

**First Voyage**  
**(Excerpts from *The Light of Taina*, a Novel-in-Progress)**

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Spacetime opens like the hungry mouth of night. The walls of the quantum tunnel are awash with crimson, orange, blue. The colors explode. I detect cloud formations, star dust. Suddenly, absolute darkness. The Earth approaches, a tiny gray rock, then a blue-green sphere that welcomes me. My mind forges an invisible path in the dense atmosphere. I hear the wind. I see birds, animals, vegetation, all of it thriving, wondrous like a mirage. Hard to reconcile this bounty with the future that awaits: my present. Hard to accept that no flora or fauna survived the freezing holocaust that, from my perspective, befell the Earth millennia ago...

**First Voyage Log:** Confirmed: I am historian HC-01 of the Home Space Station (HSS), Postsolar Age. Temporal point of arrival: second half of the fifteenth century, year 1488 of the Solar Age. Location: Earth's northern hemisphere, Caribbean Sea, Antillean Islands. Taina is visible: 24,106 square miles. The southern coast resembles a human profile. The Sierra Mayor, a mountain range that traverses the country, is visible. Beaches: visible. Point of descent: northeast peninsula, where the capital will be founded one day.

I let my mind plunge into the sea (such comfort), eager to capture the light of Taina.

Not feeling like myself yet. Aware of being two places at once: on the HSS and here, exploring a world that is "new" this very second, in its own historical moment, while also ancient from my perspective as a history professor who has traveled five thousand years into the past. We undergo rigorous training on the HSS, but nothing truly prepares us for this unsettling duality.

Slowly I move through a forest of tall trees and flowers, so many flowers. How to describe these aromas? Sweet, penetrating, fragrant? I search for words we seldom use, like beautiful, dazzling, stunning, imposing, amazing, fantastic; and ones that name colors, textures, smells, flavors. I need words, a language we don't have to capture this place.

**Historical File:** *The first island that the Spaniards colonized in the "New World" was La Hispaniola, later to become the countries of Haiti and the Dominican Republic. Several indigenous tribes lived there, as on other Caribbean islands: the Caribs, the Tainos, the Arawaks, and the Siboney. The Tainos were the largest tribe on Taina and gave the island its name. They were peace loving people who lived mostly on fruit, vegetables, and fish. The language they spoke was called Arawuaco. (The word "taino" meant "good" or "noble" in Arawuaco.) They had skin the color of copper and thick, black hair. These Amerindians went about in the nude, but married women wore naguas, a type of apron made of cotton. The Tainos adorned their bodies with seashells for some of their festivities and painted themselves with tinctures obtained from the soil. They started their days with the ritual of a bath and prayers.*

Light bathes the fields. This light is... overpowering. It hurts my eyes. Unable to transmit images to the HSS yet. The optical shield finally brings relief, and I can encounter this reality at

last —the *illusion* of an island and its inhabitants? No, not an illusion. This feels real to me.

Someone appears in the distance. A woman. Young, with a light step. She rapidly advances. She's wearing a *nagua* (status: married) and a necklace of seashells, and she carries a handful of medium-size stones. I zoom in on her face: big, dark brown eyes and long, flowing black hair. And now I hear the song she sings, which is lulling and melodious, like nothing I've ever heard. (Music on the HSS consists of droning sounds designed to help us focus on our tasks, not to entertain us or "please" us.) What is she singing about? She seems to be telling a story...

I access the Conversant, but it is unable to decode the woman's song; it wasn't created to decrypt ancient musical texts. The Conversant allows us to master a tongue without having to fully learn it. It analyzes the linguistic patterns, syntax, and lexicon of the target language; then it translates that data into meanings in ours, using context to fill in the gaps or lacunae and guess at meaning. The Conversant's most complex feature is its ability to make our speech organs produce the required sounds and our mouths say the right words to convey a message. Evidently, the Conversant has some limitations.

I try to follow the native Taina from afar but it's hard to keep up with her. I'm not used to walking this fast on rough terrain. Gravity is throwing me off. Gravity on the station is an effect we've created to strengthen our bodies —no longer victims of zero-g, as people used to be in the early days of space habitation. On this island, gravity is a constant, a factor to be dealt with every second. There's no escaping it. I'm having trouble using my feet; must tend to sores that slow me down. My muscles and joints are a source of pain as well. *Pain!* How strange it feels. I let this sensation —new, intense— linger, delaying my healing process for a few extra seconds...

I keep following the woman. What designation should I give her? I could just talk to her, learn her name, even if that would violate the Law of Observation. Would she think I am Taino? Can I pass for a native? My bluish gray skin has been suffused with a rich brown hue, reportedly the color of Tainos' skin. I am barefoot and wearing a loincloth. I should be nude, but I'm not used to nudity; none of us is on the HSS. Perhaps I will be after living here for a while. I do want to feel as free, as unencumbered as that young woman seems to feel; to be naked and deeply integrated into my habitat; to be one with nature.

The Taina is headed for the beach, obviously. I note the sky, intense blue with scattered, fluffy white clouds. The warm breeze plays with the young woman's hair. I transmit ocean waves, crystalline water, spume, heaps of algae on the sand, minuscule sea creatures (crabs?)

