CURATOR'S NOTE

Elizabeth Pérez

Abrupt as a Caribbean curse,
the legend on the photogravure read,
A Water-Carrier. Cuba, 1901.

The water-carrier's scarred wrist
steadies a clay carafe.
Double-mouthed,
it ogles the water-carrier
as he pumps water
naked to the waist, belted with rope.
The exposure turns so much of this Afrocubano's body white,
but his profile does not lie.

Let's be honest. *A Water-Carrier* was
a centerfold, soft porn
for April 1903's *Photo Era Magazine*,
among ads for Alpha Salad Cream
("Never spoils")
and steamer holidays to Jamaica,
"the photographer's paradise"
"for 'Nerve Tired' Teachers,"
with special "studios"
"for the convenience of tourists."
A Water-Carrier is the shadow

of numberless women stripped
then made to carry waters,
the spitting image of those women
with stubbed-out sepia faces
and anatomically correct curves
etched with fanatic precision.
Page 158: *One tripod slave*
is always sympathizing
with another.

For the water-carrier,
slavery had "ended" in 1886.
His sweat lathers the lathe
of a water wheel with warped spokes.
It's a joke crossroads
or Kongo cosmogram, turning smoothly
in the wrong direction.

Next time, add beneath the photographer's tag:
There is no one thirstier than the water-carrier.

LOTTERY

Elizabeth Pérez

At ten I cracked the family albums
crammed with cellophaned snaps
of blurred relatives on the airlift
from Havana to Miami,
rapt at the plenty hemorrhaged
by the stewardess,
soda and endless peanuts
(too salty by far, but free).
In the 1960s, they called it the refugee lottery.

I was after the rust-clasped manila envelope
of second-class photographs,
wedding pictures
of parents lisping vows
and sipping Spanish "Chablis"
that words had churned into mock blood.
Here, my mother pretends to pray
askance a plaster bust:
one of the smug American saints
who wears her halo like a pillbox hat
and pins the Sacred Heart into a trick corsage.

Five feet and ninety-five pounds of bride,
she already moonlights in lingerie,
sewing bra straps to lace cups in a Florida sweatshop.
The rented veil shrouds chapped hands.

There, on the agate altars of her adolescence,
a pocked Christ bled volcanic rock
and the Infant Jesus bore the skull of a gold-leaf sun
on underdeveloped bones.
Here, crosses at home
are optional;
swaddling clothes and winding-sheet,
sold separately;
one scepter thrown in with each rattle bought.

Whiteness-cloaked,
we keep the winning ticket close
and strain to master
the martyr's posture.

VISITATION FROM THE ONCE & FUTURE PRIDE OF BLACK ARKADELPHIA

—for Taryn

Elizabeth Pérez

My mother is a flooded stairwell,
standing water lanced with the six-star Dogon constellation, "Eye of the World."
Yemayá Asesú alone allows you this vision.

Miss Thing's melanin: bioluminescent.
Hair, the length of it
about a year after she shaved her head
eleven years ago:
whorls of magnetite.
Smile: disco and everything that rhymes with it.
The bites of her siphoned into samples
at two different university hospitals
(and one free clinic,
the one where she was initially misdiagnosed)?
Restored to her quickened body.

In your plain white T-shirt, you said
without an "inside" now
you feel not so
deeply
and it made sense, after tripping the dark
fantastic

I said, "When you died, we still had a lot
of smoking to do."
I would have started
smoking
for you,
but you were always quitting.
Between cessations
a lump, corklike, plugged your throat.
Once, in a Malian bistro
you put my fingertips to it,
to rap the primordial egg.
There were more,
hatching—

and then you left

and that must be
where to find me

SANTERAS

Elizabeth Pérez

At dawn my mother opened my eyes
with one of her nightly nonfictions,
half prophesy, half psychological flotsam.
I stood brushing my tongue
to the roar of the sea emptying
when she burst through the door,
splashing holy water into her hands
and slapping my forehead
with its cheap cologne.

She dreamt of a man the color of malted wheat,
a cross between my mulato great-grandfather
and a creole Saint Lazarus.
He and his greyhounds circled the yard,
seeing only barred windows and bolted doors.
Then he found space
in the television antenna and slid down to us.
The dogs followed.
Scalding his throat
on my Guantánamo-born mother's espresso,
he spat that she should exorcise,
repel the rebel daughter.

The perfect acoustics of the porcelain
gave my words more weight than I anticipated.
In the toilet, requests turn into interrogations,
whispers swell to bellows.
More marriages end between the shower curtain and the towel rod
than anywhere else in the Western world.

My "*Should I see a santero?*" acquired a tone of deep concern
that stained the question sarcastic.
I was serious, having gotten gods
the way other people inherit debts or bad circulation.
In two hours, I would leave on my first trip to Havana.

"If you find a santero, he could give you
what is necessary."
This woman inhaled five hours of sleep
to fuel seventeen of toil,
to inspire a lifetime of losing lotto sequences
and illusions of the as-yet-unborn.
Now Babalú Ayé is bossing us around
and we cannot help
following.

CHICAGO PIROPO

Elizabeth Pérez

Catching the Bronzeville bus to the patter of a counting abacus:
the Black and Brown girls' barrettes, popsicle-bright,
clap together,
each clique with a Highlife beat in a different accent,
dancing.
One rider mounts with his fingers splayed,
saves three seats for an imaginary mate:
"She's coming," he whispers, "but she's fat, sister."
The queen before me lounges at last,
en route home from her fast-food second job,
crowned with a hair net
bereft of the heirloom corals
torn from her Benin-Edo ancestors
in the Maafa.

At a stop
the candy seller hoots, "Chews! Chews!"
Two plastic grocery bags billow atop a wet poplar:
bows in a close-cropped toddler's mop.

Heading north, we gather in the global South
saying everything out loud that's none of my business
in Spanish, Yucatec Maya, Kreyòl, Tagalog,
Q'anjob'al.

Whose elder slipped out of a mosquito net
to sleep beside her shattered niece?
She's in the row behind me,
a mile and a minute from her asylum hearing,
nothing in her purse but a can of condensed milk
for later.

We may yet get where we're going
in the freezing furnace
of Xicago,
where the wind plays rough
between the legs of thunderbolts
and from the steering wheel
comes a lady driver's voice,
cheerfully hoarsening
the more honey she pours
into the street with her free advice:

"Get out the rain, baby—
sugar melts!"