

A black and white photograph of a landscape. The top half shows a cloudy sky over a body of water. The bottom half shows a mountain range with a prominent peak. The text 'ISLA' is centered in the middle of the image, and 'CHARITY STEBBINS' is centered in the lower half.

ISLA

CHARITY STEBBINS

# ISLA

CHARITY STEBBINS

Sundress Publications

You lay in your bed in the house in which you were born, day-dreaming of milkfish and of becoming a doctor. Those people, you thought, have such a love of animals. You dip your aging hands into the water of your hair, matted like tropical grass, the way it webs across coffee-colored ground. You think about the archetypes you see in films, about embraces moving into the eyes of an audience like another island arrives across the water. You wish you could eat the sweet dark fruit of the place you have just been.

But you don't know anything about birth, about loving the departing part of you. You are lying on a bed with sea-patterned sheets. You are still sleepy from flight.

There is no beach here, only water. Heaving on the concrete, seaweed is bunched by revolutions in the current. On the hot water dam are crabs and fractals of light. Out in the water a boat is measuring the deepest part of the ocean. Back at the house a bird flies rapidly in and out of the veranda. Another island is visible through the net of a fisherman, through triangulated arms deep in the sandbar.

The monkey-eating eagle spreads its seven-foot wingspan over the diver who is looking at parcels on the seafloor. Sometimes the light on the water is the length of a body. Under the acacia tree everyone is staring at your white skin and it feels like home.

These pearls are for sale. These pearls are for your mother. These pearls are from heaven. These pearls in identical arrangements from different men, as if portioned from an assembly line, from a man who sits at his desk and swims with his ankle tied to a boat.

Tell me how you reached the center of the island before the shore, how you are friendly with the people. Why have you come? I already know what you are drawing. I see the face in my mind of the mixed-up animal. It can be an odd moment when you realize the room is not empty after all, and you have been watched all this time. Laying traps in saltwater with your hands, those identifiers of your humanness. Your impulses are to catch things still living. Tell me how men and women came out of the bamboo trees, far-flung and fully formed.

Nearby, a woman says, wearing a wide-brim hat, woman says, this would have been one of my last choices. I'd rather go to India, I've never been to India. This place is too Westernized (eyed) and I've already been here, or someone identically. This place has been altered to resemble me. I want to see myself in a new, feel mutual awe. I want an exotic people. These have already been consumed.

You really did watch the sun come up? That meat, just sitting in that bucket, it was the best day of my life. Three tires built into the ceiling to collect rainwater. Do you want to go dancing? A girl rubs her small eyes leaning against her mother in the door of a hut. How do they live up here? Oh, there's a garden. You like the pressure of being up high. Your camera builds a circle around you.

A calf rubs its head against a rough branch. Strong and shining, the palm trees gather. I'm riding up and down this mountain. I'm riding up and down this mountain. The scarecrow in the rice terrace is wearing a Bears jersey. This scarecrow in the rice terrace is for the Dolphins. The name for the tall ground is water buffalo mounting. On the side of the mountain, brush is thatched salad.

But the rice terraces are too far away and everyone is talking about it. They said there would be monkeys. They said, this is the windiest bar I've ever been in. They said, I should have packed heels. We so almost killed someone. It was the only place in the village that was level. It all started with a larger conversation, foliage on steep earth thick as granite. It's the celebration of life party. She wins a prize for being a housewife. Up two stories in the tree house, rain is exploring furiously down. Banana leaves overhead, the touch-me-nots in bouquets convulse inwardly. You're describing snow to your friends at dinner. It's close, like still bees. They rub mosquito leaves on all your bodies.

It seems safe inside the ferry despite the funnel forming over the water, gray like fire-ending. A man is squatting on the shore heaping dead reef into his wheelbarrow. Someone is hosing down the boat. We run over a fish and all of its potential fish. For once, it seems, everyone is watching the parade.

Last night we could not stop laughing and moving around furniture in our hotel room. Drinking rum and young coconut milk, things that you should not have spoken, “We go praising statues, all the time” “You go in the cage but cannot go out” “Am I disturbing the houses?” The insects move into the black light trap. These are the lengths we go to, measuring our own darkness.



He makes a motion to his jaws, cupping and pulsating his hands, rolling up his eyes, to indicate deliciousness, delight. Turn off your flashes now, so as not to disturb the smallest mammals, the gestation in their mother's belly, the fiesta in the church. He makes a motion to his face like a sip of a cigarette, half closing his mouth to indicate slowing. Like butter over crabs is the afternoon. He makes a motion to his mouth like speaking, sucking the rinsed egg of delicious soup threaded with embryo. He leaves the shell with the shadow of a dark crowd on his plate.

Everyone in the camp knows the healer can only cure their backs, their skin, their ailing rashes. She does this alone, with a clear glass of water collecting their rubble. But everyone in the camp goes over to her anyway, with swollen tongues from too much sighing, with modern hearts all cyber-white, their blue-edges, their murder ballads, their falling asleep when it is still light. They come with machines for deflecting their memories, cameras for images of the natural world. They stride in like ghosts on a horse. They pass a shower beside a wire coop and faces children make to frighten one another. They see her enter from a darkened karaoke room.

If you are not poor, why all these spells? I made a bad wish in the well, one that I am already regretting. One by one, they sit in a place in the wall.

She is showing you the welts on her back and saying, this is part of my healing. This is different people coming out. Pick up, she says, answer me. I dreamt of sand every night, now it is coming out. They have changed the painting of her skin. Obscure beneath her face, like simulated drowning, she is walking into fresh water. It is then, you realize, I know this place. And I know why we have stayed away.