The woman sets down her stones and takes off her *nagua*. I capture her image, a breathtaking sight. (Our visual files pale by comparison.) Her figure... svelte? Her legs... long and supple? Her breasts... perfectly round? She plunges in and swims with abandon. I watch her, enticed (the right word?) by the way she moves, by her black hair that floats around her.

I hear the sky's uproar —thunder!— and look up. Dense, boisterous raindrops begin to fall, and I receive them on my face. Is this pleasant? It is for the young woman, no doubt; she's drinking in the rain, arms open. Soon the storm ceases, and the sky fills with birds. I glimpse a rainbow. How can something that beautiful exist? Beauty. I am witnessing *beauty*.

I need to learn to feel fear (the adrenalin rush) to escape from predators if necessary. There are so many creatures on this island. Some of them I must stay away from; others I could probably afford to warm up to and even touch. But I should identify them all first. A daunting task, since it's estimated that there were 5,800 species of flora and fauna on the Caribbean islands in 1488...

I have found shelter in a cave, a small cavity in a rock near the shore, on the eastern coast of the island. My dwelling is small, unclean, damp, yet I consider it a gift from nature. It wasn't hard to find; the rocky patch where it's located abounds in such cavities.

In this new "cell" I take the few brief naps I need on occasion, and I protect myself from the elements. Not much to worry about in that respect yet, since this is the dry season, the month of January according to the Solar Age calendar. But there have been some rain showers at times, for which I'm grateful. There's such a lot of water on this island, everywhere, fresh or salty or muddy, in ponds, streams, rivers, the sea; falling from the sky, bathing the vegetation, drenching the earth. Abundant and there for anyone to bathe in or swim in or to quench his thirst. Water!

I sustain myself with the nutrition infusions that MS creates within my body, but I do plan to venture out and taste the fruits of Taina soon. I stay busy reviewing data and composing my personal files. The latter take more than the usual effort, since they have to be encoded so only I can access them. Sitting by the mouth of the cave I can see the horizon and the sunset —our star "sinking" into the ocean— while I organize my thoughts. It is a soothing view, and one I'll always want to revisit in my mind.

I have seen the young woman bathing several times, on different days, wondering each time if she's sensed my presence. She always sings while she bathes. What or whom is she singing about? I've grown fond of her voice, which is calming yet bewitching like a Siren's call (or what I imagine a Siren's call is.) Only she's not luring me to my doom, is she?

I've tried to stop myself from watching the Taina like a hunter, hiding in the shrubs. Don't want to be that person, but I've yet to muster the courage to approach her. It has to happen, even though meeting her would go against the primary law of my mission. I have no choice, not if I want to learn the woman's name and learn *about* her. I have to make sure that no one on the station detects my interactions. The encoding must be meticulous. It is worth the effort.

*We can't observe the world without becoming part of it* —I tell myself as I walk toward the shore, determined to let the Taina see me. This is it. She's coming out of the water...

She smiles. Why doesn't she fear me? Does she intuit that I mean her no harm? She gestures for me to follow her. I decide to trust her. We hike through a forest, trees that reach the clouds, palm fronds and giant leaves of a brilliant green. The tropical fauna —bird songs, animal calls, rustling, roaring— pulses around us. At last we arrive at the beach, and there the Taina attempts to talk to me. Her voice is... soft? deep? She points to herself, repeating a word, *Sarai...*

"Is that what you call yourself?" I ask her, relying on the Conversant.

She nods. I believe she's answering yes. She understood me! My eyes capture her face, then her hands gathering a mound of stones on the shore. I transmit images of plants, flowers, hues I can't define, a hummingbird that flies by me with spirited wings, like a tiny rocket.

“I do not know you,” says the Taina. “Where do you come from?”  
“I come from a distant island,” I reply.  
“Did you cross the great deep waters?”  
“Yes, for many days and nights.”  
“Amanani must have helped you.”  
“Amanani...?”  
“Yes, the spirit of the deep waters.”  
“Ah, yes, that spirit saved me from drowning.”  
“And where is your *kanowa*?”  
“It broke, so I let Amanani take it.”  
“You will need to build another canoe, then...”  
“Yes, when the time comes for me to leave.”  
“Why are you here?”  
“I am here because I want to know your world.”  
“To know... what about my world?”  
“Everything, the people, the animals, the trees, those stones of yours.”  
“My stones, yes... Can you hear them?”  
“No, I cannot.”  
“They are talking to me.”  
“What are they saying?”

She doesn't answer. She picks up half a dozen stones of varying sizes, carries them to a nearby tree (a ceiba?) and places them on the ground, in the shade. “They will sleep here during the *peiti* time,” she tells me, “bathed by the light of the Goddess Yu. When the warmth of the God Ris returns, I will return as well to give them life.”

I manage to make sense of her words with help from the *Conversant* and the *Historical File*. Sarai will leave the stones here during the *peiti* or black time, which is night. She'll leave them in the light of the Goddess Yu, which is the moon (*yu* means “white color.”) And then Sarai will come back tomorrow, when the sun shines (*ris* means “red.”) She'll come to sculpt the stones and, in this way, “give them life.”

