

Dwight Maxwell

A FISHERMAN'S TALE

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Chorus

Pious birds who, fed by the boatswain's hands
while he sang falsetto notes,
lend me your feathery lobes, bring idle wings to bear
on the prows of these lands.
Beast or man? a howl exceeds stealthy caves.
And now upon the scene, sharp as a wounded knee
a shipwrecked hobbling god, the ecclesiastic priah,
this incubus I love, who will not leave the sea amour lonesome.
O' beware! I see him gain favor upon a wet wasteland--
native like any gull at Rio Buenos
where the fat women go to sing
on this weird Caribbean isle, orphans of the Antilles—
our island comprise of pirate skulls—
here my father's spirit debates with saffron foam.
His meticulous breed spreads from coast to coast--
high forehead man whom mother-woman bless with rose water
and bare rum and coconut oil.
On his shoulder a fishnet, and his face is sun burnt still.
Leather sandals bound his toes, the trousers girt his hips.
Silence pelicans, silence! let him speak-- drowned throats
offer much sorrow and birds cannot content with sorrow--
but be still a moment and let him reveal
the human error that doomed him in this manner.

Tell your story my parent; 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 men are no more dead,
unearthed a poor Ned from his rest
let the tongue out from my lungs.
Pity the sickled moon in my lonesome breast—
I've seen things boy,
old years gathering in me like tulip bulbs.
Boy these shoulders have not rest

for I must haul these sea nets even in death
until released by this said sea
whose mourning I placate with verses you taught me.

Many morns over the sea-sprayed-cliffs
I carried you in friendship to greet the be speckled eye
to teach you lineage as only the sun knows.
The sea sported her barnacled robes
and the gay town wakes from its ashes.
The old Scottish kilt Thermos filled with Blue Mountain coffee
sweetened with condense milk and brown sugar.

Some bobbing birds together dallied on its rolling flank,
and countless fishermen bellowed from her jaws—
methinks the day unending, tastes of fried crisp snapper
sweet festivals under the stones of Lovers Leap.
Tall-man's potion would fill our lungs until the day is done.

Ahh, sea who unravels sailors' knots
I recall you, attend, and resurrect the man I was
who rode the crest of yon shoulder sprays.
I left wife and child furlongs behind.
I abandoned the pit of my boat with fishhooks and snares.
Here I alone stood the lighthouse my sole companion.
Alas, my self-pity is without warrant, my tears undone.
I alone braced the bulk of the heavy chains
when our shore was divided among the foreigners.
At first we schooled together, fishermen of every creed,
but most took the deed and the penance that came with it.
They fled the beach, left the shores in desolate mourning.
I would drink the winy sea than leave the shores my fathers thrived.

I could not fish the sea, I could not roll my net upon the sand
neither could I clean the snares or bait the hooks.
The beach had become sterile they combed it day and night
removed all its vestments, cast them into the wind.
There was not room for men here, trees assembled brave as warriors.
But soon they hauled them down and in their place constructed strange totems
idols permeated the sand, coconuts harvested to feed burdensome throng.

One night I meant to haul my skiff out to sea, I came to see lay mauled
my instruments broken no more use to me.
I raged on, on below the indifferent moon, brought my quarrel
to the owners of the mansions, the redneck fellow
who wears doubled breasted suits under our yellow sun.
Oh, it came to blows, they beat me out of town naked. I ran for cover.

In the dire streets your parent roamed, disheveled
and induced with sorrow's nectar.
At first I took the homebound path, and the sight of you weeping
made me abandon the cause. I fished upon my father's knees
I know nothing better than the relentless sea, I have no salt--
alas the open sea is all.

It was here I made the call, on this sea-rock with its third eye.
Oh, sorrow, you encase me with your bribery, your saliva wallow in me still.
Where is their edict now, now that death claimed the flesh I once owned.
What laws is there than can rival God's own decree
the hurricane still breathes, typhoon splits the ship---
God! now all I have is your still judgment, your edicts never fade
though man may forget his own edicts when it favors him to do so.

Chorus

O' be still O' soul, the incubus seems to fade shimmering perspectives
like the sun on the table of the sea.
Nearer, nearer still—I mean to know my father's will.
Reconcile your loses, father, (if I was there you would never have plunged)
recall to your mind that suit wearing man, hobbling pirate
whose incursions filled the beaches with hollow bricks
displaced our kinder-folks.
He is the culprit, not you my father, not you, O' saint of seas.
Return to your cave, all maladies will ease with dreams.

Fisherman

Too late, too late for fro my journeys I learned the truth--
no, Permits are not from God, and I should have lived,
I took the course to Sheol, and the sin has doomed me
living lighthouse my eyes reflects the sea, I watch day and night with no reprieve.

Chorus

The spirit wanes
the sea rustle a blanket to cover mistakes
another speech this way comes.
Why did you leave me bereft of love?
the temperance in your fingers made me grasp the pen.
I am scaled without the shade of your arms.
Tomorrow I will bring you palms to shade your porcelain face.
The sea rolls through your hips seal-like on the beach.

Bobbing birds watch! the ghost repeats the act--
he drinks upon the white sheets of foam
until is covered whole.

