

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 foretoking 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.