**Historical File:** *For indigenous people such as the Tainos, gods were the personification of natural and cosmic elements: air, water, light, the sun, the moon. Early humans gave names to elements that they could relate to at a physical level.*

Sarai studies my face. “What do you call yourself?” she asks.

A key detail! I didn't think of a name for this character I embody, and now I'm drawing a blank. Sarai notes my hesitation...

“If you do not wish to tell me,” she says, “I could just call you... Marcorai.”  
“I like that name better than my own.” So true! “Why did you choose it, Sarai?”  
“Because *marcorai* is the one who visits,” she explains.  
“And that is what I am, the visitor, your friend the *marcorai*.”  
“My friend?” asks Sarai, looking surprised. “But I do not even know you.”

“You can get to know me... if you wish.”  
“Will you live on this island now?”  
“I would like to, yes, for a while at least.”  
“Then welcome to Taina.”  
“Thank you, Sarai.”  
“I must go now...”  
“Will I see you again?”  
“Yes, tomorrow, perhaps...”  
“Until then, Sarai.”

She parts. And I’m left thinking about my new name, allowing myself the joy (is that the emotion?) of embodying Sarai’s visitor, the *marcorai*.

How to express what my eyes perceive? Can’t rely on the native Taino tongue for this endeavor, since the Tainos didn’t have a written language. Other groups—the Nahuas in Mexico, the Mayas in Guatemala—did have an idiom based on drawings and icons. Several of their texts, such as the *Dresden Codex*, were saved and became part of museum collections in Europe. But the indigenous inhabitants of Taina left no formal writing. They were brutally exterminated by the Spaniards, and no one thought to transcribe their oral histories. Most of what we know of their culture is based on the symbols they painted on cave walls located in the southeastern region of Taina. We also gathered relevant data about their customs from Taino tribes that peopled other Caribbean islands. And many Arahuaco words were acquired by the Spaniards and passed on to their descendants, especially in cases of intermarriage, being adopted eventually by most major world languages. It’s an amazingly long list that includes *barbakoa* (barbecue), *kanowa* (canoe), *hamaka* (hammock), *iwana* (iguana), *papaya* (papaya), and *tabako* (tobacco). Thus, we were able to create a matrix for Arahuaco that is crude and incomplete yet functional enough to help me communicate with Sarai through the Conversant.

I have read a great deal of literature (history, fiction, poetry) that claims to portray the Tainos. I’ve sought in the Spanish writings of this era—Columbus’ *Chronicles*, among others—the language that was used to describe the native islanders. But I don’t want to emulate those writers because they didn’t really care to learn about the Tainos. They thought themselves superior to these people and violently imposed their religion and culture on the island population. I don’t wish to be like them. Or sound like them. Or write like them.

**Historical File:** *The admiral and explorer Christopher Columbus (1451-1506, born in Genoa, Italy; died in Valladolid, Spain) is credited as the discoverer of the “New World.” He left on the first of three expeditions from the port of Palos de la Frontera (Huelva, Spain) on August 3, 1492, with three ships and a crew of ninety. His mission was to find a western sea route to China and India. Upon setting foot on the Caribbean islands in October of that same year, Columbus proclaimed himself Viceroy of those lands and declared the native inhabitants subjects of the King and Queen of Spain. He was the first European to portray the “Indians” (what he called them erroneously, thinking he had arrived in India.) In a letter that became widely known (dated*

*February 15, 1493, and addressed to a scribe for the Catholic monarchs), Columbus offered comments of praise about the indigenous people, observing that they “never say no... and they show a great deal of love...” Of course, such a depiction was motivated by Columbus’ personal agenda. He wanted the Spanish monarchs to regard the natives benevolently so they would continue to support his journeys. “These Indians,” he told them, “are prone to love and inclined to serve Your Highnesses and the entire Castilian nation.”*

*Columbus’ first voyage focused mainly on observation and exploration, to establish good relations with the indigenous people of the islands. It was not until the second journey that the Italian-Spanish admiral and his men set off on their campaign of conquest and destruction. The caravels of the second expedition (which left from the port of Cádiz on September 25, 1493) were peopled by 1,500 adventurers, ex-prisoners, and ex-soldiers who had ample experience on the battlefield. Thence, with a predominantly bellicose thrust, began the Spanish invasions that would forever change the Amerindian civilizations.*

Sarai sculpts. I sit by her, capturing images to transmit: an animal that scampers by, a bird in flight, the ripples of water in a brook. None of it seems to exist for Sarai, nothing but her stones. Her hands are deft at using the rude tool, a type of chisel. She pierces the hard surface and scrapes out myriad fragments. Now and then she blows off the dust that gathers on the stone and caresses it. And while she works, she sings.

