

The Old Seaman

Sitting in the old seaman's living room,
sharing a beer between us,
stains from years of angry fits crawling up the wall above his head.

"Liss'n, liss'n," he grabs my knee,
"Who ain' a bum? who ain'?
tell me that?"

These little mysteries
fragments of a life
ready to be found
like discarded shards
of a broken vase
found in a "midden"
that is to say, a garbage dump
that's where you really understand
old actors waiting for a new theater

"I had a wife. Did I tell you?
Japanese, Osaka she was from
so I ain' a bum, ain' a bum!
It was '36 when we married.
Two children we had,
Langston and Carver
they had other names
they never saw the U.S.
I couldn bring em home
Immigration laws."

He takes down a plate from his wall,
a picture of a Japanese girl
hand-tinted, pink flesh tones

bobbed hairdo
looking seductively out from the plate
enamel yellowing
he says this is her.
He takes out a tie clasp from his chest
the woman and two boys stare sadly out.

These faces are not in his photo albums
happy pictures there of American sailors
with panda bear
dancing on the deck,
first one back to the States.
Palling around with laughing whores
posing for madcap pictures
what a glorious time
the way he tells it
organizing unions
beating up scabs
womanizing, a free
soul flipping the finger at bourgeois civility,

“I did try to bring em over
I was gonna buy a house near
the bay
she and me be living
in the senior homes
now, warm and wrapped around each other.”

He stops and swallows:

“We had two boys
Yasushire and Shinkeji
she called them
Langston and Carver

were their American names.”

The plate and the tie clasp
stare at me from my hands
gravestones in a private cemetery

Didn't he have any photos?
from the zoo?
from going out dancing?
the boys eating their first ice cream cones?
where are they?
the little memories
every parent preserves?

“Tore em up
burned em every last one
They three died in Osaka in '44
in the firebombing
I tried to bring em over
I really tried,
but every year
the man said no.
Then the war.
They say we be free,
but who ain't a slave?
tell me that?
who ain'?”