Instance of an Island

One way to erase an island is to invent a second island absolved of all the sounds the first one ever made. We don’t know who concocted this one, where the triggerfish and clowns fade to inky neon dashes under a fisherman’s skiff. A few plastic pontoons knock around makeshift slips. Dusk coaxes from the shore the small, dull chime of a spoon against a pot and TV voices flash slow across a cliff. Two pink lovers in matching swimwear kiss their glasses at the edge of a blue pool built just low enough into the hill so the couple can gaze into the sea and think of infinity. Many, many years ago, a great emperor wiggled his finger and commanded his army to corral all the lepers in his domain then pack them into a sailing ship to be delivered to the missions on this cluster of verdant volcanic rock. The emperor’s orders to his captain were clear: if the monks refused the ship’s freight, the skipper was to simply dump the whole sick cargo far from any shore. Other incurables followed in lots over time, or trickled in, hiding from nearby tribes, or banished from other lands to live among these lush slopes of mahogany, papaya, and weeds.

Two women, Filomena and Josefa, arrived within days of one another. By then, each had lost most their toes, though they had ten full fingers between them, each woman with one hand still intact. No one is sure how it began, but once a week the pair would knock on the door of the scowling
Madre Clementina to borrow the hospital’s only guitar, carved from jackfruit and cracked pretty bad along the back. To these women—no big deal, for Filomena once transcribed the early moonlight serenades of the horny friars in the Royal South for the brats of an Andalusian duke. Josefa was the daughter of a carpenter, a maker of tables to be exact. She learned to play a harana’s tremulous melodies on her mother’s banduria at the age of three. The pair of outcasts would stifle laughs, thrilled to earn the crusty nun’s grudging Yes, then amble out to lowtide and find a flat rock to share, so they could prop the old guitar on both their laps, the one bad wrist of each woman unwrapped to their stumps, pulled for now behind their backs as they looked past the bay toward the violent waters that first carried them here—and they jammed. Filomena with the five deft hammers of her left and Josefa with her right, thick-muscled—both blue-veined and furious, scrubbing from the instrument all those wicked rhythms from Castile to Nowhere, on a fragile scrap of furniture that could barely hold its tune. They sat shoulder to shoulder and thigh to thigh, their good hands brushing from time to time. What they couldn’t remember, they made up, and everything they made up disappeared past the lagoon and over the ocean, every note in every run, every lie and desire, every nick and crack in the jackfruit, the fat harmonics plucked from the old nun’s grunts, six taut strands of gut whose chords skimmed the water
like night locusts in bursts of low clouds
and which bore everything in front of them and behind,
the brine of the women's necks mixed with the salt
of the lagoon, the cliffs, the spoons, the bright
nimbus of the West dipping like a noose,
the future of pontoons and fake tits, the history
of nifty crowns pried loose of their jewels,
the jiggle of a little finger gone still.

One way to erase an island is to invent the waters
that surround it. You can name the waters
which will turn all the sounds the island makes into salt.
It will teach you to listen to everything you love
disappear . . . or you can invent a song so big
it will hold the entire ocean.

Josefa and Filomena
rocked in the dark, hip to hip, joined by that third
body of wood, which made sure there was
nothing left in the unbroken world
to possibly make them whole.