

SUVENT / ROFFENTY

47341017

ALSO BY MONIQUE ROFFEEY

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sun dog

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The Tryst

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Feb 25th

MONIQUE ROFFEEY

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p837 same history

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same

VINTAGE

Simplicity

David Baptiste's dreads are grey and his body wizened to twigs of hard black coral, but there are still a few people around St Constance who remember him as a young man and his part in the events of 1976, when those white men from Florida came to fish for marlin and instead pulled a mermaid out of the sea. It happened in April, after the leatherbacks had started to migrate. Some said she arrived with them. Others said they'd seen her before, those who'd fished far out. But most people agreed that she would never have been caught at all if the two of them hadn't been carrying on some kind of flirty-flirty behaviour.

Black Conch waters nice first thing in the morning. David Baptiste often went out as early as possible, trying to beat the other fishermen to a good catch of king fish or red snapper. He would head to the jagged rocks one mile or so off Murder Bay, taking with him his usual accoutrements to keep him company while he put his lines out – a stick of the finest local ganja and his guitar, which he didn't play

too well, an old bear-up thing his cousin, Nicer Country, had given him. He would drop anchor near those rocks, lash the rudder, light his spliff and strum to himself while the white, neon disc of the sun appeared on the horizon, pushing itself up, rising slow slow, omnipotent into the silver-blue sky.

silver-blue sky. David was strumming his guitar and singing to himself when she first raised her barnacled, seaweed-clotted head from the flat, grey sea, its stark hues of turquoise not yet stirred. Plain so, the mermaid popped up and caught sight for some time before he glanced around and 'exclaimed. She of her. . . of Holy God on earth,' he exclaimed. She put down his

[illegible]

guitar and peered across the water. 'Dou dou. Come. Mami his eyes, as if to make them see better. 'Dou dou. Come. Mami

'Ayyy,' he called.

'Ayyy, he came
wata! Come. Come, nuh.'
hand on his heart because it was leaping
trampled with desire

He put one hand around inside his chest. His stomach trembled, and fear and wonder because he knew what he'd seen. A woman. Right there, in the water. A red-skinned woman, not black, not African. Not yellow, not a Chinese woman, or a woman with golden hair from Amsterdam. Not a blue woman, either, blue like a damn fish. Red. She was a red woman, like an Amerindian. Or anyway, her top half was woman, her shoulders, her head, her breasts, and red. He had seen her shoulders, all sea mossy and jook up her long black hair like ropes, a merwoman. He stared at her long black hair like ropes. A merwoman. He took a good look with anemone and conch shell. He took a good look at the spot of her appearance for some time.

look at his spliff; was it something real strong he smoke that morning? He shook himself and gazed hard at the sea, waiting for her to pop back up.

'Come back,' he shouted into the deep greyness. The mermaid had held her head up high above the waves, and he'd seen a certain expression on her face, like she'd been studying him.

He waited.

But nothing happened. Not that day. He sat down in his pirogue and, for some reason, tears fell for his mother, just like that. For Lavinia Baptiste, his good mother, the bread baker of the village, dead not two years. Later, when he racked his brain, he thought of all those stories he'd heard since childhood, tales of half and half sea creatures, except those stories were of mermen. Black Conch legend told of mermen who lived deep in the sea and came onto land now and then to mate with river maidens – old time stories, from the colonial era. The older fishermen liked to talk in Ce-Ce's parlour on the foreshore, sometimes late into the night, after many rums and too much marijuana. The mermen of Black Conch were just that: stories.

It was April, time of the leatherback migration south to Black Conch waters, time of dry season, of pouis trees exploding in the hills, yellow and pink, like bombs of sulphur, the time when the whoreish flamboyant begins to bloom. From that moment, when that red-skinned woman rose and disappeared as if to tease him, David ached to see her again. He felt a bittersweet melancholy, a soft caress to his spirit. Nothing to do with what he'd been smoking. That day, a part of him lit up, a part he'd no idea was there

light. He had felt a sharp stabbing sensation, right there in the flat part between his ribs, in his solar plexus.

