1990

Song to ospreys : photographs, poems, and short stories on the Northern California coast

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San Jose State University

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**Song to Ospreys: Photographs, poems, and short stories on the
Northern California coast. [Original works]**

Harris, Michael, M.A.

San Jose State University, 1990

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SONG TO OSPREYS

*PHOTOGRAPHS, POEMS, AND SHORT STORIES
ON THE NORTHERN CALIFORNIA COAST*

BY MICHAEL HARRIS

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF
A
SPECIAL MAJOR MASTER'S PROJECT
IN THE FIELDS OF

ENVIRONMENTAL STUDIES
NATURAL SCIENCE
ENGLISH

May, 1990

TABLE OF CONTENTS

<i>INTRODUCTION</i>	i
<i>ACKNOWLEDGMENTS</i>	iii
<i>DEDICATION</i>	iv
<i>TURN OFF THE MOTOR AND WAIT, LISTEN. . .</i>	1
<i>ZOYA, LIVE WIRE, HAR-T-FOOL</i>	3
<i>HARBOR SEAL</i>	5
<i>STEAMER'S LANE</i>	7
<i>SAND SHARK</i>	13
<i>THE SALMON TRIP</i>	19
<i>PASSAGE OF HAWKS</i>	34
<i>ELEPHANT SEAL</i>	37
<i>LIKE LOOSE HORSES</i>	39
<i>FIVE MILES OUT</i>	55
<i>AUTUMN PLANKTON</i>	67
<i>FORGIVENESS OF PEREGRINES</i>	69
<i>LOOK THERE!</i>	73
<i>GRAY WHALE COVE</i>	75
<i>BLUE WHALE</i>	87
<i>TOMALE'S POINT</i>	89
<i>SONG TO OSPREYS</i>	91

INTRODUCTION

This book is a collection of original poems, short stories, and photographs inspired by the northern California Coast. It is accompanied by a gallery display of original large-scale photographs treating the same region. Together they form complimentary elements of a creative project for a Special Major Master's degree in Environmental Photography and Writing. Some photographs are presented in both book and gallery form and some are not. I intend for the written and photographic elements of the project to *refer* to each other rather than *duplicate* each other. Some photographs, then, are best presented mural size, some are best illustrating a story or poem. This project adds to a body of regional-specific art works created by such poets as Robinson Jeffers, Gary Snyder, and Brother Antonius, and such photographers as Morely Baer, Edward Weston, and Ansel Adams that focus on the coastal region. Such an attempt may seem formidable considering the stature of the work of these artists. Yet surely the last photograph has not been created, nor the last story written. Rather, such artists can only inspire more work from others.

I have two purposes in making this book and display. First, I hope to produce works of photography and literature that compliment each other by initial—rather than later—design. The many picture books produced by the Sierra Club and other similar organizations incorporate photography and literature from a number of sources. In Not Man Apart, to cite one example, lines taken from poet Jeffers are matched to photographs by artists such as Weston. My intent in this project is to be both writer and photographer.

Secondly, I hope with these pieces to create in an audience emotional associations with the coast. I believe a collection of fiction and poems treating the people, wildlife, and character of the region can best promote a regard for this unique landscape, for stories engage the passions of people and fascinate and involve the reader. What is more likely to be read by the public today, reports on sardine tonnage taken during the crash of that important fishery decades ago, or Steinbeck's novel Cannery Row? I think story telling, that oldest of human habits, can do at least as much to foster a regard for the environment as any

volley of arguments for conservation. In these stories and poems, my intent is not to harangue, but rather to engage the reader and create the feeling that maybe—just maybe—a mother and baby whale hampered by a gill net could swim before them, as happens in “Gray Whale Cove”, or that a wandering sight-seeker just might find a new/old General Store crowded with riotously eccentric locals as happens in “Like Loose Horses.”

Similarly, the display of photographs accompanying this book are also meant to tell a story rather than simply record the physical features of “place.” Poems accompany many of the photographs. And photographs without poems are meant to be evocative rather than documentary as in one picture where the sky is replaced with an inverted image of the sea to create a more striking effect, or the piece where reflections behind a boat mesh with a hand-drawn calendar, or a “net of time.”

I hope that these works promote in the people experiencing them a sense of that “trans-human intrinsic value,” which Jeffers defined as beauty and may foster as well a resolve to preserve the wild character of the northern California Coastline.

Michael Harris

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

What I have produced here should have a hundred names of authorship, for this work carries the influences of many fine people. Most of these are teachers. To all, I offer thanks for their support, their criticism, and their example.

Four deserve special thanks: *Dr. Gary Klee*, who first listened to my unorthodox idea for a Master's degree and book and who has been my most "rigorous" critic; *Dr. Bob Hassur* whom I met over a registration table, and who gave me the idea for my first published story; *Mr. Nils Peterson*, my first and most enduring creative writing teacher; and especially *Craig Strete*, who has confirmed my ambition to write for life.

DEDICATION

Fifty miles beyond the Golden Gate, the pilot swung the throttle hard to the left over the glinting Pacific and pulled the cargo latch to let fly ashes of a dozen people. Strangers in life, fellows now.

Among them was one who would have counted these descending people as his friends. "There is some good in everybody," he always told me. There was some bad in him. Bad fortunes, anyway. So early had he won in life. So early had he lost it all; lost it all across a hundred bars, a dozen years, and a riotous misspent life.

"I always feel better after I've been swimming in the ocean," he would tell me. "When I die, I want my ashes spread over the ocean."

To my father I dedicate this book.

*TURN OFF THE MOTOR AND WAIT,
LISTEN...*

You hear before you see them.

The ocean gleams and jostles
The silence grows loud.
And then from the edges of hearing
A sigh puffs across the water to you.

But you question what you hear:
Nothing is there, nothing seen.
Then again a puff, close as hearing;
Then more—four more—volley in. Silence.

Then a *blast* scares you out the boat
And a mountain heaves up starboard
Spouting white steam, calico with barnacles,
Heaves up and lounges in the surge.

Then another sound: haunting, nearly mournful,
Like a wind at dusk funneling down chimes.
A breath, a wind that whistles
Down caverns of pink flesh.

"ZOYA,"

"LIVE WIRE,"

"HAR-T-FOOL."

Griffins,

Fairies,

Centaurs.

Anything but vessels.

The forecastles tell:

Many are sleek & fetching as women,
rouged and manicured as princesses.

Others, squatty men with jutting cigars,
with planks layed barrel-chested, water-tight,
fashioned, each, by eccentric barons;
crafts of character or character abandoned,
delighting in white paint
and weathering wood,
in rust, missing teeth.

Ringed all, studded all, tricked all,
with icons, with jests, with gargoyles.
Sea-fops all; crusting traders all;
nomads gone out helm-alee
for the great beauty and death.

HARBOR SEAL

A noise of air slurping in water seethes above the noise of the wind. "What the hell was that?" I say out loud to the shore breeze, as one begins to do when alone with the elements. I glance at a swirl of water at a small inlet of the kelp. But there is nothing. A hole of my mind starts to teeth with spooks: a shark? Naw. What else? It was big—but not really that big judging from the froth tracings that roll over, now, before a swell. I wave the incident aside.

There are other things to mutter about right now, like how I can get these Giant Kelp fronds to lash around the ropes of my raft sides so they won't slip off in this current that seems determined enough to shove the whole continent eastward. I don't want to dive for half an hour only to surface and find the raft drifting off half a mile away.