What does she hope to gain from all her effort? I think it is art, what she’s making, although I can’t be the judge of that. I do enjoy looking at Sarai’s pieces, and I’m impressed by her work, but I wouldn’t know for certain if she’s gifted. I am familiar with the world’s greatest artists, Michelangelo, da Vinci, Rembrandt, van Gogh, Velázquez, Cézanne, Dali, Kahlo, Picasso, O’Keeffe, Himid, Kusama among my favorites. Most of the art I’ve seen has provoked a certain reaction in me. (Have I found it pleasurable, perhaps?) Yet I’ve never felt compelled to be creative. Better for me, since artists are not sanctioned by our Governing Commission. We can’t afford to promote leisure, and art is considered a leisure activity. Every aspect of life in our world must have a pragmatic objective. Before engaging in any endeavor, one must first answer two questions: 1) In what manner will we be able to utilize its outcome? 2) How will that outcome contribute to our acquisition of knowledge? While it is true that some of us are born with a predisposition — officially deemed a genetic design error— toward artistic matters, we’re not encouraged to develop it. If the artists among us want to live a successful life, they must suppress their creative impulse or indulge it only in private, if at all.

***Historical File:*** *Many Tainos devoted their time to artistic endeavors: sculptures, ceramics; jewelry made of coral, conches, and stone; belts for their ball games; religious artifacts in the form of a man or an animal, called cemís; and ceremonial chairs they called duhos, which were made of wood and decorated in gold and semiprecious stones. The Tainos did not rejoice in great deeds or demonstrations of power. But, judging from their artistic work, they found contentment in being creative. Some scholars of the Solar Age observed that Taino art reflected grace and harmony, and that it must have brought a great deal of joy to their lives.*

“I enjoy being with my stones,” Sarai tells me. “Sometimes they speak to me about the beginning, when the gods made the earth, the people, the water, and the fire. Very few of my brothers and sisters, my guaitiao, can hear these voices as they escape their silence.”

“Why is it that only a few of you can hear them?” I ask her.

“Because,” she explains, “most of my guaitiao believe that the spirits inhabit another island. They think the dead make their home in a place unknown to us, far from us. Yet I have seen the dead right here, not just at night but also during the hours of the Ris God. I have seen souls that sing and dance with bodies of smoke and who invite me to dance with them. Sometimes I join them. It is a very happy time for me...”

I wonder what Sarai sees. How does her brain produce those images of souls singing and dancing? Part of me —the scientific mind— rejects the existence of a spirit world, of a reality where the body is not the sole vessel and definition of life. And yet in our own way, we, too, can “hear” and inhabit the spirit world. For aren’t thoughts our version of the soul?

I survey the figures Sarai has sculpted and recognize a bird (is it an eagle?), a woman holding her child, and a face (a male face?).

“What do you use those things for?” I ask her.

“Use... what things?”

“The objects you have created.”

“I do not understand your question, Marcorai.”

“What purpose do your creations have?”

“I look at them and listen to their stories. Is that a... ‘purpose’?”

“Yes, I suppose it is.”

“The stones are my friends,” she adds. “They live in my house.”

“Your house, yes, of course... Where do you live, Sarai? Could you show me?”

“No, Marcorai, that would not be possible.” She avoids my eyes.

“Why not?”

“Because I live with a man who will not welcome you.”

**Historical File:** *Taino society was matriarchal; lineage was traced through the mother. A significant aspect of their social system is the amount of power women had, as compared to women in Western cultures of the period. Taino females lived together, apart from the men, and helped each other raise the children. They decided when they wanted to have physical contact with their husbands and engage in sexual activities, hence they had control over their bodies and were able to determine when or if they were ready to bear children. The men who exhibited abusive behavior toward their wives were banned from the tribe indefinitely; the length of their expulsion would depend on the gravity of their actions. Some women held as much power as the men when important decisions for the tribe had to be made. Ironically, given their independence and empowerment, most young Taino women would end up being treated like commodities by the Spaniards, used, abused, and kept as concubines by many of the conquistadores.*

“So, you live with a man,” I ask Sarai, “not with other women?”

“Yes, I live with my husband.”

“Why?”

She collects her creations in haste. “I must go now,” she says.

“I am sorry, Sarai. I ask too many questions...”

“Goodbye, Marcorai.”

Today I’ve followed Sarai from a distance, wanting to see where she lives. Hidden in the bushes, I catch sight of her village, huts with thatched roofs. According to the *HF*, the tribes lived in yucayeques or villages built near the water—the beach, a stream, or a river. There was a batey, a rectangular central plaza with trees, and all major events of Taino society, including ceremonies and ball games, took place there. Houses were made primarily of palm leaves; round, with conical roofs and no windows, these dwellings were called bohíos. The caciques or tribal chiefs and the bohiques (priests or shamans) lived in caneyes. Rectangular in shape, these caneyes were the biggest dwellings of the village. And around the yucayeques there were the conucos or farms.

Our pictorial files didn’t prepare me for this visual experience. A living community... villagers gathered on the batey; women sitting on the ground, kneading flour on stone plates, unperturbed by the commotion of life around them. An exciting ball game is going on! (Why is it *exciting*?) Games are not part of my culture, yet I have an overwhelming urge to join those Tainos in their play, to run after that bouncy ball and to score points—to win! It *thrills* me (the right word?) to see all those people engaged in this activity: the men, naked, their entire bodies painted red and brown and white. Several of the women are playing too, some with painted skin like the men. There are children milling around; Sarai stands by them. I hear laughter...

