

## The Stays

*When this you see  
pray think on me  
tho many miles we distant be  
tho we are a great way part  
I wish you well with all my heart*

- carved stay busk, 1783. Possibly a gift from a sailor to his love

My heart's a bird,  
my bulk a bride.  
You left me with the turning tide.  
You gave me this before you went:  
a length of bone, a sentiment.

A stiffener,  
a quickener,  
a keepsake and a stickler.  
A catechism scarred with verse  
to slip inside my inmost dress.

I'm sorry I'm  
just wasting time –  
these letters full of slow decline.  
I wish to live the present tense,  
remind you what I'm up against –

but haven't strength  
to catch my breath.  
The gift you gave is hard as death.  
I picture you, the venturer.  
My breath becomes the shallower.

This stick of bone  
has driven home.  
You sail the seas; I sit and comb.  
I curse the necessary stays.  
This hasn't felt like love for days.