

A Consenting Adult: White Lies

Jan Crawford

the only colorless one again
 this crowded as hell subway
 a thin sliver of humanity
 pulsing itself straight through
 this morning's agreeing earth

pretending I'm not corrupted
 by my own DNA's anxious superiority
 as even (they tell me) my purest of
 bloods twists and cracks within
 the lie of it I want to scream

love me they were the greedy bastards
 they seized and shipped and sold your bodies
 I am just a faded and fading old lady
 innocent of course of any crime
 the air between us thick and sharp

trying to act as if we do not know some of mine
 worked and beat or raped to death many of yours
 that Washington's friend Col. William Crawford
 having "taken two towns and doing great service"
 was burned at the stake by Delaware Chief Pike

his penis "black and shredded and still smoking"
 as a squaw poured embers into his half-open scalp
 both praying they say to their gods
 each assuming his obvious righteousness
 Pike's eyes wild with the thrill of vengeance

that my ancestor John Edwards bequeathed his son
 "a negro boy named Jeff, a brown mare, a bed"
 or that my occasional housekeeper Maria
 will never cross her own borders to meet
 my awkward gestures of friendship

shots in the steamy Texas night still ringing louder
 than anything I could ever say or do
 the dogs howls still closer
 than she will ever allow me near enough
 to know or even imagine with her

and dangling underground that other truth
 I do love my own and can now receive the gifts
 my bones my mind my breath itself
 their desperation and cruelty and grit mine
 and at one time their trouble with drink mine

blinding loyalties wisdom and kindness mine, their
 hearts also filled with hope for life to come and then
 the grief as well for those lost young or
 standing on other shores and I have learned
 it is not mine to damn or justify their acts

when I can barely face my own or what I am willing
 to return besides my shame turning away again
 drawn back into the inertia of faithful belonging
 to those who also denied any thoughts of gratitude
 and to those who would never consider reparations

besides what could I sacrifice, this is too difficult
 there must be another way, too hard to calculate
 too unpleasant to live without any one
 of my pretty things I'll think about it tomorrow:
 perhaps an honoring bow will be enough

the ride will soon be over anyway when suddenly
 overpowering history and broken promises the young woman
 offers me her seat with a complex smile and for a
 moment a relief from this tiring war spreads like
 fluid grace across all foolish myths of difference

the only distinction now the sweet difference of youth
 and age and of the slow drift north and west of my tribe
 drawn to the cooler angles of the African sun
 our skins however forever longing for the warm
 beauty of their original colors and ways

and tonight a Shoshone elder, generations at her back
 will sing prayers over our pale souls widening the circle
 beyond anything justified each chant dissolving
 the materiality of time, mine and yours, life and death
 you and I, the mystery and what we do think we know

each chant accelerating the universe's rate of expansion
 pushing life further and further into the inclusive truth
 and teaching agreement with my part of this and the
 courage to look into the other's but also my own
 sometimes raging sad and tender eyes knowing

tomorrow the screeching silver doors will propel us once
 again into the new morning's streets and the struggle
 to exclude nothing, to hold it all at once together
 to remember who is free and who is not
 to remember when I am free and when I am not