

Five Poems · *Joyce Carol Oates*

WINSLOW HOMER'S "THE GULF STREAM," 1902

If there is a God of the Gulf it is a God
of water, not waves but water,
all the globe turned water pocked ris-
ing and falling tireless, for-
ever. Here is your story.

The Bahamas, the aftermath of a storm.
On the deck of a small heaving fish-
ing sloop lies a Negro, superbly muscled,
doomed, bucking the waves
of the Gulf Stream which are china-

blue, notched like the fins, tails,
and teeth of white sharks
following in his wake. The sloop's mast
has broken off. The waves
are tinged with blood.

The sharks appear to be cavorting
like porpoises but we know
that if there is a God of the Gulf
it is a God of crazed beauty
and appetite, a gut with teeth,

a painted form you might say like
any other. Art's great terrible
truth composed in brush strokes out of
so many small lies.
To the right of the canvas, in the back-

ground, there is a funnel of water rising
dreamily out of the sea to no purpose.
And though on the horizon a ship has appeared—
ghostly, four-masted, story-
book—it cannot save the doomed man,

it is irrelevant to his story. With what
composure he stares off the canvas,
indifferent to his fate! As if, long
ago, he'd memorized all the forms
of the Gulf, now it is time to forget.

MUTABILITY

The candle flames gutter
but don't go out, we're
saved again. How we love
one another at such times!—
this evening, yesterday.
Tomorrow morning when we cross out
today's date on all our calendars.

SHRIVEN

After you've been hurt, pierced
to the bone, what
innocence!—you could live forever.

SILENCE

How we fear it, like this—
no warning and now
murmurs of interior life,
our own, ease forward—