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Dwight Maxwell

A FISHERMAN'S TALE

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Chorus

Pious gulls feeding at the boatswain's hands
while he sings falsetto notes:
lend me your feathery lobes --bring idle wings to bare
on the prow of our land—jurors of the sea, witnesses to the trial
of a wounded spirit...for it is you alone who can judge
aright and distinguish justice from human cruelty.
I am the son of Dudley, the silent mariner of Boscobel.
And on this day the anniversary of my father's death
I am drawn to this part of Salem, near the white-capped waves
To rekindle crimes ostracized from land into sea.
And in this hour, the Merchants of Venice do cower
for their time is short; their immoral exploits stitched
into the fabric of the hegemony has taken flesh to dwell among men.

Demon or man? I hear a howl as if from a lion's lair.
And now upon the scene,
sharp as a wounded knee a shipwrecked god--
the ecclesiastical pariah, the ghost misfortune leads by a collar,
bound to the lonesome murmuring of the sea, hobbles upon the sand.
Beware O' Kinsmen! A terrible horror he becomes --
Slow and deliberate like a forlorn gull at Rio Buenos.

Once my father's spirit strove with saffron foam.
His stubborn breed once spread from coast to coast--
Head of our village he spoke the foreigners dialect.
He had sun burnt cheeks that were serious in the wind.
Over his shoulder the old fishnet he carried.
Leather sandals bound his toes, and the khaki trousers tightly girt his
hips.
Silence O air, silence O cantankerous sea! The spirit is upon me—
The ghost shall sing a threnody to notify us of past ills.
He has come to judge the wicked exploiters of a poor fishing village—

to unpin time unending thread, the nonchalance of the dead shall end
and past years and hours to us shall be afforded,
revealed like approaching dawn before us.
Thus, let Justice un-blind-folded step assuredly on the plateau of
righteousness.

Let her exonerate the name of an African fisherman
displaced by foreign merchants who speak with seven tongues.
Tell your story my father; let the whole world grieve with you:

Fisherman (painstakingly turning from the sea, wading from the water as if just returning from a recent expedition)

Old man no more dead,
unearthed poor Dudley from his eternal rest
to revel the mysteries of the dead
to release the heart and mind from bottom of the lung.
Morose, the sickled moon in my lonesome breast—
I've seen things my son better left unseen and said,
old years are gathering in me like tulip bulbs.
Still I toil and these shoulders have not rest
for I must haul these fishnets even in death
until released by Jah the ever faithful one,
whose anger I placated with verses you taught me.

Many morns over the sea-sprayed-cliffs
I carried you on my shoulders to the harbor, my beloved son
to greet the be speckled eye in the eastern sky--
to teach you our lineage as only the sun can tell.
Remember those times? The sea sported her barnacled robes
and the seaside town awoke from its ashes like a united school of thought.
With my old Scottish kilt Thermos filled with Blue Mountain coffee
sweetened with condense milk and brown sugar, victuals
and blankets for the overnight sails every man a kiss would bless
upon his lady's alabaster forehead and off to sea for weeks on end.

Remember bobbing gulls, and narrow fishing skiffs
and countless fishermen singing and stringing bits for bates with
flippancy—
I charged those days unending, paradise achieved on earth
free from exploitation and invaders... tastes of fried crispy snappers
I can remember with tender festivals for starch and strength
under the stones of Lovers Leap I readied my companion to trek the sea.

Ah, the sea that unravels all sailors' knots.
Alpha and Omega she who spawned life
and takes men souls to shallow graves.
Remember the fisherman, attend, and resurrect a faithful servant
who rode upon the crest of distant waters.
I left wife and child furlongs behind.
I abandoned the pit of my boat with fishhooks and snares.
Here I alone stand, the lighthouse my sole companion.
Cheated out of life because of my potential earning.
Alas, my self-pity is without warrant, my tears undone.
I cannot rightly blame any man for the burning flames about me.
I alone braced the bulk of the heavy chains

when our shores were divided among the foreign merchants.
At first we schooled together, fishermen of every creed, and sort,
but most took the money and the penance that came with it.
They left the shores of patrimony, left the shores without piety.
But I sore to drink the wine dark sea
than abandon the shores my fathers left to me.

I could not fish the sea; I could not fold my net upon the sand
neither could I clean the snares or bait the hooks.
The beach to sterility went they combed it day and night
removed all its vestments, cast them into the wind and built a fence of
lead.

There were no room for fishing; trees assembled
brave as warriors ready to do battle with tractors
but soon they too were uprooted and in their place
stood Hedonism II, Sanders Resort and Nudist colonies--
idols permeated the sand, our food harvested to feed Bacchus ritual.

