

OMEROS



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FARRAR STRAUS GIROUX

NEW YORK

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in slightly different form

FOR MY SHIPMATES IN THIS CRAFT,

FOR MY BROTHER, RODERICK,

& FOR ROGER STRAUS

BOOK ONE



Chapter I

I

“This is how, one sunrise, we cut down them canoes.”
Philoctete smiles for the tourists, who try taking
his soul with their cameras. “Once wind bring the news

to the *laurier-cannelles*, their leaves start shaking
the minute the axe of sunlight hit the cedars,
because they could see the axes in our own eyes.

Wind lift the ferns. They sound like the sea that feed us
fishermen all our life, and the ferns nodded ‘Yes,
the trees have to die.’ So, fists jam in our jacket,

cause the heights was cold and our breath making feathers
like the mist, we pass the rum. When it came back, it
give us the spirit to turn into murderers.

I lift up the axe and pray for strength in my hands
to wound the first cedar. Dew was filling my eyes,
but I fire one more white rum. Then we advance.”

For some extra silver, under a sea-almond,
he shows them a scar made by a rusted anchor,
rolling one trouser-leg up with the rising moan

of a conch. It has puckered like the corolla
of a sea-urchin. He does not explain its cure.
“It have some things”—he smiles—“worth more than a dollar.”

He has left it to a garrulous waterfall
to pour out his secret down La Sorcière, since
the tall laurels fell, for the ground-dove’s mating call

to pass on its note to the blue, tacit mountains
whose talkative brooks, carrying it to the sea,
turn into idle pools where the clear minnows shoot

and an egret stalks the reeds with one rusted cry
as it stabs and stabs the mud with one lifting foot.
Then silence is sawn in half by a dragonfly

as eels sign their names along the clear bottom-sand,
when the sunrise brightens the river’s memory
and waves of huge ferns are nodding to the sea’s sound.

Although smoke forgets the earth from which it ascends,
and nettles guard the holes where the laurels were killed,
an iguana hears the axes, clouding each lens

over its lost name, when the hunched island was called
“Iounalao,” “Where the iguana is found.”
But, taking its own time, the iguana will scale

the rigging of vines in a year, its dewlap fanned,
its elbows akimbo, its deliberate tail
moving with the island. The slit pods of its eyes

ripened in a pause that lasted for centuries,
that rose with the Aruacs’ smoke till a new race
unknown to the lizard stood measuring the trees.

These were their pillars that fell, leaving a blue space
for a single God where the old gods stood before.
The first god was a gommier. The generator

began with a whine, and a shark, with sidewise jaw,
sent the chips flying like mackerel over water
into trembling weeds. Now they cut off the saw,

still hot and shaking, to examine the wound it
had made. They scraped off its gangrenous moss, then ripped
the wound clear of the net of vines that still bound it

to this earth, and nodded. The generator whipped
back to its work, and the chips flew much faster as
the shark’s teeth gnawed evenly. They covered their eyes

from the splintering nest. Now, over the pastures
of bananas, the island lifted its horns. Sunrise
trickled down its valleys, blood splashed on the cedars,

and the grove flooded with the light of sacrifice.
A gommier was cracking. Its leaves an enormous
tarpaulin with the ridgepole gone. The creaking sound

made the fishermen leap back as the angling mast
leant slowly towards the troughs of ferns; then the ground
shuddered under the feet in waves, then the waves passed.

Achille looked up at the hole the laurel had left.
He saw the hole silently healing with the foam
of a cloud like a breaker. Then he saw the swift

crossing the cloud-surf, a small thing, far from its home,
confused by the waves of blue hills. A thorn vine gripped
his heel. He tugged it free. Around him, other ships

were shaping from the saw. With his cutlass he made
a swift sign of the cross, his thumb touching his lips
while the height rang with axes. He swayed back the blade,

and hacked the limbs from the dead god, knot after knot,
wrenching the severed veins from the trunk as he prayed:
"Tree! You can be a canoe! Or else you cannot!"

