

1500 A.D., ANOTHER ATLANTIC CROSSING

The dream-- or was it weariness and wine
Inventing scenes of gargoyle fantasy?
Convulsing heart, an ague in the brain.
Cathedral bells and stabs of fiery tongues,
Vignettes of naked natives, cursing Spaniards.
Canary Island trees kowtowing west
Like supplicating crones, trunks forming arches,
Hair flung down foretokening the ground--
That vision loomed so many times before,
Asleep, awake, a simmer in the soul.

Half-thoughts in swirling idiom, a stew
Of Latin, Portuguese, Castilian steeped
In seaman's argot. He wondered where he was--
Back in a yawing cradle, child again,
Or ill across a horse ignobly sprawled?
The Admiral, rising, bumped his head; the dusk
Revealed his place. His hands reflexed, he heard
The linking metal, felt its weight and wept.

The caravel was under way across
A bias-running tide. The bulkheads groaned
Disrhythmically; he languished on his bunk
To drain the tankard pressed between his palms,
His hard-won palm-lined shores lost from his grasp.

The captain of the ship released his bonds
Which he, Colón, the colonizer, true
To God and Sovereigns, loftily relocked.
Let Isabella witness this injustice;
Chains would be his scepter, calumny his crown!

By day, his silence broken only by
His iron expletives against the rails,
He watched the tropic birds dive whitely hungry,
Longed to hold a quadrant to the sun.

The caravel embraced the blue winds-- his.
His route, his reckoning, unknown before
He shaped the course. Now every idle sail
In Christendom would fill with jealous greed
Of westward-bearing amateurs who sought
The East, the scoffers and the scholars who
Believed but had no spine for unmapped risks.

(cont.)

The monarchs would restore his station soon.
 They must. His words would open, clear their eyes.
 He would return; his mission was Cathay
 And still Cathay: This salt of Genoa,
 This commoner who lived by wool and wits
 And charts to touch Cipangu's fringes, claim
 Them for Castile, was Destiny's own son
 Ordained by God. He would not founder now
 So close her gold reflected in each stream.
 Next voyage, her silk and spice, her lace-carved tusks
 And more would ride his holds low in the sea.

By night he made the stars his rosary,
 Lamenting long to heaven's porchlights, pride
 Still preened, comparing all his griefs to Job's,
 And did I govern badly? Providence
 Almighty was my guide. What choice had I
 But execution of insurgents who
 Defied the law? The gall of Bobadilla
 Seizing private papers! And my house!

The captain was uneasy in these waters;
 He sought and took his prisoner's advice:
 "Northeast to catch the stronger westerlies.
 This time of year Madeira is the landfall--"
 The only words Colón spoke on his journey
 Of degradation back to Spanish judgement.

The Admiral of the Ocean Sea could walk
 The quarterdeck between arrested sleep.
 He thought about how knowledge changed a man.
 While proving others wrong, teredo worms
 Of error/doubt could enervate his own
 Accepted stock. But one thing never changed:
 The Evil One beset all chosen men
 Proportionate to greatness. Take the jinns,
 Those cursed spawns of Islam loose on earth
 To foul supplies and water, cause a plague
 Or agitate the settlers' discontent.
 Or pour malevolence in ears at court...

Misfortune falls on triumph like a fever.
 Nor yet is either over, guiding angels...
 I rally at this wrongful bitter dose!