Tainos are handsome people. They have high cheekbones, a gentle smile (mischievous, verging on laughter in the children), an ample nose with wide nostrils, dreamy eyes; fleshy, rose-pink lips; and golden-brown bodies that are short compared to ours yet seem robust and agile.

I had never seen real human beings in the nude. We’re all required to cover our physical selves on the HSS. Our garments are not gender-specific; we all wear the same white robes—except for the Governing Commission members, who wear black. The body for us is the depository of knowledge, not an object of desire. I was made in a lab, like everyone else on the station. I have no way of knowing, of *experiencing* enjoyment, physical attraction, lust. Yet I do. Are there ancient genes working within me? Ancestral memories?

I like being part of this community, if only from a distance. As I observe this society, time seems eternal, and life on the planet promising, unending. I think about Sarai. She’s exposed to myriad dangers but will never be deprived of light, of air and water and trees. She’ll never be impacted by the mysterious energy that pierced the sun’s heart. I see her strolling, laughing as she stops now and then to play with the children, who seem cheerful, so unlike those on the Home Space Station. Taino youngsters play with abandon. They laugh!

I follow Sarai with my eyes as she joins the women’s team, apparently replacing one of the players. She strikes the ball (batu) with her elbows and hips swiftly, scoring one, two, three points in a row! The other team’s goalie can’t keep up; the ball keeps hitting his goal. *Bravo, Sarai!* I want to shout out my support, my admiration (a strange impulse) ... *Bravo!*

Suddenly the game stops, as do the laughter and the cheering. The players disperse, returning to their chores or their bohíos. A man has arrived, dragging a dead boar that he drops smack in the middle of the batey. Who is he? Evidently a hunter, but there were no such people among the Tainos. Could he be from some other island? I resent his arrival, the way he crushed the festive mood. I abhor the brutality he exudes and the disturbing sight of the gory carcass he has brought —its fatal injuries plainly visible, a river of blood left in its wake. Yet that man is also provoking in me a reaction (is it an emotion? a feeling?) I'm not quite able to name or register. I find myself gazing at the contour of his muscles, at his imposing features. I long to possess his masculine beauty and his strength. His power.

The hunter talks to Sarai and grabs her arm, forcing her to go with him into one of the bohíos. Is that man her husband? Is that hut their home? I fear for Sarai...

Not certain how long I've been in Taina. Several months? I stopped checking a while ago. Wanted to perceive the passing of days the way Tainos do. Here the cycles of nature guide the calendar; minutes can be dense and elastic or swift like the wind. Sometimes they seem tangible.

Sarai and I have developed a routine of daily visits. I wait for her under a ceiba tree. She always arrives in a good mood, usually singing, and we walk to the beach to swim and talk. There are days when I just sit and watch her do her sculpting. Like today.

I have finally parted with my loincloth. Sarai didn't look surprised. Nudity is natural for her and in fact she had seemed puzzled by my reluctance to be naked. It was unsettling for me at first but then the breeze, the sunlight, and the water on my loins felt pleasant. It's been liberating.

Sarai's nudity always draws me to her, as if my body were awakening from a long sleep. Can this be possible? Curious and eager, I decided to touch Sarai at the beach today, ever so gently. Ah, what a fulfilling sensation, touching someone's skin! I was empty of thoughts for the first time in my life. And then Sarai caressed my face...

"I had never touched a face like yours before," she said, as we lay down on the sand. "It feels... different, not rough, not smooth. Why, Marcorai?"

"That is just the way we are," I answered, "all of us members of my tribe."

I wanted to tell her about my real life somehow. So, I said to her that in my sleep, I saw the fire dwelling inside the God Ris; that I dreamed of objects that flew without wings, of an island that floated in the air, inhabited by beings with glowing bodies...

"Your dreams are beautiful," she said.

"Could it be that my dreams are showing me the future, a coming time, Sarai?"

"Perhaps. I too see the coming time when I talk to the stones."

"What kind of future do they show you?"

"Some days it is joyful, other days it scares me..."

"And your guaitiao, can they see the coming time like you do?"

"No. They only see the things that happened before. They believe in the past."

"On my island, too, there are people who venerate the past."

"Do you celebrate the Areito?"

“No, Sarai, we don’t celebrate anything.”

“We dance and sing all night during the Areito.”

“What else do you do?”

“We pray to Yu and ask for her protection. And we promise the Goddess to always remember the story of the First Ones.”

“The First Ones?” Nothing about this in the *HF*.

“Yes, Marcorai, those who lived here long before us.”

“Are they... the ones who created your world?”

“Yes. Nothing existed before they did. Our bohique tells stories about what happened when the gods were born. He says they lived in a time of Always, a sacred time. And that we should not let anything change so we can be like the Tainos of the Beginning.”

“But that is not possible, Sarai. You cannot stop things from changing.”

“Things... yes. But our souls can remain the same.”

“Perhaps they can...”

I zoom in on a small sculpture Sarai has made and transmit its image to the station. It represents two people, a woman and a man, I think, locked in an embrace. The work looks coarse, unfinished, but the image is easily recognizable. The two people stand, yearning and naked (in love?) as they melt into each other. Sarai places the work of art in my hands.

