euphony

EUPHONY

VOLUME 22, NUMBER 2

SPRING 2022

Euphony is a nonprofit literary journal produced biannually at the University of Chicago. We are dedicated to publishing the finest work by writers and artists both accomplished and aspiring. We publish a variety of works including poetry, fiction, drama, essays, criticism, and translations.

Founded Spring 2000 by
Stephen Barbara and Matthew Deming

euphonyjournal.org

Euphony is a registered member of the
Council of Literary Magazines and Presses
www.clmp.org

STAFF

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POEMS

Of Roaring Water Bay

Alison Hackett

It blooms inside,
in mother-father bud,
in sister-brother-sister leaf,
my leitmotif of love.

In roll of wave, in pound of surf,
in grasses bent by shifting wind,
in castle ruin, in dried-dung whiff
airlifted by a salt-flecked breeze.
In mushroom hunt, in two-horned bull,
the bull from which we ran away.
In thinking of our footsteps
quick-sanding on the shores
of the three Calf islands,
of Roaring Water Bay.

On a Visit to the Gynecologist's Office

Ivana Mestrovic

A woman is born with 1 to 2 million immature eggs or follicles. Throughout her life most will die. By puberty maybe 400,000. With each menstrual cycle over a thousand follicles are lost and only one matures into an egg. So of a million only about 400 will mature...

There are no children there
even though the eggs assiduously dropped
each month since puberty

Born with a potential multitude
the cold unyielding speculum explores
the febrile darkness of possibility
an underwater rift where bubble
all sorts of fantastical creatures
that shrink from the probing light.

What are we to make of that–
the overwhelming waste or bounty
or precariousness in response to life

What a cosmology.

The evaluation is deemed satisfactory and
The transformational zone component
is indeterminate due to atrophy.
No malignancy identified.

But the seed is always there: what has not been.
That is what I grapple with. And what is.
That darkness. Let me look at it. I pray
that it not grow into something I cannot bear

Let it lie fallow and rest.

Fresh Start Diner

Bill Garten

I order my eggs benedict
hollandaise sauce icing

I fork
the poached egg

yoke bleeds
on the white, pale plate

into the ketchup
yellow & orange & red entrails

spread on porcelain pavement
like a dead rabbit

I am a crow
eating this carcass, only interrupted

by an oncoming car, or the waitress asking
if I need anything else.

A Grammar of the Four Seasons

Hugh Savage

Spring

As if, from the frog-king's riff
we have learned there is another planet
orbiting beyond the grip of Pluto,
raptor of Persephone, we know
one thing of the month of Mars that's telling:

spring is always future tense. It's what
we are told *will* happen: nature's latest forgery
of Botticelli's *Primavera* drumrolled out
as we—convinced of its authenticity—
duped as always, wince but pay the price.

And not just once: daffodils detract, *distract*
from precocious crocuses already poking
gold and jellybean-purple crocs through what
till yesterday the starving snow's
sheer crust now christens. Peepers,

squish fast-forward out of warming
mud, post-shower raise a chorus
to enflowering forsythia, pubescent
willows—swallows, even—sallow withies.
Roll down your windows, kids, and listen

as they sync the joy of their goy Klezmer
with the best of birdsong. (Let's say we stay
for *Nessun dorma*, then go home.)
but also of . . . you know the rest—the phatic
vox turturis, vatic owl, so trite, so true . . .

Summer

We have come to be the owners of the night.
The Merrymonth was half a breeze:
days teed up, agog for the green-baize revels.

(The aspect "up-till-now" is perfect
as the tense is present: the nights *have been*

enticingly warm.) *By now* we have forgotten
the petulance of March, its torn sky
buffeted by crosswinds, devoid of all but,
tatter-tailed, an unstrung paper diamond.
We have done as much to April and to May.

Now we are rich—rich and unashamed.
The rough elms are ours, the gnarly oaks,
horse-chestnut stands with outsplayed fans,
their *nachtmusik* played as a *leitmotif*:
Nocturne-in-Green for four hands.

For now it has begun: the song goes up,
while, otherwhere, one puffball-bellied toad
glugs in punctuated equilibrium, weighing in
against the high-strung insect section's
Schzzz! Schzzz! rasping hysterical *scherzi*.

All belongs to us. Here at last come on
Arnold's high Midsummer pomps,
Frost's great Overdog that romps the skies,
mingling stars with fireflies—God's night out,
of which we are the proud possessors.

Autumn

It begins with a forgetting—a letting
down of standards, a taking for granted
of what had been urgent at its emergence.
Unthinkingly, a page with deckled edges—
freckled, foxed in places, in no wise

so foolish as to look (Excuse me, but how
can anything so crisp . . .?) fondly
toward the cold—is turned. The mood
is subjunctive: *might have been / could be*.
There is an interlude before the shock

of ice, the urgency of maskers shouting

"Look at us!" in our pumpkin-colored leaves.
And all who through them kick their way
to a rendezvous with the year's loose ends
wear the colors of the season on their sleeves

—and *up* them the "honesties" of the tricksters
of their trade! Comes then a prank revival
for those who pretend to forget that the -ember
months slipperyslope to the blasted heath
—almost a treat, could it lately, so sweetly, last.

And then it's over: the cast scrolls up the bleak
fall sky, credits from a counterfeit Identikit,
as the name of each bare tree is stated,
and all ill winds that had (*or might have*)
nicked and sold this foolsgold picnic are indicted.

Winter

Without a doubt, it had to come to this:
January doubling down on icemanship.
If autumn meant to take us in, winter means
to *keep* us. And so it's been decreed: COLD
is called for and the North obeys. Blow,

winds—and the rest of it. Inside, the gas is
flaring, turned up high. There is no
whether or why. The mood is imperative:
the tempest is *told*. The first flakes
sarabanding in the wild wind, landing,

melt—but after dark the wetfall sticks.
And we in the morning's lockdown wonder
if for kicks we might as well half-listen
to Gottschalk's Tropical Symphony,
reading "Snowbound" to each other aloud.

In the Met, though, the Retrospective
is by no means canceled. Standing
in the slush-melt our galoshes have tracked
in from the avenue outside, we drop
by—as we tend do in winter—to gape

once more at the gift of snow in Breughel's
Hunters. Then we drift as the crowd drifts
into the luminous gallery where
the pear trees are in bloom at Combray and
—period (full stop)—it is spring.

In The Bag

Virginia Schnurr

I wish to own again
my mother's evening bag.
The one with tobacco flakes,

pungently released
from Parisian
cigarette papers.

The one with
the peppermint
Life Saver stuck
to the bottom.

The one that
smelled of
Shalimar and
Revlon Fire Engine Red.

I want
to see her
one last time,
with her
wedding rings on—

even loved by
Canadian Club
in the evening,
in the bag.

The Studebaker

Murray Silverstein

found in the woods, rusting
on moss, stripped to its chassis. A '53.
Or was it a '54? (At ten I knew the models cold.)

Growing around it a circle of pines, ferns and salal
poking up through the floor. (How I coveted one!
Futuristic wings, classical proportions—who does that anymore?)

The chrome door handle, driver's side, hung
like an earring from the mangled door.
Its gleaming this morning is what caught my eye—

how could it still be so bright? Does someone come
to buff it, we laughed, old guy, can of Turtle Wax
and a rag? So what's your story, pal? *Sit down,*

shut up, I'm trying to say: I'm rust. Rust rusting.
No earrings, no gleam, and sure as hell no guy
with a rag. Mushrooms grow on my crumbling dash.

Watching the trees become my jail, I've become,
despite myself, quite the happy prisoner.
Learning to let the world come to me.

It's north of the lake, off the old logging road,
if you need to go and listen.

Porcelain Trees

Oisín Breen

I issue my tender ministration,
Here, sat under an apple tree,
And I dig for what's left of you,
Keening in epiphanies of mud,
And I cradle this branch in my arms,
Where rootstock and scion join,
To read the last notes we wrote to each other –
A final ink-wet rain.

And I am here,
Because I have never left, and can not.
So I kneel under a canopy of budding fruit,
To dig for what's left of you.
Yet, in my ravings, I fear the heat of stars,
And porcelain, time is longer than your rains.

Yet, as I force the soil into tremors with my shaking fingers,
Sclera, damp with the issuance of tears shed,
The earth relinquishes its fitful watch,
And reveals what remains of you
In the heady nostalgia of cracked sherds and buried glass.
And I track my hands through a widening berm
Of reminisce and muck, and I recall your footsteps,
Your dreams, too, and your growing silence.

Now I cradle this branch in my arms –
Where rootstock and scion join –
And read it.
And though a thin pane of glass separates us,
So too does it bind us,
And it, a sand-rendered apostate to life,
It leavens our history from potentate to past,
From ministry to vigil for the dead.

PROSE

What Happens When the Lights Go Out

Matthew Chabe

The night Jackson passed out in front of the big church, he had been drinking pretty hard. I guess it's fair to say we both were. Most people thought Jackson was a real asshole, but I liked him alright; when he got drunk he got metaphysical. It's hard to find people who want to talk about stuff like that instead of sports or the stock market or whatever. I don't know what Jackson did when he was alone, but I'm pretty sure it didn't involve the Patriots.

