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Etiquette

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Four Poems · *Robin Behn*

ETIQUETTE

The man and the woman enter
the bar in that order: male, fe-male, the root
word and its bud. From the way he strains to hold the heavy wood
door for her—his chapped, heroic
arm jutting out from the impossible
fulcrum of his groin where his body will not bend,

(not like the Victorian lady outside who bends
forever, always about to enter
the man-made harbor and leave her impossible
tail still carved into the prow of the boat like a root
marooned and drying in the hot salt air that the hero
rehydrates with kisses in the novel the Victorian lady would

have written in golds on the water's surface, that would
have made the tourists bend
over the guardrails to read, our hero
among them, would have made the whole shipload finally enter
the sea to decode the text—the roots
of shifting, womanly surfaces, the possible

layers of meaning in water, and the impossible
cold where the lady's words settle on the bottom among wooden
relics of this and that—if she only had a pen, if she knew the route
to fame—); and from the way the woman, the human woman, bends
beneath the man's arm, her spine like green wood as she enters
the bar, its black wave of noise, divining what she can't quite hear:
oh's

and *ah's* from those of us who glimpse her oh-
so-recently tossed hair and think of the possible
poses in which he tossed it, no doubt entering
his name upon the deepest ledger of her body where it would
count, or so we think she must have told him as she bent
above him saying *now yes now* and he digs like a mole for the
root

he thinks he left in her, and makes their small boat rock, nearly
uproot
the anchor. On the prow the lady remains a tightlipped hero.
The boat tosses with their motions and the lady bends
like the stirrer in the drink the man just bought the woman. It's
possible
they'll go on like this. Probably the wooden
lady will stay mute. Tomorrow they'll sail on, anchor, do what's
called *love* and then enter

—enter what?—a harbor bar? the “world”? with the same heroic
motions. At each watering-place along their watery route, she'll bend
and make her entrance through his proscenium wood arm. *See, their
bodies say, how love's nightliness is possible?*

LETTER VIA STARS

How hard it must have been for you—no roof, no body overhead—
how hard to learn to count by counting stars.

And how hard it will be when you outlive them all,
since they were born, and so have life-spans, star-

spans. So do the whirls born in different hemispheres—
one like sand, one like black earth—

who would have been your parents. I
am writing for us both, you know that.