

Virginia Dare

—first English child born in the Americas,
August 18, 1587

(i)

Grandpa White left Roanoke as Governor,
his new titles shimmering from the teak boat
and a kiss trailing off his good stiff Puritan
arm. Spain lurked over England. The setting
was historically correct: powder-blue
sea, a white rind of sail, some unknown fish
floating at the hull. Grandpa White left Roanoke
as he came to it—a silent island
in a uniform of black waves. Virginia
raises her nine days into a fist and makes
history grabbing her mother's hair,
first Christian of America. Ellinor
twirls a tooled lace hanky: goodbye to Dad.

(ii)

Grandpa White takes the backwards ride of Virginia
in Ellinor's belly, curled in the sleep cabin,
a father in his daughter's womb. On maps,
clouds perpetually huff across oceans as he lands
half-mad from the salt rattling his lungs.
Sometimes England calls him governor.

He appears to Parliament as a curious man in black.
He sleeps fortnights on the ship; no one
wants to keep house with him, *curious man*.
Years. Years on the brackish water
and the codfish under his bed turning transparent
eyes at him. The Armada skims
between him and Virginia. He dreams
scenery beyond the powder-blue
drum-smoke of canons: Virginia is walking
in new leather shoes. Ellinor is following
God faithfully and trade begins.
Ellinor is teaching Virginia to speak.
Virginia knows his name.

(iii)

He imagines
his ship pulling from the bay November
after November, but no news returns.
The sea sends back no letters, no belabored notes
folded in bottles and wrapped in black ribbon.
Barnacles collect in white blisters on the ship's ribs.
Grandpa White lobbies for the colony
and wins twenty bolts of sackcloth, boxes of salted beef,
prizes for his dis-ease. God wills people to move.
Unmarked barrels line the skiff and the Spanish drift
back toward the continent, their masts
receding into mist like healing bones.
The sea stiffens into a straight black tarp
from one island to another. Desperate women come,
cook, agree to a journey whose name sounds
like what they lost.

(iv)

Grandpa White prefers
to sleep outside at night, connecting the larger stars.
He becomes his own man again, lying on his
white, mole back and stabbing the night
sky with a pencil. Virginia will know these
creatures by name: Orion and his
diamond-collared dog, the Seven Sisters
cackling with light. Astern, two women are sick.
The sea turns its white fists into their bellies;
they begin to sleep.

(v)

August

lights a finger of land through miles.
Virginia smiles a hard crooked line
of green forest and white rock.

Grandpa White leads a prayer over sackcloth
cots for providence, as governors do.

*Virginia and her new language. Virginia
and the glass beads of natives. Virginia and
Ellinor, his daughter waving hello;
and they will wave hello, they will see
the ship painted, bearing their small, good names.*

(vi)

No smoke or signs of settlement. No
tree whispers a secret. The white pines jack
at a powder-blue sky with no Roanoke
to govern. A post hisses *croatoan*
but there are no crosses waving. Trees cross
and tangle like Ellinor's black hair.
The shore of Virginia smiles her rock-toothed grin
and is three years old. Grandpa White begins

(vii)

to disappear. His hair recedes in a dark
accent of bone. Ash marks the days he is
gone, then snow. White trees starve at intervals,
wave hello and goodbye. The women
speculate, are sick, give birth to his side
of the world. *Where has she gone, they ask,
daughter of John the Governor, the man
at whom fish rolled their terrible eyes?*

They talk of this country, how
it is beginning to eat its people.