

Darwin Strikes a Match

Sweet tobacco wafts through the quarterdeck,
around the sweating rungs and under the hatch,
while a perfumed woman studies the Captain
to her wicked tattoos. She is rare
as a whale's tooth and as brown as she puffs
a length of pipe and breathes it through
the pink interior of the Captain's room.

Darwin sits quiet beside the Captain,
finishing the last of the swiveling port, the etched glass
opening a crimson throat. The Captain's table
shines darkly, polished with wine revelers have slopped
in salutation to the dawn and now this ash
that mists over the Captain's skylight so that
there is no light but only fleck and spray.
For days the sailors wade through this smoke—
the volcano on shore yielding slow fire
beyond the tree line—and the black water laps the ship
with small tremors like the sick cat
lapping up the last of the wine. Having this woman
onboard is unlucky, they know. Birds
have flown from the jungle. The lanterns and the table
lean forward. The woman leans forward.
She is leaning to unbutton her shoes: no—
she is picking up a fallen spoon. Her face
bends in the silver like a face of a coin distorts
under a jeweler's loupe: a scratched and ill-lit glow.
She loosens her hair from a knot and lays her
hands on the pocked wood of the table, on the smooth
candlelight that is the view of the table, her hair unraveling.
Did the woman learn this from other travels,
or is this the sharp courtesy of a guest?
Her hands fold, one small animal nesting into

another. It is almost evening now: the lanterns up
on the bow and stern and all over this cramped town
that they live in, that they work with rotted braids of rope
and the iron hooks through which the sailors string
the rot and sing. Her hands are quiet specimens
on the table as Darwin bends down and lifts
the hoop, her petticoat and its crisp waves receding
in his grasp. *The leg is beyond repair*, Darwin says
to the Captain, and so it is. They lift her to half-standing,
they give her the feast of old bread and hard
cheese and the wine in which there swirls dirt, and the swain
is calling, the swain is calling, the fire made rain
falls over them like a muslin cloth—little room to breathe
in the hothouse—and they toss and toss
as Darwin returns to his torrid chamber
and is sick in the corner: it is his name for the storm
and it is his name for the woman now fanning
her face with a small dirty plate.
Come morning, the sailors will throw anchor and row
their cargo to the village, the woman
cursing against the plume of her skirt trailing
in the brackish water: its black uneven weight.
They will stretch her good leg gently, as if
stretched to collect rain, all the while the woman
looking to the ash-ridden sky saying
Digame, Digame, Digame.

First Sex

Who would guess that glory
would live on a pea plant's
sticky mouth smeared

with golden pollen?
The monk frees
the flowers' sexes

from the calico bonnets
and shoos the abbot's
sweet-bottomed bees

and with tweezers snips
powder from the anthers
while the style hot with nectar

reaches up. He pushes the tip
of the camel-hair brush
in this bright dust—

and the bells of the flowers
twist to him; the knotting tendrils
strain on their brittle twigs—

and the tiny stem is painted
gently, as if it were
a thread of spun glass.

The opening yellow
bud swallows
the scientist's bait

and it floats down
into the ovum like a
point of light in the throat

so that the whole body
is singing deep praise
of his touch and oh

yes Mendel this
moment is the best
of glory's evidence—

one can see it even
in the white blossom's
effusion of bliss.

My Natural History

This is how my father will tell it:
he is a young man, not even twenty,
driving down a road in Arizona with my mother
and searching for the place where they will park,
put their backs to cool June grass,
and lie naked together for the first time.
In his mind he is also another man:
one in the last few weeks of his dying,
and in his end he finds himself wondering
over their naked bodies in the field from above
as broken aloe weeps a sharp green perfume.
He marvels at the brown geography of her hair,
the order of her fingers in moonlight like thin lit stones.
He feels the first tremor, sees himself
shift over, begins again in the rift
of red stone that opens between them.
The rocks push through layers of sediment and he
crosses the pale borders of shale plates and limbs,
a mountain rising in her hip and his future
spiraling in a fossil of white shell. The water
is rising up now to run its dark course:
the water will wear her form for years.
As the gap yawns wider, it is this history
he chooses to remember:
a young woman, not even twenty,
reclining in the grass and the distance.
The blade of a river flowing between them
in which their daughter is being carried away.