Anyway, I remember that night he had something stuck in that big beard of his. When he opened his mouth, it writhed like a fly in a spider's nest.

"Idiots. They're all idiots!" he yelled. He pounded his fist on the bar. I nodded, but really I was transfixed by the junk that teetered on his face. All it needed was a simple nudge—a puff of air, really—and it would be gone.

"Are you listening to me?" His eyes rolled like steel bearings.

"Yeah. Idiots."

"Right? Good. So these idiots, they think I should do everything. Personally, I think they should be more, I don't know—" he side-eyed me and drained his beer— "fucking productive." His next beer had been foreplanned, and he slid it into his embrace.

"Hegel thought—" I began, but Jackson wasn't done.

"Was doin' just fine down in Arizona. You know that?" He shook his head. The thing in his beard held fast. I had heard the story enough times to recount it word by word. There was no way to stop him. I caught the bartender's eye and pointed at the Guinness tap.

"What was it you were you doing down there?"

"Software engineering. Coding. Almost worked at Google. You know that? But fuck me, my old man dies. Five days later my uncle calls—'Come to Maine,' he says. 'Need your help with the business.' Wants to retire, he says. Needs me to take over." Jackson scoffed. "That jackoff'll never retire." He pitched his head back and half of his beer disappeared. He slammed the glass down and pointed at the bartender like a ref in a boxing match.

"'Wherever you go, there you are,' huh?" Who said that?" I snapped my fingers. "Pooh. Winnie the Pooh."

"It wasn't fucking Pooh." Jackson sneered. "It's a Buddhist saying."

The bartender materialized with my beer. "It's a book," he said.

"It's not a book," said Jackson. "The Buddhists say it."

"What Buddhists are those?"

"People who practice Buddhism, man." He jerked his thumb at the bartender. "This guy, right?" Jackson was no Buddhist, but I knew where he got his information. A few months back, he had gone to a meditation retreat with his girlfriend, Beth. Even an environment of chronic Zen couldn't cure their tempestuous ills: a week later, she had packed all her things and moved back in with her folks. She just up and went. Jackson didn't seem much different for it. Maybe he drank a little more. It was hard to tell.

The bartender pushed the beer at me and disappeared. I grabbed it and slid off my barstool. The place was busy for a Tuesday; the booths were full, and people gathered around stanchions hung heavy with winter coats. On a stage in the corner a guy in a flannel set up a PA. That meant the bartender would soon switch off the Dropkick Murphy's playlist—sea shanties from Boston traded for wagon wheels and "Sweet Caroline" singalongs. It was a fair and preferable trade.

"All these people, man. All these people." Jackson leaned against the bar and swept his hands. His words were like mayonnaise. "Ev'ry one of 'em thinks they're so special. They look around, and they think, they think—" here he burped—"they think, 'Everyone else is boring. What fucking sheep.' Yet here they all are, gettin' drunk on the same beer. Slingin' the same bullshit. You feel me?"

He rolled his eyes; it was a long, weighted expression that seemed terrible to perform. "Sure," I said. I thought he was done, but I was wrong.

"This woman I work with. Ev'ry Monday she comes in bitching. Her son-in-law's lazy or whatever. He won't work. Her daughter needs food stamps, but the state's frigging up the application. Daughter can't catch a break—system's a mess, husband's a screwup. It's always the same. Someone else's fault. Meanwhile, I come in, I'm like, 'Hey, Rhonda. Did you get the reports I needed last Friday?' I'm real nice about it. And she looks at me like I just crashed her fucking wedding. I'm, like, her *boss*, man. Her *boss*. Do you know what—"

At that moment, the place went dark. The music stopped. Outside the plate-glass windows, snow blazed blue in the moonlight. From the corner came a squeal. Then the floor groaned as a generator in the basement came to life. Emergency lights clicked into service; their light was like that of a yellowed photograph; the faces in the bar became absurd, upturned masks as shadows leapt beneath their noses and brows.

"Everyone, stay cool!" yelled the bartender. "If you got cash, I got beer." A cheer rose from the crowd. Jackson turned. He squinted into the ceiling and mumbled.

"What?" I said. He ignored me and leaned across the bar.

"Hey!" he bellowed. "What's that unit?" He jabbed a finger at the emergency light that hung above the bartender.

"What?"

"What kind of lights're these?"

"Beats me."

"How're they powered?"

"How would I know? They work when the power goes out."

"Whoever put them in's an idiot!" Jackson's voice rang over the buzz of the crowd. "I bet those things're only five watt. Probably last an hour'n a half, right?" Jackson smirked. I had a good one tied on, but even in this light I could tell that Jackson was shitfaced. "Shoulda went with the seven-watters. They're brighter! Las' five hours! I'll tell you what, man—someone really fucked up!"

"Oh yeah?" The bartender scrawled a receipt on a folded napkin. "What makes you an expert?"

"What. Makes. Me. An. Expert. Lessee—I run a fuckin' housing company for poor people." He waved his hands. "No. Sorry. 'Low income.' Ev'ry day I deal with this shit."

"OK, Frank Lloyd Wright." He gave me a wink. "You're the boss."

Jackson turned to me. "Who the fuck's that? That Frank?"

"I don't know," I said, even though I did. I waved it away.

"Is that guy being a dick?"

"I think that's the guy getting you drunk. Be nice."

"Fuckin' A," said Jackson. He stood and tested his stability. There was a moment of alarm as he pitched left; then he steadied himself, growled, and stumbled away. A group of kids crowded the restroom door as they pulled their jackets from the wall. They glared as Jackson shoved past them and disappeared.

I scooped mixed nuts into my palm and hung my head. Someone had adorned the bar with a selection of coins from around the world, and they were on full display beneath the scratched epoxy. There was one from Japan. Another from Indonesia. One, from China, had a hole punched in it. Beside a Canadian loonie was a token for Baby Dolls, a strip club downstate. Good for One Drink, it read beneath a silhouette of a woman with massive breasts. Maybe it was someone's idea of a joke. The girls at Baby Dolls weren't nearly that attractive.

I hadn't even put an almond in my mouth when there was a crash behind me. I turned in time to see Jackson collapsed over a toppled stool. His legs flailed and his fingers waggled like a kid counting to ten. The crowd parted. They watched in silence as Jackson scrambled to stand.

"Fuckin' place! Too crowded!" he roared. "Get out th' way! Chrissakes!" He clambered and fell back onto the stool.

"Hey, is your buddy alright?" The bartender appeared behind me like a vengeful spirit. "You better get him out of here."

"Yeah. OK." I slid off my stool and bent to Jackson. He scrambled to find purchase on the floor, but his knees were tangled in the chair. I hooked my hands beneath his arms and heaved. We both lurched as he kicked the stool away. For a moment, I thought we'd tumble into the mob. But somehow, miraculously, Jackson's feet found the floor and our momentum ended.

Jackson swayed for a moment in the dim glare of the lights. He turned his head to regard the crowd.

"What the fuck're yoool..."—he paused to gather his thought—"*you all* looking at?" It was just a moment, but it felt like forever.

I looked at the bartender. He wore a clear expression that said, "Get the fuck out now." I grabbed our jackets from where we had shoved them at our feet.

"Hey, pal," I said. "Let's grab a smoke."

Jackson lumbered after me as I walked to the exit. As soon as I opened the door, I exploded into shivers. The cold stole my breath and froze snot to the inside of my nose. I forced my arms into my jacket and yanked my beanie over my head. The power outage was bigger than I had realized: in both directions, the storefronts that lined Main Street were grey like dead televisions.

Jackson leaned against the brick wall and fought with his lighter. A cigarette hung from his lips at a precarious angle. I pulled a smoke from my own pack, lit it, and extended the flame to him. He inhaled like a soldier that hadn't smoked in months.

"Power's out," he said. He could have told me that water was wet, maybe, or that the sky was blue. It would have been the same. I took a drag and looked at my phone. It was almost last call. There'd be a mad rush to grab another beer or settle tabs, then everyone would spill into the night. I looked through the window: inside, the movement and the chatter had resumed. It was like Jackson and his spectacle had never existed.

"How'd it happen?" said Jackson.

"What?"

"The power, man," he said. He surveyed the street through half-closed eyes. The smoke from his cigarette rose in loose curls, beaten back by molecules slowed in the frigid air. The object that had been stuck in his beard was gone.

"How the fuck should I know?"

"I—I like it." He took another drag and looked up. "Sumtimes I just stan' on my balcony. I look at the stars. Fuckin' streetlights make it hard to see 'em." I followed his gaze upwards. He was right: without the constant illumination of the downtown, each star was a distinct point in the sky. Jackson slumped further.

"You nowatt—you know what fucksh me up? All those things up

there, they're suns. Fuckin' suns, man. All that shit you see, it's juss *a fraction* of a fraction. It's juss the cloooose ones. But they're still, like, thousan's of light years away. It takes so long for th' light to get here. What we see is akshly, like, the *dissant past*." He shrugged, and his shoulders fell like weights. "There could be people out there with entire lives—whole civilizashuns—but by the time we see 'em they're already dead. Dead'z a doornail."

