

TO FUTURE CARGO CULTS

Poems by J. Jaime Olivo

Giants

My grandfather was a giant,
burning his fingers on the hearts of women
I watched him shave his head with a kitchen knife
drizzling pitch oil over that ball-bearing dome,
and mocking self-immolation.

Then he danced the St. Vitus as the pain receded
beyond his mottled hairline:
"It will never grow back!" he howled,
wild brows flickering like flaming cane fields,
the oil turning brown with blood
—bubbling like burnt sugar.

Hulking, he sang some Patuá to an obeah dark sky
—this Spanish Negro Elvis,
teeth fully armored in Trinidad Cement Limited gold,
his red crater mouth full of focks and cunts.

Blowing cigar choked air through flapping lips
with a sound like a snorting stud horse
he shivered a moment, shaking off some crown
—and I never saw another hair on his big fat head.

Big man cowering beneath the broom like an old street dog;
me, hiding behind the makeshift porch of scrap wood
and corrugated metal he'd built for limin',
a sconce for the susurrant slurs of secondary schoolers;
hemmed between the sewer and the dongs tree
full of restless jumbee and predators of impossible shadow,
fixed on their own aberrant feet.

We'd sing Calypso and Marvin Gaye every night
right there, where I'd first felt a girl's hand plunge deep
into the tailored pocket of my school uniform,
right there, where we timeshared our adolescence.

Marveling now at grandma, her deep sunken eyes
sparkling in their hollow vault;
the eyes she'd given me
dark Indian circles,
and no Bollywood cure.

She arced like a lick of black flame across the footbridge,
giving chase over the open sewer; the general in full retreat;
striking him two, three, four times with the broom;
a martial art, developed against undisciplined children.

All us kids knew the right movements,
had decoded the strikes, had mastered the turns,
knew the calculus to ease those blows,
but not this big slow giant.
The master Fleeing! Fleeing!
over the roots of the dongs tree
which sprung from the tar by his tiny car,
where he crumpled himself inside
and sped away—trailing punctuated grey smoke;
falling away from the Old Life;
falling away from the crushing vice of ceramic bric-a-brac;
granny's worthless things, pricelessly arranged;
away from guarding his plate with foothold traps,
and baiting the outside children with laxative chocolates
at three times the price of just chocolate.
Away from granny's vengeful God,
away from Long Jehovah.

Granny actually smiled later that week
putting bay rum on my thighs, after I'd been mauled by dogs
who'd rushed me with gnashing teeth
for whistling symphonies at the bats
that exploded from their fell roosts
to feast under a failing sun.

Bay Rum: granny's readymade catholicon,
which she'd used even when I'd been hit by the neighbor's car,
which had "bounce' me down" as I played Robot
with a box on my head;
Uncle, two months my senior,
watched in mute glee while it happened
—a matte white car full of coal black revelers,

and one liberated Indian caste-traitor,
like my great-grandmother.
Bay Rum on my back, my chest, my thighs;
my body like some pliant material,
holding the bumper's imprint,
like in the flesh of some pitting edemic;
grandfather nowhere to be found.

I'd glide by his mistress's sometimes,
frozen, like a statue moved by strongbacks
on a piece of stolen plywood,
which I'd fastened to two decapitated rollerskates
on a street that was dead silent but for those thundering wheels.

And there on the porch of some shack on stilts,
lounging megacephalic on the ungrandma's lap,
hands misspelling the firmament;
plotting the path between her thighs and some fake eternity
described in curses and petty complaints,
was that red skinned giant.

He always saw me—taunted me,
beckoned "come na boy!" like all was innocent,
waving his dark lined palm through the air,
his garish rings strobing in the Trini sun,
forming sigils and finger spells
—and then on cue, the blue-gowned ungrandma would stand,
materialize a bowl full of chutney, kalaloo,
or the same chicken I'd last seen alive
the day before, when it shat on my Bata-dogs
and strutted Jurassic,
a proud gait which went extinct
beneath a Holocene machete,

Eventually His giant's heart failed him,
and despite the offense,
granny took her plot next to his,
having spent twenty years or more
faithful to a ghost.