I know I shouldn't dive alone. Well no, I don't know it, don't know it enough, obviously, because here I am. Oddly enough, though, each time I have gone and broken "the rule" I meet another who is diving alone. One guy has dived alone here for thirty years. Small satisfying adventures.

When I slide off the raft through the

gold-brown branchings of kelp, I find the visibility is not as great as I first thought gazing from above: fifteen to twenty feet, with lots of stuff in the water. Almost immediately I'm aware of a white blotch of a phantom below me, persistent, present as a dream that has been just waiting for eyelids to close, waiting to unwind. I glance around me and examine the long trailing ropes of the giant kelp stalks descending to invisibility. I glance downward. The whitish blob is still a blob. What is it? I descend without effort since I have just a little too much weight on my belt, while my mind tries to fit this thing like a peg into some hole of cognition. A jellyfish, yes, a jellyfish it must be. But then the apparition melts and reforms itself into a little toy seal.

Descending.

I see it looking up at me fixedly.

And I realize, densely, this is a seal, a harbor seal, pearl white in the gloom, it is a good fifty feet down. It is miniaturized only by distance, and it looks up at me unwavering, again like a dream that has been waiting to spin with the close of one's lids.

I float downwards. It does not move away. I drift to a few yards and the seal glides along between the trunks of kelp, consumingly curious. I roll over and swim as playfully as I can appear, having learned that fish will approach you on their own if you don't beeline for them. And this seems

to work with the seal also. For it arcs and glides around to my other side, staring like I am the most amazing thing it has seen in a month. Its white body, streaked with dark brush-stroke markings, fairly glows in the gloomy backdrop of the sea bottom fifty feet beneath the surface. It swims around like a fat little ballerina dancing at home on a Sunday morning.

And strangely, I wonder if I will fully remember the corporeality of this event; if I'll recall these turns and glances of hers, remember fully each twist through columns of kelp—or if I even fully experience the event *now*, even now as the fat lantern-white ballerina zooms between kelp spires. It is so easy to thrust these events as they happen to a sideshow of the mind, because a thing occurs in the “common” present—a present common because, well, because here it is—it's all right here—like everything else—no big deal. With retelling the experience grows pompous in weight and drama.

So I strain almost fifty feet under, 1½ atmospheres under, to fully appreciate what is simply and corporeally before me, to keep dreaming, to zoom out of reference, to engage the fullness of my fat little harbor seal, so that she lives unrecalled, strangely unbreathing, untimed and gliding through dithering beams and glooms.

STEAMER'S LANE

"Watch out? *You* tell *me* to watch out? We'll see who can 'watch out!' I been surfing here for years, twerp, *years*. This is my spot! *Mine*, you little valley bitch! This is Tobias Quint's front yard!"

That's what he was yelling, I'm telling you real! Wait, get this—then he catches a wave and tries to run over the poor slob, I mean I didn't see what the dude even did to get Tobias' goat that much. Nothin' that I could see. But there he is trying to run this 'valley dude' over.

"Yeah and that goes for all you twerps, all of youuuu! Where were *you* when I shot the tunnel twelve different times in one day? You were hangin' from yer mother's tit, that's where! *We* were the hot doggers—still are!—just stay outta my way! You stay outta my way, I say. Me and the lions are the ownliest ones deserve to be here. Why don't you go back to your smoggy little valley and cook yourselves to piss?

And then he starts yelling 'and

bellowing until it all boils over into some kinda *animal* noise. Some kinda donkey bray, some kind of sea lion bawl.

"AAAAHHHbbb!"

AHHHHOOOUbbb!"

There he is bawlin' like a goddam *antmule* in the six-foot swells banking around the point. And all the sea lions are clowning all over the place like usual out on the big rock bluffin' and buttin' chests and mouths at each other like they do. And me and about fifty people are watching the surfers from the cliff, just like always. And Tobias keeps bellowing like a crazy animal. And so—get this—I see this *one*, this huge old bull sea lion out on the rock—yeah, I seen this one before: a big and battered old fart of a lion he is, he looks like he's won and lost a few marbles along the way—he seems to hear all this palaver and he hunkers up and throws his thick neck and head into the air like he's listening; and he glares around in our direction. Tobias is yellin,'

"You jerks don't even *deserve* to be out here! There's no *room* on these waves! I can't get any *room* around here! There's too many damned people. I hate people! *I*

bate people! You can't even think anymore there's so many goddam people. You jerks don't even *deserve* to be here! AAAHHhh! AAAHHHOOUUHH!

Then the big old sea lion dives offa the rock into the water and...

"Surfin's for *men*, not boys! You're all *cheap shots*. None 'a you would know a wave if it slapped you on yer asses. AAAHHHhhh!

And the big bull sea lion catches a wave and barrels on up. But Tobias doesn't see the damned thing coming. It leaps up right over Tobias and splashes its tail fins right across his legs and makes him fall off his board.

"**Whoowww...** Whoo...did that? I'll k-k(cough) **kill** the bastard! I'll kill 'em!"

And Tobias is coming all unglued, he's so sputtering mad. He punches at the water trying to hit another guy, but misses. He grabs his board and climbs back on.

"I'll kill 'em! WHOOOOO?! Somebody here is a **dead man!** I wanna KNOW! **WHHOOOO!?** That man dies! Hey, hey, what the hell, hey let go 'a me you bastard!"

The lion—he must weigh 1,000

pounds! It nips at Tobias' fin, like in play. But, you know, a bull sea lion playing is like an elephant playing.

"Let go 'a me, you bastard! I said let go! AAAHHHHOOOUUHH! I'll kill you too, lion! AAHHHOOUUUHH!"

And this only eggs the sea lion on more! He seems to dig the call, or whatever. Anyway, get this—both of them are bellowing out there in the surf, and then the damned thing suddenly bursts out of the water and lunges up on *top* of Tobias! There's thrashin' and splashin' for a few seconds, you can't tell a wet suit from seal skin, a slow frothing wave rolls over them, and, then we just didn't see neither of 'em anymore, Sheriff...

SAND SHARK

"Whatchu got, Ricky?" three kids ask at once but not entirely together. They crowd around a shaggy brown-haired boy who is reeling something up onto the pier up from the water. Wind gusts whip off the blue and white-capped ocean bringing that fresh and sour smell of Pacific brine.

"I don't know, let's see!" Ricky answers as he keeps reeling his catch in all the way up from the rolling surf twenty feet below. People have been catching champion-sized fish here all the summer—a twenty-five pound salmon was reeled in just a couple minutes ago. But Ricky has a smaller pole—just three feet—with which he fishes for surf-perch and flounders. As he reels, more kids come over

"Hey look, a baby shark!" says Fillipo, Ricky's best friend. Sure enough, Rick has pulled up what seems to be a toy shark about 10 inches long. It flops around in sideways jerks on the cement pier, just

the way it swims in the water, but with greater force. And Ricky holds the little shark down with his foot and one hand to try and get the hook out of the shark's mouth with some long-nosed pliers.

"Put your fingers in his mouth," jokes Fillipo.

"You put your fingers in his mouth," Rick shoots back.

"No way, man."

A man in a green parka with a grey furry hood looms over the children. He leans way over them, the sun is blocked by his great hood, and he casts a shadow at the center of the little group. He croaks, "Sand shark, you got yourself a little sand shark."

"Does that mean they eat sand?" brays Horsehead Miller with his buck teeth flashing back up into the shadow of the man.

"No, dodo," Fillipo jeers trying to ignore the shadow. He steps sideways to get into the sun again.

"Well, what do they eat then?" Horsehead yells without really yelling—the way he always sounds. His voice booms through the gust of wind that blusters, just now, up over the pier.

