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Pissaro's Tropical Impressions of St. Thomas, Virgin Islands: Sketch Reprinted on the Front Page of *The New York Daily Times*, Weekend

(I lived on St. Thomas:
Sky Line, Hospital Road, Cha Cha Town)

The young lad
carrying
the huge jug
atop his head
with a thin smile
a pencil line
simple, direct
for the artist's brush.

“What does he carry
in his jug,
and so far,
lemon juice, quince or
some strange alcoholic
beverage only he
and his mother
know.”

(Witch. Bruja. Sorcerer.)

What does he carry
in the pail
in his right hand.
Milk from a cow, or goat,
tamarind juice
avocado seeds
for planting
rumtumrum
That is what it is...
rum.
Hence the smile
penciled for the artist.
Oh I know that smile

...

very well.

I have seen it on my own mouth
my own purple lips
which tasted of rum
under moonlight.

*I'll tell only
the man with the paint and brush
as he sits by my Caribbean
with my warm waters on his
paint spattered cheek.
What's in my pail
Perhaps mangos
under the moon.*

His sketch.
I see his green cheek
shaded by the pencil:
I see his dark eyes
shadowed;
I feel his darkness
mystery
brownness
as though I could reach
and pinch
the flesh of his arm
or cheek.

*But then possible
I would spill
the contents of my jug,
of my pail
and then
my mother might whip me.*

Camile,
there are virgins yet
though they carry no jugs
nor buckets nor pails
of rumtumrum
they remain
rainbows
though as you remember

there were/are few
rainbows
as there was/is so
little rain
but when it rained
he would throw down the jug
she would throw down the jug
drop the pail on naked earth
and dance between the rain drops.

*Each pore of my black skin
absorbs the little fingers
and I glisten
spotted in silver
of the cool rain
and I tingled, tickled
by those tropical hands.*

As we all danced within the rain
to Danish tunes
salt free and cool
and we knew
we would drink again
the sweet gift of the clouds
of the gods
and so he danced
and she danced
and we danced
the village danced
the whole island danced
on absolute delight
danced naked feet
beautiful flesh
spattered with rainbows.

And you Camille Pissaro
stood there and watched
as the young girls
and the young boys
swayed in
voluptuous rhythms
and old women
with sagging breasts
and fisherman
with strings of dead fish

and jugs of rum
or lime juice
resting sagely on the earth
(now running blood).

“Impressions.
Only impressions.
I have a lifetime
of memories.
See my pictures.
My painted poems
my sensual drawing
of the sensuous boy
(you should have seen him
prancing down the street
with the jug placed on his head
and his feet stomping
kicking up the island dust
the tropical dust)
yes, my painted poems,
smiles in pencil.
How dare they write
so arrogantly
on my impressions.”

We digested it all..
the rum still to this moment
spills from my lips
and runs sticky and sweet
down my chin
anticipating rain
and the exotic dance
the sensuous sway
of our bodies
to the beat of the rain
drumming the dusty earth
I would dance in papaya juice.
I would dance in lime juice.
I would dance in a thunderclap,
I would dance and make lightning.

I will always carry the jug and pail
and my smile will taunt the ages.
Witch me if you will.
Witch me if you must
Pencil my lips

I will dance under rain.

Remember the sweaty days
and sweltering nights
under a hot tropical moon
that stole sleep
remember iguanas,
lizards, white chameleons,
on whitewashed walls
of the cottage high
on palm-treed hillside
over-looking the blue bay,
over-looking the vast peacock-blue harbor,
mysterious
spinnakers striking
gongs as the Caribbean
breezed across the patio
gentle shaking the mango
to a soft tremble
to music, rhythm of the isle.

*I walked into his sketch
forever a boy
as I strolled into this poem
forever a boy
as though the witch, the bruja,
the jumm jumm
had tranced me into this future
onto this page of history.*

“And I would observe him move
down the dusty path, the road
his jug rather juggling
on his un-steady head because
of his odd dancing gait
on un-sturdy legs
listing because of the heavy pail.
kicking up the dust
the bloody dust settling on
the hibiscus blooms, cactus,
bougainvillea;
the sweet pencil smile
which drew my attention
I mean to be ever there,
the charcoal cheek
with or without rainbows

as you say..but I
can't recall rainbows
in those Virgin Islands
(what do poets know)
and his heavy-breasted mother
somewhere ahead down the dirt road
cooking green bananas,
bacalao and yams
with a sprinkle of salt
a swash of olive oil
a toss of onion rings
The choice meal sits on her table
Which will certainly bring
an additional smile."

I hope you tasted that good tropical food
as you recorded the 19th Century
with pencil and charcoal and oil
recorded the smile,
the jug and pail
and that sweet black face
and what was behind that African smile.
I hope you had the inclination
to wonder that one day
a hundred or more
years later we would be sitting
at my typewriter talking
of this child. It would/will
rekindle memories in my imagination
of the frani-pani, iguanas,
the pomegranates,
the melons sweet and orange
hanging from my tree
when my neighbors' monkey
would not allow the papaya to hang;
oh yes and the rum nights
and coconut days by the sea,
the rain and the occasional rainbows
and the dances...
the days of dancing with naked feet
on the wet earth or slippery walks...
dancing naked, the carnival

*I walked into his sketch
etched forever
on the front page*

*of the New York Times "Weekend."
No storm from the sea,
no sand storm from the shore,
nor rain and lightning from the sky
can ever, will ever
now erase my penciled smile
he penciled onto his canvas,
you typed onto the paper.
My mother heaves her breasts
and laughs, the wood floor
of our shack juggling
like the jug he sketched unto my head*

Yes, I can hear her.

"I hear her laugh, too."

*She laughs so hard
and stomps the wood
floor so hard the rats
run out into the sunshine,
the coconuts shake,
an avocado falls
the chickens cluck
the goat baas and the mule brays*

*Better than that my mouth
will always
carry the smile,
that my jug and pail
will always be full
and my mother in her misery
will always laugh
and jar an avocado down
and make a chicken cluck.*

"Amen."

Amen.

*My father will always
be fishing,
and the bacalao will always
be drying on the line
blowing in the Caribbean breeze.
And I will always walk*

*the waterfront
dreaming of far off countries
and other islands
where other boys
carry jugs of exotic juices
atop their heads.
And their mothers will always
be placing good food
on what could be an empty
bare table.*