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Two Women with Mangoes

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TWO WOMEN WITH MANGOES

One of them seems to offer her breasts
as if they were fruit, though she holds
the canoe-shaped bowl of mangoes like a gift
received. Her eyes dart off to the right,
one hand curving around the bowl's rim
as though to guard what it presents.
The other woman holds a small bouquet
of pinkish-white flowers, presses them
between her palms. In that green dress
which exposes only one breast,
she looks even more chaste than her friend.
Is it correct to call them friends?
Certainly the wash of green and yellow
in the background is not friendly, implying
turbulent weather or a growth of weeds.
If these women and their island
offer nothing we could say we need, then what
should we ask for?

Gauguin, at 17,
joined the navy and traveled to Brazil.
When he left his wife, five children
and impressionism for Brittany and then Tahiti,
he must have been aroused by what he found
at first—the coppery skin, the bodies uncorseted.
But these women do not look like lovers,
either for himself or for each other.
If the fruit they hold and the breasts they show
are anything to give, they're not for us:
we don't know what to ask for.
Perhaps their pose was Gauguin's own
rendition of two women, two refusals—
the head of one turned slightly toward the other,
as if she were about to speak, or had just spoken.