'Come back, nuh,' he said, soft soft and gentlemanlike after his mother-tears had dried and his face was tight with the salt. Something had happened. She had risen from the waves, chosen him, a humble fisherman.

'Come, nuh, *dou dou*,' he pleaded, this time softer still, as if to lure her. But the water had settled back flat.

Next morning, David went to the exact same spot by those jagged rocks off Murder Bay and waited for several hours and saw nothing. He smoked nothing. Day after, the same thing. Four days he went out to those rocks in his pirogue. He cut the engine, threw out the anchor, and waited. He told no one what he had seen. He avoided Ce-Ce's parlour, the property of his kind-hearted, bigmouth aunt. He avoided his cousins, his partners in St Constance. He went home to his small house on the hill, the house he'd built himself, surrounded by banana trees, where he lived with Harvey, his pot hound. He felt on edge. He went to bed early so as to rise early. He needed to see the mermaid again, to be sure that his eyes had seen correctly. He needed to cool what had become an inflammation in his heart, to pacify the buzz that his nervous system. He had never had that had started up in his nervous system. He had never had this type of feeling, certainly not for no mortal woman.

Then, day five, around six o'clock, he was strumming his guitar, humming a hymn, when the mermaid showed herself again.

This time she splashed the water with one hand and made a sound like a bird squeak. When he looked up he didn't

frighten so bad, even though his belly clenched tight and every fibre in his body froze. He stayed still and watched her good. She was floating port side of his boat, cool cool, like a regular woman on a raft, except there was no raft. The mermaid, with long black hair and big, shining eyes, was taking a long suspicious look at him. She cocked her head, and it was only then David realised she was watching his guitar. Slow slow, so as not to make her disappear again, he picked it up and began to strum and hum a tune, quietly. She stayed there, floating, watching him, stroking the water, slowly, with her arms and her massive tail.

The music brought her to him, not the engine sound, though she knew that too. It was the magic that music makes, the song that lives within every creature on earth, including mermaids. She hadn't heard music for a long time, maybe a thousand years, and she was irresistibly drawn up to the surface, real slow and real interested.

That morning David played her soft hymns he'd learnt as a boy, praising God. He sang holy songs for her, songs which brought tears to his eyes, and there they stayed, on this second meeting, a small patch of sea apart, watching each other - a young, wet-eyed Black Conch fisherman with an old guitar, and a mermaid who'd arrived on the currents from Cuban waters, where once they talked of her by the name of Aycayia.

*

I disappear one night, in a big storm
long long ago
Island once where Taino people live

and the people before Taino
North in this pattern of islands and west too
The island I remember
was shaped like a lizard

I have seen the sea
I have seen its glory
I have seen its power
the power of its kingdom
I have swum its angers
I have swum its misery
I have swum its velvet floor
the corals
the cities underneath
I have swum under islands
I have swum close to shore in shallow waves
and seen children playing
I have swum with slow steel canoa
I have swum everywhere in this archipelago
I have swum with large pod of dolphins
I have swum with shoal of fish
I have swum with size of one whole human being
big like the size of one whole human being
I have dived into walls of ocean
I would have died very soon as a woman
Forty cycles? Children, husband
life of land and life of birth and death
Instead I lived for more than a thousand cycles
inside the sea
I was not alone at the time of my cursing
an old woman was also cursed
and she disappeared too same night

long long ago so long I don't know the time
only that they called up a huracan
to take me far away
seal up my legs inside a tail

*

David Baptiste's journal, March, 2015

Whenever I see the first leatherbacks arrive, I always feel happy. I know she, my mermaid, will soon appear, happy too, to greet me. I used to look out for her every evening from April onwards. She always knew where to find me, by the same jagged rocks where we first ketch sight of each other, one mile off Murder Bay. Still a private place, even now, since all the damn fish in the sea get fished out. I look out for Aycayia more than half my damn life. I have plenty women since those days long past, all kinda woman – friend, baby mother, lover – but nothing ever again like she.

She was something else.

