

**nominal spaces**  
stories for photographs

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## The Floating Island

for Holly King



Holly King. *Solitude*, 2000  
Chromogenic print, 99 x 168 cm.  
Courtesy of the artist and Trépanier-Baer Gallery, Calgary.

On evenings when the tide was favourable, Cavalcanti, the retired magistrate, would row across the estuary to play cards with the fishermen in the village. From their rooms above the square, leaning out with elbows on iron balconies, the wives of the fishermen would watch Cavalcanti as he passed like a wraith below their windows. His damp robes, dragging across the dusty cobbles, left an enigmatic stroke like that of a brush, which led some of the more superstitious among them to read signs on the wet stones. What had happened that he should be banished to their poor stretch of coast was not known, but there was speculation that he had angered someone powerful whom he would have been wiser to please. Either that, or the old man was a practitioner of the dark arts, though evidence of the latter was never produced. Where nothing is known, there is mystery; where there is mystery, fear. With his black robes and inscrutable silence, Cavalcanti was feared as much as he was respected. Small children drew back from open doorways when he passed through the streets. It was said by those who had crossed the salt river near the magistrate's house that he ventured out only at night, preferring his books to the company of men, candle light to

that of the sun. Except for those words absolutely necessary to make his needs known, Cavalcanti spoke only to the fishermen at cards. In the private room at the back of the tavern, where the cards were played, it is known that on one occasion he stopped a knife fight and, on another, prevented a fool from gambling away his boat and nets. But the fishermen, who enjoyed relieving the magistrate of his gold, were typically circumspect, as if sworn to secrecy in return for their winnings at the table. So it was a surprise to all that the disappearance of Rigoberto the fisherman, which had long haunted the village, would finally be explained to the priest by the magistrate as he lay trembling on his death bed, many years later.

Late one night, when the moon was an umber crescent hanging just above the trees, Rigoberto was returning home after a long and arduous day. Tilting his oars back in the locks, he drifted past the shadow of the magistrate's house, weary as he was from many hours bending his back against the sea. So close now to home, where soon he would lay with a soft pallet beneath him, and hot soup to warm him, Rigoberto was content for a moment to let the tide pull him toward shore. So it was for this reason that the fisherman, who otherwise would have had the creak and groan of oars and water fill his ears, was able to hear a faint but rhythmic tapping across the water.

A low light burned in one of the magistrate's windows. A shadow cast by the upward projection of a lamp seemed to the fisherman,

silent in his boat, a monstrous figure reeling in the stony glow of the room. Perhaps it was merely pretext for a tale he would later share with friends, but Rigoberto beached his boat on a narrow spit of sand and, drawing his cloak about his shoulders, made his way up a steep path from the shore until panting, he was standing beneath the lighted window, his back against the stone wall, his breath a vaporous shape like a pear in front of his face.

From above, the sound of tapping. Seizing the lower branches of a fruit tree growing close to the wall, the fisherman hoisted himself off the ground and perched on a sturdy branch, his bare toes gripping the bark. He waited until his breath quieted, then raised his head and peered cautiously over the sill of the open window.

The magistrate, bare-chested save for a crucifix, was shuffling around a large desk in the centre of the room. In his left hand he held a broom handle, which he tapped on the floor before him in the manner of the blind. His other hand he held out protectively at chest height, as if to ward off a blow. The tip of the cane hit an obstacle and Cavalcanti swore and stopped mid-shuffle, his free hand groping the air. A wooden chair. He edged gingerly around the chair and Rigoberto shrank down as the magistrate rounded the corner of the desk and turned his face to the window. The fisherman held his breath, prepared to leap to the ground. The cane tapped forward over the floor until Cavalcanti was within arm's reach, looking right at the fisherman, the magistrate's mouth set in a grim line of concen-

tration. Nothing. Emboldened, the fisherman reached through the window and waved a hand in front of Cavalcanti's face. Still nothing. The old man was completely blind.

Cavalcanti stopped before the window, and the fisherman quietly let out his breath. The magistrate sniffed, catching a sudden whiff of garlic, sardines and red wine. Like an adder striking, his hand shot out and locked onto Rigoberto's forearm, which had been resting on the windowsill. The fisherman let out a cry and jerked back, losing his footing on the branch and, if it had not been for the vise-like grip on his arm, he would have fallen backwards into the night.

"Who's there?" Cavalcanti demanded. "In the name of the Lord, reveal thyself!"