"That's shitty, man."

"You'd never know," he muttered. He threw his half-smoked cigarette to the sidewalk and fumbled in his pocket. "Wheres m'fuckin' smokes?" I handed him one of mine, and his fat fingers trembled as he took it. He looked away, up toward the big Episcopalian church at the top of the hill. He didn't seem to be looking at it, or anything else in particular. Instead he seemed to stare at some point on the horizon, past the hill and past the moonlight and past even the city in its darkened totality.

Jackson hiccupped. He shuffled his feet and murmured. I couldn't make it out. But before I could ask him what the fuck he was talking about, he turned. The face that appeared to me wasn't Jackson's; it had become something else, a parody that had come from the shadows to take Jackson's place. Tears stained his cheeks like blue antifreeze. A hard fist gripped my heart. I had never seen a man cry before. It was the ugliest thing in the world.

"*I don' know whatteye di' wrong*," he moaned. His chest rose in heaves. I took a drag from my cigarette and looked away. In the bar people laughed; they clinked their glasses, grabbed each other's shoulders, and howled. The musician played his guitar from a stool on the stage. I could hear all of it conducted through the plane of glass; it was so close, but it seemed like a transmission from a different universe. I wished I was in there.

Suddenly, Jackson's arms were around me. His shoulders shook as he gasped and gulped. My nose was filled with the scent of beer and fresh cigarettes and sweat. His beard scratched my neck and I felt sick. It was more of Jackson than I had ever hoped to experience. Yet here it was. I had no idea how to react. So I didn't. I just stood.

"*She waz alleye 'ad*," he sobbed. "*She waz so unhappy. Eye 'ad to let'er go. But I tried. I tried so hard.*"

I couldn't move. I don't know why: maybe it was fear. Maybe it was helplessness. Whatever it was, I stayed until he removed his arms and retreated to the wall. He sniffled and wiped his face with his sleeve. A lit cigarette still dangled from his knuckles. I'm glad that thing didn't burn me up, I thought, but part of me wished it had.

"Never should've lef' Arizona, man," he said. "Juss... shoulda stayed." I searched for something to say. There was silence for a few moments. Then I said the first thing I could think of:

"You know, man, wherever you go, there you are."

"Huh. I guess. Fuckin' Pooh." He snorted. Then, as if all the beer and the cold and the weight had been sucked from him, he stood erect. He clapped a hand on my shoulder and I winced with the force. "I'mma walk 'ome. S'fuckin' late."

"Alright, man. I'll call you later," I started, but he had already gone. I wondered for a moment if I should catch up to him, to make sure he got home. But he lived just around the bend—how much trouble could he get in? I watched as he weaved among the dirty piles of snow that had gathered on the sidewalk. At the top of the hill, in front of the church, his head looked toward the stars. Then he turned the corner and was gone.

The first people from the bar had already spilled onto the sidewalk. They lit their cigarettes and made proclamations as the cold robbed them of composure. I pulled another smoke from my jacket, lit it, and began my own long walk in the opposite direction. As I went, I looked up at the sky and thought about what Jackson had said. I thought about how the stars could go out right now, and no one would know for thousands of years. It was weird how something so big could happen, but because of the time and distance between, it was like it never happened at all. I thought about the dark houses I passed and about the people that lived behind those dull windows. I wondered what they did when the lights went out, and if anyone would ever know or even care. It all seemed so far away.

It was past 2 a.m. when I reached my apartment. As I removed my boots, I thought about Jackson. I dialed his number once, then twice more for good measure, but it all went to voice mail. I figured he had made it home and passed out. When I pulled myself from bed the next afternoon, however, I saw that he had texted:

Hey bro, what did we get up to last night? All blurry after first six pints lol. Woke up on lawn of church. 4 am. Cold as shit. Maybe I found God.

And then, another one:

Beers tonight?

I squinted at the words through swollen eyes. Icepicks cracked my brain. I dropped the phone on the sideboard, went to the toilet, and downed three aspirin. As I brushed the dry taste of beer from my mouth, I thought about a response. Then I let it go. It's just that way sometimes, I thought: something happens so suddenly, so slightly, you wonder if the world you remembered being in had ever existed at all. I thought about Jackson, and I thought about the stars, and I thought how big and important it had all seemed. Then I went back to bed, and I thought about nothing at all.

The Unnatural

J. Gunter Brett

Best hitter in the galaxy? Well, you picked the right man to ask. I've seen darn near all of them in my day, from Achernar to Zaurak—nearly the whole history of the game. Ruth and Williams? All-time greats, absolutely. Cobb and Hornsby? For sure, two of the best. Del Edwards? Mighty fine. He's from Earth, you know. The A's snuck him into the Big Series—real name was Ed Delahanty. Hobbs? Well, I heard stories, but they had to be made up.

I'll tell you, though, nobody ever hit a baseball like Kid Blanton. I know, you look at that one line of stats in the Galactic Baseball Encyclopedia, and you think maybe a tragic accident ended his career—but that ain't even the tip of the iceberg. You know that saying, "Truth is stranger than fiction"? Well, whoever said that had The Kid in mind.

Remember Charlie Simmons? He was a grizzled old veteran when I got to the big leagues. He looked out for me a big chunk of my career—then when the Sharks cut me, he brought me on as a coach. I was his right-hand man, all the way to Betelgeuse. Lord, it broke my heart to follow him as manager there. I hated to take the job—but it wasn't like I got him fired. It was Kid Blanton done him in.

The Encyclopedia calls him William, but during his time with the Bisons, he was always just The Kid. He showed up maybe a month into the season with a suitcase that looked like he'd kicked it all the way from Procyon. He said he'd played ball on Elnath, which isn't exactly the biggest of big leagues. Even so, you'd think one of us would have heard about what happened—but neither Charlie nor I ever had what you'd call an abundance of good luck. I checked the database later, trying to understand it all, and The Kid never actually lied to us, but he took his damn time telling the truth.

He picked a good year for a tryout; we'd won four of our first twenty, and attendance was so low that when the games ended, everybody shook hands. We figured we didn't have much to lose—which was our first mistake but nowhere close to the last. Charlie tells The Kid to take some swings. He grabs the first bat he sees and jumps in the cage. Charlie tells Joe not to go easy on him—and in street clothes and loafers, The Kid hammers every pitch he gets. Two feet outside, up in his eyes, at his ankles—don't matter; he crushes it all. His grounders leave furrows you could plant crops in, his line drives have vapor trails, and his fly balls draw complaints from Planetary Weather Control.

Well, Charlie's impressed, sure—but he figures if The Kid could hit the curve, he'd be a legend already. He has Joe switch to the deuce, and it don't mean a thing to The Kid. Andy tries him with sliders, no difference. He murders any pitch our staff can throw, and Charlie's dreaming of a pennant—but first he needs to sign The Kid to a contract.

He's also got to hide him before the Astros take the field, since they could probably use a guy who hits forkballs like they're on a tee. He drags The Kid up to Gene's office to make a deal. You know Gene—hates to waste money on a bum he didn't find all by himself. Still, Charlie talks him into a nice, fat, four-year deal—but only the first three were guaranteed.

What's that? Sure, it looks bad now. Most folks think they were both nuts, seeing that only Charlie had seen him hit, and Charlie had only seen him hit, but Charlie figures it won't matter if The Kid's a stiff at every position—his bat's worth it. We had a designated hitter already—Masters couldn't pass for a left fielder at a costume party—so he needs The Kid to play a position, or he'll have to stick Masters in left and pray we outscore everybody.

Charlie keeps him on the bench that night, waiting for the right moment, and he gets it in the bottom of the eighth, down by three. Cole walks and Wallace doubles him to third. The Astros walk Masters, even though he's the tying run, because Harris is zero for the month, and they know Charlie's got nothing on the bench. He grins real big and sends The Kid up for Harris. Norton comes after him with an inside fastball, and The Kid pulls a screamer over the left field fence. It sounds like a sonic boom; it was a hundred feet up when it cleared the fence and still climbing when it left the stadium. A bunch of kids go racing after the ball, and one finds it three blocks away, shaped like a great big egg. From that spot to home plate was over two thousand feet; even with a great bounce, it had to be nine hundred on the fly—adjusting for the lower gravity, call it seven-fifty—and if you don't believe me, you could verify it in the database.

The Kid acts like he's never seen a home run trot; he's around the bases before the ball comes down. The team mobs him at the plate, and our tiny crowd cheers for five minutes and two curtain calls. Charlie's picturing his name on the Manager of the Year trophy—but he's got one inning left, and with all the leads we've blown, he wants to keep that bat in the lineup just in case. He finally gets around to asking The Kid's position and he says DH. Charlie says sure, but what's your best position in the field, and The Kid says it doesn't matter—which is like saying you can put him anywhere, for all the good it'll do. But Charlie's off in fantasyland, spelling his name for the engraver, and leaves him in for Harris. The Kid borrows a glove—he didn't bring one, which, if you're lookin' for clues, is another hint and a half—and trots out to left.

