

THE FAIREST OF THE FAIR

When she is ready — and she selects
her moment — she appears to admirers
in an astonishing silk gown garnished

with pearls that call attention
to the alabaster complexion
it's taken her hours to achieve.

No idler by the looking glass, she labors
some days from dawn to sundown,
believing beauty's not an easy ruse.

Most mornings, it's her custom
to bathe her face with mercury
and wipe off a rind of worn skin.

Proceeding like a practiced
horticulturalist, she prunes
the thinning stubble on her brow

back an inch to create the correct edge
for the high forehead that's in fashion.
She plucks eyebrows to a narrow curve,

each appearing like a gently-bending
path above an eye that will sparkle
after she adds a drop of belladonna.

To make certain the face she shows
is as pale and shimmery as the moon,
she used to take a teaspoon of arsenic

flavored with cinnamon and lavender.
She's tried applying ceruse, a popular
mixture of white lead and vinegar

or boiled egg whites and rice powder
but prefers a paste of alum and tin ash
spread on the neck, face and bosom.

To lips, she adds a pomade of madder
crushed into veal grease and beef marrow,
or layers of vermilion, a mercuric sulfide.

Lastly, to enhance the size of her eyes,
she traces the contours with coal tar,
though powdered antimony does the same.

And all of this devotion to discipline,
merely to appear the fairest of the fair,
a sublime beauty in a bland world.