Three generations stood in that heat,
as the hole was dug by

some diminutive excavation machine.
'Then her casket came loose from its rope,
dipping violently to gasps and explosions of tearful wails,
and we saw in that dredged-up dirt,
the phalanges, carpals, and metacarpals,
of some red negro giant,
and before I could speak,
some small, choked voice in the crowd
of bewildered relations, asked
"tha'is daddy own?"

My grandfather was a giant,
And I am sure the bastard loved them both;
sure that love's blindness is an illusion,
the way adults seem brilliant and menacing in youth;
and painfully absurd with age;
that if we had centuries to live, these suchsimplethings
would work themselves out with an ancient kindness,
and giants could sleep wherever they pleased.

An Electron Stuck in the Show Me State

Show me this world's only star
lost in useless territory,
crippled and edging
an unremarkable galaxy.
its brilliant viscera smeared across
trembling skies of chromatic st-st-stutter;
of green-not-yellow-blue
of blackbody red
star fat spattered
like the inky innards
of a crushed animal,
a cosmic scream under Goodyear tread.

'There will be no more good years,
the sun's final act —the pop!
of a camera flash
under that milky canopy.
Show me twenty-two hours
of earth and the planets

clinging to memories
caught in the gravity of a ghost
falling forever in darkness—
Jupiter's second chance
at a central position
in some new theology.

Show me the quaking billionaire hearts,
the trained contempt freed from their bodies
when there is nothing more
their paper notes can buy.

Show me all former worlds
in flattened geometries,
from civilizations to fine powder,
small enough to pass through the anus of a pilot fish.

Show me dogs cocking their heads
at the absurd order of human etiquette,
now dashed by our sudden impermanence
from animality to intelligibility,
as they paw their first symbols in the dirt.

Show me the end of countries;
just an old world
and some imaginary lines that no bird,
no snake, or wolf
has ever even seen.

And I'll show you inevitability.

I knew you'd gotten it
when your family's wincing matriarch revealed
your hopelessness to the rest of the table.
Your face as calm as bongwater
you'd seen a world
where our failures were the background noise

of crippled machinery;
So i followed you, let you pin me like a thrashing bug
against a dying olive tree.

My fingers fumbled, tumbling,
clumsily, defenestrated, falling to the courtyard of your
belly below, and then we asked
“What is the passage of time
without memories?”
and left the absurdity of punctuating that friendship
with sex beneath that tree
like a ripe and fallen olive left to rot
on the cold, wet ground.

Pacemaker

There are three colored wires
between decaffeinated walks under the jaundiced streetlamps
[twinkling their coded messages to stars beyond the milky veil
about the ground states of three grams of sodium gas]
and the black, black, endless black
of unknown unknowns and certain death.

In 1994, I learned there were methods
for reviving stars long dead
[when I was stranded outside bidet country
with a suitcase full of toilet paper]
—a simple science
obtained by a toddler-whisperer
and then smuggled past dark border fences
like the crayon-colored dossier
of a Cold War spy.

To revive a star was instant,
but the results could not be seen
for billions of years
if you picked a good one.

But you could wait, if you wanted.
Wait, until terminal
and cryogenically frozen,
your bank account drained
and your canister drained

Until you are the last woman on earth
drawing soldiers in the dirt.
You see it go out,
and scribble a checkmark
on a notepad.

Or should we just rush this life?

Hooky

As a teen, I wanted a girl they called Hooky;
her one arm
was malformed, frozen in position
like cradling an invisible child.

My conspirators told me
she would lay me beneath the stairwell
if I simply said to her, in their vernacular,
that I wanted to bull.

