Gosnold’s Footing (after 400 years)

by Eric H. Edwards

I slip down
from the rock;
is 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.

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
captured 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.

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
captured 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