"Fingers!" Fillipo laughs like a pealing bell from his edge of sunlight.

The brown loaves of the hills hunch above the little seaside town like sleepy old cronies, like old cheeks and chins whose sole amusement consists in watching the tricks and trials on the long munipicle pier beneath them. And the pier is the chief feature of the coast for miles around. It marches through the white plundering breakers straight out into the sweep of blue shoulders. Great schools of anchovies and smelt cruise up right here, followed by the sea lions, by the salmon, the striped bass, and by the sharks.

"Are you going to keep him?" Fillipo asks flashing a white smile from his gleam of the sun.

"Maybe I should throw him back—can you eat sharks?" Ricky asks as he stands up with the hook gleaming from his pliers."

"No, but they can eat you!" Fillipo shouts.

"Yeah, yeah, throw him back" several kids say at once. "That's a nice fish, a good eatin' fish, ought to barbecue up real good," croaks the man from his green-hooded

shadow. Ricky squints up at the man, but all that can be seen is a stiff black ball of a beard sticking out of the shadow of the furry hood.

"Yeah, that's a real nice fish there," he croaks again and turns to clomp away into the thicket of twelve-foot fishing rods that are bristling all along the length of the pier.

Filippo's kid sister, Grace, dances up gaily and says like a little doll, "is a nice fish!—a nice fish!" And Ricky frowns.

"Why does everybody call a fish they are going to kill a nice fish?" he asks out loud. "Aren't they alright just swimming around?"

"So are you going to keep him?" Fillippo asks of Ricky again.

"I don't know," he answers glumly looking at the toy shark wiggling sideways back and forth. It is light gray on top and white on the bottom, and it is very streamlined. Ricky never looked at a shark up close before. "It's kind of pretty, isn't it?"

"Is a nice fish!" little Grace sings again, but she won't go near it.

"If I throw him back, though," Ricky muses out loud, " if I throw him back he'll

probably take a bite out of me in four years when I start surfen.' " Everybody suddenly laughs and hoots over this.

"Yeah, you better not throw him back then," bawls Horsehead Miller. "Or don't surf, because he sure as shootin' will remember you snaggin' him up out of the water. Wait 'till you're on his hunting grounds! Ha, he'll probably grow to be 10 feet long—twenty! All sharks grow up to be 20 feet long, I saw it on TV. And they never forget a thing."

"How do you know that, dumb?" challenges Fillipo, "You're thinking of elephants. Sharks can't remember anything. They're just like you! Without buck teeth."

"I'm tellin' ya sharks remember everything. Look at this one. He remembers where the water is, he remembers what side you caught him on, see, he's wriggling back towards it."

Ricky toys with the little shark with his feet for a minute, debating whether or not Horsehead Miller might be right.

"How big did you say these sharks get?" he asked. A familiar croak of a voice lobs over his shoulder again in answer:

"Oh, they get a few feet long," the

croaking man in the green parka says, appearing again from the thicket of fishing rods—"maybe longer. You can't tell until you catch them again—or until they catch you, heh, heh, heh." Ricky scowls. Everybody thinks they're funny today.

"So are you going to keep it, or throw it back?" Fillipo asks for the third or fourth time.

"I'm thinking, I'm thinking," Ricky frowns, "don't rush me."

"You better throw it back pretty quick if your going to, sport," the green parka plods on, "they can't last forever out of water, ya know. You oughtta keep it and barbecue it. It's a good fish. A good eatin' fish." And he shuffles off again with low guttural chuckles. Ricky squints ruefully after him.

"But then," he says out loud more to himself than anybody else. "But then, it might remember that I let it go and so won't bite me later on."

"That's silly," guffaws Horsehead Miller, "sharks don't remember like that."

"You just said they did, dodo!" Fillipo jeers.

"Don't talk to me about sharks, I

know all about sharks and you don't. All this shark's gonna remember about you is *bittin*.' So you better eat it, Ricky."

"That doesn't make sense." Ricky rolls his eyes.

"What doesn't?" demands Horsehead Miller. "It makes sense to me. Sharks are killers. You better barbecue it."

"Well, I don't know," Ricky hesitates.

"Oh, OK, *fry* it then," Horsehead says with a screwed up face that makes him look like a horse with a cowlick.

"It's my fish, I caught it, I say what happens to it," yells Ricky.

"So then, what do you say?" Horsehead Miller brays with popping-open eyes.

"Are you going to keep it?" Fillipo asks even again.

"Maybe I will, or maybe I won't."

"You better make up your mind, hey, you heard what that goofy guy said, it can't stay out of water for long."

Ricky slowly nudges the little shark with one foot, then the other foot over to the side of the pier. He hesitates a moment when it reaches the edge of the cement.

"Maybe I should keep it for a

souvenir. Or maybe I should let it be."

"Hey, Sport," the green parka croaks, "I'll take that little fry if you don't want it, hey, hey, Sport, I said I'll take it."

All the kids rush over to the railing to watch Ricky nudge the little gray shark the last inch over the pier and drop twenty feet to splash into the sea. It floats like is dead for a minute, then could just be seen swimming downward as a white foraging wave churns over it.

THE SALMON TRIP

He was a good—or a bad captain—I guess, depending on how you looked at it. He carefully counted out each big salmon hook behind the counter like they were silver dollars in the pre-dawn cigar-filled bait shop. He obviously set his own course even on old floor planks, not trusting anyone to count his hooks nor usher him around the groggy fishermen that lined up to pay their fare and buy their beer.

"COMIN' THROUGH, COMIN THROUGH," he boomed on his way down to his boat, the "Salty Dog." Tall, six and a half feet or so, maybe more, Captain Tom looked like a middle-aged actor with those rouged cheeks only the sea bestows. The sea also bestowed bossy voices on its favorites. When he spoke, he made it obvious that 'being liked' was not an issue in his life. Worse, hardly a thing alive, dead, or imagined, it seemed, was too small to pass Captain Tom without drawing thunder. You could hear him clear down at the dock in the pre-dawn darkness barking to his first

boarders.

"SET YOUR THINGS IN THE MIDDLE BETWEEN THE BENCHES, BETWEEN THE BENCHES," I could see him braying to a white-haired old fart who was already engaged in stowing things between the benches, "WE DON'T WANT THINGS ROLLING ALL OVER FROM HELL TO BREAKFAST!"

The dark February morning was just cold enough to trigger a shiver without dampening the lure of adventure. The stars overhead had just stabbed through opaque wisping clouds and shone with a cold passion of diamonds. Black black velvet held them all. The engines of the forty-foot fishing boat idled healthily in the berth of the dock warming up; not even a stutter came from the throaty exhaust pipes. It was a fine boat, really, roomy, with wide decks sweeping out from the high bow, a boat made for the chop and spray of the northern Pacific out of San Francisco.

"What d'ya think, a six pack enough?" my friend Randy asked of me in the slight fog of cigar smoke of the shop as he doffed his green ball cap and pulled a five-dollar bill from the tight curls of hair

above his ear. With his oddly lopsided grin, words only spilled out one side of his mouth.

"For you? I guess so. I brought some beer with me, but I don't want to be caught short of ration out there," I answered yawning, and my other two buddies chimed in.

"Don't want to be caught short," Little Joe grinned, who was the shortest one of us all.

"No way," my best friend Lee laughed, 'be prepared,' I say, just like when I was an eagle scout." Lee, tall and shaggy headed, with a kind earnest voice, was the most avid fisherman of us all.