The fisherman pulled himself back to the safety of the wall, steadying himself on the branch as he wiped his brow. "It is I, Rigoberto, back from fishing the deeps," he said, catching his breath. "I did not intend to disturb you. I was passing nearby when I heard a strange noise. I saw your light, and thought I might be of some help if you were in need."

The magistrate retained his grip on the fisherman's arm. "Perhaps there is a way you can be of help. This morning I awakened blind and cannot see. I went to sleep a sound man, but when I awoke I was afflicted."

The magistrate released Rigoberto's arm and picked up the stick, which had fallen to the floor. "Come in." He turned and shuffled to the desk, and the fisherman lifted himself over the windowsill and dropped lightly into the room.

Cavalcanti drew a chair close and sat at the desk, his hands drifting over the clutter atop the desk until they touched a decanter of golden liquor. "Pour a glass for yourself and for me," he said. From a drawer in the desk he produced two dirty glasses.

Rigoberto, who had never been in a room with so many books, gazed around in awe. From floor to ceiling, the study was lined with books, the spines grey or black, with lettering of faded gold. The shelves bowed under their weight.

"H-how will you read, now that your eyes have been afflicted?" Rigoberto asked, unstopping the decanter and filling two glasses, his own almost to overflowing. In truth, the magistrate's eyes looked perfectly healthy, neither clouded nor wandering, as one might expect blind eyes to appear. Rigoberto set a glass into the old man's waiting hands. Cavalcanti raised the glass with both hands and drank heavily without answering.

Rigoberto gulped his sherry and sat in a rotten armchair beside the desk, quietly refilling his glass. The magistrate, of course, did not object.

A small leather sack lay in the centre of the desk, immediately in front of the magistrate. The sack was tied with a drawstring. Rigoberto leaned forward to move the sack aside as Cavalcanti made to set his glass down. Something clinked in the sack and again the magistrate's hand shot out with uncanny speed, pinning Rigoberto's hand and the sack to the desk. From the feel, Rigoberto surmised the leather to be full of coins.

"I was simply moving the bag out of harm's way," Rigoberto mumbled. Cavalcanti scooped up the bag and hung it on its drawstring around his neck, the thong digging into the back of his bony neck. The magistrate fumbled behind his chair and pulled on a rough tunic. The shirt tented over the sack, which lay like an extra heart against Cavalcanti's thin chest.

"Scales have covered my eyes, and I know not why," he said at last, cradling his glass of sherry, which Rigoberto had once again filled. "Years ago, when I lived in the city, I heard of a doctor who had success curing diseases of this nature. He may be able to help. He lives a day's travel north of here along the coast. I will pay you to take me there in your boat. I have only the coins in this bag to pay both you and the doctor. In spite of what you might think, I am not a wealthy man."

Rigoberto leaned across the desk and took the magistrate's hand in his, raised it to his lips. "I would be honoured to help you, my

friend. We can set out at once this very night, after I empty my nets and provision the boat."

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By dawn, a heavy fog had rolled in, and Rigoberto could no longer hear the surf crashing against the shore. The magistrate dozed fitfully at the stern of the boat, muffled in a coarse woolen blanket that was now spangled with beads of moisture. In the grey mist which enveloped them Rigoberto, who had never travelled out of sight of the signal fire which burned night and day on the cliff above the village, realized he was lost. He shipped oars and rested his cramped hands on his knees. Except for the water lapping the side of the boat, the sea was completely silent, with not even the cry of a bird. Rigoberto took his cork-handled knife and cut off a slice of bread, stuffed the chewy bread into his mouth. The empty decanter rolled between his feet, half afloat in the bilge. Cavalcanti had drunk the remainder of the sherry and then proceeded to vomit it over the side of the boat before they had even pulled far enough from shore to hit the sea swell.

Rigoberto twisted around, craning his neck to see the dim glow of the sun through the fog, but to no avail. He put the knife away and bent his back to the oars again, hoping he was heading in the right direction.

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When he awoke, the sun was beating down on his head and Cavalcanti was poking him in the ribs with the end of his stick. “You were snoring,” the magistrate said. Rigoberto batted the stick away and sat up on the bench, looking around. The sea was dead calm, the sun directly overhead. How long had he been asleep? The fog had burned away. In the far distance, a small island with a lone tree broke the horizon. There was no other land in sight.