You were all there, I guess? Or should I finish? Anyway, we get two quick groundouts, and Charlie thinks we might win one. Then Cruz draws a walk. Watson hits a fly ball to left, and The Kid don't need to move one step—but instead he takes off running like people are shooting at him and cowers under the foul pole while the ball rolls to the wall. Cruz scores before Cole can even retrieve the ball, and Watson comes all the way around without a throw to put the Astros back ahead. That little crowd was so quiet, you'd think someone hit the mute button.

Charlie looks like he's been hit by a bus. He goes out and talks to The Kid for a minute, then walks him back to his position. He comes back to the dugout looking like he just found out the bus that hit him is his, and he owes a bunch of taxes on it. I ask what happened with The Kid. "He don't know," Charlie says. "I asked if he thought it might happen again, and he said only if they hit another ball out there." I ask why leave him in? He says the damage is done, and maybe The Kid or Masters will get to the plate.

They don't, of course; we make three outs real polite in the bottom of the ninth. In the clubhouse no one wants to even look at The Kid on account of him being some kind of fruit salad, but he acts like it's still a normal day. Charlie calls him in the office, and we try to figure out what small animals are running around in his head. He asks The Kid again why he ran from the ball like that, and The Kid says he thought he was over it. Charlie asks over what. It turns out The Kid was in left field in Game Four of Elnath's championship series a couple years back. They were up by three in the ninth, and he misjudged three straight fly balls to load the bases. The next guy hit one over his head, he lost track of the wall and slammed into it full speed, the ball hit him smack on the top of the head and bounced over the fence for a grand slam, and he woke up in the hospital the laughingstock of the whole planet. After that he just can't bring himself to get anywhere near a fly ball.

Well, Charlie's all smiles now because he thinks it's a problem he can lick. Next day he's got The Kid shagging flies; he is catching them, even if he looks like someone juggling snakes at gunpoint. Charlie don't want to rush things, so The Kid is DH next game, with Masters in left. The Kid goes 4-for-4, with two homers and a double; the pitchers can't even waste a pitch that he don't reach out and smack it. But Masters is a DH for a reason, and he ruins us with some poisonous glove work of his own. He don't hit either, telling Charlie that playing left messes up his hitting. Charlie asks real sharp what messed up his fielding, but deep down he knows you shouldn't ask a fish to play the trombone.

Next day The Kid gets through a whole practice without any kind of spectacle, and Charlie tries him in left again. He hits everything he swings at—3-for-5, with a homer and a triple—but the first time a ball comes his way, he tries to hide under the bullpen mound. We manage

to pull out the game with two outfielders and a speed bump, and afterwards Charlie has a brainstorm. The Kid can't handle fly balls but what about grounders? The Kid says sure, so next game Harris is back in left and The Kid's at third base.

At this point I feel obliged to remind Charlie that third basemen occasionally need to field more than just ground balls. Charlie says he knows, but one, it can't be worse than the outfield; two, Ramirez or Price can handle most of the pop-ups, and The Kid won't get in their way because by the time the ball comes down, he'll be in the dugout, behind the watercooler; and three, line drives will get to him too fast for him to run away, and he might accidentally catch one or two. I can see there's no talking him out of it.

Fact is, Charlie's right about everything he says; he just don't say enough. The Kid goes 3-for-4, with two doubles—but he's a nightmare in the field again. It looks good in the first inning, when he catches a line drive out of reflex. Charlie's patting himself on the back, but in the fifth inning Wilson chops one to third; The Kid scoops it cleanly, then throws it up the right field line. Wilson goes to second on the error. Butler tries to move Wilson to third with a bunt toward The Kid, who makes a sweet barehanded grab—and fires the ball in the dugout. One run scores and Butler's on second. Lanier wants to see The Kid throw again, so he has Helms drop another bunt down. The Kid's throw is on line this time—a gentle toss that only misses getting Helms at first by about seven steps. Even Howard squares to bunt, so Charlie moves The Kid back to left, and we play a man short the rest of the game.

Poor Charlie tries to convince himself the throw from third is too long, so when the Twins come to town, he tries The Kid at second. It's all the same, though—one throw wide left, one wide right, and one that rolls to a stop about six feet shy of first. Plus he bails out on a pop-up no one else can reach, so out he comes. On the bench the next chapter of the sad story comes out. Seems The Kid played shortstop in Game Five of that disastrous World Series. Up by one in the ninth, with runners on second and third and two out, the batter hit him an easy bouncer. If he makes a good strong throw to first, they win the Series—and he did. No one knows why the first baseman never got a glove on the ball; he got a bug in his eye, or winked at his girl in the bleachers, or just had some kind of vapor lock. Anyway, The Kid's throw nailed him right between the eyes and—get this—killed him on the spot. Even worse, both runners scored, game over. Now The Kid is petrified he might hurt the guy covering the base, so he either misses by a mile or babies the throw.

Now, Charlie's not what you'd call slow—not to his face, certainly. He points out that firing the ball in the dugout or the stands is a lot more likely to hurt someone than throwing at a guy wearing a glove

and expecting the ball. Absolutely right, of course—but the look of horror on The Kid's face tells me he'll never make another hard throw anywhere, which shows you that even a single piece of wisdom can be dangerous when it's a single piece of wisdom.

Next day Charlie tells me he's putting The Kid at first 'cause there aren't that many throws to make. Throwing to the pitcher or second baseman covering first is mostly lobs, which The Kid can do, and first basemen don't start a whole bunch of double plays, so we can do without. Other guys can cut off throws from the outfield, and if he has to charge a bunt, maybe he can tag the runner. He asks me if I think it'll work—and I do 'cause he's got a gleam in his eye and a bat in his hand.

The Kid starts at first base, and Charlie doesn't even get to find out if his plan would've worked. The Kid never has to make a throw—but he can't catch anything. Sometimes he don't even get the glove in the way because he keeps looking down at his feet. On one throw from deep in the hole at shortstop, he looks down five times before the ball smacks him in the chest, and Charlie gives him the hook.

I know there's bound to be another story for this new piece of lunatic behavior, and The Kid don't let me down. He played first base in Game Six of that horrible Series—what with their regular first baseman bein' buried the next day—and with a one-run lead in the top of the ninth and a man on third with two out, the batter grounded to second. The throw to first that would win the Series got there in time, but The Kid's foot was off the bag and the tying run scored. Then in the tenth inning, the same damn thing happened again and they lost. Now he can't take a throw unless he knows his foot's on the base. A week earlier I'd have said that was the craziest thing I'd ever heard, but at this point it was only about the third craziest, so I keep my trap shut.

Charlie finally admits there's nowhere to hide The Kid in the field, and his two best hitters don't have a position. He won't trade The Kid even if he could, so he sends Masters to the White Sox for a fungo bat and a box of jockstraps, and The Kid is the full-time DH. Right then we start a ten-game losing streak. It ain't The Kid's fault; we fall behind so early every game, the other teams don't bother pitching around him, and he hits over .750 during the streak. Fifteen games into his career, he's got eighteen doubles, four triples, and twelve home runs, and his slugging percentage has an exponent on the end.

Eventually we get a tight game, tied at three in the seventh. We get a man to second with one out and The Kid at the plate. Cox decides to walk him and set up the double play—and on the pitcher's first toss, The Kid reaches over the plate as far as he can and takes a vicious cut that misses the ball by maybe an inch. Charlie laughs a little bit and says, "Damn, that boy likes to hit. Almost caught them napping too." But now I'm thinking back through all The Kid's at-bats, and except for when he

got plunked by pitchers tired of ducking line drives, I can't recall him *not* swinging at a pitch.

I grab Charlie's arm and say, "I can't remember him taking a pitch, Charlie. *Has* he? Ever?" Then Dobson tosses another one, careful to throw it way out of reach—and The Kid goes after it again, but this time he's about six feet short.

I'm shaking Charlie's arm, telling him to call time-out, but one look in his eyes tells me Charlie's not home right now. *I* jump up and call time, take a deep breath, and make myself go out to talk to The Kid. I say, "I know we've never given you the take sign, but you know what it is, right?" He says yeah. I say, "If I give you the take sign, what are you supposed to do?" He says take the pitch. I say, "And what are you *not* supposed to do?" He says swing. I say, "Good. I'm giving you the take sign right now; that means you're not supposed to swing at *anything* until I give you the sign to hit away, right?" He says right. I go back to the dugout.

You notice I don't ask why the hell he's swinging at pitches off the plate by ten feet or so. I figure there's a good chance he *tells* me, and I damn sure don't want that. I think our little chat is crystal clear but I make one mistake: I ask what he's *supposed* to do, not what he's *gonna* do. Truth is I hope they'll try to sneak one by him 'cause I know he's gonna swing no matter where the pitch is. But Dobson's not dumb enough to try it; he makes sure the next one is halfway up the first base line.

