

# The Tower of the Antilles

*Achy Obejas*

*with thanks to Kcho, for Archipiélago en mi pensamiento*

1.



What is your name?

You already know my name.

What is your name?

You already know my name.

They went on like this, one with his line, the other with hers.

What ...

You already know ...

...

... name, they coincided, not exactly in harmony: One voice was a little reedy, though steady, the other flat.

The room was black and moist. Things may have been slithering about, small harmless things. The faint cataphonics of carpentry whispered from the solitary window.

What is your name?

This time, silence.

What is your name?

His chair bumped along on the sandy floor. When he stretched, his body distracted the lightest breeze from her face. The wooden beat from outside continued, still dim.

A door opened, shut. In between, a vague rustle.

2.

In truth, there's only speculation about the formation of the island, carved by lava and tides, how the tips of peaks became mountains, and islet after islet merged, thousands of them, until they became an archipelago shaped like a curved cicatrix.

The island's natives did not know how to cultivate land or use tools. They picked fruit, chased crabs out of their sandy wells. They grew root vegetables, usually in mounds of soil designed to retard erosion and lengthen storage, and knew how to make bread from an otherwise poisonous tuber. They fished, hunted rats and iguanas, and ate both turtles and dogs.

The men went naked for the most part, the women frequently wore short skirts but breasts were generally bared. They flattened their foreheads by binding them with a hard plate before they were fully formed. This way their heads slanted, reflecting light back to the heavens.

They were terrible, unambitious mariners, with no sense at all for navigation. For a while, in fact, many believed the island was no island at all, but a monstrous raft made of packed dirt and clay, impossible to pilot.

They had two supreme gods, each with a particular allegiance to water: a lord of the sea and a goddess of rivers and abundance. As reverence, these accepted prayer and platefuls of food: plump marlin filets, papayas bursting with pockets of gooey black seeds, buckets of coconut milk.

Before making offerings, devotees had to cleanse themselves through absolution, fasting and ritualized vomiting. Hungrily, they put wooden spades down their throats, liturgical implements they lazily let slide from their lips.

Afterwards, they used a long, straw-like tube to sniff the pulverized bark of a local tree, which caused extreme hallucinations.

3.

What is your name? he asked.

Pinewood is best, easy to whittle, she thought to herself. The island was dense with mahogany, cedar and palm trees with feathery leaf bouquets.

You already know my name, she said through lips that were a little sore.

She coughed unintentionally. She knew even then how important it was to choose wood without knots, blemishes or cracks. She thought of nothing but the pulpy inner flesh of trees, of Madras muslin and hemp.

What is your name?

Her boat needed a brace. About five centimeters thick, a meter wide and two and a quarter meters long. In her head, she measured roughly 30 centimeters from one edge toward the center. She marked the points, then drew diagonal lines across it.

What is your name?

She continued, counting off intimate distances, her fingers designing on the tender canvass of her thighs.

4.

One day, a very large brown woman with slanted eyes set a tiny boat on the island's shore. It was made from the languid leaves of a local flower, folded over this way and that until the triangle in the middle signaled completion. Only a few of the natives noticed, or cared, and when the tiny boat was found missing among the usual debris at dawn, everyone presumed the tide's eager tendrils were to blame.

That afternoon, the large brown woman with slanted eyes returned, this time with a boat of balsa wood. Its skin was as smooth as a baby's, pink and sweet. Again, it vanished over night.

During that week, boats began to appear - canoes and kayaks, floats made of driftwood, hollowed tree trunks, discarded refrigerators made buoyant with inflated tubes, car chassis with water wings. They piled one on top of the other, each decreasing in size as the structure ascended, so that they began to form separate stories. Each level had its own peculiar color, usually a variation of whitewashed blue, or a smear of dense aquamarine.

Later, the boats began to pivot, each one a little, so that soon there were prows of a sort directed to the four points of the compass. There was nothing between the vessels, each one perfectly balanced on top of the other, so that they swayed with the trade winds, waved to the waters but did not fall.

5.

Eventually, he stopped asking her name. He would just come in and sit across from her for a while in the darkness. She'd grown accustomed to the visits. Her thighs were covered with ghostly designs for boats. After a time, he'd scrape the chair backwards, get up and disappear.

Then her lips would soundlessly form the words that followed him: *You already know my name.*

6.

On the island's coast, a few mangy dogs, bats and a tempest or two of wild bees came to rest on the column of boats. It swelled with frogs in its crevices, snails crawled the walls. Birds with feathers frazzled like uncombed hair perched and called. There were clear days and days of fog, nights when the stars flashed across the sky and others when they refused to shine.

That was usually when the boats would moan from the weight of the natives scaling the tower.