He rowed for more than an hour, his mouth shut. Cavalcanti, as if sensing his mood, was silent. The magistrate had draped the woolen blanket over his head for shade, and looked for all the world like an undersized boy wearing a giant’s wig. He had stripped off his tunic, so the leather money sack, darkened with sweat, lay heavy in the centre of his chest.

Gradually they drew nearer the island. High above them, the sky was metallic and ominous and towards the horizon, veined with lightning. The sea was a single undulating glassy swell beneath them, so they seemed afloat on a mirrored tray. No birds turned overhead, and nothing passed in the watery depths below their keel. Rigoberto, in spite of the heat, felt a cold sweat roll down his back, and he crossed himself for luck. The magistrate was oblivious to Rigoberto’s unease, and seemed to enjoy the gentle movement of the boat. He dozed with his feet over the transom, sandals dangling lackadaisically from his toes.

They were almost upon the island before Rigoberto realized what was wrong. Every time he had looked over his shoulder to correct his course, the island had appeared to waver in the heat. In fact, now that he was close enough to touch it, he could see the little island was bobbing slowly on the surface of the sea. He shipped oars again and waited for the ripples created by the movement of the boat to subside. The island rocked and then came gently to rest. Rigoberto pulled an oar from the oarlock and poked the island with the blade. The island see-sawed up and down, the leaves of the tree rustling gently overhead.

“Are we there?” Cavalcanti was sitting up, the makeshift cane propped between his knees. He looked around expectantly, as if to catch the scent of noonday cooking fires in the air.

Rigoberto beached the boat and stepped ashore, the little island settling noticeably under his weight.

Feeling his way, the magistrate clambered over the rowing thwart to the bow. “Here?” he asked. “Step down here?” One of his leather sandals fell off and dropped to the water.

Rigoberto said “Yes, step down here,” and the magistrate stepped down heavily to the sand of the tiny beach.

The sandal lay on the water. Rigoberto, leaning on the boat, reached out to pick it up. The leather wasn’t wet. He laid his hand on the sur-

face of the sea. It was like fabric of some sort, a type of metallic fabric that gave beneath his palm to reveal something solid below.

“Can you see the town?” Cavalcanti asked. He had picked up his stick and crawled up the beach to rest at the base of the solitary tree, which on closer inspection looked artificial, as if constructed by hand from paper or clay.

The boat rocked as Rigoberto stepped from the shore onto the water. It held beneath his weight. The fabric billowed gently away from the indentations of his feet. He walked out to the stern of the boat, holding the gunwale, then let go and took a few tentative steps away from the island. He was walking on water. He let out a laugh.

“You won’t believe this,” he called out to Cavalcanti, “but I’m walking on water!” He took a half-dozen more steps and did a little jump into the air, landing solidly on the surface of the sea.

At the base of the tree, the magistrate crossed himself. “It’s the heat affecting your brain,” Cavalcanti said. “Come rest with me in the shade, and then we can make our way along the beach to the town. We will get some water to drink.”

The fisherman walked away from the boat and the little island. Around him stretched an infinity of ocean. The sea-blue metallic fabric was hot underfoot. When he looked back, the tree was bobbing ever so gently with the clumsy movements of the magistrate as he circled the toy island, the tip of his cane flicking sand into the air.

“Rigoberto,” the magistrate cried out, “I will give you all the gold I carry. Do not abandon me here!” Perhaps fear, coupled with heat prostration, lack of sleep and dehydration, conspired to break the old man’s will. Hearing no reply, Cavalcanti fell to his knees and wept, pressing his hands to his eyes. But the salt tears, streaming down his cheeks, unlocked something inside him, a man who had not cried for more than forty years.

“Rigoberto,” he called out again, astonished, his sorrow turning in an instant to joy. Cavalcanti struggled to his feet and looked around for the fisherman. “A miracle! The scales have fallen from my eyes. A miracle! I can see again,” he shouted.

Cavalcanti flung the stick aside and staggered to the edge of the sand. He spotted the fisherman standing far out on the water. Rigoberto, looking back one last time, saw the magistrate wading waist-deep in the brine, one arm on the fishing boat to steady himself against the lap of the waves, the other held high as if in benediction or farewell. And at that instant Rigoberto plunged down into the sea and sank without a trace. Like most fishermen, he had never learned to swim. As the waters closed over him, his last perfect breath rose in a jewelled cloud before his face.