

How Myths Are Born

I gather my thoughts behind plate glass,
watching curls of mythic proportions cresting
a quarter mile off the headlands, reminding
me of Venus, born of sea foam

from drops of blood when Cronus castrated
his father. Not a Botticelli, borne by Zephyrus'
wind on a sea shell across a tranquil bay,
to step ashore in all her naked glory.

That's the way it is with history, the message
changing with the messenger. Better to have
lived the myth than pass it around campfires for
a thousand years, all the emotion drained away;

the Victory, sailing into battle, decks sanded
so bare feet would not slip in the blood, black
muzzles pointing through the ports, gunners
stripped to the waist, heads wrapped to keep
sweat from their eyes.

This is the same sea where Agamemnon sacrificed
his daughter to bring favorable winds for the Greek
ships sailing to Troy, where King Canute ordered

the tide to stop, Venus coyly exposed her arms,
and dorymen cut loose in the fog, wonder how long
it takes to drown.

Part of me wants to be out there teetering
on the deck of a frigate in stinging hail, fog
and gleaming threat of ice, the "mad seas

and most intolerable winds" of the Horn,
risking sudden death in frigid waters
too violent for rescue, breakers speaking

the language of myths, stories etched on
my brain to read with squinty eyes every time
the sea turns cold.

And in the end, no priest or mourning relatives,
no soft pillow or listening to the clock wind down,
Just the wind eating the canvas, sailors sinking

in a sunless void, everything becoming clearer
as they reach the depths, water music seeping
in their ears.

Jack Rickard