

Maria from Penryn

Maria née Edwards, a 'blackwoman' was recorded in the 1851 census as a 'born Africa British subject' and resident of Penryn. She was baptised at St Gluvias at nine years old on 10 July 1769 and married three times, first to a Black mariner called John Hooper on 24 November 1778, then to John Joseph Blackall on 4 September 1787 and finally to 'William Weymouth of this parish Bachelor a Negro' on 28 June 1802. She gave birth to eight children.¹

Reflecting on the potentialities of critical fabulation, and employing regional historical analysis, this poem hopes to shine a light on a moment in time during Maria's late adolescence shortly before her first marriage. The light of historical enquiry and creative imagining casts her shadow onto the walls of Penryn's St Gluvias church, allowing us to catch a glimpse of her form as she moved through the intimate, quotidian moments of life in Cornwall by the sea; the body of water that made her Maria.

10 July 1778

Surrounded by the meadowgrass,
the pine trees,
lime trees,
and all the others that I can not name,
I feel the heat of the stones of St Gluvias
radiate through the wool at my back
and remember the same sun's brightness
shining behind all those faces
who knew me before.

Now I am Maria,
not so different from Mariam -
and still bound to be a mother.
The 'm' just becomes silent,
breath stuck in my throat
as I choke on the salty air
that winds its way up the hill

¹ 'Baptism of Maria Edwards,' 10 July 1769, *Register of baptisms, marriages and burials, St Gluvias Parish Church 1747-1809*, <https://kresenkernow.org/SOAP/detail/d2f49a09-e8ef-44a8-9c0e-631251a0ed86/?tH=%5B%22Black%22%2C%22history%22%5D> accessed 10 May 2022 and 'Marriage of William Weymouth and Maria Blackall,' 28 June 1802, *Register of marriages and banns of marriage, St Gluvias Parish Church 1789-1812* (2021), <https://kresenkernow.org/SOAP/detail/34c2094d-98c6-4f4b-b2c4-826290d00275/?tH=%5B%22blackall%22%5D> accessed 10 May 2022.

to my viewpoint,
where I can taste the isthmus
between us and them;
two continents made distant by man and God.

This water made me Maria,
baptised me into a new world
where coldness and wet rot
make even more precious
the warm smiles of the Friends;
the Fox's and Tregelles
who march their song of righteousness through town
to where dear Elizabeth keeps her shop,
magical instruments balanced on shelves
that sing in a voice more distant than my own.

And sweeter still,
is John's laughter echoing for hours
in the silent expanse of the smuggler's tunnel
hidden beneath my feet,
using words that smack of home
and sting my skin red -
blushing.

These moments have become me;
sparks of light
flickering against the memory of my selfhood
and casting a dancing shadow
that defies the sneering face
of the Big House by the water,
its mulberry orchards and formal gardens
planted as sweet distraction
from the sourness that built it;
a story that stings like the nettles I forage
away from the enclosures -
up, up, up
beyond Love Lane,
back turned to hatred.

However far I need to go to find

the bilberries,
the blackberries,
that remind me of the beauty
found in darkness.

The Lord is the Maker of them All (Proverbs, 22:2).

I lean my head against the wall of St Gluvias,
the stones a harsh pillow,
and as I look out at the Penryn River
that ceaselessly forges its way to the sea,
I count its daylight stars,
blurry with my own confusion,
and pray
that it is in Jannah
- in Heaven -
that I find myself whole
and finally at rest
in my own monument of peace.