An adolescent counsel, a wisdom of teen boys,
had worked out—in the algebra of hormonal yearning
that this was how I could free myself
from virginity's bottomless gravity well
which pulled my teenage years away from greatness.

So I gathered my stupid American courage,
drank a Stag and stood outside of her house
calling her down the stone stairs;
quietly though, so her mother,
who had put her hands on me once before,
could not hear over Days of Our Lives.

She emerged in the spackled archway,
body arched over the half door

like a dark lizard, parts of her colored tribal by vitiligo,
the rest of her skin blue-black, darker even than the sky,
which was faintly lit by refinery flare stacks and cane fires.

She wore a shock of curly locks
a relaxed afro, stillwet and fullshine
exploding outward from a weary expression,
made all the more fatigued by the presence
of the adolescent brain-stem at the bottom of her stairs.

Older than me, and with a slyness
I couldn't have known.
She carried a bowl of string beans
in her hook arm, which looked unaffected,
bornright and natural,
as she walked slowly down the stairs
all regal like she was wearing a gown
that trailed to infinity
though it was a simple skirt which displayed no pretense.

And the other boys, two black de Bergeracs
and an Indian boy named Charlie,
who lived beneath her,
(and whose parents barely tolerated my existence)
squatted like tribal elders behind the cement wall
on the side with the chickens
with a very violent goose who'd "peck out your arsehole"
if you were drunk and fell running.

I slipped my hands around her waist, as instructed—
her face showing some variation on pleasant surprise
as my hands
sparked and animated
with unknown purpose,
worked toward a mysterious end,
and terrified by my own actions
I pulled her toward me anyway,
my heart on stroke-time
and my blood pumping more than enough
to support a teenage hard-on.

But that oilslick beauty,
burnt coffee black,
eyes two dark circles framed in the whitest white...

she was already laughing at me;
string beans still propped against her hip,
lips pouting pink and puFFy
fuck! the shame.

But a froth had built up inside me, a deep agitation
in a once quiet stream, and
I whispered in her ear those idiot words
met with a silence that lasted, and hasn't since ceased
except for one calm and sure response:
she hit me with a smile that was playful
but so sad
and steupsed loud enough for the shadow boys to hear
then, with her cheek grazing mine
and the wind of her breath lifting
the hairs on my neck, whispered back
“Jimmy boy, that ain't you, boy.”

She put her good hand against my chest
with a firmness that held back a rushing river
and pushed me away, like a boat from a dock,

But she kissed me

and walked away shelling a string of beans in her free hand
and discarding the remains in the goose's yard
right where the other boys were sure they'd been hidden.
Her hips swung proudly, I think, I don't know
(I've never known that kind of pride myself)
but it etched permanent curves in my memory.
Having exposed this pathetic overture
for the four boy charade it was
and with a new kind of courage filling my empty spaces
I let her hear as I told the other boys
to fuck right off.

Then she swung both halves of the Dutch door shut
and latched it tight.

Decimate a Ruin

your sticker, "America United"
is a fatal anagram
which you pounded proudly
into the bumper of your small, ailing clacker
soon to be jutting awkwardly
from a coveted Employee of the Month space.

The fast-track, the five year pin;
the four blushing indentations in the fat of each hand
fingers pink-to-white knuckle pale,
curled like fetal cats,
accomplices to the daily strangling
of the steering column
of your small, ailing clacker.

A bobble head in a suit
its permanent glad-handly grimace somehow serene,
flags in both its hands,
locked in a perpetual spring-loaded seizure
—which you must find comforting!

Rear-view pointed straight through,
your eyes grid locked
to the oily tongue of the open road
but I saw you and you saw me
your lips curled downward
controlled by the part of your mind
you do not access in mixed company;
in that instant as we passed,
maybe 30 mph between us

—two souls stranded
in the ragged landscape of our lives
sharing an unfinished sentence;
your face a spiteful semaphore.

Strangers, but
right then I knew your true name
and you knew mine.