

The Eider Duck

The eider is an ugly duck.
She dives, and with a little luck
will catch some snails or have a stab
at mollusc, fish or scuttling crab.
As everybody surely knows,
she has broad webs between her toes
and something of a Roman nose;
is brown and drab and comatose.
In autumn gales and winter snows,
whether the gusty west wind blows
or sunshine on the sand-dunes glows,
when neap tide ebbs and spring tide flows,
the eider ducks just sit in rows
far out upon the sea and doze.

How different are the eider drakes!
What show of gallantry they make
with glossy black and gleaming white,
their head plumes green in April light
as each in spring a-courting goes
and croons and whistles all he knows,
and tilts his head and upwards throws
his beak, an act which clearly shows
his nuptial charms. His plumage glows
and if another drake comes close,
he can become quite bellicose
and fight him off with vicious blows.

And so the duck that each drake chose
and mated with, soon landward goes
and tucks between her scaly legs
a clutch of green and glossy eggs.
Now many others, wild and tame,
come springtime, do the very same;
but she's the only bird in town
that beds them in an eiderdown.
Now that's a feat that only her feet
can thus achieve. She has a surfeit,
upon her downy breast, of feathers
that keep the cold out in all weathers,
which she sees fit to sacrifice
to warm her brood. It is a price
that you or I would never pay,
to pluck our plumage in that way.

Some humans, meaner than the rest,
see fit to rob the eider's nest,
and steal the down she has caressed

from the very pattern of her breast,
that warmest, softest winter vest.
Perhaps they do it for the best,
and see it as an honest quest;
but I call him a rotten pup
who picks the down (that she's pulled) up.
Or should I say, it makes me frown
that he picks up what she's pulled: down.