"Eagle scout?" wisecracked Randy out the side of his mouth. "You look more like a 'beagle scout' to me." Two more six packs were purchased, bringing a smile to the fat store owner's outdoorsy face.

"Shall we, gents?" invited Lee of us all. "Let's get some fish!"

In the darkness, sweat-shirt and parka-clad figures stepped awkwardly over the gunwale into the boat from the dock to then arrange themselves around the perimeter, each taking up residence at a

brace that would hold their fishing rods. My three buddies all took spots together, but I went to the far corner at the rear of the boat figuring four conspiring fishermen in one place was unfair to the fish, or to my own prospects for catching anything. This proved to be wrong as far as fishing was concerned, but just the spot to see the strange turn of events that day.

"CAST OFF THE ROPE, AMOS," boomed Captain Tom, "HURRY UP CAST OFF THE ROPE, LET'S GET THE HELL OUT OF HERE, THESE PEOPLE ARE WAITING,"

The 'Salty Dog' barreled out of the harbor into the night swells. The air grew crisper, sharper, bringing giggles to some of the younger fishermen. I looked up as we headed past the pillars that marked the entrance to the harbor to see the black sky began to shift blue-black, almost like a surprise, and then to sourceless gray. The sea took on a milky mercurial sheen as the boat split out and tossed back its lively white wake. Altogether, about thirty bundled people chatted and slurped coffee or huddled with their thoughts in the dawn. It seemed like it was going to be a beautiful day. It would certainly be an unusual one

in the annals of fishing lore.

"THERE'S COFFEE IN THE CABIN FOR ALL, HAVE AN EXTRA CUP OF COFFEE," the Captain blared over the loudspeaker, "WE DON'T WANT ANYBODY FALLING ASLEEP AND OVERBOARD FOR LACK OF COFFEE." Then he switched off the loudspeaker and answered his first mate in the cabin with as much volume as when the microphone was on, "WHAT DO YOU MEAN, I SHOULD GET A NEW COFFEE URN? I'VE HAD THAT COFFEE URN FOR TWENTY YEARS, GOT IT FROM AN UNCLE IN THE NORWEGIAN NAVY, HE GOT IT FROM A PORTUGUESE FISHING CAPTAIN WHO GOT IT FROM COLUMBUS' 123RD NEPHEW. SO WHAT IF IT LOOKS LIKE A BILGE TANK, IT MAKES LOTS OF COFFEE AND IT MAKES ME LUCKY—I NEVER COME BACK EMPTY HANDED AS LONG AS ITS BREWIN.' SO STOW YOUR MALARKY."

I treated myself to a cup made from the battered old bilge pump of a coffee urn—Columbus just may have carried the thing. It cranked out a brew that scalded your pipes and gave your breath an air like old rope. As the brave ones of us winced

with Captain's coffee in the chill, the planked world beneath our feet suddenly pitched. The high muscling drone of engines that we all took for gospel slackened and slowed. The wake crept forward after us and all ears perked up in the new moorings of the dawn.

"IN THE WATER, GET READY TO GET YOUR HOOKS IN THE WATER! CHECK YOUR BAIT, IT ALL SHOULD BE READY FOR YOU, WE DID FOR YOU, GET THAT BAIT IN THE WATER WHEN WE STOP, THERE'S FISH BEIN' CAUGHT RIGHT NOW FROM THE OTHER BOATS, IF WE DIDN'T TAKE SO LONG TO GET GOIN' WE'D BE HEADIN' BACK RIGHT NOW WITH LIMITS," Captain Tom squawked over his loudspeaker.

"Ya, and we would be catchin' fishes if all the dammed noise would ever stop!" blurted a voice next to me in the new-found hearing. I glanced sideways to see a pair of hard-worked hands fiddling with the anchovy bait. They were hands that told a story of their own, of a lifetime of use; strong, cut, blistered and healed, hands not pretty to see, but fascinating to watch because their nimbleness belied their scars.

The hands had brought along their own bait and hook; they were threading the long salmon hook down the corridor of the fish's gullet to emerge from its mouth. The whole thing was then wrapped around with the fish line in deft windings.

"You must like that bait a lot to treat it so well," I remarked and two bright blue eyes turned to regard me from under brambly white brows.

"A good fish will catch a good fish," he winked. The man looked at my rented rig and shook his head sadly. Patiently, he unhooked my leader from the eye it was snagged on, reached into a bag at his feet and pulled out a gleaming silver anchovy. Then he loosed one of the long salmon hooks from his inner vest and snapped it on my line. The whole careful sequence I had just witnessed, of threading the hook through the smelt and wrapping it with line, was repeated.

"GET THOSE POLES BAITED, JESUS, WHAT ARE YA WAITIN' FOR?" Captain Tom yelled at his crew from the cabin. The first mate and the second hurried around to each fisherman with baited hooks, which they snapped to the leaders of every line.

"I got my own, thank you, get the others," my new-found pal sputtered. "If we were in Boston, the cod would be jumpin' in the boat by now," he winked at me.

"BY GOD, DON'T START ON THAT BOSTON MALARKY," boomed the Captain who just stepped out of the cabin to survey his people, "I NEVER HEARD SO MANY FISH STORIES IN MY LIFE AS I HEARD FROM THIS ONE," motioning to this old man, "FISHIN', FISHIN', AND FISHIN' STORIES! JUST DON'T GET HIM SPOUTIN' ON BOSTON—THIS IS THE PACIFIC," he turns to everybody like an actor, "AND I KNOW WHAT FISHES BEST HERE."

"Yeah, and you should by now, but I will fish my own hook, thank you, just find us all a good spot!"

"I KNOW THE SPOTS, I KNOW THEM ALL, I BEEN FISHIN' THESE WATERS FOR 25 YEARS, YOU JUST GET THOSE LINES IN THE WATER WHEN I TELL YOU, AND KEEP WORKING YOUR BAIT, WORK YOUR BAIT! OR WE'LL BE HERE ALL DAY!"

"Ya, he says he knows the spots, but we will see. Last year they were running

down at Santa Cruz and this year they is runnin' up here, but more north, I think, more north. Well, we will see," and he arched his line out into the water and started pulling arm lengths of more line from his reel.

"WAIT 'TILL I TELL YOU YOUR NUMBER, WAIT 'TILL I TELL YOU YOUR NUMBER!" huffed the Captain, but the old man just waved his hand at Tom and kept letting out line. Captain Tom loomed over to us in the brightening day. Ten minutes earlier he would have been a foreboding shape. Now, with more light, he seemed less imposing, even a little comical. "WAIT 'TILL I GIVE YOU A NUMBER," he barked like a bull sea lion at the old man.

"I know how to fish!" the man retorted over his shoulder as he let out two more pulls of line.

"EVERYBODY WAITS FOR A NUMBER, OTHERWISE EVERYBODY'S DAMNED LINE IS GOING TO GET TANGLED!" Tom pretended to bellow to the group, but obviously intending it for this mutinous regular customer.

"Sixteen," the old man said loudly to the sea.

"THERE'S GOING TO BE JUST ONE MAN COUNTING HERE, AND THAT ONE MAN WILL BE ME, BY GOD!" spouted the Captain.

"Go ahead," my friend told me in a loud "aside," his hand cupped to his mouth, "sixteen pulls."

