

Letter of the Master of Horse  
by Gary Geddes

I was signed  
on the King's authority  
as master of horse.  
Three days  
( I remember  
quite clearly )  
three days after we parted.  
I did not really believe it  
it seemed so much the unrolling  
of an incredible dream.

Bright plumes, scarlet tunics,  
glint of sunlight on armour.  
Fifty of the King's best horses,  
strong, high-spirited, rearing  
to the blast of trumpets,  
galloping  
down the long avenida  
to the waiting ships.  
And me, your gangling brother,  
permitted to ride with cavalry.

Laughter,  
children singing  
in the market, women  
dancing with flowers,  
the whole street covered  
with flowers.

In the plaza del sol  
a blind beggar kissed my eyes.  
I hadn't expected the softness  
of his fingers  
moving upon my face.

A bad beginning.  
The animals knew, hesitated  
at the ramps, backed off,  
finally had to be blindfolded  
and beaten aboard.

The sailors grumbled for days  
as if we had brought on board  
a cargo of women.

But the sea smiled.  
It smiled as we passed  
through the world's gate,  
smiled as we lost our escort  
of gulls. I have seen  
such smiles on faces of whores  
in Barcelona.

For months now  
an unwelcome guest  
in my own body.  
I squat by the fire  
in a silence broken only  
by the tireless grinding  
of insects.

I have taken  
to drawing your face  
in the brown earth  
at my feet.  
(The ears are  
never quite right.)

Perhaps Father Antonio would  
let me paint the angels  
for fiesta, You laugh?  
It is a sound unheard  
in this place, where  
one needs angels more  
than bread.

You are waving,  
waving.  
Your tears are a river  
that swells, rushes beside me.  
I lie for days in a sea drier  
than the desert of the Moors,  
but your tears are lost,  
sucked

into the parched throat of the sky.

I am watched daily.

The ship's carpenter is at work  
nearby, within the stockade,  
fashioning a harness for me,  
a wooden collar. He is a fool  
who takes no pride in his work,  
yet the chips lie about his feet,  
beautiful as yellow petals.

Days melt  
in a hot sun, flow  
together. An order is given  
to jettison the horses,  
it sweeps like a breeze  
over parched black faces.

I am not consulted, though  
Ortega comes to me later  
when it is over and says:

God knows, there are men  
I'd have worried less to lose.

The sailors are relieved,  
fall to it with abandon.  
The first horse is blindfolded,  
led to the gunwales, and struck  
so hard it leaps skyward  
in an arc, its great body  
silhouetted against the sun.

I remember thinking  
how graceless it looked,  
out of its element, legs  
braced and stiffened  
for the plunge.

They drink long  
draughts, muzzles submerged  
to the eyes, set out like spokes  
in all directions.  
The salt does its work.

The first scream, proud head  
thrown back, nostrils flared,  
flesh tight over teeth  
and gums.  
(yellow teeth,  
bloody gums.)  
The spasms, heaving bodies,  
turning, turning.  
I am the the centre  
of this churning circumference.  
The wretch beside me,  
fingers  
knotted to the gunwales.

They plunge toward  
the ship, hooves crashing  
on the planked hull.  
Soft muzzles, ripped  
and bleeding on splintered  
wood and barnacles.  
The ensigne's mare  
struggles half out of the water  
on the backs of two  
hapless animals.

When the affair ended  
the sea was littered with bodies,  
smooth bloated carcasses.  
Neither pike-poles nor ship's  
boats could keep them off.  
Sailors that never missed  
a meal wretched violently  
in a hot sun, Only  
the silent industry of sharks  
could give them rest.

What is the shape of freedom  
after all? Did I come here  
to be devoured by insects, or  
maddened by screams in the night?

Ortega, when we found him,  
pinned and swinging in his bones,  
jawbone pinned and singing

in the wind, God's lieutenant,  
more eloquent in death.

Sooner or later all hope  
evaporates, joy itself  
is seasonal. The others?  
They are Spaniards, no more  
no less, and burn with a lust  
that sends them tilting  
at the sun itself.

Ortega, listen to the horses,  
where are the sun's horses  
to pull his chariot from the sea,  
end this conspiracy of dark?

The nights are long, the cold  
a maggot boarding in my flesh.

I hear them moving,  
barely perceptible at first,  
faint as the roar of insects,  
gathering  
gathering to thunder  
across the hidden valleys  
of the sea, crash of hooves  
upon my door, hot quick  
breath upon my face.

My eyes, he kissed my eyes,  
the softness of his fingers  
moving.....

Forgive me, I did not  
mean this to be my final offering.  
Sometimes the need  
to forgive, be forgiven,  
makes the heart a pilgrim.  
I am no traveller.  
My Christopher was faceless  
with rubbing on the voyage out,  
the voyage into exile.  
Islanded in our separate  
selves, words are

too frail a bridge.

I see you in the morning  
running to meet me down  
the mountainside, your face  
transfigures with happiness.  
Wait for me, my sister,  
where wind rubs bare  
the cliff-face, where we rode  
to watch the passing ships  
at daybreak, and saw them  
burn golden, from masthead  
down to waterline.

I will come soon.