“I want you to have this stone,” she says. Hard to believe she uses the word *stone* to refer to it. “I made it for you, to live in your house.”

I wish I could take this gift with me. I wish I didn’t have to tell her, “Thank you, Sarai. It is quite beautiful, and I am very grateful. But I cannot keep this stone. You see, I have nowhere to put it, and I am very far from home.”

“I will guard it for you, then,” she tells me, smiling. “The voice inside this stone will be your voice, Marcorai. It will make me happy to hear it when you are not here.”

I sense her closeness as an invitation, a chance for us to embrace, melt, and become “art” together. Yes, I want to fuse with Sarai like those two figures of rock. But my body, this replicated body won’t comply; as I try to reach out, it freezes. Yet I do want to know intimacy with another human being. Will I ever? I’m feeling confused, conflicted; can’t separate objective reality—the world I come from and the world around me, Sarai’s sculptures, her beauty—from the reality I’m living inside, in this place that the Tainos call *machichi*. My heart.

“My husband likes to eat meat,” Sarai informs me, as if responding to a question. “He is the only one in our yucayeque who kills large animals. I hate that kind of food; it smells of blood. I eat flesh because my husband wants me to. I have no choice about it.”

“Have you been married for a long time?” I ask her.

“It seems like a long time to me,” she replies and keeps silent.

“Tell me about your husband. What is his name?”

Sarai lowers her eyes. “His name is Peitio,” she says then.

“Why did you marry Peitio?”

“I did not seem to have a choice... My mother died giving birth to me, and I was brought up by all the other mothers in our tribe. Then much later, shortly before he died, my father told me I must be united with a strong young man from our yucayeque, someone who could keep me from harm. I was not allowed to pick my mate, as it is our tradition, because my father was too concerned about my future. He wanted a good, strong husband for me, and he thought Peitio could be that person. I said I did not need a man to protect me, but he would not listen. Thus, I ended up having to marry someone I did not love.”

“Why do you stay with Peitio, being his wife?”

“Because he is cruel and ill-natured; he could make me suffer if I leave him. He might even kill me. I have tried to go live with the other women several times, as I am supposed to, but Peitio would not let me. He always wants to do things his way...”

“I wish I could help you, Sarai.”

“No one can.”

“I wish I could free you from that terrible man.”

“Thank you for your kind wish, Marcorai...”

I review the *Historical File*, but there’s no data corroborating the existence of hunters like Peitio among the Tainos. No doubt we have an incomplete record of this period in Taina.

It’s been four days since I last saw Sarai. She must be busy with her chores at the yucayeque. I’m not sure how to define what I feel. Is it loneliness? Solitude is the condition we all aspire to on the HSS, the silence, the penumbra, the time to be with one’s thoughts. But here I have come to enjoy Sarai’s company to such an extent that I find myself unsettled by her absence, as if companionship were the norm and not isolation. I believe this is what it means to *miss* someone.

Sarai is gathering stones at the beach, not far from the ceiba where we always meet. She smiles when she sees me, but her smile fades too soon. I note the cut on her cheek, small but deep; the skin of her arms shows signs of abuse. Her body seems fragile when I hold her.

“What happened, Sarai? Did your husband hurt you?” I ask her.

“Yes,” she responds, crying, “more than any time before.”

I hug Sarai, tenderly kiss her face. A man’s voice reaches us.

“You must go now,” she tells me, trembling in my arms. “Peitio is on his way.”

“I do not wish to leave you with him.”

“He will kill you, Marcorai. My husband found out about you somehow and is looking for you. I came to warn you. Please, hide! Go now!”

“Fine, but I will not be too far.”

I hide in the bushes but manage to see Peitio from here, his immensity, his seismic pace. The man grabs Sarai by the waist. The stones she was holding fall, scatter. She tries to break free, an action that seems to ignite Peitio’s anger. The hunter lifts his wife, carries her away.

I follow them. He catches sight of me and yells. I can’t understand his words.

“Go, Marcorai!” Sarai begs me. “Run!”

Too late. Peitio lunges toward me, too fast to be outrun, and he hits me in the face, the chest, the stomach. I fight back, dodging his fists. I am overcome with rage, with a surge of anger—the first time I feel this. I pummel the hunter; he falls. Swiftly back on his feet, Peitio strikes me in the forehead. I hear Sarai’s voice, and then darkness and pain overwhelm me.

I wake up by the shore, my entire body aching. I tend to my bruises, and I’m back to normal in less than an hour. Sarai’s voice resounds in my head. *Go! Run!* I had never assaulted anyone before. The violence that propelled me, where did it come from? Despite my failure to help Sarai, I’m experiencing a new and disquieting pleasure, something akin to triumph...

I head for the village and spot Sarai by her bohío. She can barely walk. I see her falling to the ground, seemingly unconscious. I run to her side, exposing myself to the glances, hearing cries of fear and surprise... Several villagers are coming out of Sarai’s hut. I enter the bohío and find Peitio on the floor, in a puddle of blood. Dead. Sarai’s stones are strewn everywhere. Near the cadaver I see the “stone” of the two embracing lovers. There are blood stains on it.