"SIXTEEN," Captain Tom bellowed at me, and quickly went braying down the line to everybody else, "TWELVE, FOURTEEN, EIGHT, EIGHT, TWELVE," and so on around the perimeter of the boat, clapping every person on the shoulder like they would miss it. And everybody dutifully, clumsily, pulled arm lengths of line from their reels—sixteen, sixteen, twelve, eight, twelve—and stared eagerly at the thin nearly invisible line that would cut the lapping water and create small mesmerizing rings around it. For long minutes there was no conversation at all, everybody in the boat was intent on the fish lurking beneath them. The sounds of the sea filled the vacuum. Gulls wheeled and cried, and the sea lapped at the boat sides as it idled in the surge. The sun now beamed through the layers of our clothing and the world felt like a smile curling up out on the water.

Every man-jack and woman-jack stared intently at their miniscule spots where lines entered the dark water, ready for action. But after a while, the noticeable lack of fish began to tease at the great communal hunting drive like some small pestering child, and idle conversations cropped up around the boat. Hands reached into pockets and pulled out crackers, candy bars, cookies. Nary a fish interrupted them.

"I used to work in a foundry on the docks at Boston in the war, we were making big links for anchor chains," the old Swede was telling me, Miller was his name, "yep, yew would get so used to the heat you wouldn't even feel it anymore. And the molten metal would drip and drip down your clothes and you wouldn't feel it but you would smell yer flesh a-burning. So you would go over to big tubs of water and dip your arms and chest in the tub to drench yourself. The hot metal dripping would leave a white scar where it was. I got these little white scars all over my body," he leaned over closer showing me his forearms indeed streaked with little white scars, and whispered, "I even gott 'em on my *prick*, I was strong those days,

like a bull! I took up landscaping after that, the shipyards was hard work!" I laughed and caught sight of one of my buddies popping a beer over against the side of the boat.

"And how are you angling there, Randy old chum?" I yelled over to him.

"Oh, we're keeping a sharp eye out for those little beggars, matey," he drawled out the open side of his mouth as he tossed back his head and beer on the other side.

"Have a beer, pard?"

"Now? It's only eight in the morning?" Randy wiped his mouth and said again,

"Beer, pard?"

"Oh, well, sure," I consented, and began to amble over a little unsteadily in the roll of the boat to get one. Just as I reached him, my other buddy Lee snapped his rod end upwards—a strike! It figured Lee would be the first one to nail one. All attention, like a stooping hawk, swooped over to him as he reeled his line steadily in.

"Fish on!" went up the cry around the boat.

"FISH ON! REEL IN YOUR LINES, PULL IN YOUR LINES NOW!" Captain Tom

bellowed from somewhere, everywhere. People frantically worked at their reels, many for the first time, and, of course, got a few of their lines hopelessly snarled. And all this, of course, did not escape the notice of Captain Tom. "JESUS CHRIST, YOU GOT YOUR LINES TANGLED, I TOLD YOU TO REEL THEM IN, CUT YOUR LINE, CUT THEM OFF, WE GOT ENOUGH BAIT, CUT YOUR LINE!" Yet in spite of the commotion, Lee reeled in a two-foot silver salmon. It flopped satisfactorily on the deck while one of the crew, clumsy in the frenzy of a first catch, hopped around with a club to clobber the thing. After a few erring swipes, he succeeded in lowering the boom on one salmon. Everybody swooped back as one body to some keen fishing.

"FISH ON!" yelled Captain Tom. Almost as soon as Lee had dropped an anchovy in the water, he had *another* fish. I expected one yanking on *my* line any instant, since Lee he was my buddy. But it was *Randy* that caught the next one. "Fish on!" people yelled.

"FISH ON," yelled Captain Tom, "GET THOSE LINES IN, REEL IN THOSE LINES AND DON'T GET THEM ALL

FOULED UP!" But there was decidedly less enthusiasm in the reeling this time around. Little Joe was the next one to catch a fish, standing next to Lee as he was. "Fish on!"

"FISH ON!" yelled Captain Tom. "REEL IN THOSE LINES!" Not one line moved even an inch. Three salmon soon flopped on the deck with that munchkin-of-a-first mate, Amos, hopping after all three in a blinding-red plaid shirt trying to align their flops with the club in his right hand. It took a couple of tries. At least twice he succeeded in smashing the toe of another fisherman. All eyes scanned the water; each person stared at their own heart-string of a fishing line.

But as the minutes slipped on, no one else caught any fish. And as the minutes slipped further on, not a single other person even got a nibble. Then, all of a sudden, Randy got a strike, yelled happily, and started winding in his reel. He yanked up a big flashing rainbow-hued salmon onto the deck and laughed and laughed. All of us buddies laughed with him. But from my point of view at the stern, I saw we were the only ones laughing. Captain Tom seemed to pick up

on this also, as well as my new pal Miller. The old Swede just chuckled every once in a while from under his brambles of white brow, as if he had seen this all before. After another ten minutes of no action, the Captain blared out—maybe over the loudspeaker, maybe not, you couldn't tell anymore, "PULL IN YOUR LINES, PULL IN YOUR LINES, FOLKS! LET'S TRY ANOTHER SPOT." Judging from the zeal now displayed by the adventurers now, the Captain might have ordered everybody to pull their feet in to keep from being bitten by sharks. The engines roared to life and everybody—en masse—looked forward to the bow as if Lady Luck sat there waving to them in a bikini.

And yet the fishing pattern, uncannily, held true to form. Three different hoists of anchor and setting were negotiated within the next two hours. In those two hours, twelve fish were caught—and most of those were caught by the same bunch of people: my three buddies. Now get this: three guys caught all the fish. Twenty five other people with the same bait, the same rods, and standing within yards of each other, caught nothing.

The boat turned around and around in the current. The boat traveled for miles. Just three guys caught all the fish. Even Miller started to complain. "This is crap!" he muttered.

But salmon is limited to only two fish per customer, and so as my buddies kept catching salmon, the fish were distributed to the boating party as a group. This eased the strain a little. But only a little.

By about 1:00 Captain Tom was making noises about going in. But not everybody had a fish as yet, and it was his business to get everybody a fish. He ordered his crew to count up the day's catch, then to count them again. Then *he* counted them, not trusting his mates to do it right. But they *were* right. Several people were still short a fish, including the old Swede. And Miller was not a happy man, apparently, if he couldn't catch a fish. It was more than just a meal to him, you could see that.

"At least let's get some rock cod, go in by de kelp," Miller said to the Captain at the door to the cabin. "Go over to the kelp," he motioned as he walked back to his spot.

"I'M SURE AS HELL NOT GETTING THESE PROPS CAUGHT IN THAT KELP, BY GOD," thundered the Captain. But as the minutes continued to wear on without luck and Captain Tom kept on glancing at his watch, the Swede kept motioning toward the reefs and the kelp beds. Though Captain Tom always studiously ignored people, the Swede seemed to be getting to him. Finally he burst out, "AW, WHAT THE HELL," fired up the engines and swung in toward the shore.

By now, Little Joe, Lee and Randy were drinking up a light riot and offering to hire out to anybody who wanted to catch a fish. "Go on, just touch me," he joked with a kid, a skinny boy with enough freckles that they seemed to spill out from under his baseball cap. "Go on, touch me, your fishin' pole will turn to gold. You'll catch golden fish." Then I heard Amos, the first mate tell Captain Tom,

"You better try and get that kid a fish, boss, he's the son of one of the Coastal Commissioners. You want a variance to get the dock extended, don't you?" And I could see the Captain scratching his jaw over this, glancing back and forth at the kid. Then

the Captain did an amazing thing. He abruptly struck up a curious conversation with his prized and battered coffee urn.

