

VIRGILIO PIÑERA

FROM THE WHOLE ISLAND

TRANSLATED BY MARK WEISS

The violent wave invades the wide hall of genuflections.
No one thinks to beg, thank, be grateful, testify.
Sanctity collapses in a gale of laughter.
Although love's chaotic symbols are the first things touched,
we have the luck to be ignorant of voluptuousness or cunnilingus,
the perfect lover and the octopus woman,
the strategic mirrors,
we don't know how to bear syphilis with a swan-like grace,
unaware that soon enough we'll acquire these fatal refinements.

Bodies in the mysterious tropical drizzle,
in the daily drizzle, the nightly drizzle, always the drizzle,
bodies opening their millions of eyes,
bodies, ruled by light, retreat
before the slaying of skin,
bodies, devouring waves of light, return like sunflowers of flame
at the crest of ecstatic waters,
bodies, afloat, drift seawards like extinguished embers.

It's confusion, terror, abundance,
The imminent loss of virginity.
Rotten mangoes in the riverbed dazzle thought,
and I scale the highest tree to fall like a piece of fruit.
There's no restraining this body destined for the hooves of horses,
caught crazily between poetry and sun.

Bravely I escort the pierced heart,
stab the sharpest stiletto into the sleepers' necks.
The tropic erupts and its flow invades my head
pinned fast to the crust of night.
The original piety of gold-bearing sands
resoundingly drowns the Spanish mares,
the whirlwind disorders the best-kept manes.

I can't see through these dilated eyes.
No one knows how to watch, to study, to strip a body.
It's the dreadful confusion of a hand in the greenery,
stranglers traveling at the edge of sight.
We didn't know how to fill the lonely course of love with glances.

I linger over a few old words:
downpour, siesta, cane field, tobacco,
with a simple gesture, scarcely if onomatopoeically,
majestically I step through the crest of their music,
intoning: water, noon, sugar, smoke.

And I combine them:
the downpour sticks to the backs of horses,
siesta binds a horse's tail,
the cane field devouring horses
horses stray stealthily
into the shadowy emanation of tobacco,
final gesture of the Siboneys, smoke passing through the pitchfork's tines
like the cart of death,
final gesture of the Siboneys,
and I dig in this earth for idols and make for myself a history.

Peoples and their histories in the mouths of all the people.

Suddenly, the gold-laden galleon enters the mouth
of one of the storytellers,
and Cadmus, toothless, begins to play the bongo.
The ancient sadness of Cadmus and his lost status:
on a tropical island the last red drops of a dragon's blood
stain the cloak of decadence with imperial dignity.

Eternal histories or the history of a day beneath the sun,
eternal histories of these lands that bring forth buffoons and blowhards,
eternal histories of blacks who were
and whites who weren't,
or the other way around or any way at all,
endless white, black, yellow, red, blue histories,
—the whole chromatic spectrum bursting into flames above me—
the endless history of the cynical smile of the European
who had come to squeeze my mother's teats.

The horrific circular walk,
the shadowy play of feet on the circle of sand,

the poisonous movement of a heel avoiding the urchin's spine,
the sinister mangroves, like a cancerous belt,
force the island back,
mangroves and fetid sand
squeeze the kidneys of the island's people.

Only a flamingo rises aloft.

There's no way out! There's no way out!
Life in a funnel crusted with rage.
There's no way out:
the smallest shark would refuse to carry an intact body.
There's no way out:
a grape moored to the face of the creole
languidly fanning herself in a rocking-chair
and "there's no way out" comes to a terrifying end in the crash of the *claves*.

Each man eating pieces of the island,
each man devouring its fruit, stones, and nutritious excrement,
each man biting the space left by his shadow,
each man tearing with his teeth at the void where the sun expects to be,
each man, his mouth like a cistern, dams up the sea's water
but pathetically, like Munchausen's horse,
spews it from its hindquarters,
each man in the rancorous labor of trimming
the edges of the world's most beautiful island,
each man trying to drive the beast that's a cross
between beast and fireflies.

But the beast is as lazy as a beautiful stallion
and stubborn as a primitive mare.
Each day it passes through the four chaotic moments,
the four moments in which it can study itself
—its head between its paws—searching the horizon with a cruel eye,
the four moments when cancer opens: daybreak, noon, dusk, and night.

The first drops of a coarse rain strike its back
until the skin takes on the sharp resonance of maracas.

At this moment an agreeable mystery
could be unfurled, like a sheet or a flag of truce,
but the avalanche of luxuriant greens drowns out the wet sounds,
and boredom invades the enveloping tunnel of leaves.

The luminous face of a badly born dream,
a carnival that begins with the song of a rooster,
mist covering the scandal of the savannah with its icy disguise,
each palm proudly cascading in a green jet of water,
pierce, with an incandescent triangle, the breasts of the first water vendors,
and the column of water hurls its vapors at the sun's face sewn by a rooster.
It's the terrible hour.
The devourers of mist evaporate
swampwards,
and an alligator gives them a sweet once-over.
It's the terrible hour.
The final gleam of Yara's light
forces the horses into the mud.

It's the terrible hour.
Like a meteor the horrific hen falls
and everyone drinks his coffee.

But what can the sun do in this benighted town?
The day's work coils around men's necks
while milk falls desperately.
What can the sun do in this benighted town?
With murderous determination the cane cutters clear swaths of brush,
the grieving iguana leaps baroquely in a spout of blood,
the cane cutters, bringing shiploads of light, will darken to the tint
of an Egyptian tunnel.
Who could hope for clemency at such an hour?

In confusion a people escape their skin
dozing off with the light,
the explosive drug that can bring a fatal dream
to the beautiful eyes of men and women,
their immense and shadowy eyes

through which skin enters into whatever strange rites.

Skin at this hour stretches out like a reef
and bites its own borders,
skin takes to screaming like a madwoman, like a fat sow,
skin tries to cover its light with palm leaves,
with fronds carried carelessly by the wind,
in a fury skin covers itself with parrots and pitahayas,
absurdly it covers itself with somber tobacco leaves
and the remains of shadowy legends,
and when skin has become but a dark ball,
the horrific hen brings forth a white egg.

Cover it! Cover it!
But the light advances, invades
perversely, obliquely, perpendicularly,
the light is an enormous vent that sucks the shadow,
and you slowly raise your hands to shield your eyes.

The least confessable secrets are spoken:
light moves tongues,
light moves arms,
light throws itself on the guava vendor,
light throws itself on blacks and whites,
light strikes itself,
rushes convulsively from side to side,
begins to explode, to burst, to split apart,
light begins the most horrific illumination,
light begins to give birth to light.
It's noon.

The complete text of *The Whole Island* can be found at the Shearsman Books website: goo.gl/dL4lOD