I give The Kid credit—he tries to hold back. For half a second he stands there frozen, with a kind of constipated look on his face. Then he snaps, goes scurrying down the line, and takes a swinging dive, or maybe it was a diving swing—I never saw either one before, so I can't really say which. I'd like to say he hit the ball or even came real close. Wouldn't have mattered—as soon as he crossed the plate it was strike three, by rule—but I wish I could say he hit it, just to make it a better story, you understand.

Charlie is still in a coma, so I manage the rest of the game but we lose anyway. The Kid and I haul Charlie back to his office, and I splash some water on his face and slap him six or eight times so we can both hear the next chapter of The Kid's tale of woe 'cause I ain't about to suffer alone.

Sure enough, it happened in Game *Seven* of that thrice-damned, rat-bastard World Series, and if you're keeping track, you see that The Kid's team won the first three games, and then he *personally* cost them the next four games straight. The final game was a nip-and-tuck affair all the way, and the opposing pitchers tied him in knots. Everything was a back-door slider or a roundhouse curve that dropped in at the end or a fastball that just nicked a corner, and four times in a row he was out

on three called strikes. Down one run in the ninth, bases loaded and two out, he was their last chance; this time he watched three *straight* go by to end the game. From then on he just couldn't let a pitch go by. He didn't *want* to swing at everything but he *had* to.

Well, all the other lunacies Charlie can live with, but The Kid's *got* to learn to take a pitch. Charlie tried everything: psychoanalysis, hypnotism, pharmaceuticals, mysticism—once he told The Kid there was a sniper in the stands behind the plate with orders to shoot him if he ignored a take sign. It was a lie, of course—we didn't have that kind of budget—but it didn't matter. The Kid just couldn't stop himself.

Charlie wasn't ready give up yet. He got the longest bat the rules allowed and moved The Kid to the outer edge of the batter's box, trying to fool the pitcher into throwing something close enough he could stride in and crush. When that didn't work, he tried The Kid with his toes touching the plate; that lasted until some wiseacre threw a pitch *behind* him, and he nearly screwed himself into the ground.

Charlie kept trying, though. First game of every series, he'd put The Kid in the lineup, hoping teams hadn't heard about him, but it seemed like *everyone* knew. His World Series catastrophe might have been small-town news but we weren't so lucky. Video of that flying-squirrel act down the first base line was what you kids call *viral*. The *first* one, at least; all them others that came after was just hard to watch. He didn't get half a dozen pitches he could reach for the rest of his career, which was another twenty-seven games, or thirty-four strikeouts. And that's all there is to tell: the tragic story of Kid Blanton, the best hitter I ever saw—but, in the end, surely the worst *batter* in baseball history.

Now, *that* is just rude. Maybe I *am* splitting hairs, but I said up front nobody ever hit a baseball like The Kid, and no one's ever changed my mind. He could have had *all* the records if he'd been just a little more disciplined at the plate—but that awful string of bad breaks on Elnath took that away from him. Well, more like took it out back and shot it several times, but you get the idea.

Charlie? Funny enough, he was never the same after that. When Gene finally cut The Kid, Charlie retired on the spot and swore off the game forever. He told me he meant to get himself a place in the middle of nowhere—maybe on a snow-covered mountaintop where there was no such thing as baseball season. Far as I know, the last words he ever said to another person were, "Kid, when you give up on this miserable game, come visit me on the mountain." He's still up there, I believe, watching for The Kid's big, soft head to come bobbing up the hill—and making pile after pile of snowballs.

Fordston Bay

Perry Nagle

"Pickhook," said the stocky female clerk, placing a bright orange plastic object on the countertop, garish, like the color hunters wore. About three inches long, it was made to fit in your hand, like the handle for a knife, except instead of a blade there was a short hook at the end. I had no idea what it was for. The hook was pointed and made of stainless steel. It reminded me of the fishing hooks we used for catching sunfish on our lake in Wisconsin, but larger and without the barb at the end that kept the worm on and sometimes mangled the fish's lip. Worse yet the fish would swallow the whole mess and bleed out its gills. Those were never the same. We put them back in but they never got upright again.

"Kershaw knife," said the clerk. "Ansell arm sleeves. Atlas 620s. Those are gloves, you'll need those, and wristers." She started unfolding a heavy yellow rain jacket on the countertop, and matching farmer john pants with suspenders, and talking about liners and warmth and moisture protection. I kept looking at the pickhook and wondering what it was for.

It was the summer of 1985. I'd just finished my freshman year at college in Seattle and taken a summer job on a commercial fishing boat in Fordston Bay, Alaska, on the Bering Sea, one of the most productive salmon fisheries in the world.

"Viking steel toes," said the clerk. "And Grundens. Most people use Grundens. Do you want steel toes?"

It's hard to describe what became of me in Fordston Bay. What I turned into, I mean, covered in fish blood and scales with one of my Viking boots wedged against the side of the lurching deck, setting nets and pulling floatlines and gaffing fish. My life was reduced to the sweaty rubbery smell of the liner of my Helly-Hansen rain jacket, chafing against my skin but blocking some of the stinging wind that whipped across the deck, or gazing at the drumming ripples in the fish blood pooling in the back corners of the boat, dancing to the surging marine diesel, or feeling the hot metal engine compartment burning my back as I leaned against it so that some kind of sensation, any sensation, somehow reached my brain. Summer in Alaska was cold. I was wet and cold. For days.

My pickhook became an extension of my body, snug in my palm like a pointed claw. I used it for pulling nets and lines and for pounding

things, like the latch on the fish hold that sometimes got stuck or the floats that slipped off the reel. The steel had an instinct for penetration, crunching through gills or sliding into eyeball sockets or piercing the soft skin under a fish's mouth, except that the jaws sometimes tore off. Salmon looked ridiculous with their big round surprised eyes and no mouth. I could do almost anything with my pickhook. It never left my hand.

❖

I arrived in Fordston Bay on a brisk sunny day and would not see the sun again for several weeks. Captain Rick's 32-foot boat was docked at Grannick, a cannery town that smelled like bleach and rotted fish built atop tall pilings leaning out over the mouth of the Stragus River. Wide and muddy, the Stragus drained ice melt from Alaska's deep interior into the ocean. Mottled brown arctic tundra lay to the east, roadless and frozen over most of the year. To the west past the river mouth was the gray sliver of the bay.

Captain Rick's boat was tied up behind the cannery at a tall pier. My first impression was that it was too small for four people. Ray, an elderly cook, and Carl the first mate would join Captain Rick and myself. The boat was made of heavy aluminum and had a large round drum reel on the back deck as tall as a man, that held the net, and a cabin on the front half for our living quarters.

Boarding the boat I found Carl, a thin stooped man with the dark complexion of a heavy smoker. He was kneeling beside an opening in the back deck where a man was hanging from his waist, upside down and shirtless. Metal clinked against metal and curses emanated from below, along with the oily smell of a diesel engine.

"How's it going, Cap?" called Carl, who had ignored my arrival, down into the opening. He had one hand on a nearby toolbox.

"How the hell do you think, Carl?" replied Captain Rick. Captain Rick was a blunt, foul-mouthed man. Sweat ran down his back between thick muscles along his spine, and his jeans were low and tight. "Do you happen to have an extra alternator lying around?" he said, pulling himself up and leaning on one elbow beside the opening like a greasy Playgirl centerfold.

I extended my hand and introduced myself, since we'd only talked by phone, but Captain Rick stared at me blankly.

"It's good to finally meet you in person," I said.

"Three quarter inch box wrench," said Captain Rick, holding out his grimy hand to Carl for another tool.

"I'm glad to help if there's anything I can do," I said. "I used to fix the engines on our ski boats in Wisconsin."

Captain Rick raised an eyebrow while Carl rummaged for tools.

"So you wanna screw up my boat?" he said.

"Heh," grunted Carl.

"No, of course not," I said. "I'm just saying I'm glad to help out." I couldn't tell whether he was joking or not.

"He just wants to help out," said Captain Rick, looking at Carl. "He's a helper."

"Heh," grunted Carl again.

"Then do you wanna crawl down into this hole and get the goddamned wrench I just dropped?" said Captain Rick.

Carl stifled a laugh.

"Not really," I said.

"Then shut the hell up," said Captain Rick. "This isn't fucking Wisconsin."

❖

Years later I met a guy from Anchorage and told him about Fordston Bay. He said native Alaskans had legends about humans and animals changing places and that he thought I'd become a "Hak'elik," or Fire Snake, which was a creature that punished humans for their evil deeds. With all due respect to local folklore, I'm not a superstitious person. But I will say that in the 20 years since I left Fordston Bay, I still don't really understand what happened that summer.

❖

My first night on the boat was uneventful. I shared a small bow compartment with Ray, who was 62 years old and taught shop class at a Seattle high school when he wasn't fishing. Waves lapped against the hull and I could feel the boat bump up against the pier, but not hard enough to keep me awake. Captain Rick and Carl slept in the main cabin, which had two seats in front, a small sink on one side and a narrow table on the other. Their bunks folded down over the sink.