"C'MON OLD GURL," he murmured to it under his breath—murmured the way a fog horn murmurs. The sound carries for miles. Now try and picture a six-foot-six grown man—thirty years at sea—wrinkles and cuts burned into his core with a floppy blue stocking cap to ease the soreness of his demeanor. And then picture this old salt cooing to a 10-gallon urn of once-stainless steel. He rubbed at it and teased one more cup of coffee from the old scow, coffee acidic enough to smelt gold ore from mute rock. "GOOD OLD GOOD LUCK PIECE, NEVER FAILS ME," he carries on, "WE WANT THE DOCK BIGGER DON'T WE? WE GOT FISH, DON'T WE?"

People pretended not to notice him. A captain knows what he's doing, right?

"WE MAKE BARGAINS, DON'T WE?" he carried on to his coffee urn. A DOCK FOR A FISH. THAT'S NOT TO MUCH TO ASK, BABE, IS IT? A DOCK FOR A FISH. A DOCK FOR A FISH."

"Fish on!" the cry goes up. And sure enough, the kid has caught something. His

face is as bright as a burning white mantle on a gas lantern at night, and he struggled mightily with his fishing rod. The rod bent over nearly to snapping, it seemed, and the old Swede Miller reached over to help him.

"I must have a *giant* salmon!" the boy screamed. I noticed that the Captain's face from the cabin is slightly perplexed as he watched on. Just then Randy lets out a yelp. He has gone into the cabin heading for the bathroom a little unsteadily and he has tripped and fallen against the coffee urn, nearly tipping it over. But he has instinctively grabbed at it as it was falling, burning his hands, and I saw the distracted Captain leap to life and rush to his urn. The boat takes a unexpected lean and they both are thrown against the urn, propping it back into its place and breaking off its spigot.

"JESUS AND MARY, YOU BROKE THE DAMNED THING! YOU BROKE BY LUCKY COFFEE URN, YOU MISERABLE LUBBER!"

"Gee, I'm awful damned sorry, Captain, I didn't mean..."

"SORRY! SORRY! YOU'RE SORRY ALRIGHT, YOU'RE THE SORRIEST LOOKING. . . BAH, CHRIST, JUST GET OUT

OF THE WAY, JUST DON'T TOUCH ANYTHING IN HERE, YOU UNDERSTAND, AH CHRIST. GET OUT OF HERE." And the Captain goes to tending to his wounded urn. At the rear of the boat, the kid and the Swede were struggling with the fighting fish. It seemed like it was possessed, and swims all over the place back and forth behind the boat, bending the pole like a wet noodle. It is even pulling the big boat backwards, and before anyone is aware, the boat has drifted into the kelp beds.

"Hey, Cappy," the Amos calls out. "Uh, looks like we got caught in the seaweed." The Captain, engaged in fixing the spigot back onto the urn, looks up with a glare and storms out to see.

"OH JESUS AND MARY, WE'RE OVER THE DAMNED KELP," he cursed, and he hurried back to the cabin to gun the engines to life. The props started to turn but then seemed muffled. Kelp fronds have lashed around them, it seemed.

"I KNEW IT, I KNEW IT! OH, BAH, WHY DID I EVER LISTEN TO THAT OLD WRECK OF A . . ." Captain Tom came blustering out of the Cabin taking up a long pole and fixing a long knife to the end of it.

He started spearing at the props with the thing cutting at the kelp fronds. A lather of curses boiled from out of his mouth. He glared at the Swede who was plainly having the time of his life helping the boy with the great unseen fish. Tom glared at the rod bending.

"THAT CAN'T BE NO REGULAR FISH!" the Captain barked. "THAT'S GOT TO BE A RAY THE WAY THE DAMNED POLE IS BENDING. WE'LL BE HERE ALL DAY TRYING TO LAND THAT BLASTED THING. CUT YOUR LINE, THERE, WE DON'T WANT NO RAY FLOPPING AROUND IN THIS BOAT. IT'S GOT A STINGER!" But the boy and the Swede ignored him. Just then the fish broke surface, and sure enough, the boy had caught a bat ray that slapped its powerful wings against the water and submerged again.

"WHAT DID I TELL YOU? DID I TELL YOU? IT'S A RAY, CUT YOUR LINE, WE GOT ENOUGH TROUBLES WITHOUT TRYING TO MESS WITH THAT DAMNED THING." But the boy looked crestfallen. Miller continued to ignore the Captain and just kept laughing crazily, helping the boy

to reel the bat ray in even closer.

"Hoo boy," he grinned widely, "you got a big old fish dere, don't we, Sonny?" Hope fired up in the boy's eyes.

"I SAID CUT YOUR LINE" yelled the Captain. Hope dimmed in the boy's eyes.

"We paid yew good money yew old blabbermouth, and this boy has got himself a big fish!" Miller spouted over his shoulder at the Captain.

"Psst!" the first mate whispered to the Captain. "Psst, Tom, remember, it's the commissioner's son. You want that variance! We need that dock extended so we can run two boats, remember? Let him land it!" The Captain looked like a rodeo bronc rider trying to decide which horse in which chute he is supposed to get on and ride. Just then, the ray broke surface only ten feet from the boat. Miller and the boy reeled frantically, whipping it up.

"OH JESUS AND MARY!" Tom finally yelled, and handed the first mate the pole knife. "HERE, GET US LOOSE OF THIS KELP," and Tom stormed over to the cabin to latch up a fishing gaff to hook the ray with. "WELL, REEL IT OVER, FOR CHRISSAKES, IF YOU WANT THE THING

SO MUCH, C'MON REEL IT OVER!" and Tom made a lunge for the flapping wings of the black ray, gaffed it, and started heaving it up over the side. The glistening black triangular-shaped ray was turned upside down to show its white belly and its horizontal serrated mouth. It flapped on the floor of the boat. A long whip-like tail slipped back and forth over the floor. The boy looked like he had entered heaven.

"Wow, wait 'til dad sees this!" he beamed. Tom looked significantly at the mate, who looked up from his labor of cutting at the kelp.

"We're free, Tom," the mate said.

"Huh? What did you say?"

"We're free of the kelp."

"OK, OK. AMOS, FIRE UP THE ENGINES AND GET US OUT OF HERE, FOR CRISSAKES, WHILE I GET THIS DAMNED RAY INTO A HOLD." The mate perked up and lit out for the cabin, eager to man the controls of the boat. Captain Tom fumbled around on the floor trying to lift a trap door to a storage compartment. The mate was a little too eager, perhaps, for he gunned the engines to life and threw the throttle forward a little too jerkily, and the

boat lurched, sending Tom backwards and tripping over a fishing pole to fall squarely onto the ray. Before anybody can think, the ray has stung the Captain three or four times with its barb at the base of its tail and Tom let out a whelp that could be heard from shore half a mile away.

"AHH, CHRIST IT HURTS, THE DAMNED THING STUNG ME, I TOLD YOU TO CUT IT LOOSE, AH CHRIST," and he tore at his pants leg and ripped it up the seams to reveal three ugly red welts beginning to raise on his leg. The boat's entire entourage, naturally, is horror struck, and nobody knows what to do. The only action taken was by the mate who came out, sized up the situation, and ducked back into the cabin to goose the engines full-throttle homeward. Miller tried to help the Captain up onto one of the benches, but was pushed away as soon as the Tom realized who was helping him.

"I DON'T NEED YOUR HELP, BY GOD," he screamed, his face contorted with hatred and pain. The welts seemed to be spreading up his leg slowly. The mate could be heard inside radioing to the marina back past the Golden Gate.

"MAYDAY MAYDAY. We have a man stung by a ray."