I am an ol' man now, and sick sick so I cyan move much, sick so I cyan work, go out to sea, and so I go write my story. I go sit down and drink a rum or two to drown my sorrow, drown my damn fuckin heart in this bottle. After Hurricane Rosamund, everything changed, man, every last damn thing blow away and then, one year on from the time we meet, yeah, she come back!

Miss Rain teach she words in that time she came by me, after they pull she out of the sea that fateful day. She know

could barely keep them away from her; how the women of the village didn't like it at all.

The son, Hank Clayson, was full of sorrow. He'd drunk too many beers too quickly and the fight and the thrill of it and the emotion of the catch now overwhelmed him. His body ached with his hours of holding the rod. He didn't like to see her naked body watched by so many other men. He wanted to cover her up. He wished they hadn't done it now, hadn't pulled her out. Already he was calling her Helen. He didn't know what to do about it all. She was moaning, possibly coming round from the blow to the head. Clearly, no one had any idea what to do about her nakedness, either. Men stared. She was a mutation of the natural world, and she was dying.

Quietly, it started to rain.

One man burped, loudly, and went back into the bar.

Others followed.

Hank Clayson wondered if he would ever be the same again. How could he find a wife for himself after this? The mermaid was supposed to be a 'story' from antiquity. He wanted to cut her down; he wanted to lose the sight of her. He followed the men to the bar, to get damn drunk, drunk as possible.

The rain fell on the mermaid as night settled in. The light at the end of the jetty came on and glowed orange. The rain bathed her. She began to shiver, coming back to life. One man was left to stand guard. Thomas Clayson had stuffed a hundred dollars into his hands and told him he would pay a hundred more when he returned. The guard

was a small man with a thick but trimmed moustache and a baseball hat crammed down over his eyes. He was from Miami and had been watching from behind the others. He had been drinking, too, red rum and Coke on ice. When the others had gone, he took his cigarette from his mouth and stubbed it on her stomach. Then he unbuckled his belt and unzipped his shorts and pulled out his soft pink dick and showed it to her, asking her if she would like to suck it. He'd never had a mermaid suck his dick. He dangled his chubby thing in front of her face as if it were a juicy worm. 'See,' he said. 'Want some?' Then he wiped it across her face and laughed and said that he was the only man on earth to fuck a mermaid and then he grabbed her, and tried to hump her from the behind. He would fuck her there and then if he could. He said this loudly into the dead of night and to the mermaid who'd been approached many times, in her last life, by men who wanted to hump and fuck.

Then, he pissed copiously on her flanks, waving his thing as if to hose her down. His urine was hot and reeked of ammonia and rum.

The mermaid eyed him with utter hatred.

'Go fuck yourself,' he said in his Yankee drawl and then he staggered, drunk, back down the jetty, weaving as he went, towards Ce-Ce's parlour, forgetting he had to keep watch. The parlour was full of men, all still talking about the mermaid. Many stories were told that night, many men had things to say: that they were good luck, that they were bad luck, that they could eat a whole boat, that they had mated with orcas, that they indeed had a clift, a small oyster enfolded somewhere secret in the tail, and everyone laughed

at this. Men drank the mermaid down their throats. Thomas Clayson bought drinks on the house. He was dazzled and happy and tired and had a sense that, at last, he had done a great thing near the end of his disappointment of a life. Maybe he would even divorce his wife, finally. He would buy a bigger boat, definitely.

3

Back on Land

David Baptiste's journal, April, 2015

Well, when I saw her hanging upside down, like reverse crucified, my heart stop and my blood run cold cold cold. So, they ketch her. My worse fear. I kept up with their boat for an hour or so, but left before they hook her good. They were heading far out. I turn back; I already had a bad feeling in my gut that my boat engine might lure her to them. So I turn back, but too late. My damn fault they pull her out of the sea, bring she back half-dead. I figure she was dead when I saw her hanging so, upside down, mouth and hands tie up, just like a crab ready for the market. I feel shame, man, to see her like that, and I figured quick quick how to cut her down. I was fraid something bad go happen otherwise. Men could get on bad in these parts with too much alcohol, with a thing like this. Miss Rain wouldn't like it at all. I knew that. She was very particular about women and how they get treated. I fetch a wheelbarrow from my neighbour's yard and put it in the back of my pick-up truck and drive down quiet

into a man, their love affair stumbled. He wasn't happy, and she couldn't please him as she had when they were youths. He wanted more than Black Conch, and he minded that she was rich. They argued a lot. Her parents didn't approve. There'd been two pregnancies which had both ended in miscarriage. But then a third pregnancy stuck, Reggie.