The bearded elders endured the decimation
of their tribe without uttering a syllable
of that language they had uttered as one nation,

the speech taught their saplings: from the towering babble
of the cedar to green vowels of *bois-campêche*.

The *bois-flot* held its tongue with the *laurier-cannelle*,

the red-skinned logwood endured the thorns in its flesh,
while the Aruacs' patois crackled in the smell
of a resinous bonfire that turned the leaves brown

with curling tongues, then ash, and their language was lost.
Like barbarians striding columns they have brought down,
the fishermen shouted. The gods were down at last.

Like pygmies they hacked the trunks of wrinkled giants
for paddles and oars. They were working with the same
concentration as an army of fire-ants.

But vexed by the smoke for defaming their forest,
blow-darts of mosquitoes kept needling Achille's trunk.
He frothed white rum on both forearms that, at least,

those that he flattened to asterisks would die drunk.
They went for his eyes. They circled them with attacks
that made him weep blindly. Then the host retreated

to high bamboo like the archers of Aruacs
running from the muskets of cracking logs, routed
by the fire's banner and the remorseless axe

hacking the branches. The men bound the big logs first
with new hemp and, like ants, trundled them to a cliff
to plunge through tall nettles. The logs gathered that thirst

for the sea which their own vined bodies were born with.
Now the trunks in eagerness to become canoes
ploughed into breakers of bushes, making raw holes

of boulders, feeling not death inside them, but use—
to roof the sea, to be hulls. Then, on the beach, coals
were set in their hollows that were chipped with an adze.

A flat-bed truck had carried their rope-bound bodies.
The charcoals, smouldering, cored the dugouts for days
till heat widened the wood enough for ribbed gunwales.

Under his tapping chisel Achille felt their hollows
exhaling to touch the sea, lunging towards the haze
of bird-printed islets, the beaks of their parted bows.

Then everything fit. The pirogues crouched on the sand like hounds with sprigs in their teeth. The priest sprinkled them with a bell, then he made the swift's sign.

When he smiled at Achille's canoe, *In God We Troust*, Achille said: "Leave it! Is God' spelling and mine." After Mass one sunrise the canoes entered the troughs

of the surpliced shallows, and their nodding prows agreed with the waves to forget their lives as trees; one would serve Hector and another, Achilles.

III

Achille peed in the dark, then bolted the half-door shut. It was rusted from sea-blast. He hoisted the fishpot with the crab of one hand; in the hole under the hut

he hid the cinder-block step. As he neared the depot, the dawn breeze salted him coming up the grey street past sleep-tight houses, under the sodium bars

of street-lamps, to the dry asphalt scraped by his feet; he counted the small blue sparks of separate stars. Banana fronds nodded to the undulating

anger of roosters, their cries screeching like red chalk drawing hills on a board. Like his teacher, waiting, the surf kept chafing at his deliberate walk.

By the time they met at the wall of the concrete shed the morning star had stepped back, hating the odour of nets and fish-guts; the light was hard overhead

and there was a horizon. He put the net by the door of the depot, then washed his hands in its basin. The surf did not raise its voice, even the ribbed hounds

around the canoes were quiet; a flask of l'absinthe was passed by the fishermen, who made smacking sounds and shook at the bitter bark from which it was brewed.

This was the light that Achille was happiest in. When, before their hands gripped the gunwales, they stood for the sea-width to enter them, feeling their day begin.

Chapter II

I

Hector was there. Theophile also. In this light, they have only Christian names. Placide, Pancreas, Chrysostom, Maljo, Philoctete with his head white

as the coiled surf. They shipped the lances of oars, placed them parallel in the grave of the gunwales like man and wife. They scooped the leaf-bilge from the planks,

loosened knots from the bodies of flour-sack sails, while Hector, at the shallows' edge, gave a quick thanks, with the sea for a font, before he waded, thigh-in.

The rest walked up the sand with identical stride except for foam-haired Philoctete. The sore on his shin still unhealed, like a radiant anemone. It had come