

Humber Arm

Bored with earth's endless business convention in north-east
Quebec – the black-suited granites huddled, mulling
their policies,
Humber Arm in a sleeveless dress crosses the cloud-choked Gulf,
opens an eastern window and reaches out for the feel of
freshness on her skin,
rain or snow or sunlight, whatever's outside.

Her fine forearm hairs rise in the coolness.

Warm wafts of scent.

Pale in the darkness, she reaches toward you like a path through
dunes near the sound of surf,
like when the person you're talking to on the phone about the day's
finished chores, pauses and in a new voice, loosened, open,
asks, "What are you wearing now?"

Lark Harbour, Gillams, John's Beach, thin bracelets glinting.

The crook of her arm bending slightly backward making a blue-
veined mound.

Goes on opening windows, entering. Every morning is in your
bed. Always another bone in your body she wants to learn.

What rustles under her skin is another nature.
Watching her eat a soft-boiled egg you forget that even her
fingernails are ocean's daughters.

Leaving the street map of her palm, I kiss her wrist's twin tendons,
like a boat's fresh wake,
climb to the meadow of her upper arm, the musky hollow near
where her breast begins.

I have slept there in a shrubby dip in the hill above Little Port, my
face in the gleaming stems of old grass.

I map her imagined shape past her shoulder, past my own reach,
projecting the probable roots of her smells and rustling,
up the muscles' continued lines, the pivoted sweep of her movements
to the source of her reaching out,
to her neck and ears, her temples, her hair and eyes,
which I cannot see but can know and remember and cannot stop
trying to tell about.

Is that a cigarette between her fingers?

I have embraced each of those fingers like tall naked sisters with
substantial thighs.

A-la-man-a left and *Doe-see-doe*, how many years have we been
doing this?

Has me eating out of her palm. Snow, which tastes partly chalky,
partly like apples.

And something remote, ignored, grey, that I know by its taste
underlies most evolved life, something uninhabited. Long
before parrots and hibiscus.

I eat this knowledge and grow gaunt, face turned away north like a
shaggy laird in his cold stone turret.

How many goddesses there must be, like you, slowly swaying your
five terrible arms in the starlight with no one watching,
at least for long stretches of time.

When I was young I answered an advertisement for custodian of
the chapel housing the one remaining relic of Saint Cynthia
Humber,

her arm,
sheathed in hammered silver, resting on a faded green pillow in a
cloudy glass case.

Now my family has left this out-of-the-way shrine for various
cities,

but I stay on, too old to abandon the saint's remains, to which I
have devoted my life

and which only two or three people a year come to visit – secretive
scholars or addled Americans –

“Saint Cynthia Humber,” I say, “not a baseball pitcher. She was
martyred by the Granites of north-east Quebec, descendants
of those who broiled Saint Lawrence on a grill.”

One grizzled man knelt for a breathless hour close to the case, then,
leaving, changed his expression and said, “There's nothing
inside the silver, is there.”

And I winked and said, “Of course not.” Easing his jealousy. And
mine.

Why would I tell him she reaches down sweet as lobster flesh out of
the thorny morning sun and touches my lips to waken me
or that she loves to burrow inside my pajama leg like a young cat?

Always between sleeping and waking. Like almost heard singing.