June Spalding

Koromantyn Girl

The one overboard is my sister.
I hold her grave inside me,
a memorial without words, a fire
scurrying along my shackled legs,
rushing to scorch out a spot
on the sweet shores of paradise.

This is the land of wood and water,
swimming with bodies
oiled and revived for
hands that will fondle their future
like pirated pieces of eight,
a buccaneer's contraband
brought ashore at Port Royal,
fertile port for successive shipments
of sea-scarred bodies and eyes
like mine, that cast a backward glance
through time and memory.

And all the while
I fetch the wood and water
for somebody else, not for me,
for I am a slave,
weatherproofed by my blackness,
working to increase the fields of sweet
brown sugar that spring from the blood
of fingers splayed in sun-struck fields.

The black molasses on Massa's table
sweetens his imperial palate,
but not his tongue that could halt
my cane-carved callouses.
My two yellow children
cress Massa's food in the big kitchen,
while Major eyes their pale, suspicious legs tripping from stove to sink between a promise and daybreak, his head resting on well-fed forepaws that Massa strokes in the prim shadows. But Massa ignores the love Missis begs for in the bated despair of her night, when his determined boots crunch the dirt outside my door, and I wield my machete in silence at cane leaves and the bleached head hovering above my corn-husk pillow that offers dreams livelier than he finds between his own white sheets.

My own sister's hands model corals in the warm Caribbean sea. And the lonely island, adrift from its mother continent, stares at my torn, worm-eaten hands that grip the cold earth, buttressed by a charged body, bent, but buoyed by tomorrow, bowed on land as on that fearful passage of shackled tongues and conspiring tides that hide my sister's name from the whip, while fearless maroons resist white bayonets and bullets, and I, fierce and proud, child of a free people, will rise like doubloons recovered from the seabed.