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Postcards from the Islands

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David Baker

POSTCARDS FROM THE ISLANDS

1.

From a distance the dozen off-islands
seem more like a quality of dusk light
and the green and silver bay like a sky
in which clouds and color have bled away.

The whole world is flipped over that way,
as though a part of the brain is switched off
whose job is to restore each image, right-
side up, which has been crisscrossed, inverted,

cast on the concave back wall of the eye.
Eons of looking have wired us this way.
The silver cay shimmers with running lights.
And so the masts of the boats, homing, must

be there, though they are invisible black,
part of the witness imagination
like the sliver of moon cupped in the bay,
bright chalice beneath one star to catch it.

2.

*It's a scene that can take the breath away,
as when a small shower starts
from nowhere, like many wings suddenly
settling around us. The palmetto fronds
shudder and shine, soaked, at pool-
side, so perfect they're plastic,
and the palm leaves*

*flicker like rib bones lined
down slick limbs. Rain
on the tin roofs
seethes, and slows, and sweeps
off the wind like a wave . . .
There is salt on our lips, a tidal breeze—
a tropical drink. Taste it.*

I've got more ice here.
I'm fine. Thanks.
That's the Seven Sisters in that dim little cluster.
The shower's over already. Just look at that moon. Here, lie down on the railing and look up.
Don't fall.
I won't. This is amazing.
This whole view is totally amazing, don't you think?

*The weak lights of the village below,
festive and small, wink on,
one by one, as the shower advances
over the bay valley
and sifts into the sea.
It's like an eye blinking, but slow motion,
the way the soft, gray rain-cloud
shadows the vista and then
passes, the way even the night air
glistens, brighter, when it goes.*

What were you two staring at up on the deck?
It's so perfect here in the pool.
Are the stars the same?
I think they're different, and it's all shifted down that way.
Did you take your clothes off?
It's not that dark.
It feels very sexy.
I think it's better . . .
Did you see the little soldier crab come out? He lives in the ferns under the

big bougainvillea. He eats the cat food. He scuttles across the tiles, eats the food, and then the geckos come along and clean it up. The plate's always spotless.

I don't know what the cats eat.

The geckos?

What were you two looking at?

This is the most incredible scenery on the whole island. You can look over the village and the houses, and you can hear the roosters and dogs and doors slamming, and all the little lights of the cars on the mountain pass, all the way over the bay. And the boats anchored at the cay out toward the off-islands

...

It's like the postcards.

What was that?

Don't be mean.

I was just talking about the view. So why is every postcard exactly the same?

It's his theory—there are just three nature scenes in Western art.

Oh.

Who wants wine?

You're standing up high and look out at the big distance and some billowy clouds.

Will someone pour me some wine?

Bierstadt, Asher Durand, Thomas Cole and the promontory, that's one. You know the famous pictures. It's supposed to be religious. A tiny person scans all of creation, fertile green and misty, and you're feeling little, and God's fingers shine through the clouds. Or the sea beating to marrow and foam on the ancient rocks below.

Marrow and foam?

It's about power.

No, it's about possessing everything you see.

Here we go.

Manifest destiny, control. The febrile eye and pointing finger as a phallus and a fence line.

Book of poems by—

Shh.

What are the others?

Is that rain again?

No, I think he's windows.
He's horizon.
It's all about absence. Think of plain landscape, flat snow, sand blowing,
beaches and waves.
I love beaches and waves.
Why are they always about something?
They are.
Also they are spiritual, this kind, going out into a big, stretching nothing.
I like that—stretching nothing.
Isn't that the new quark?
That's spinning-nothing.
Quit.
And it's not a quark, it's a quantum particle.
Anyway, what I mean is this is an ascetic scene.
O'Keeffe?
Well, if you look inside the flowers and bones, it's endless horizon, isn't it.
No, she's sex.
But isn't she kind of doing still-life flowers and that?
That's not one of his three scenes.
Oh.
What's the third?
Swim over here. Be quiet.
Listen to the birds and the stars.
Did you take your trunks off?
It's so beautiful here.
You're horny.
Three is the spooky one.
You're all spooky and this place is spooky.
You're a quark.
I wonder what's crawling around out there in the flowers and plants and up
those palm trees.
Orchids.
Crawling up the trees?
Did you see those today at the Mongoose, the way the big white orchids
grew on the side of the palm trunks? Well, people put them there.

It's when you wish to be obliterated by nature—blown away, zippo, gone.
Whoosh.
You wish to be other.
Whoosh.
That's the horse part. They're sex and they always take you to the wild
place.
Woo-woo! *Here is my horse Abstraction—!*
Do you come back?
You do not come back.
Okay, so it's death.
Didn't Emily do that first, horses and death and sex?
Oh yes, I love Emily.
She didn't do sex.
I bet she did.
How do you know?
I know. That's a sexy poem.
It's a poem.
I thought we were all talking about pictures.

3.

Strings of blinking Christmas lights run along
the porch railings, the pitched roofs. The hillside
of shacks shines brightly even in the haze.

There are trucks mired in many years of mud.
There are bakery smells, and a pop-pop
on the dingy asphalt basketball court . . .

Roosters. A horn, another horn. Voices.
We're driving through the village toward the docks.
Who are we? People driving in a poem.

The narrow streets are full of people now
that the market is open, and the sun-
lit, high clouds seem like pennants, ripped to wave

goodbye, hello to the tourist liners
anchored far out in the gleaming channel.
The cafe fronts and fruit-stands stop directly

at the streetside curb. People are pushing
through the vendors and carrels to get by.
The whole world is flipped over that way.

A man, white, with dusty dreadlocks, wants to
dance with a woman beside a stone wall.
Someone is bent over from their troubles

and someone is listening to weather
and someone to reggae from the big church.
We're driving by. We're watching as someone

dances, his t-shirt red as a flower,
eyes closed, arms afloat as though weightless, ghost
across the honking street. We can't tell. Does

the woman who has raised her skirt past her
stomach want to, or now is it the man
trying to kiss her, or hurt her, or take

something from her, who yanks her clothes so high?
We're driving by on our way somewhere else.
But we just can't tear them, our eyes, away.