The mayor's son says the gas leak will be contained. His voice is like construction in the early morning. Your full taxi passes through the shut-up street, the only one in the city that is empty, quiet, like the space between a trauma and waking up. As if in a moment of consciousness, the street sickly rousing, two bare bodies lay facing each other on flat cardboard, touching slowly. You release them from your sight.

You go to see Mr. J. Instead you find women in creature-colored elastic crumbling their hands over your shoulders, their breasts like soft bulbs below polished streaks of collar bone. They applaud when you enter, drinking watered down shots of local tequila. Zeyna and Raina touch the place between your knee and thigh, leaning over to speak to one another. You can tell one of them loves you and one of them hates you. A tin of limes shaped like the pink swatches on Raina's face. Do you live alone? She is drinking in your foreignness. She wants to be on other islands. She admires the shape of your nose. Like a patient opponent in chess she puts her small hands on the table, moves your glass. Your order gets lost in the red room.

They look through you and behind the tin slats of a shanty onto their sleeping children, and the boiled water left beside their beds. Your ideas of any other life spurs quick blankness, like a storefront shutting tightly against the suggestion of dusk. The gaps in her voice remind you of the way birds fly into any room here, how everything is permeable to creatures, how every morning at the hotels there are a dozen men sweeping up spent fractions of trees, dew-heavy, with long brown needles. How calamansi falls on the outside stairs, citrus splitting into ordinary halves, the millipedes on tile, how you are now accustomed to ants tracing your lower limbs, how in low tide you can walk, ankle deep, to another island.

You are so beautiful, she says. You are so young.

Your taxi gets thundered with a rain of hands. The men around you see your color and grate their faces with excitement. Which woman do you want? Three girls in front of tinted glass. The pimps are passing flyers through the window slit. They say, this woman can shoot darts from her cunt. This woman can smoke cigarettes with her cunt. There are three in front of the tires of the cab, lined up, unable to see you. You pull away from the pimps and the hazmats and the taxi driver is saying, “they used to have a tax on windows here. The more windows you had the more the city took. So people began boarding up all of the openings.” You drive through a tent filled high with smoke.

We take pills for moving too much. You must go do votivo. The metal slats have red circlets trailing behind them, like long hair hung over the side of a bed. From the paper discarded under the holy water, you light candles *for nine consecutive days*. You *leave six copies of this prayer in the church each day*. Your prayer *will be answered on the ninth day no matter what your prayer is*. In this time of need, *pray* with the *saints* for the things that you *desire*.

There were some locals who died so they were in the news. They let the patients out into the hall. A body fell on a woman and saved her life.

The Madonna looks back into the clean van, bland, divine, and sightless, roving with the movements of startled pedicabs and plastic bags of water pressed toward you, sold blazing in certain realms of sunlight. The van is like a plantation house where you passengers are imposing white pillars, stooped from the elegance of disuse, plants and poverty making sleeves of concrete proliferating green. Squatters have placed lines between your ruined stone pleating. You are lurching, a storm is coming, you are in the Pacific, your skin is under parts of water like shatterings of lantern light, notes keep changing on the radio mambo, elusive pop song of the driver's cell phone, rattling like a birdcage or luggage in a valet's tin cart. Bursts of laughter, speaking, who would have come if we had to sleep in this heat?

If this room didn't leak and that room didn't let in too much light then they would all be identical. The concierge is spreading her arms like a fern, her head drooping like a flower's trumpet. Her eyes, refreshing culinary items, speak with her mouth; we're walking under the sea stone bridges. She knows when to go to breakfast and why the maids keep the white cats caged on a roof. You hover, with a monkey's intelligence, on the rug before the numbered door. You are pure survivalist. You think about the things made out of shells. You think about the things you have seen slept upon. The room is damaged but you don't feel it.



Under the cobra-heavy trees he was shot in the back. He was scavenging for steel. He was a man in the tunnel. Hot and dank the radio buzzed wetly, help-is-on-the-way. The barracks expose their beds, their Japanese scissors. There is fever protruding. The island goes flat.

Decades later, the war is over, mortars dismantled. His wife is pleading with a loudspeaker, asking, surrender, come-home. He is under the red moths and bats in a hole, his penance is eating on his knees, there are earthquakes like sulphite bombs, trees grow up through the floor, consuming the clearing.

You were shot in your back and you have returned here, under the two-sized leaves where the strangler fig put its seed in sunning branches and grew over its elder, a beautiful parasite; the first tree dies. You are the spirit in the rotted hollow. Some seeds do not take to the ground but only other beings. All ghosts are somewhere.

The island says, devote yourself to me, for I am lonely at night. Continents of sounds, acoustics of swooping bats, like strangers speaking from high windows of an unfamiliar street. Or unspoken, with the familiarity of a husband who helps you dress when you are old, and there are too many hidden things to make any more conversation. With its brown body spent cheaply at your feet or its tenements of bright gifts you cannot have for yourself, like blue stars under the ocean, where there is not enough breath to sink deep enough without thinking of dying. The sea it is turquoise in the shallows and pitches darker with depth. Busting corals at your heels where you walk to your neck; razor fish part the sea floor like tarp cut away from rain beating on a truck bed.

You are floating over a canyon on the seafloor. All the urgent hearts of the water are below you. There the reef is in peaks of sinew and flat eyes are looking up at your human years. Giant clams you could fit inside. Blue fish turn on like chandelier ends. This is the closest you will ever get to flying.

*You are like a tree that grows in water. The water around you is highlighter green.*

Before you left this island you argued and you wish you had time to fix things. Under the church organ the paint is bright blue. The parrot with its wings left unclipped has bounded into the air, beyond the reach of a ladder. It leaves an exoskeleton, a fever dream.



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# COLOPHON

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