The news runs through the tribe. I sense both confusion and relief in the villagers. No one had ever dared to confront Peitio, much less fight him and destroy him. They must think that Sarai was helped by the gods. How else could she have mustered such strength?

Strength. That’s what I need to save a dying woman. All my medical training is about to be put to the test, an unforeseen kind of test. Not sure I can do it. All of us on the HSS can heal ourselves with our minds, tending to injuries and ailments without medical instruments. But only the members of our Wellness Commission (citizens trained as MDs) are able to treat others, and only in extreme cases, when the patient can’t repair the damage himself. Most of our medical issues have to do with life in an enclosed environment and injuries caused by accidents; not many of the latter, since most of our hard labor is carried out by machines. I was warned that the attempt to perform curative procedures on others could weaken me and damage my replicated body. But I must try. I have to save my friend!

Several of Sarai’s guaitiao surround her now. The shaman is rubbing a bundle of leaves over her wounds, her face and head. I kneel by her, and he steps aside. The other Tainos begin to whisper, *marcorai!* Yes, I am your “visitor,” and I must get to work. No time to waste.

A scene far removed from the reality of Taina: this strange man, an outsider, moving his right hand in circles over the victim’s injuries, his eyes shut tight. Yet it isn’t unlike what the bohique was doing with his leaves and his prayers, the work of a healer.

Like our doctors, I follow a series of steps, all interdependent and essential to the process. And the process works somehow. Sarai is out of danger! I don’t feel weakened nor drained; in fact, it’s the opposite. I feel stronger than ever, with renewed, boundless vigor—as if the compound that created my body had suddenly infused it with surplus energy. The Tainos who’ve been watching me drop to the ground, kneeling before me: the sage, the deity. Because only a being with supernatural powers can revive a mortally wounded woman with his mere hands. The shaman looks askance at Sarai. Noting that she’s opening her eyes, he begins to pray.

She gradually awakens. There is confusion in her gaze.

I offer her a smile and say to her, "Hello, my dear friend."  
"You are... you are," she starts to say.  
"I am Marcorai," I whisper in her ear. "Do you remember me?"  
"I do." She looks around. "And... Peitio?" she asks.  
"He will never make you suffer again."  
"Did he die?"  
"Yes, you fought him. You defended yourself."  
"But I did not mean to kill him!" she cries out, and the effort jolts her entire body. She's shaking. "Now I am just like Peitio. I am capable of killing."  
"No, you will never be like that man."  
"I am sad, Marcorai."  
"The spirits will ease your sadness. They always help you."  
"Yes, they tried to protect me from Peitio."  
"Could you tell me what happened?"  
"I think so... When I got home, my husband grabbed me, hit me, then he threw my stones on the ground. And now I heard the spirits telling me, *Mayanimacaná!* I saw them flying, enraged, as tired of the pain as I was. I felt strong all of a sudden. I kicked Peitio, shoved him; then I saw my husband falling and hitting his head with one of the stones—the one I made for you. There was blood running out of him like a river! I felt such sorrow for Peitio, seeing him so defeated. He called out my name, and that is the last thing I remember. His voice."  
"You did what you had to do, Sarai."  
"Yes, Marcorai, because I was tired of living in fear."

There is a celebration at the yucayeque. Dancing, singing, bounteous food. But they're not celebrating the Areito. This is all in our honor: the woman who vanquished the reviled hunter and the visitor who brought that woman back from death. These people's jubilation is contagious.

I capture and register the image of Sarai beside me in front of her bohío, smiling, the two of us seated and surrounded by many of her guaitiao. Thanks to her I feel at home in this community, much more than I've ever felt on the Home Space Station.

My name is being called out by the crowd, *Marcorai!* The cacique gestures to Sarai from his ceremonial chair; I note the richly crafted gold necklaces he's wearing. Seconds later she begins to sing her song, and all her guaitiao join in the singing. It is choral music like I've never heard, joyful yet marked by a certain longing.

"I will have a bohío made for the marcorai!" the cacique announces.

"Thank you, sir," I say clumsily, realizing too late that no one, especially not an outsider, is allowed to talk to the cacique directly as I have.

Hours later, at the beach, I ask Sarai about Peitio's body.

"His remains were taken far away," she tells me, "where Peitio's spirit will not haunt us. He could not be buried here. I would not allow his bones to remain in our yucayeque."

"I understand," I say after accessing the *Historical File* and confirming this key fact: *When*

*their loved ones died, Tainos buried them in their communal dwellings. They believed that the spirits of those family members continued to exist in their bones.*

“The bohío I shared with Peitio,” said Sarai now, in a whisper, “will also be taken away. There must remain no part of it, not even ashes after we burn it.”

“They burned Peitio’s body too, did they not?”

“Yes, and his ashes were offered to Amanani.”

“Why was that done?”

“Because Peitio did not belong among us. He was not one of us.”

“Where will you live now, Sarai?”

“In a new bohío, with some of the women.”

“I hope you will be happy in your new home, Sarai. You deserve to be.”

