



My Island, My Bond

IF YOU HAVE LIVED BY THE sand, the wind and the stars, then you know the feeling that travels with you wherever you go. It's a soft insistence that gently reminds you that the earth, your island earth, is with you, and it is like a marriage that cannot be broken. The bond of an islander.

SUSAN SANFORD

You may wake up absorbed in an antique city like Prague, where the ancient winding streets are inscribed on the soles of your shoes from days of walking from one place to another, but still there is that calling, that quiet, insistent calling—"I am here, waiting. Come home soon."

What strangeness am I speaking of? Something that coaxes you out of sleep aboard an ocean liner somewhere in the Leewards, whispering: "Wanderer, wake up. I am here. Waiting."

No matter where I go—and I go often—I hear the voice of my island.

What a curious act of allegiance it is: hearing that which is absent. Or is it?

They say the land remembers. That, if we have loved it truly, it holds us in a lover's embrace. My island voice, that remembered caller, gets me when I least expect it. And certainly it's beyond my ability to imagine it, conjure it, or play mind games with it. It rings me up in the most unusual places.

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Once, on the Oregon coast, I listened to the wind coming all the way from China, as I stood and watched a great whale moving up the rugged coast in the summer dusk. One whale alone on the Pacific. I watched it spume for miles and miles until, in the end, I could see it no longer. And I asked myself why I yearned for something else. Why did I have an uneasy feeling while soaking in the magnificence of this vision before me?

I need not have asked why, for right then I heard the voice of my island singing its familiar song—
“Come home, I am waiting.”

ONCE, IN NEW ORLEANS, THE atmosphere was so much like here that I almost imagined the Big Easy was my home, too. But it wasn't. The food was delicious and the Mississippi River was brown and muddy and full of stories. The faces around me were mellow and there was a molasses drip to the dialect, but folks, trust me, I still yearned for something beyond my periphery.

I yearned for Charlotte Harbor's mud flats and for the oyster bars ribbed with weeds and smelling of lowly tides. I hankered for the half masts poking out of the Matlacha Pass and the young eagles crying from out of the blue. I yearned for the whippoorwills and chuck will's widows and the mosquito hawks

diving and humming at eventide, and the toads trilling and the horses whinnying and the squishy feeling of the spongy ground of my home as I walked over it in my Matlacha Reeboks, my big white fisherman's boots, which, at the end of a long hot summer, have to be boiled to get the foot mulch out. Oh, but these things are my bond to the remembered earth, and they were calling to me in New Orleans and Prague, and the coast of Oregon, and Vicksburg, Miss., and Washington, D.C., and every other place I have found myself giving talks, telling stories and, generally, making a living with my mouth, my pen, my heart and my head.

Give me the ground of home, anytime. Get me the island voice. Give me this voice and the natural memories that come with it. Give me the green flash that I saw for the first time on Marco Island. The sky peach and gold and red. Flushed and tender, and then suddenly—blip—that unbelievable eruption of greenish-blue: the Flash! Yes, that is how it is—trembling along the flat gray horizon line ... and then gone. And everyone on the beach talking about it. But it's gone. And that glimpse of glory is also part of the voice.

Give me the barking of little gray squirrels and the sucking noise they make when they're annoyed, and while you're at it, give me all manner of squirrely noises. And let me not forget the young gray squirrel that I saved after a hurricane—the same squirrel that turned around after it had grown and saved me. My mattress caught fire one night from a faulty current in an electric blanket and that pet squirrel of mine ran across my face until my eyes opened, and I smelled the smoke.

Give me all the dogs I have buried on this remembered earth of mine. They say you become a part of the earth only when you “bury on it”—that's how they phrase it in Jamaica. Well, I have buried four

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dogs and one cat here. I scattered the ashes of our Great Dane Zeb at the base of a traveler’s palm that has grown so tall it touches the sky and dwarfs all the other trees. This is Zeb’s tree now; that is what we call it.

After we buried Mocha, our golden brown Akita, I crept among the bushes and found her summer house under the palmettos. She’d dug herself a cave, and it is there after these many years—a huge cave walled in earth and bound by palmetto roots. You didn’t know dogs were builders?

Give me the seeds we planted and the lemon grass we grew that now stands 15 feet high, and it will cure a cold if you drink the tea boiled from its leaves.

Give me the feeling of uncertainty when, swimming in our dark tannic pond, the great snapper passes under my white feet, never having bitten anyone. Give me that memory of imaginary danger that my feet feel when I swim in water the color of ebony.

Give me the sunlight on polished leaves of ginger, holly and laurel and the smell of palmetto blossoms and the sound of bees hunting in the drowse, ferrying their sugared pollens away on the wind.

Give me the remembered land. Give it to me strong, so that when I am far away on a journey, on a ship, on a plane, on a bus, in a car, I can close my eyes and give myself back to the earth, the sand, the wind and the stars. Give it to me so I can hear that distinctive lover’s voice calling me out of the silence—“Come home, I am waiting.” †