

In 1500 A.D., a man named Bobadilla came to the new world colony of Española to replace Cristobal Colón, Governor, Admiral of the Ocean Sea, who was shipped back to Spain in irons.

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
But nothing holy. Nothing sure or whole.
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.
In a sullen 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 master 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.

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,
So near he breathed her lotus-perfumed twilights.
Next voyage, her gilded idols, 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.
Or softly humming sailors' lusty songs,
Rattling his shackles like a tambourine.

His thoughts ran constant as the sand in glass,
Pouring out the hours, turned, repeated.
And had he governed badly? Providence
Almighty was his guide. He had no choice
But execution of insurgents who
Defied his law. The gall of Bobadilla
Seizing private papers! And his 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 was the landfall--
The only words Colón spoke on his journey
Of humiliation back to Spanish judgement.

The Admiral of the Ocean Sea could walk
The quarterdeck between arrested sleep.
At leisure, he reviewed the zodiac,
Philosophy and legend. Knowledge changed
A man. A man could also alter knowledge.
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,
A rash or make a wind go slack and stinking.
Or agitate the settlers' discontent.
Or pour malevolence in ears at court....

Misfortune falls on triumph like a fever.
Nor yet is either over, Española...
Be cheered by this most terrible amount!