“I am grateful for your wishes, Marcorai. You are a true friend.”

“And you, Sarai... you are the first and only friend I have ever had.”

“It seems that the gods have brought us together.”

“Yes, and I thank them for that.”

The dwelling they have built for me is a rectangular abode like that of the cacique. In contrast to the tribal chief’s caney, however, the walls of my house have small openings that function as windows—to allow the villagers to see me whenever they please. I’m being constantly watched. This is the unexpected irony of my situation: the observer has become the observed. Everyone stops to look at me, to touch me. Sick or injured people beg me to do my “magic” on them; and, somehow, I manage to help them all without suffering any dire consequences myself. What’s more, I seem to draw energy from healing others.

I am now a part of Taino mythology. I’ve come to embody their new bohique. But I didn’t come to the past to be this person. I don’t wish to be worshiped, even if only for the short time I have left here. The role of shaman doesn’t suit me.

**First Voyage Log:** Confirmed: It has been almost seven months since my arrival in Taina. I will soon be taking a respite—a temporal breather, you might say—before I set out again. My next voyage: the nineteenth century, year 1865. Exact day: impossible to pinpoint.

I try to inform Sarai about my imminent departure.

“The time has come for me to leave,” I tell her.

“Are you returning to your island?” she asks.

“Yes, Sarai. My world awaits me.”

“Stay with us, Marcorai. You could be happy living among us.”

“I cannot stay, Sarai. I must return.”

“The stones have told me about your world...”

“What did the spirits tell you?”

“They showed me your dreams. And I was able to see your home, a yucayeque that floats in the air, as big as the sky.”

“Now you know where I come from, Sarai.”  
“Yes, and I also know...” She pauses, turning somber, pensive.  
“What is it? What else did your stones show you about my world?”  
“I saw darkness everywhere, Marcorai, as if the God Ris were hiding from your people.”  
“Not hiding, Sarai, but dying. Our sun is very sick.”  
“Yours is a mighty tribe, Marcorai. Can you all not heal the sun?”  
“No, we are not that powerful.”  
“I wish you could take some of our light with you.”  
“I can and I will, in here,” I say, pointing to my heart.  
“You possess a godly kind of power, Marcorai. You healed me and many of my guaitiao. But I have not asked you how you do this. I respect the secret of your magic.”  
“As I respect the magic of your spirits, even though I do not understand it.”  
“There are things that cannot be understood, things that can only be held in *machichi*.”  
“Yes, Sarai, I have learned that from you...”  
“Who waits for you on your island, Marcorai? Do you have a wife, children?”  
“No wife or children. But many of my guaitiao are waiting for me.”  
“There really is no friend like me in your yucayeque?”  
“No. There is no one there like you.”  
“Are you going to tell your tribe about my people?”  
“Yes, I will tell them about your stones, your trees and animals, about your gods, your food, your village. I will share with them all that you have taught me.”  
“Will you ever come back?”  
“I would like to...”  
“I hope you do.”  
“I must go now, Sarai.”  
“No, Marcorai. Stay one more time of light... please.”  
“I will. One more day, then.”

We swim at the beach during our last “time of light,” and we sit by a stream, eating our favorite fruits under a ceiba. Sarai sings her song now and then. She knows how happy it makes me.

“What is your song about?” I ask her.  
“It tells a secret story,” she replies. “Perhaps you will learn to sing it someday.”  
“I hope so...”  
“Will you sleep in my new bohío tonight, Marcorai?”  
“Yes, Sarai. But what about the women you live with?”  
“I could ask them to let us be alone for just one night.”  
“Please do not tell anyone that I am leaving. When your guaitiao ask about me...”  
“I will say that you had to return to your island.”

Sunset is upon us when we reach the yucayeque. Sarai arranges for our night together. In the hut, I give her my hand, hesitantly, and I let her guide me. She places her fine long fingers on

my cheeks, gently caresses me, and for an instant I nurture the dream of staying with her forever.

“I will never forget you,” she says. “You will live in machichi for as long as I live.”

She reaches out to me. My flesh responds as it should, but my mind blocks my attempts to follow through. I wish I could break free, subvert my encoding, fulfill my wish of uniting with Sarai. The stone lovers must remain only a fantasy, it seems, an image I’ve tried to envision but which ultimately failed to become real. The idea of pleasure —of *love*— denied to me.

If only Sarai and her guaitiao could change their tragic fate! I’ve seen these people’s future in the *Historical File*. The enemies of all Caribbean tribes will invade the coasts of Taina in just a few years and impose their laws and their religion. *The native population died off due to the brutal labor they were made to endure and to the illnesses brought by the Spaniards*. Those men will destroy Sarai’s world. That’s what happened, what *will happen* inevitably. In the short span of two decades after Columbus’ arrival, there won’t be any Tainos left alive on this island.

It hurts me (yes, this is *pain*) to have to leave Sarai. But the future can’t be altered, and I must embark on my next journey. Her voice still resounds, always will, invoking a world I’ve tried to understand, singing a song I wish I could sing. My beloved Sarai among her spirits, all of them inviting me to that mysterious place they inhabit, letting me join in their dance...