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Six Poem Sequence from Coral Reveries: Darwinian Poetics

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Please Note: the six poems which follow meditate upon, or in some cases rework/recombine, random phrases appearing in the 2nd edition of Charles Darwin's *The Voyage of the Beagle*. The first edition of the work appeared in 1839. I hope I have done some justice to the natural lyricism evident in Darwin's relaxed prose style.

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A Power Denuded the Granite

All that glitters in the sun's rays
suggests a profound ocean
and a growing burden

*How many years
short of infinity
to polish these
burnished stones?*

I have come to the tides
and the rivulets
the countless inundations,
the waves on the black rocks
the cataracts, the great rivers
the stubborn work of millennia.

I am growing old and weary
on this boat,
this salt-stained boat
of Empire.

The Devil's Confervae

Can you see us from behind?
 early morning salt haze—the sun
rising. And the boat slowing
 enters an eerie stretch of
 ocean, velvet-red, and
glides between a god-infested heaven
 and a godless carpet of sea stuff.
This blood track—it must be
 two miles long—of
infernal waters.

The boat slows, we glide
 Can you see us from behind?
The morning is huge
 as we plough
 the pulp of our sorrow.
The whole surface of the water
 pulses—and the waves lapping.

Under the lens, I observe
 the contraction of tiny granular spheres
their number must be infinite.

I've heard they make
 the Red Sea
 (appear) red.

Their Massive God

Whether I killed their God,
 one and massive
book-tombed, with chiselled words
 on granite—his puny reign,
 mere millennia—
was not the issue.

Mine was the gambler's fear, for
 the mist-wrapped hull of the new
drifts only slowly into view
 contrasts with the rotting hulk of God
 (as slowly sinking).

How will they endure
 this unbearable in-between?

The Noble Love of Freedom

In the forest,
 with huge butterflies
 that float
 among horses and men
 such brilliant colours!
 —they flit
 from shade
 to sunshine—
 I find it dreamy
 to think of her
 and ignore the granite hills
 steep and bare.

They tell a story
 steep and bare
 of runaway slaves
 and the moon was dim
 (a few fireflies)
 and we came upon a desert
 followed by a wasteland
 of marshes and lagoons
 heard the sea's sullen roar
 off in the distance.

We tethered the horses
 but they refused to settle.

We tethered the horses
 on a sandy plain
 next morning, more salt lagoons
 and a few stunted trees.
 The nights grew hot, and
 a dim moon on white sand.

Became aware
 (the exact moment is not recorded)
 of a problem with the horses.

We bathed in lakes and lagoons
 traversed pastures ruined by ants' nests
 passed forests with lofty trees.

Every morning more horses
 bitten and infected
 until one evening
 I saw it in the gloom
 suctioned to a horse's back
 a large vampire bat.

I found it dream-like
 blatant in the gloom
 (How could I ignore the granite hills?)

But then I saw it
 suctioned to a horse's back

a large vampire bat.

The Work of Minute and Tender Animals

Not far off shore
 we test the bottom
 (the bottomless ocean)
 The line spins down and down.

Envisage:
 a steep edifice
 (theorise: underwater ramparts, sheer
 and dense).

In awe of these submerged mountains—
 accumulated stone of ages!

The island, the reef, the coral—the coral
 the living part of the greater death,
 a vast, eroded, sedimentary death.

*Once a volcano—spewed hot
 then froze into a geologic form
 then whipped by the wind
 and lashed by the water
 for countless millennia.
 Amazing to contemplate—
 the splendid work of ages.*

It looms from obscene depths
 and bleaches in the diving—
 the underwater kingdom of
 vegetable bones!
 But near the surface
 such colours, such vividness, such
 intricacies of fish and frond.

Coral! The epiphanies of coral
 their various shapes
 their complex textures
 —marvellous life on a bed of death!

Our ancestry as sediment—
 compacted into memory.
 Today, for the first time, I sense
 their concrete presence.
 This self, mere fruit of their tragedies—
 (the past beneath the waves).

To Inhabit the Fields of Time

The more I observe
 'Mother Nature', the less
God I see,
 the more in need of a God
(or gods)
 I become. Even as I
 refuse to believe their
broadcast baloney.

The idea gnaws.

I came upon a parasite
 in some distant jungle—
it gives me wild ideas, and though
 the doctors work their alchemy
I still feel 'inhabited'. Besides
 my son in a coffin.

So many blind millennia—
 and still they refuse to see.
But is my vision true—
 unencumbered by faith
 (my daughter, my daughter)?

The clear and terrible beauty
 of aeons of methodical suffering.
He never did intervene. If
 he exists, he's a patient sadist
 or useless, as the carnivores
of all ages, thrive and
 evolve.