I put my pickhook on a small shelf over the bed. It gleamed orange even in the dark and reminded me of my first set of polyurethane skateboard wheels when I was 13. Flashy like the pickhook, they came in bright blue, orange, green and a yellow that became dirty very quickly. The plan was to outfit the boat over the next several days, then fish for about three weeks and return to Grannick to re-provision the boat. We would sell our catch to a large processing vessel anchored in the bay. Ray suggested I walk around the cannery before we left port, but to stay up on the decking in case bears came around. Most of Grannick was built on pilings to keep it from sinking into the tundra.

"This is my gun," said Captain Rick the next morning, removing a Colt 45 from the holster on his hip. "It's the law up here. This gun is the goddamned law."

"Wow," I said, unsure how to respond. This was my longest conversation with Captain Rick so far.

"Take it," he said, pushing the gun at me, "and don't drop it."

He started listing the things he'd shot but I wasn't listening because I'd never held a handgun before and it is a miraculous thing, really, the first time you hold one. Smooth. Compact. Much heavier than expected. Powerful. Purposeful. I put my finger on the thin trigger and looked at my hand. The gun's grip fit right into my palm, just like the pickhook, except it was black and metal and cold.

"Gimme the gun, you dumbass," said Captain Rick, grabbing my elbow.

If my recollection is correct, it was at this moment that I first imagined shooting Captain Rick. Not really shooting him, of course, and no doubt it was just the fleeting thought of an angry teenager. But I already knew I hated him and it was a different thing to hate someone with a gun in your hand. "Screw you," I would say, and then just shoot him in the chest.

Two quick reports suddenly ripped the air, causing me to jump and leaving my ears ringing. Captain Rick had fired two rounds into the ocean and was holding the smoking gun in my face. Ray came charging out of the cabin.

"Don't get started with the gun!" he yelled. "We don't need the cannery on our backs."

"Screw 'em," said Captain Rick, putting the gun back in its holster.

"Rick thinks it's funny to shoot at DNR planes," said Ray to everyone. "But it's not funny, it's stupid."

"Screw the DNR," said Captain Rick. "Screw them and their cameras." Apparently the DNR, the Alaska Department of Natural Resources, took photos of the ID numbers painted on the back decks of the boats if the boats were caught in the wrong place, then mailed fines to the owners.

"Why don't you cover up the numbers?" I suggested, imagining I was still part of the conversation.

"Why don't you cover up the numbers," Captain Rick mimicked in a high voice. "Don't you think I thought of that? They'll send a patrol boat and then you're screwed, that's why. Is that how smart you got at your fucking college?"

❖

The Fire Snake was a mythical serpent with a head as sharp as a knife and a tongue that shot lightning bolts. It was an ally of the Thunderbird and helped the Thunderbird hunt whales, dwelling among the feathers until unleashed with a flap of the wings to pierce the heart of the whale. The belt buckles of Royal Canadian Navy captains featured a Fire Snake wrapped around an anchor.

❖

I was eager to leave Grannick. At high tide the ocean backed up into the river, creating whirlpools and eddies and deep water. At low tide our boat sat in the mud at the bottom of the tall pier. The rancid smell of the

tidal flats was only slightly less disgusting than the smell of the cannery.

Before we could depart, I took our garbage to a dump located out near the ocean, riding an ATV about half a mile from the cannery. Parts of engines and old machinery were dumped near the road, followed by nylon netting, scrap plastic and tangled anchor cables further along. Everything Grannick didn't want seemed to be here, with the organic waste smoldering in a burn pile at the back.

Ray had warned me about bears again, but I didn't see any. He seemed preoccupied with bears.

"We had bears in Wisconsin," I told him.

"These aren't Wisconsin bears," he said. "The cannery tries to leave food waste every day so the bears will stay at the dump. Each year the river gets more overfished and more bears come downstream looking for food."

"What if the cannery doesn't leave food waste?" I asked.

"If the tide is out, the bears trap salmon in the shallows," he said. "Otherwise they come back to the cannery and you'd better hope we're not around. We had a big brownie come right up through the floor a couple years ago and kill a guy. Had to shoot it 14 times."

"Wow," I said. "That's awful."

"It's awful if you're the guy that gets killed," said Ray. "Kodiaks are mean bears."

We left port at mid-tide that afternoon, heading out towards the ocean where low clouds hung over the bay. A stiff breeze caused waves to spray across the deck as we punched through the mild chop. The diesel engine growled and felt powerful. I was excited. I stood on the back deck watching Grannick shrink into the distance. It had been a strange week but we were fishing at last.

When we cleared the river mouth, I got my first view of the wide wind-swept ocean beaches that fronted Fordston Bay, which were littered with the remains of abandoned ships sinking into the sand. It looked like a junk yard, with blackened hulls, decks, rails and steel sticking out at strange angles. Scraggly seagulls lined up along the whitened portions that protruded upwards, and several spotted us and glided over to hover behind our boat. Ray said we were headed a few miles north where the fleet had found some fish.

❖

The Fire Snake once punished a tribe that broke the moral laws of fishing. Take only what you need. Use everything you take. And preserve the environment. He cut off their arms and legs. And even though they were allowed to put themselves back together again, they picked the wrong legs and arms and were forever misshapen.

❖

"Wake up!" yelled Captain Rick. "Wake the hell up!" I'd fallen asleep with

my face pressed against the cold aluminum quarter deck. Captain Rick was hovering over me. He was probably going to kick me, but I didn't care anymore. I was too tired. We'd been fishing for a week straight. I could sleep in any position now, including standing up. Ray said I was going to fall overboard. The water was 35 degrees and he said it would kill me in about seven minutes.

"Get off my deck, goddammit," yelled Captain Rick again. I opened one eye and saw part of a fin near my nose.

"Yep," I finally responded, rocking slowly back upright.

The big diesel engine shook to life and belched acrid black smoke. Time to fish again. On Captain Rick's command, Carl would throttle forward while I released the brake on the reel that held the net, letting the net slide out over the back of the boat into the water. Gill nets were several hundred yards long and hung from the surface like a curtain.

"Let's go Carl!" yelled Captain Rick.

We never stopped fishing. The nights were short this far north. The days were long and wet and cold. I lost track of the hours, then the days, then the weeks, setting nets, gaffing fish into the holds, hosing the decks and starting all over again. Pulling. Cutting. Washing. Icy sea spray. Blood. Diesel fumes. The growl of the marine engine as it grabbed into the ocean. Captain Rick barking instructions. Ray holding onto the door frame relaying orders. Carl on the bridge and me on the reel. It was a ballet performed by filthy men who hated each other.

❖

"Don't let that load hit my cabin, goddammit!" yelled Captain Rick. We were unloading a 3,000-pound net bag of fish onto a towering processing vessel. It was hanging from a long cable as it was lifted out of our hold by a crane.

The bag was slowly drifting towards the cabin so I put my shoulder against it and pushed as hard as I could. Fish blood rained down on me like a horror movie, covering my plastic hood and jacket and pooling on the deck below me, mixing with entrails and eyeballs and other fish parts into an awful fish stew.

"Get this bag off my goddamned deck!" yelled Captain Rick into his walkie talkie.

The load slowly began to rise and move away from the cabin, draining blood and gore across the deck until it cleared the rail and began spattering into the ocean leaving a greasy red slick. Countless glassy fish eyes stared at me from the mesh bag. Suddenly a fish popped out of the top and flopped back onto the deck. I swiped at it with my pickhook, tearing off the small pectoral fin behind the eye before crunching through the gill cover and slinging it into the hold, where it slapped against the aluminum wall of the hold and left a bloody imprint.

We needed a break. We'd migrated north over several weeks

following schools near the shore, but now turned back towards Grannick where we'd heard some of the fleet were having success along a sand bar south of the Stragus River mouth. The trip would take three hours, so Ray took the bridge and the rest of us got some sleep.

❖

Tik'zet was the god of violent death. The Fire Snake stole the moon from Tik'zet and placed it in the sky to nourish humanity. But if humanity ever altered the earth's environment, the moon would return to Tik'zet and stop protecting humanity, and souls encountering Tik'zet's wrath would meet a violent death without warning.

❖

"Get off my goddamned net, Riggins!" screamed Captain Rick, standing on the back deck waving his gun. "Get the hell off my net you bastard!"

It was the first clear day in several weeks and we were fishing the sand bar south of the Stragus River mouth. An onshore breeze was picking up and clouds gathered on the horizon. Our holds were almost full but Captain Rick wanted to top up our catch. Riggins, the captain of a competing boat, lined up to set his net parallel to ours, which meant he would get most of the catch.

"Clear out you son-of-a-bitch!" yelled Captain Rick, pointing his gun directly at the offending vessel while holding onto the reel to steady himself.

"He hates Robby Riggins," said Ray beside me, "but he won't shoot him. Robby was a crab boat captain until a couple of years ago. That's a whole different league from gill netting and Rick can't stand it."

"Where's your crab boat, Riggins?" yelled Captain Rick. "Where's your goddammed crab boat?"

"Jesus Christ, lay off it, Rick," said Ray.

Ray said Robby lost his crab boat in a storm two seasons ago, and most of his 15-man crew.

"They all died?" I said.

