

FERNS

As treetops whisper
to sublime heights,
we spread ourselves
in lush basement.

Beneath us burrows
quivering warmth,
and our blades carry
feral scents.

Ancient, we know
that winter brings
a desolate peace,
sky's blue bruise.

But years won't pass
till our shiny youth
raises slingshots
on the moist earth.

KNOX

John Knox and fellow Reformers held out in St. Andrews Castle until it fell on the 7th August 1547. For nineteen months afterwards, Knox was condemned to slavery on a French galley, the Notre Dame. Of this episode Knox writes: "What torment I sustained in the galleys and what were the sobs in my heart is now no time to recite." This experience in the galleys is considered, however, to be crucial to the evolution of Knox's views on predestination and justification through faith alone.

*

I told you so,
when we expected
a brilliant dawn to burn the wicked,

I told you so,
when we laughed and drank
and fornicated
in the Castle walls,

when we bathed hands in blood
of holy murder
red as a Cardinal's robe,
I told you,

when friars rowped like ravens,
and we bore the ashes
of martyred bodies,

when plague's fruit ripened
and split in our joints,
when waves were gnawing
our vain defences,

when shot leapt hot from galleys below,

when we knew the night
of another defeat,

I told you so.

*

I have never been noble
enough. The better of birth
know freedom. And I

stand betrayed in a foreign port,
with chains to lash me
to a galley-deck. A lash

to prick from flesh a new rhythm,
wind to carry up the earth's dry dust,
kill and mortify the contemptuously despised.

*

For Notre Dame
we row,
side-by-side
in our chains.

Spindly arms
resist a wind,
prise up the swell
for an absent bridge.

Here we cook
a thin soup
of shit and puke,
of acrid sweat.

At night, beneath
a canvas sheet,

men carve from bodies
spasms of love.

The crew don't dare
descend among us,
as galaxies hide
from this putrid hull.

*

There would be

earth open and patient
for the sky's pure seed.

There would be

trees in blossom
caught in frost.

There would be.

*

An adder slithers
through blooming heather,

beneath the busy
honey-workers.

An adder stirs
by the narrow path,

as bare ankles follow
the spoors of hares.

*

We passed up the Loire's
castellated slit

to ports all fancy,
frenchified.

My forehead rested
on a cool portal,

while shouts and vomit
spattered the quays

and loins were oiled
in some warm halt.

*

This is a body
chafed by irons,
whose bones protest
through their livid envelope.

This is a body
in a mirrorless dark,
that would dearly love
to love the whip.

*

Notre Dame
sets out from France
with its cargo of damned

through weeks of plague
and furious fires,
extracting shrieks
from Protestant ranks,

and I keep the rhythm,
bend my bleeding back,
and seek from a brother
some justification.

If the sea is the world.
If evil is the wind.
If the boat is the Kirk.
If the helmsman the prophet.

So night joins the waves
in their freezing bed
and the owl speaks freely
in its blind kingdom.

*

There would be

a woman to hear me,
to press upon me
her flawed skin.

There would be

words like kisses,
dolour to dolour
to soothe my glondours.

*

I might obtest and exhort
in ire and rage,
swear oath and covenant
in moisture and rain.

I might wish a plague
on the black brood,

wish murder and rape
on scurrilous scurrility.

Still a crewman comes
to bring me bread,
butters it with spit
for my vain vanity.

*

One day Notre Dame
found St. Andrews Bay.
We rowed beneath
a parliament of gulls.

Waves reclaimed the strand.
Crows strutted on dunes.
The cathedral sulked
beside fuming hovels.

The kirk-bells rang
to my creaking oars,
and the punching swell
proclaimed a future.

*

We might walk
like sons of light.

We might glint
like stars at night.

We might be wheat
among the cockle,

We might be
prudent virgins

daily renewing
their lamps with oil.

*

Some days a crewman
descends from the bridge,
aureoled with tempest,
flood and fire.

Chains to a plank
my desert body,
and leaves on its 'wounds
his sentence of seed.

*

It was a sob that made me
stones lighter.

Frail and fragile
on the undertow.

My I dissolving
in the iodine.

It was a sob that made me
stones lighter.

*

Below this hull,
inedible shoals
trace their lives
in fathomless dark.

A mother whale
will suckle its calf

till the moon drags her
upon some beach.

Storm stuns the crew,
our small efforts,
and soaked you realise
you're still alive.

*

We will walk
like sons of light.

We will glint
like stars at night.

We will be wheat
among the cockle.

We will be
prudent virgins,

daily renewing
their lamps with oil.

*

Scotia's skirts
of snow and gloam.

Corbies sprouting
on sweating loam.

The minging poor
beneath granite walls.

I press in a puddle
my liberated sole.

*

When glory's in fever and diarrhoea,
when the body lies like a bundle of sticks,

you believe in mercy
piercing the haar,
conquering the bay,
the Castle and the pier,

and you give yourself
to virile hands

for no good reason.