Nicolette Bethel

THE SCOTSMAN GIVES LILY HER NAME (1904)

He lay without regret beside
a girl whose child was calmed to sleep
by breasts of well-rubbed teak, and wet with milk.
When Annie filled her daughter’s mouth
on liquid nights, he suckled too,
and chased the shades of boats across the sea.
*His* child surprised him, springing wild
and undesired in her. Alive despite his fear,
she swam insistent for the light.

Malcolm smiled; she looked like him,
skin pale as teeth, hair still as water
hauled cool from limestone wells.
Her lips were pink against the breast
his lips had pulled; her hands
curled bright against the dark.
He dreamed of sails trimmed tight,
and fed his face to slapping air.

He named her Lily, for her whiteness,
but her eyes held secrets, dark as lakes
that swallowed sons beneath their waves.
He gathered winds about him. He wrapped
her fingers round a ring, and left.
Annie held her girls and wept.