

Helina Hookoomsing

Grandmothers

I am asked to honour my female ancestors,
Cup my palms, pour water into the soil, let my prayer be carried
by the zephyr to the four directions – to the land of the dead, in the centre
where they can hear the dulcet ringing of each drop, each word,
Water as an offering because I cannot give my tears,
I never knew my ancestors, I never knew my grandmothers
on this island that is knowable and conquerable,
A mythological babe in the womb of the Indian Ocean,
Ever-flinching from the sweaty fingers
of the colonial need to caress its own pride and shame

Who were these women?

My grandmothers who sang when mourning their dead,
Who whispered and wept, resting flowers at the feet of their gods,
Who cursed the fury of the heat on their dusky terrene backs,
Stooping to the soil, the earth echoing from their indentured throats,
An angry rolling laughter, peeling over mud and corrugated iron homes,
bulldozing rows of sugarcane as they worked from sunrise to nightfall,
As I lay in the dark, if my memory can capture the evanescence of my dreams,
I hear this laughing lullaby, so distant to me, so distant these roaring rapids
are the trickling sounds of an elusive source flowing to cradle me

Who were these women?

My grandmothers who knew how to cut a grain
of cooked rice to feed eight mouths,

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How to thicken hot water so their bellies could sleep at night,
How to make rubber sandals walk six years without wearing thin,
How to accept the betrayals, like never kicking rocks to find gold,

But finding themselves lost
in a land they were made to call home, in fear of never seeing home again,
Longing for the smell of a continent always behind them,
their histories at their backs

Who were these women?

My grandmothers who were too tired to sleep,
The gift of one idle hour, more rousing, and a joke
Too ridiculous to repeat,

Lies, disappointment occupy every thought on these foreign shores,
Roots slowly merged with hardened palms and fists,
After colonial ships had sailed away, indentured families remained anchored,
My grandmothers whose mouths I hear singing, weeping, cursing, laughing,
As they listen to the water pouring from my hands, my pensive silence

Note to poem: punctuation is as intended.