

AN UNKNOWN SHORE:
VARIATIONS ON A FRAGMENT BY OPPEN

Cortez arrives.

 he is absolutely lost
at an unknown shore.
 and he is enraptured

(this is the nature of poetry

The poem:

Cortez arrives at an unknown shore
he is absolutely lost
and he is enraptured

Cortez arrives at an unknown shore
he is utterly lost
but he is enraptured

Cortez arrives too late.
the shore is absolutely barren, the men lost
to starvation and rapture

Cortez utters:

“lost.”

(this is the nature of description

Cortez walks upon the beach.
the ocean is as still as a map
spread out on a table.

(he takes a nap.

All the Cortezs arrive.
all the waves arrive

(this is the nature of disaster

THE PAPERMAKERS

Art older than Christ, its rags more colorful,
its watermark two hands open to receive a gift:

a piece of silver, a blank check, the universal sign
for alms. During the weeping, the hand-wringing,

wet pages began falling, leafing through saturated air
curling around survivors' arms as they wilted

under the white heat of the sky dome.

In the exposed roots of the oaks, in the rigging of boats

sunk in their berths, upon the archipelago
of rooftops, an endless supply of fresh sheets

tiling the muddy water, delicate flagstones
offering the solace of the idea of disaster

as a clean page, a baptismal current of paper,
God's great pulpy torrent ripping,

running bodies through a sieve of cyclone fence.

Art older than Christ, finding something

to write with and on at the insistence of the dead.