

Christina Maile

SKIN

The gravel road cuts through the skin of the jungle taking us from the port city at the edge of the Caribbean to a grand 19th century colonial house standing alone in a clearing of gardenias and palms. As the car tires crunch against the cocoa bean shells of the driveway, my husband and I see that the glorious sight from afar is, on closer inspection, crumbling. Rotting wood scars the white porticos, steps are broken, columns are buttressed with plywood, the wide verandah is sagging. Yet the house with its colonial decay still commands the space. As does the woman who rises from the verandah to greet us. She is tall, straight backed, almost youthfully thin, dressed in an old-fashioned filmy white dress that covers her arms and legs. Like the house, up close she is very old, her porcelain powdered skin broken by cracks and lines. Yet her blue eyes are friendly and her accent lilting, as she welcomes us into her family home. “We have only begun to rent rooms to our island’s visitors,” she says. “You are our first!”

She glides along the central hallway of the dark cool house, pointing out the rooms that long ago must have entertained dozens of guests. The ballroom, the morning room, the library, the parlor, the dining room. But what we see is only the aging skin of the house—peeling wallpaper, water-stained ceilings, threadbare rugs. The furniture is oppressive mahogany, much of it missing if you take in the patches of darker color on the floors. In some rooms, the pieces are covered with linen sheets. The dim light filtering through the thin curtains gives these rooms the aspect of a gray turbulent sea.

“My father hunted in Kenya,” she says, throwing open the doors of the lounge, now inhabited only by the tattered skins of tiger and antelope and zebra. We end at the back verandah overlooking a lush garden. In the tangle of trees beyond, Miss Ellen’s voice softens. “Over there were once my family’s coffee fields—they stretched as far as the eye could see.”

“Benjamin,” she calls out. “Our guests have arrived. Isn’t that wonderful?”

The man in the garden rises, removes his gardening apron and walks stiffly toward us. It is so surprising that he is dressed so formally in a white shirt, vest, dress pants. “Yes.” He smiles at the woman standing above him on the verandah. “That is wonderful.”

The receipt that Miss Ellen has given us for our night’s lodging is beautifully handwritten, cursive and formal. The stair banister is a silk scarf under my hand as my husband and I follow Benjamin to our room. Another couple arrives, and Miss Ellen goes to meet them. Our room is crowded with armoires and marble-topped dressers. The bed in the center is as big as a sailing ship. Vines have crawled over the tiny balcony and twisted themselves around the French doors so tightly that they can no longer close. Through the open doors, the rumble of birds and insects tells us how close our room is to the large heavily leafed trees that surround the back of the house. Benjamin has told us we are free to roam the house, and that there is lemonade and cake in the dining room. But my husband is tired after a day at the beach, too many beers, and the long drive. He collapses on the bed. Next door, I find that the water in the bathtub is lukewarm, but it is so calming to be in such a beautiful room with its ornate plumbing and mosaic tiles.

Eventually, I make my way back down the stairs. The new couple are arguing in their room. Lights have been turned on. Wall sconces. Floor lamps. But the light is weak. The shadows seem as solid as furniture. The house smells of lemon oil and dead leaves. There is a radio playing music somewhere.

In the dining room, the lemonade is warm, and the cake is cold. Still, I take a glass and a slice. I see Benjamin and Ellen moving about in a distant room. It might be the kitchen, the light is so warm there. Everywhere I look I see both the past and the present—rectangular patches revealing walls stripped of paintings, glass china cabinets empty of china, shelves filled with nothing. In their stead, there are decades of photos, cotillions of them, populating the tables and mantles. So tarnished are their silver and mirrored frames, it’s as if the frames themselves had taken on the burden of getting old so that the photos inside would remain forever young.

Among the crowds of complacent white men and women, I catch glimpses of a young, unlined Miss Ellen in her white frocks and parasols. Waving from a car. Sitting on a horse. Playing

croquet. Luncheons and teas. And every now and then, accidentally, a young Benjamin in his servant livery, always in the background, carrying a tray, opening a door. Occasionally, though, the unknown photographer has caught a moment: Miss Ellen looking at Benjamin when she should have been looking at the camera. Benjamin looking at her, when he should have stepped back. From the intensity of their gazes, and the society of their skin, they have always been apart and together.

Back in our room, I turn off the bedside light my husband left on. The walls are now moonlit, and I close my eyes. Breezes edged with earth and feathers flow through the open windows, drifting over my skin. But sometime in the night, something awakens me. It is not the breeze. The touch is harsher. It's not my husband's hand either, which is usually rough and moist. There are skittering sounds everywhere. I roll up and turn on the light to a nightmare or a dream. But I know it is neither, because I could never have imagined the long, thin lizards climbing the curtains, as they are doing now. Nor the moths suddenly circling the light, their giant wings crackling in the air. How would I have known about birds with such large eyes flying back and forth through the French doors, perching on the heavy dresser mirror, snapping their beaks. Or that insects could burst from the floral wallpaper, flutter around me, landing on chairs, on chests, on the bed. And under the bed, something is thrashing. I want to run, but the floor has become a moving iridescent carpet. I try to wake my husband, but the beer has knocked him out. We are skin against skin, but often we have nothing in common.

I cover myself in sheets like the furniture downstairs. But I don't seem to matter. So absorbed is everything in themselves—in their hunting and swallowing, their beaks and tongues, their gaping appetites beneath their blossom eyes, their pummeling wings, their cathedral legs. In this stifling and decrepit room, something is happening, beautiful and murderous.

Wrapped tightly in my cocoon of sheets, ignored by everything, I am beginning to enjoy the invasion. I think of the coffee plantation owner who built this grand house to house this room and the other grand rooms. What would he have thought if he had known that the skin he should have been most afraid of was not black like Benjamin's, but iridescent and scaled, feathered, carapaced in glossy dots, veined and leafy, swollen in damp amphibian green. These skins that

have taken over his house have crept and swarmed into these rooms, opening them to rain and heat, digesting this house little by little inside their tiny secret mouths.

Eventually, the night and their hunger must have faded for I must have fallen asleep. My husband pushes me awake: “Aren’t you warm under all that?” I want to tell him about the skins, and the birds and lizards and how our bed was like a ship inside a jungle. But there’s nothing left in the room for him to believe.

The other couple is already in the dining room when we arrive for breakfast. They are silent. The table is laid with delicate chinaware, silverware gleams dully, the napkins thick. All of it too grand to serve the tiny fried egg accompanied by a single piece of dry toast. A little pot of marmalade stands next to a glass container from which Miss Ellen pours us instant coffee.

“Please take a turn in the gardens,” she says. “They are Benjamin’s pride and joy.” We do—they are intricate with flowers and vegetables, but we cannot stay because my husband wants to get an early start.

Miss Ellen is waiting for us in the driveway. “Please come again, and tell your friends.” She bends and gathers up from the driveway some of its crushed cocoa bean shells. She takes my hand and pours them into my palm. “A souvenir of your stay.” The skin of the shells is a soft glowing brown.

Benjamin steps out onto the verandah. Miss Ellen smiles up at him. “They enjoyed seeing your gardens. And they loved the house.” From his height above, Benjamin nods to us and Miss Ellen. “It’s a wonderful house,” he replies, his hands on the railing, his gaze traveling over the driveway, the gardens, the jungle beyond, all that is in his sight . . . all that he possesses.