the tides from all around are coming
in, only in, they never leave
from this rock, never flow to rescue —
nothing, no way out

—Kendel Hippolyte, “Islands”[34]

•

The sea don’t have branches.

—Trinidadian proverb counseling against swimming past one’s depth

•••

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