But Life done leave her ass, and his own boy chile too. He had made his point, and it had been a punishment. She had come down with measles and Reggie had been born deaf. She had thought herself still young when Life departed. Now she was older, a decade of her mature adulthood lived solitary and confined in her castle on the hill, living with her humiliation, the horned woman with the luxury of a cliff-top view. No one felt an inch of pain for she, in her faded peeling house and the acres of forest that went with it. Waiting and then not waiting. Her sadness had changed her into another woman altogether; it had wearied her and it had also blossomed her.

*

David Baptiste's journal, April, 2015

Around day ten, her legs started to come apart. One long stump separated into two. She stared in wonder at her new legs – in fact her old legs. I was still careful around her. One problem was shit. She began to shit the fruit she eat and this floated in the tub. We both knew she had to come out. So, like with the hook, I made the first move. I offered her my outstretched arms but she refused to come. 'Please dou, I go hose you down,' I said.

But she didn't understand. She only looked at me with dread, as though I was going to hurt her, just like the American men. Still no words, just squeaks. I worried we had come to some kind of end of things. But there was the practical problem to solve; how to get her out of the tub?

She tried hoisting herself on her arms, and then tried to make her legs work, but they wouldn't. It was messy and awkward. My old T-shirt was covered in shit and she pulled it off. Somehow, she struggled and slipped, then clambered naked from the tub. I helped to heave her out and then she was on the floor, in a puddle, crouched down on her knees, hiding herself with her long dreads. Quickly, I hosed her down, saying, 'Okay, honey, okay, now, doh worry, doh frighten.' Then I covered her in a big old towel. She didn't move at first, just hunkered down, hiding.

She ent no longer what she was, that was for sure. She was scared, like being unlocked from a prison and given freedom. I was scared too, of her and for her and what to do next. The situation was not like anything I knew about. I hadn't tried to capture a woman, let alone planned to hide or look after a woman. So, I was always on the back foot. Something new happened every day. If I left her for too long I was afraid of what go happen next, of what new change might need my attention.

She couldn't use her legs. They were still soft as soap, and so, careful careful, I towelled her dry and wrapped her up and carried her upstairs, to the room where I slept. My bed was just a double mattress on pallets, but it was comfortable and dry and I was ready to let her share it with me. But that was a joke. She ent having me share anything so

close. Quickly, I got the idea she remember what a bed was. She actually snarled at me and gave me such a menacing look I backed away. She ent want me to share no bed. I watched her cover herself with the towel. I found her some of my clothes too, an old jersey and a track pants and I threw them to her and she looked at me like she understand to cover sheself. She needed covering now, no more shark-skin suit or fishtail to hide who she was. Yes, a young woman in my bed now; and not no friendly woman at all, none of that. I went back downstairs and started to cook myself a simple meal. I heard grunts coming from upstairs. I wondered then if she go try to run away. And though I wanted to help her, for a time, if truth be told, I also wanted her to go. I was afraid of what I'd brought into my home. I knew she was from ancient times, from times when people knew magic, when people saw gods everywhere and talked to the plants, the animals and even the fish in the sea. I ent check on her till early morning time, and when I did, I found she fast asleep, wearing my old clothes, curl-up under the sheets like a child in the womb.

I climb outta dat tub one day
I wonder if the curse was gone now
I could not walk
Legs soft soft
David give me clothes to cover my body
I did not want them
My people did not wear clothes

He gave me his bed
I woulda kill him if he come near me
I did not leave that bed for many days
I had not sleep for long long time
And so I fell asleep
I dream of my sisters
I dream my mother
I sleep and sleep and dream of long ago
I feel like I was in my dream
What was real?
What was dream?