"Happens a lot," said Ray. Crabbers fished in the winter and stacked too many crab pots on the deck, he explained. Then a storm would blow in, they'd ice up on one side, then flip. Only Robby and two other crew members survived.

Captain Rick had given up yelling and was no longer pointing his gun at Riggins' boat. Riggins calmly proceeded to block our net.

The sun was low in the sky by now and the onshore wind was still picking up, but Captain Rick wanted to pull our net and put it in one more time. As Carl reversed the boat and Ray and I pulled in the net, I looked at the long white sand bar that reached all the way back to the shore. I could see a trickle of smoke on the horizon, which must have been from Grannick's garbage dump, and the rusty hull of an abandoned ship protruding from the beach. It cast a dark shadow over

the white sand.

By the time we put the net back in, the other boats had already cleared out. Carl throttled forward while I released the reel and set the net. Captain Rick stood on the back deck with his arms crossed watching the net. Waves were starting to slap the side of the boat now, making a wet sloppy sound.

"Just over 12 foot below us," yelled Ray from the cabin, reading from the green LED depth monitor. "We're getting pushed onto the sand bar."

"Should we pull the net, Cap?" asked Carl.

Captain Rick didn't respond. He just stood there with his arms crossed. It seemed like he stood there forever, but my memory may not be completely accurate. In truth I really don't know how long we waited.

We knew it would be a frantic process to pull the net when Captain Rick gave the signal, given how shallow we were. Carl would reverse hard and we'd just dump the net into the back of the boat to save time, rather than roll it onto the reel.

"Bow's in the mud!" Ray suddenly yelled from the cabin.

"Dammit," said Captain Rick. "Pull the goddamned net."

Ray came back to help and we started pulling in the net while Carl put the boat in reverse, looking back at us through the cabin door. The boat lurched as he added power, causing us all to stumble.

"Don't chew my net," yelled Captain Rick, but it was too late. Carl had wrapped the net around the propeller, which was now making a low humming sound that meant it was jammed.

"Goddammit!" yelled Captain Rick. He stripped off his shirt, unbuckled his gun holster and sat on the side of the boat pulling off his boots.

"Get me a knife," he told Ray.

"You're getting in the water?" I said.

"I'm gonna clear the prop," he responded. "You wanna do it?"

Wearing just his jeans now, he threw one leg over the side of the boat, took the knife from Ray and clenched it between his teeth like an actor in a low-grade action movie, and slid over the rail into the icy water yelling "fuck" as best he could with the knife in his mouth. Then he dove under the boat.

Ray and Carl and I stood staring over the back of the boat. We could see Captain Rick underwater sawing away at the twisted net. His eyes were squinted and he was holding onto the jammed propeller with one hand and cutting with the other while his thin hair drifted around in the current. The boat started listing to one side as waves pushed us against the sand bar.

"We need more draft," yelled Ray when Captain Rick came up for air. "We've gotta dump some fish."

"Do it," said Captain Rick, gulping air and diving back under the

boat.

Carl and I jumped into the hold and began shoveling armfuls of fish up over the rail into the water while Ray pulled on the net from above to help Captain Rick. It took us about five minutes to dump half the load.

Suddenly the boat shook violently, like something heavy had hit the hull, and we heard thrashing in the water. Ray jumped away from the back of the boat and yelled "bear!" grabbing the reel to steady himself. The hull thumped again and the thrashing continued until we heard a guttural sound that must have come from Captain Rick. I'd never heard a sound like that before. I scrambled up out of the hold and saw a huge brown bear with its jaws clamped onto Captain Rick's neck and shoulder. It was backing away from the boat dragging Captain Rick up onto the sand bar. Captain Rick stared straight up and a thin trickle of blood ran down his bare chest.

"Jesus Christ," said Ray, rushing into the cabin and grabbing the radio handset.

"Mayday, Mayday," he said. "We've got a bear attack on the sand bar at the south river mouth of the Stragus. We have a man down and need assistance. I repeat, we have a bear attack and a man down and need assistance immediately."

I was frozen in place on the back deck watching the bear drag Captain Rick, whose body was leaving a trail in the sand that was filling with blood and seawater.

"Get the gun!" yelled Ray from the cabin.

The holster was lying beside me. I dropped my pickhook and took out the gun, holding it in front of me with my arms outstretched. The bear was about 10 feet away.

"Unlock the safety!" yelled Ray.

I unlocked the safety and pointed the gun at the bear again, getting down on one knee to steady myself.

"It's gonna gut him," said Carl behind me. "It's gonna gut him right in front of us."

The bear was now grunting from the effort of pulling Captain Rick's body up onto the sand bar, spewing white frothy saliva from its jowls. It gave one more yank and then released its grip, letting Captain Rick flop onto the sand. Then it swung its huge head from side to side and let out a loud roar.

I looked at my hands in front of me holding the gun, which was shaking. Dark blood pooled in the sand around Captain Rick's body and the bear kept swinging its huge head and growling.

Suddenly Ray was beside me. He snatched the gun from my hands and shot several rounds in the air. The bear backed away and stared at us, then turned and loped back up the sand bar towards the shore, leaving deep pawprints in the sand. I watched the bear until it reached

the rusty shipwreck on the beach, where it paused and looked at us one more time. Then it turned and disappeared inland.

❖

Captain Rick's body was stiff from lying in the icy water by the time a DNR helicopter arrived. The fingers on one of his hands were splayed like he was clawing the sand in fear. He wouldn't have liked that. Captain Rick wasn't scared of anything. We lifted him into a rescue stretcher and I tried to straighten his fingers. Then I wiped the cold sand from his hand with my shirt and tucked his arm in bedside him. The stretcher ascended on a cable, slowly rotating in the fading light, and that was the last I saw of Captain Rick.

❖

Oh, Great Spirit
Whose voice I hear in the Winds
Whose breath gives life to all the World
Teach me that I may walk in Balance
with the passing of each glorious Sun
For as long as the Moon shall rise
For as long as the Rivers shall flow
For as long as the Fish shall swim
Let us know peace.

The Navigator

Sammy Aiko

He knew it was nearly suppertime when the jellyfish woman came to find him.

Sometimes he was wandering the halls of the palace; most often he was in his chambers, writing or sketching all he saw on sheafs of seal-skin parchment; always she came to find him.

He didn't know her name– he called her the jellyfish woman because that is what she reminded him of. She was pale pink all around, her skin slippery and slightly luminescent. From her scalp emerged long tendrils, thicker and wilder than hair, and from her waist protruded a large bell-like shape, like that of a mushroom or an umbrella, that might be an underskirt but which he suspected was flesh. He caught glimpses of it through the gap in her robe sometimes, and wondered.

She never spoke to him– even if she were to try, he understood little of their rattling, gargling language– but always appeared silently at his side and led him to the baths.

By now he had mostly ceased to attract stares from the denizens of the bathhouse, and had learned to let himself relax into the scalding, slightly sulphurous-smelling pit as the jellyfish woman combed out his hair, shaved his cheeks and jaw with a silver knife, scrubbed his back and shoulders. When she was done, she helped him out and dressed him in bright-colored robes finer than the silk garments of the Eastern bazaars, robes that against his skin felt like hardly more than a gentle current. Finally, she fixed his hair, now grown long and wild, behind his head with a comb of coral and pearl.

Then it was suppertime.

Every night the court feasted in a grand hall, roughly ovaline and with a ceiling so high it disappeared into the distant gloom– upon reflection, he couldn't be sure it had a ceiling at all. The walls were of glittering crystal; they reflected the blue-white glow of the tiny worm-like creatures who clung to them in brilliant patches, illuminating the room. Across the dark stone floor stretched three long stone tables which were each night piled with the finest and richest foods: whole villages of crabs with red armor and pink flesh, mountains of soft pale fruits with no earthly names, heaps of cool slimy oysters, great slabs of red meat tender as warm butter, carafes of sweet wine large as human children. Every night to this grand feast came the courtiers: hundreds of bright-hued robes, bejeweled heads, and odd appendages, dazzling

and eerie in the ghostly light.

Overlooking it all, at a table on a dais at the far end of the hall, sat the Queen with her seven sons and seven daughters. Next to her, an empty seat.

It was to this seat that the jellyfish woman led him every night, after he had been bathed and dressed. He took his place between the Queen, who spared him a smile with her mouth just slightly wider than a human woman's mouth, and the eldest Prince, who glowered and tore at his food with dagger-like teeth long as a man's finger.

It was a silent sort of meal. Though the hall was filled with chatter and on either side of him the Princes and Princesses conversed merrily, he could speak but a few phrases in their tongue and they knew not a word of his. Occasionally he attempted to speak to the Queen– simple things, like *The oysters are good today*, or *I like your dress*– but she usually just laughed at him, a deep bubbling sound that had scared him the first time he'd heard it.

When the Queen finished her supper, she stood up, and the court stood up too. There was a great scraping and commotion as she raised her hand to dismiss them and they hurried to down the last of their wine, slurp one more oyster, or make a final jest to their companions before bowing and taking their leave. As this fuss subsided, she took his hand and led him away.

