

Essai de Darragh McKeon

En réponse au poème “What if we got it wrong?” de Lemn Sissay

History is the lie commonly agreed upon.

Voltaire

I’m thinking of you on that Christmas day when we paddled our canoes around the edge of one of the islands, pushing back against the water now and again to break our momentum, lowering our heads to glimpse the families of spider monkeys we could hear echoing through the trees.

Solentiname: a name that is almost a greeting. Solentiname: ‘the place of many guests’.

I’m thinking of the sun moving within a bank of clouds, low to the water. The clouds encasing the sun, cupping it like a young bird, a frail and innocent heart.

The thirty two islands of Solentiname rest at the southern end of Lake Nicaragua, a three hour boat ride from the mainland. Until the islanders bought their first engine in 1973, the same boat ride took three days of steady rowing. Ninety families are scattered over the archipelago. The police force is comprised of two teenage boys – Ernesto and Raul - chosen by the community. They have no need for a uniform, everybody knows everybody’s name.

I’m thinking of how quickly, how easily we could predict the herons’ surge into flight. Their necks of grey ink, resting in a question mark, stretched out gradually, as an answer spoken softly, their wings unfurling to punctuate their soar into white space.

Columbus passed through here on his last voyage to the Americas, leaving Spanish as the spoken language. In the following four hundred and fifty years until that first engine arrived, little changed. Canoes were carved from hollowed-out trees, houses were framed by tied saplings, roofed with reeds. The forty years since have brought television, fashion, solar power, tin sheeting, cement and armed rebellion. The islands became a refuge for artists and revolutionaries during the Sandinista uprising. In response to guerilla attacks on the mainland, the ruling Somoza army razed the community and its elders were exiled for a time in Costa Rica.

But these changes are merely temporary or cosmetic. Life has retained its natural rhythm. There are no shops, no cars, motorbikes, hotels, billboards. People still eat only what the island provides – chicken, fish, fruit, vegetables. They rise and sleep with the sun. In the evenings, they sit in the russet light and trade memories, snippets of politics, gossip, jokes, stories they have read, songs they have learned, ideas they have nurtured.

I'm thinking of you lying in a stilled hammock, your hand outstretched as if begging, lazily. Your face, whispering to a smile as I began to rock you gently, paternally, in your cradle.

Three weeks before that Christmas day, on the east coast of Nicaragua, site work began on a new canal that will link the Caribbean to the Pacific. Wider, longer and deeper than the Panama Canal, designed to receive a new generation of supertankers that will soon bellow past 'the place of many guests'. Five billion dollars have already been spent. Numbers that trickle across computer screens in Beijing, New York, Zurich, Singapore, rumbling into a tsunami of change.

I'm thinking of Ramona and her husband, speaking with us as we sat on their porch, drinking coconut milk. A woman that had birthed, fed, washed three sons. A woman with a gaze as assured as a carpenter's hands. Her husband, neat and attentive beside her. His occasional contributions to the conversation coming in the form of sharp, apt reflections or flickers of wit that began in his eyes.

I'm thinking of Ramona's calm acceptance of their future. A sentence I remember: 'We have adapted to so much, we will adapt to this'.

I'm thinking of how attuned she was to the cycles of time.

I'm thinking of how naïve she was to the appetites of the stock market.

The fanaticism of our globalised economic system insists that growth, expansion, accumulation is equal to progress. It proclaims, with the unwavering certainty of the fundamentalist, that no alternative is possible. And this is simply not true. Tens of thousands of years of tribes and communities, living in every corner of the planet, stand in refutation of this claim.

I'm thinking of the words of Baruch Spinoza – 'Surely human affairs would be far happier if the power in men to be silent were the same as that to speak'.

I'm thinking, my love, of our tomorrows.

Commande du Centre Culturel Irlandais, juin 2015