

Gosnold's Footing (after 400 years)

by Eric H. Edwards

I slip down
from the rock;
its plaque
attached for the ages,
where I am
only a ghost
(so the implication goes),
and plaques with names
regard the ghostly
flesh-encumbered soul
that passes by
with nameless indifference.

Somebody else's decision
put this here
and put me here
and finding Gosnold
was never easy.
Where he came from,
Cape Cod
was a dangerous trip
not for tourists,
easily fatal
if he wasn't terribly careful.
And he was both,
terrible and careful;
blind to the world
as it presented itself,
sensitive to what
might be taken from it.

What did they take
that they did not bring?
(the English)
later it would be disaster for all,
opulence for all.
Was Gosnold also careful
what he wished for?
His settlers felt
unsettled at the end,
returned to England
with the rest,
his fellow officers
busy alternately measuring
and staring spellbound
at this hook of land
caught in their senses.

It was so much,
none of them could see
the people for the trees,
the fish, the currents.
Like a dream of Eden
overstocked with possibilities,
they had to leave
in order to find it
again and again.

But what they took,
 what fascinated most,
 was sassafras;
 that pungency of root
 and mucilaginous
 mittened leaf,
 that small twisted tree
 of salt-breeze undergrowth.
 Plant at the edge of things,
 the beginning of things,
 fresh perceptions
 the Door of Heaven
 the Door of Release
 from all of England's
 inbred history.

I slide into the grass
 and stop
 exactly in the spot
 where Gosnold rested
 on his right hip,
 considering
 Wampanoag, weather,
 tide, the islands
 stretching west...
 and out of everything,
 constant and amazing,
 the constant, rich
 smell of the thought,
 "I must take back
 some sassafras."

Eric H. Edwards is a Woods Hole poet.



Drawing by Julia S. Child