They walked through long dim halls where slithering eels brushed against their ankles and unknown things uttered alien cries from adjoining passages. The palace was a labyrinth, dark and impossible, its twists and turns seemingly without logic– every night they walked a different path from the hall to the Queen's chambers. In all his ramblings through the palace he had never once come across her rooms by chance, vast though they were, and though he had never tried to find them on his own, he was certain he would be unable to, as though their location was a secret kept between her and the palace.

They came to her chambers at the end of a hallway as long and dim as all the others, behind a massive stone door which swung open at the touch of her hand. Inside was a wild jumble of rooms, the walls hewn crystal, the ceilings dripping drunk with stalactites. Stone beasts with pearly eyes snarled from shelves and crevices, silk tapestries woven with scenes of strange hunts swayed against the walls, everywhere were strewn wonderful gowns and strings of jewels any one of which would surely fetch a man a fortune. She led him past it all, past kelp curtains and mother-of-pearl mirrors, past chests and divans and vanities, to a smallish and relatively bare room which contained only one thing: her bed.

It was an extraordinary bed. Twice the length of a man and ten times his width, it filled the entire room, wall to wall. Its sheets, red as fresh

blood, were of the same cloth as his robes, softer and cooler than all the silks of China, and upon them in gold thread so delicate it seemed barely more than a shimmer was embroidered a pattern of writhing roaring dragons. Most wonderful of all, though, this bed sat not atop a wooden frame and four legs but nestled into some great monstrous skull, split in half and turned upside-down so that its beaklike maxilla gaped to the heavens and its eye sockets, near resting on the ground, gazed listlessly at the walls. Sitting on this bed he felt like Jonah on the tongue of the whale.

She stood over him and untied her robe, which billowed for a moment like angels' wings behind her before she cast it away. Her body was strong and hard, and so deathly pale that blue veins appeared, twisting stark as rivers across her flesh. As she fell upon him, all black hair and flashing eyes, she looked almost human, but for the webs between her fingers and toes, the gills sliced into her neck, the pupils so large and dark they nearly swallowed the whole eye...

He'd been a seafaring man once, a navigator on a merchant ship. He remembered with fondness his days aboard the *Amphitrite*, sailing those long miles between England and the East, the brig cutting low through the water with a belly full of tea, spices, and opium. He was a young man still, just past twenty, aching for adventure and the freedom of the sailor's life. He had known the clamor of foreign ports and the touch of exotic women. He had awoken each day with the hot sun on his skin and the sting of brine in his nostrils.

Until the night of the typhoon, that awful night when the *Amphitrite* went down in the South China Sea. Grown angry with the vessel named to flatter her, the sea goddess sent all the armies of her husband's domain to torment her– waves high as cathedrals, rains sharp as daggers, winds to tear a man's skin from his bones. He was torn from the deck though his cramped fingers clung to the mast with all their might, as all around him his crewmates sunk to watery graves. The last thing he remembered from that night, amidst the gray-green chaos of the waves and the nauseating taste of salt in his throat, was a tugging at his wrist: the distinct feeling of squeezing fingers, cold and slimy like the grip of a dead thing.

He had awoken in that very bed, blind at first as his eyes struggled to adjust to the darkness. He felt very odd. He was not in pain, nor was he cold, nor hot, but he knew that something was wrong. As he raised a hand to feel about himself, wondering if he had perhaps woken in a coffin, he realized that the air around him was not indeed air but water.

He knew then, with the sureness of a sailor, with the certainty of a man well-acquainted with her vast awful face, that he found himself at the bottom of the sea.

But when he opened his mouth to scream, he found that, rather

than a rush of bubbles escaping his mouth and water filling his lungs, he could breath the seawater as effortlessly as an infant breathes the water of the womb. Though it was cooler, heavier, more insistently *present* than air, though he found the slight floating sensation disorienting at first, he learned soon enough that he could move and speak in the water almost as usual.

Later he came to impute this miracle to some sorcery of hers. Lying next to her in that strange bed, he often thought about her magic, keeping him alive, and about how beautiful and terrible she was that first night she came to him, white as bleached bone.

He never knew quite what time it was, in that palace at the bottom of the sea which had always the look of twilight, but he knew it was not yet suppertime, as the jellyfish woman had not yet come to find him.

He was wandering the halls of the palace, as he sometimes did, knowing not what he hoped to find. He passed through dozens of hallways, so similar and so circuitous that he couldn't be sure he was really going anywhere at all. He had seen, however, a great variety of extraordinary things– more, it seemed, than on one of his typical excursions. He had seen a man with the lower half of a giant lobster, scuttling about on six legs; a school of tiny fish whose skeletons glowed green through their clear jelly-like bodies; a gaggle of girls with slits in the backs of their robes to make room for rows of arm-length spines; a turtle as large as a horse, drifting lazily in the slight current; a veiled figure in a palanquin born by six scarlet octopi, for which he had been forced to flatten himself against the wall so as not to be knocked over.

Eventually he came to a hallway which ended in a stone door not unlike the Queen's, except this one was smaller and slightly ajar, and from the space around the door emanated a halo of bluish light and the faint clatter of movement and voices. This door intrigued him, for though he had seen doors like it before, they had always been dark and silent and tightly shut. He glanced nervously back down the hall before approaching this door with cautious steps and reaching a hand out to touch it.

It gave way slightly under his fingers without making a sound. He continued to exert gentle pressure until the door was open just wide enough for him to peer in.

There was nobody there.

It was a dim stone chamber, only a few square meters, more like a grotto than a room. It was empty of living beings, except for a few stray glow-worms– the light he had seen and sounds he had heard were actually coming from behind a second door, half open at the opposite side of the room– but against the walls of this room were piled shadowy masses of *things*. Ordinary things, it seemed: one corner housed mostly

glass bottles, while another was dedicated to muddy-colored garments. Here a modestly-sized stack of books and there a mound of glittering gold and silver jewelry. Ordinary things, yes, but ordinary *human* things– he had not seen their like since coming to the palace.

Overcome with curiosity, he stepped into the room to examine them. The books were closest to him; he picked one up from the top of the stack. It was a notebook, thin and shabbily bound in plain leather. When he opened it, he found the frail pages waterlogged and the ink smeared– whatever had been written in it was now illegible. As he moved to put it down, another book caught his eye, a small blue one with gold-embossed letters. It looked just like the Bible which his old friend, the first mate on the *Amphitrite*, kept always on his person for protection.

He snatched it up and opened it, nearly tearing the binding in the process. And sure enough, there on the first page were penciled the initials *J.H.R*.

He was standing stock still, staring at the book in his hands, when there was movement at the far door. He had hardly time to press himself against the wall when someone entered– a small, stout figure with eyes on stalks like a crab– and tossed a pocketwatch onto the jewelry pile. The creature left without seeming to see him, going back through the door from which issued the noise and light, leaving it mostly open.

Now he had a clear view into the adjoining room. It was a kitchen, massive and bustling with activity. Servants came and went, arms filled with jugs and bowls and platters; great iron pots simmered and slabs of meat sizzled over huge blue-white flames; tables stood laden with crabs to be boiled and fruit to be cut.

In the far corner, barely in his line of vision, stood a strange party– or perhaps *stood* was the wrong word, as the man who seemed to be the leader of this party, the bulkiest and most menacing of the group, had from the waist down not human legs but the powerful gray tail of a shark. This party was armored, with spears strapped to their backs and swords dangling from their belts. Between them they held what seemed to be a few large nets.

He watched as a servant, a woman with outsized claws like a crab, approached the party and gestured towards the nets. As the leader crouched to help her disentangle something from within them, he could see clearly what they contained.

Human bodies– mostly young, male, in the garb of sailors and navy men. One looked to be a cabin boy, no older than thirteen. Another was white-bearded and peg-legged. All were blue-faced, motionless.

The crab-clawed woman and shark-tailed man succeeded in their object: they extracted from this human mass the body of a straw-haired young man in the red and white of a Royal Marine. The woman

carried him over her shoulder to an empty table, laid him down, and began to undress him, dumping his clothing and personal affects unceremoniously into the arms of the small figure he had seen before.

When he was completely naked, she produced a large triangular knife and, with the swiftness of the laughing street-butchers of London, cracked through his ribcage and sliced open his torso.

This process was now obscured by the thick cloud of blood that bloomed in the water around the body, and his eyes began to wander, to look with fresh horror upon the activities of the kitchen. The hunks of meat roasting on spits over the fire were now stomach-turning rather than mouth-watering, and he noticed for the first time the row of skinned carcasses on silver meat hooks; the barrel underneath overflowing with hands, feet, heads; and everywhere the cruel glint of cleavers and tenderizers.

He clutched the first mate's Bible to his chest and stood there, staring, dumb. He thought he could taste his friend's flesh on his tongue, feel his tendons between his teeth. It occurred to him then that none of the Queen's children, even the very youngest, seemed to have fathers around.

CONTRIBUTORS

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5706 S. University Avenue, Room 001
Chicago, IL 60637

PRINTING
Grace Printing
8130 N. St. Louis Ave.
Skokie, IL 60076

euphonyjournal.org