

Sweet as moonlight

Louisa Adjoa Parker

His birth is a dark song he carries inside him
an almost-memory: a young woman's screams
as she lies in the black belly of a ship, surrounded
by cold bodies, her skin slicked with salt,
and the cold air holds the stench of human waste
and the air is filled with fear
and waves rock the ship like displeased Gods
and his mother, a songbird who longs to fly home
and the labour a storm raging inside her

and life: bright as a new coin
loud as an elephant's roar
vast as the sea they are crossing.

He is but a gift for the white sisters,
an almost-boy, plump-limbed and milky
a pet wrapped in a rich child's clothing
and his mind is bright as the stars
although the white sisters find him simple
and his hair is the fleece of a lamb
and his eyes are the colour of coffee
drunk by merchants from bone-china cups
and his skin marks him out as a slave

and books: sweet as moonlight
loud as the laughter from coffee shops
vast as new worlds just discovered.

His parents are ghost-birds who flew over the sea
flew back to the ancestors, but dwell in his heart
and his mother's face has long been forgotten
and his father's face was never once seen
and the white sisters mostly ignore him
and the duke sees the flame that burns in his soul
and indulges the boy's turn for reading,
and inked pages transport him to new worlds
and with death comes great opportunity
and he flees like a thief in the night

and freedom: sweet as sugar
loud as raindrops in a storm
vast as the dull London sky.

Money is a flame in his pocket
and good times are there to be purchased
and he is now a man of letters
and a gentleman fit to be painted
and his clothes are of the finest broadcloth
and his shirt buttons are a collar of steel
and his wig is dressed in bear grease
and hides the true nap of his hair
and his jacket is the red of dried blood
and money, like wells, can run dry

and chances: rare as pineapples
loud as drunks in a tavern
vast as the Thames at night.

His wife is a songbird from the West Indies
and his children are small gifts from God,
plump-limbed and born free and milk-sweet
and he cuts the most respectable figure
and the best part of his life is beginning
and his shop sells tea, snuff, and tobacco
and friends come for advice and to be near him
and words flow from his pen to the rhythm
of his love chopping sugar on the counter
and his belly grows plump as a planter's
and his fortune has been through God's blessing
and slavery is but a memory –
a bitter draught caught in his throat

and love: bright as morning light
sweet as the peal of the doorbell
deep as the seas he once crossed.