"JESUS AND MARY, DON'T TELL THEM THAT, YOU BASTARD, THAT'S NOTHING TO BE YELLING MAYDAY ABOUT. THEY'LL LAUGH US OUT OF THE MARINA. OH JESUS, IT HURTS. GOD, JUST FLOOR THIS THING, WILL YA? I'M GONNA DIE." He tried to stand and limp over to the cabin but he fell back to the bench. Miller was frowning, knowing the situation was partly his fault, but not letting himself shed any tears over it; he just stared at the welts as if he had seen them before.

"Can't we do something?" I asked Miller. His washed blue eyes just stared out from his brambly white brows. Then he comes to himself and answers me,

"Ya, I know what to do. I was stung once myself years ago in Boston. Hurts like a bastard."

"So what do we do?" I ask.

"When I was in Boston,"

"WHAT WE DON'T DO IS LISTEN TO ANYTHING A BOSTON SWEDE TELLS YOU, THAT'S WHAT WE DON'T DO. I NEVER SHOULD'A LISTENED TO YOU AND I WON'T LISTEN TO YA NOW, EVER!

I CAN RUIN THINGS BY MYSELF
WITHOUT A FOREIGN HAND GUMMING
UP THE WORKS, BY GOD.

"Ya, well yew yest stay there and suffer, then, yew stubborn old fool. Tom tried to get up again, made it, hobbled toward the cabin, but the boat swerved, and he fell back again onto the bench.

"Just tell me what to do," I ask of Miller. "I'll do it, c'mon, those welts are spreading up his leg."

"Ya. dey are poison, it won't be good if it gets to his heart, thet's for sure."

"STEP ON IT WILL YOU, FOR CHRISSAKES," bellows Tom to his mate. "GET US BACK TO HARBOR, CALL AHEAD FOR A DOCTOR."

"I did call for a doctor already, Tom" yelled out the mate.

"Salty Dog," a voice from the radio called out, "this is the Harbor Patrol, we have a doctor on the line, he will tell you what first aid measures to apply. Stand by while we transmit from the phone line." A lot of static issues from the radio.

"C'mon," yelled Amos, and he pounded the radio, "why don't you guys get your act together?"

"They can't get the damned transmission hooked up," my buddy Lee said next to me. "They got their frequencies mixed up." More squawking from the radio, then a voice came on.

"Salty Dog, this is Dr. Lungeon, do you receive?"

"Roger Doctor, we receive you, over," yelled the mate.

"OH CHRIST, I GOT A DOLT THAT THINKS HE'S REGULAR FIGHTER PILOT FOR HIRED HELP. WHY ME, GOD? WHY ME?"

"So what do we do?" I asked Miller again, "we got to do something, look at those welts going up his leg?"

"Ah, alright, I yust let him simmer a little in his own bilge, that's all, I fix the poor bastard, I'm sick of hearin' him caterwaulin' like a school girl." And with that, Miller strides into the cabin, grabs at the scalding coffee urn with uncovered hands and walks back out with it, step by step. The thing is steaming like a river boat stack.

"Salty Dog, this is Dr. Lungeon, now listen, what you need to do..." Static.

"WHAT ARE YOU DOING WITH MY

COFFEE..." started in Captain Tom. But before he can finish, Miller turned the urn upside down, the lid popped off, and all the oil-black coffee dumped all over the Captain's festering leg.

"AWHHHHHHH!" screamed the Captain.

"What you need to do," crackled the radio, "is apply hot water to the stings. The poison only is effective at the temperature of sea water. Get warm or hot water and rinse the wounds with it—the poison will dissolve."

"YOU BOSTON BASTARD," screamed Captain Tom, "I'LL KILL YOU, I'LL DRAG YOU FROM THE KEEL FROM HERE TO PANAMA, WAIT TILL I GET MY HANDS ON YOU, HELP ME UP, HELP ME UP, I SAY, WHERE'S MY GUN?"

"Ya, shut-up yew old fool, yer fixed up, yer gonna live to fish another day, sorry to say," and the Swede tossed aside the coffee urn with a loud clang on the deck.

"Salty Dog, Salty dog, do you read me? Do you understand what to do about the stings of the ray?" squawked the doctor.

"Maybe you should ask him what to do about second degree burns," I suggested

to the mate in the cabin. He just shrugged.

"Uh, yeah, Roger, Doctor," answered the mate, "we got ya. Everything is A-OK, I guess. We'll see ya in about half an hour."

"Alright, Salty dog, we'll have a full medivac team waiting for you. Oh, and also, Supervisor Meddlesome is one hand with the press. He wants to know how is son is." The mate and I turned to see Old Miller and the supervisor's son teasing each other and beaming over the bat ray.

"Tell the supervisor his son is real happy, he got hisself a big fish. It's so big we might need to have the dock extended to land it."

"OH JESUS AND MARY, I NEED A DRINK," Captain Tom lamented.

PASSAGE OF HAWKS

Each day their attachment to the land
Slips upwards, lifts higher in thermals,
Shortens with the minutes each dusk.
And come night, their longings tumble
Down dreams of altitude—
The north shivers while the south gleams,
Fields chill like a change of heart
Until, one and another, they peel off
In fall to join an ancient assembly
Venturing southward.

Their travels trace a strange design.
The western half of North America
Shoves them to the coast
Where they appear in bewildering sorties
Over the headlands north of the Golden Gate:
Rangy primadonnas of death,
Like dancers flicking knives in the air;
Sharp wings and talons flicking,
Flicking knives in the autumn air,
More of a circus than a pack of hunters.
Their territories spin, unravelling
To strangely fitted rounds of rivals
And members; banding and disbanding
Through mountain gusts, through brimming thermals.

Empty blue for an hour—
And then one appears—
And across the sky suddenly a dozen
More loom like a constellation
Through the radared peaks
To regroup over this last ridge,

You begin to know them by feel,
Discern them by moves, by dances,
As though a species mimes a fugue.
Above me a Red Tailed Hawk is heavily soaring
On square-sailing wings and tail.
Below it, a trimmer Red Shouldered Hawk
Breaks its glides with swiping, then gliding—
Wings translucent near the primaries,
Translucent as a window near the wing tip,

Above them both a Cooper's Hawk wheels
On shorter quicker assault-wings;
With a feline directness,
Flap and glide, flap, flap,
Bank and glide, flexing, chasing.
A smaller accipiter, a Sharp-shin,
Bluish slate above and fluttery for a killer,
Stitches circles through the air.
Beneath them, a Kestrel hurries.
Its falcon wings and head are painted bright
As joy, rouge above, streaked below
As if a candle flickers out
His eyes and drips a wax of night
Over all the white of his chest.

ELEPHANT SEAL

He chortles in the night surf
Like some drain that is clearing:
Some rattle of metal and water
Lower than surf or fog horns,
Prattling over the beach

A spell like memory: distant, intimate.
He lounges in the shore-break,
Monstrous head and tail
Silhouette the night's glimmer,
And he regards me dare

A yard, then retreat,
Dare a step and scamper back.
He looms near, curious,
Then resumes this gurgling rattle
That reveals to more than females

In Ano Nuevo his arrival from Alaska;
Beckoning more than his kind—
Next dusk I find him on the berm:
His great nose ripples with snoring,
And a monstrous wound pits his flank.

The Great White had charged
Yet never closed its bite—
This young bull had twisted,
Slammed a blow of his own,
And then fled south,

Forced, now, to skirt the lure of battles
And females; to skirt the prize beaches,
To solitude and Waddell Creek—
Unlikely this year to mate:
Healing—paining—brooding. . .

LIKE LOOSE HORSES

I think I passed it.

I did pass it, I must have. But what did I pass?

