The Dry Tortugas

They were building a house in the Dry Tortugas, less for the solitude there than the open eyes of a swallowtailed hummingbird they had seen once on a fishing trip—the early Fifties, he reeling in an oversized yellowfin, Humphrey Bogart facing the wind one foot on the rail in To Have and Have Not, she whistling the stuttered call of the Amazonian kingfisher, and singing in Spanish to flocks of Bonaparte’s gulls. It comes to nothing in the end, though the land is paced off and measured and two palms felled to expand the view, a road graded the requisite mile, and some of their friends fly down from New York to surprise them, circle the islands all morning, gleeful and chic in their 4-seater Cessna (he’s something exalted at Chase), and later the bottles of Myer’s and Appleton Gold sweat dark rings on the terrace flagstones, and someone’s pink lipstick makes delicate kissprints along the rim of her glass. No one has told me what happened—his heart attack in Guatemala, her premonition about the wide and empty view, or the world swinging in with its usual brazen distractions—but they framed the architect’s plans of the house, and this is what I inherit, a rendering in colored pencil: what they were dreaming before I was born.