

Matelot

for Archie Markham

You can never remember, you say,
as our second glasses usher in
a most unaccountable dreamtime,
whether the word means “sailor” or “stool”.
Ah. You must think it possible, then,
that my great great grandfather,
whom I’ve only just brought into this our conversation,
was possessed of three wooden legs,
and bobbed his way along the main
without benefit of sail, all the way to Antigua.
Or am I misunderstanding you here?
Perhaps you conceive of a British naval vessel
officered by men but crewed by furniture,
a true Ship of Stools. I’d prefer to think so.
Seeing my ancestor
as but one among a whole ship’s complement
of forms, benches, balloon-backs, settles,
folding items for use on safari, modified tubs,
casks, slatted garden seats and early forms of deckchair
is clearly very much nicer for me to imagine.
It renders him less egregious, more a part of history.
For what is most important about my forebear
is not the number or nature of his legs
but the fact of his being one among thousands
of items designed or adapted for sitting upon
which were set afloat to combat an evil trade
on the ocean between the Slave Coast and the Brasils.

True, there were those among his older mates
who had fought those damn "chaises longues", the French,
and hankered after such days of glory still,
but to younger crew like him I sense that it seemed
(I choose to believe that it seemed)
rather more worthwhile, even rather more noble,
to lift out of dark wormy holds
and pile on deck in air as dawn was breaking
or the sun going down their undoubted brothers and sisters
than to bandy splinters with other wooden worlds.
That I've always wanted to visit the Caribbean
is what I was going to say before you started
this nonsense about stools and now you tell me
if I ever do so to be sure to stay
with your sisters in Dominica.
I would really like that, Archie,
I think I would really like that,
at least to judge by the way I already imagine
all of those presently seated around this table
set out instead upon a sudden veranda,
in warmest moonlight, overlooking the sea.

Braxy-Hams

“The hams of those sheep which die of the *braxy*”

—JOHN MCTAGGART,
Scottish Gallovidian Encyclopedia, 1824.

I am your moorland lover.
I bring you braxy-hams.
Slung across my saddle-bow.
To aid my lover's cause.

The sheep it died last autumn.
I found it on the hill.
I shook it thrice, to try its strength,
And it did not fall apart.

Although it died of the braxy, dear,
It's no bad food when ham'd.
The smell in a great measure leaves it, then.
I've had a slice myself.

It's no bad food when ham'd, my queen,
As your mother will not deny.
I've tried a slice or two myself
On my farm behind the hill.

On my farm behind the hill, my dear,
To which I'll carry you soon.
To which you'll go 'cross my saddle-bow,
On top of the braxy-hams.