

Abaiang Island, February 14, 1840

GILBERTESE WARRIOR

When you were twelve
And Antares rose after sunset
You were told to face the fire upwind to the east
Not to move or flinch or look away

Father's father cut your hair with a shark's tooth
Father's brothers made the magic protection
Against weakness and attractions to women
Against fear and cowardice

When you were twenty and two moons
And Antares rose after sunset
You were told to face the fire upwind to the east
Not to move or flinch or look away

Father cut your hair with a shark's tooth all night
Father's brothers beat you with palm fronds
Lit a torch over your head and dripped it on you
And you did not move or flinch or look away

Close to the fire you drank from a coconut shell
Sea water and oil, mixed with a stingray barb
Fumed with incantations, magical strength
While father stabbed his own hair with the tooth

Father's father made your first spear
Seasoned coconut wood twelve feet long
Double rows of shark teeth at the point
Tied on by strands of warrior's hair

Father kept the spear when you were
Sent away to a secluded hut to the east
Where you stayed alone until the roof began to leak
Five years without visitors, without women

Senior men brought you special food, and silence
 Grandfather gave you work cutting trees and bushes
 Carrying stones, learning tactics, weapons
 Shark's tooth swords, sennit armor, war clubs

Learning strength of family, origins, histories
 Pushing discipline, the boundaries of hardship
 Fathoming grandfather's magic, wisdom
 Practicing fighting in the sea, on the reef

Then you were led to the village maneaba
 And young men danced in your honor
 And young women danced in your honor
 And songs were crafted and sung for you

And you were strong, strong they sang
 And you were wise, wise they sang
 And you were feared, feared they sang
 And you were *rorobuaka* — warrior

One day a traitor and a white man from Tarawa
 Came to your island and skirted it in a small boat
 With a new weapon at hand, a long stick
 A cracking noise that killed, a trick of the gods

The warriors formed a ferocious wall on the shore
 Tradition and courage in a line, armed and unafraid
 The tube smoked with a loud report and nobody understood
 It smoked again and a pebble of death pierced your shield

Knocked you down, knocked out your breath
 Stole your vision, your strength, your power
 Drained your blood, your round pebble magic
 Killed your grandfather's pride, your father's son

And the reef turned red that day
 And the sky turned silver for a year
 And the sea was diseased with iron ships
 And the land was swallowed by thunder and smoke