One night an expedition I sought to undertake was foiled.
My ancestral boat, Nanny of the Sea, was by strangers taken
and ravished like a maiden in the company of perverted solders.
Nowhere in sight was she, "Nanny" I begged the night,
reveal yourself to your master's eyes; if you have a care
for one who holds you dear beyond life or companionship tell of where
you be.

Yet a voice did speak to me in my heart and drove me to see beneath the
waves.

I beheld the vessel upon its side sunken with a large hole gaping in its
side.

My anger that night was personified, I was even too angry to speak.
I cursed the moon, and for the first time blasphemed against the sea.
I was going to kill and do evil things to the enemy that raped my Nanny.
Soon I learned the merchants' hired hands were to blame.

I took my cutlass and off to their pavilion I marched
demanding justice or the price of their heads.

To the owners of Hedonism II, the corporate robber barons
in their doubled breasted suits in the heat of our yellow sun
did I carry the righteous speech in my heart and mind.

They rejected my claims and offered me conversion by money.

It came to blows—I severed an arm and ten toes.

They beat me out of town naked as Adam.

I ran for cover in the bush of Salem.

In the dire streets your parent roamed, disheveled
and induced with sorrow and dread. Unrecognized by shipmates
and land bound folks—to see the disgust upon their faces
making dyer boldfaced accusations.

I meant to flee and never again return to the scene.

At first I took the homebound path, and the sight of your mother weeping

with the ambushed police force waiting with bribery
on their lollygagging tongues caused me to abandon the plan.

I fished upon my father's knees
I knew nothing better than the relentless sea. I had no salt--
Alas the open sea was all.

It was here, after many sorrowful hours that I made the call,
on this megalithic rock with the eye of ages past.
Oh, regret, my new found friend, you caught me with your snare,
your saliva is regret the heirloom of the dead.
Where are their contracts and legal bantering now? –
now that death has so dutifully claimed my flesh.
What law is there that can rival the Lord's commandments:
the hurricane still threatens our waters, typhoon splits the ship---
All that's left is Jah's steadfast judgment: Oh Lord Almighty!
Your edicts never change.
The word of a man to thee is no more than dust and sand.

Chorus: (pleading insistently with the ghost)

Be still O my soul, the spirit has turn to walk away
like the sun on the table of the sea.
Nearer, nearer still—I mean to know my father's fate.
From childhood hence our name the town disgraced
with neither shame or regret they serve the merchants
selling their children to grand hotels.
Reconcile your loses, father: Where is Justice?
Her redeeming light upon the situation personifies commandments
for wayward mankind so bent on asserting themselves to new sins.
Remember the merchant, who drove you to suicide, his clean-shaven face
whose invasion filled the beaches with hollow bricks
displaced the world we once knew.
He is the villain, not you my father, not you, O' saint of Fishermen.
Return to your cave, all maladies will ease with dreams.
Your sleep shall fleeting be for to suffer is to gain.
Splendid shall your pain transform from bitter gall to pure sugar upon the
tongue.

Fisherman

Too late, too late—my son for to and fro my journeys I learned the truth--
Who can tell a man, "depart and fish here no longer for the sea was
bought
by a merchant from Venice?" Why do I need permission
to do the work of Jah Almighty and likewise feed my young?
They drove me to an early grave. I allowed my emotions to take sway
and toss my soul upon the sea of my despair.
I took the road to Sheol, and the sin has doomed me--
As living lighthouse my eyes reflects the sea,
I watch day and night with no reprieve.

Fair well, Attila, learn from your father's tragic end.
Make a name for yourself through your deeds of righteousness.
Fair well oh gentle breeze, gentle streams, and somber meadows.
Fair well oh hills, valleys where the women of sea men dwell.
I go to the underground hall of shade where the eternal night awaits.

Chorus

The spirit evaporates into the cursive waves.
The sea speaks of revenge and hate,
lances are drawn by the dark moon and will clash at sunrise
like a din of warriors' voices unleashed upon the battle field
when the battalion of Lions awake from their slumbering.
For years I mourn the absent King.
His diadem confined to the murky waters.
I awake and already a thousand songs,
A thousand task lies before me.
I awake and it is as if I've always been asleep.
I asked for truth and truth was myself
Lost in innocent service to the scornful
retches who murdered my father.
I, a meek and poor poet in a world of deceitful violent men
That schemed and plotted against the seed of Jah.
I the broken instrument from birth,
Will mend myself, for now all that I have is my temple
though defiled by the unrestrained and harsh.
Myself protected from the mighty winds of greed and fascism.
But this the infant shall no more sleep--
Oh, my father, Ghost perpetual— your death is my freedom.
For with your demise comes my enlightenment.
Air, I go, one two three never more to be by the lonely sea.