That *building* back there must have been the town. "Aww, this only happens in the midwest," I grumble, "we have too many people in this state for this kind of jive, even on the coast."

But sure enough, on returning, the weathered sign reads "Welcome to Wetbutt," the two story barn-plank building reads "General Store," and my watch reads, "lateyoulate." I need to make a last phone call for the day—make it quick—and then I need to find a bathroom. Maybe sooner.

A fine storm is glowering over the sea a few miles away, sending brooms of wind cleansing the air before it. A marsh hawk trills kek! kek! kek! like a trumpet behind me, banks and swoops around and into its roosting tree. Dusk has begun filing up the shadows and I think the store is

closed or unused, for it seems dark inside, and I peer intently through the windows—too intently—I overlook the phone booth to my left. Lights are on in the store. A head moves within—it's open!—and I push the moisture-swollen wood door inwards to be greeted by smiles.

So I smile back to them and I turn to meet the third thing that's needed in my life at that moment—a bar. With beer. With a smiling woman barkeep with long long red-brown chestnut hair who is jabbering out a story to one slightly moronic blonde girl and her admiring boyfriend.

I amble up to the low bar of good hard oak, dark and glistening as sin, sit myself down, and am surprised to see, as I glance around the room, that my new-found nest actually takes up only a little corner of this place. The store itself is huge, the size of a small auditorium, and it has a wonderland of hardware and books for sale; fine cowboy hats and lithographs; new frying pans and poetry. Partitions section the place off like some old hollowed-out tree-trunk, and it all smells of leather and woods . . . and one other smell I can't quite put my finger on. I turn to watch the

bartendress who has on a full head of steam into her story. She takes her sweet time coming over to me. But as far as I'm concerned, she can take her sweet time anytime: a bronco-sass of a country girl, she moves and jabbars in a stream, always moving and talking loud, clear, and swift as a river. She wears bare feet and legs bare clear up her side-split cut-offs. A dark T-shirt knotted to the side draws taught when her loose breasts jostle beneath like horses playing. Her face is a little like a freckled girl's, but more decadent. Long chestnut and reddish hair constantly swirls around her because she constantly tosses her head as she speaks. Abruptly, she breaks off with her two listeners and sails over to finish the last twenty words of her story to me.

"So they went out 'a here and then they came back in here and *then* they told me they were leaving! Ha! Can you believe it? My name's Betsy, and what can I do you for, honeybunch?" she winks.

"You have any beer?" I ask eyeing the draft spigots. She laughs a belly laugh and says, "Nope. Fresh out."

"Then I'll have two." Another belly

laugh. She bends way over and reaches into the cooler for a cold glass for me. I follow her legs up the split seams of her cut-offs—she really has terrible skin. Blotchy all over. Maybe she drinks too much. Maybe she just has blotchy skin. "Say where's your restroom," I ask standing and handing her the money for the beer. It is getting hard to stay seated. I have to find the bathroom.

"Sorry baby, it's right over there, but it don't work. My cow stepped on the water pipe outside in back yesterday and busted the whole damned thing. We ain't had water pressure in a day. Ain't that a kick?"

"Oh, no kidding," I laugh. "Uh, do you have a phone then?"

"Oh yeah, sugar, right outside, see, in front of that van there."

"Uh, yeah, that's *my* van," I grin, and go out to make use of the phone, make use of the cover of this well-known van and the dusk, and then return to my beer, triply relieved. And as I sit there, business done, I notice a small sign on the wall of the bar, handwritten in block letters.

Bar Closes at 6:00

No Exceptions

—the management

And I look down at my watch to see it is ten to six. I order another beer before I have finished the one I'm working on, not wanting to be caught dry.

Five minutes go by.

The other two people at the bar order another round of drinks.

And I order another beer.

Two more people come in the door lost in discussion and order drinks.

Another minute goes by.

Three more people open the door and saunter into the bar, and order some drinks.

Then two more.

Six o'clock strikes high and unheard except for the chime of the door opening to admit more people and for the slam of the refrigerator door as Betsy grabs more tinkling glasses and booze, not missing a stitch of her constant chatter.

"So I'm tellin' ya, Susy, me and Lucy, we were leaving the bar over in Boulder

Creek, and two guys in the parking lot start coming all *un-glued* and making noises—well, they oughtta come unglued over the likes of us, right?—so they're hootin' and coolin' and we just give them a wave, you know—one of them's pretty cute, I say, and I'll listen to him and let him hoot, you know what I mean, yeah you know what I mean, Susy, so they come up to us after we get in the car, and they start a big rap on us, you know, like 'c'mon baby, come take a ride with us,' you know the line, and so we say, 'oh honeys, you're both so fine, show us what you got—yeah c'mon we want to see em'. So this really gets to them, they look at each other over the top of the car, and you can just see them trying to figure the whole thing, but they do it—get this, Susy, they unzip their pants and they flop 'em out. So we grab 'em, and these two broncs just melt like little guys, while the rest of them gets like big guys, and then Lucy starts the car, throws it into reverse and guns her big boat out into the parking lot, throws it into drive, and we scream off through the parking lot—and the two studs are sittin' here with their pants down and their mouths dropping lower

than that. They're yellin', 'hey, you can't do that to us!' and they try runnin' after, but they're pants are down and they can't run—I'm telling ya, Susy, it was the biggest goddamned kick in two counties!"

Betsy belts out as laugh as big and long as a promise, and she sashays down the bar, swings around and sashays back up the bar. The noise of the new crowd suddenly turns up an octave as if it hasn't really been listening and it fills up the whole room.

"Roll you for a drink, Charlie?" she challenges the man sitting next to me, a man somehow boyish in his forty-five years of work in denims. He smiles and rolls. She loses and frowns.

"Hmm. I don't have anything to pay ya with, Pard," she eyes him. You'll have to take it out of me," she smiles lustily. She pops open a beer with a long neck and says, "Just maybe you'll have to pluck it out of me." And Charlie grins back at her appropriately.

"OK, I'll take it—anytime. Even right now, challenges Charlie."

"Ha!" she yells at him, "C'mon over here, sweetheart," she pulls his hand, "come

on down here, I have to show you something. I'll crack you all up, darlin'!" and they go down the bar holding their hands over people's heads down to the end of the bar. She pulls him by the hand through a door at the end, which reads,

RESTROOM. OUT OF ORDER.

The door slams. In a short minute hysterical laughing is heard. And from my vantage point at the bar looking into the mirror, I can see all the men in the place begin to salivate like puppy-dogs.

"You don't know Betsy," one of them winks to me. "But you might if you sweet-talk her." The couple soon comes out of the room laughing convulsively, Red is hitching up his pants and Betsy is sashaying her big boobs around like they are horses playing inside her T-shirt.

I decide I should get another drink.

"Ok, what'll it be, sugar? Not another one? Hell, I like a man that likes a drink. Hey, you want to roll for dice?" she winks. I look appropriately interested.

Just then the door opens with a snappy ring and a big beefy man followed

by two other gents saunters into the room. They are engaged in some hearty issue of the moment.

"Ahh, there's my boss," she smiles sideways and pours me a beer. "Here, sweetheart, this one's on the house, compliments 'a me and the boss over there," she smiles and juts her jaw at the man just as he looks at me sourly.

This boss is half-arguing with the other men, who seem slightly official. The boss is obviously a big cheese around this *only* building in town—which he obviously owns. And he has quite a charming idea for a store, I'll grant him that—keep the best of the old and offer the best of the new—in one store. The best of the old is the real-leather cowboy hats: hats built wide to keep the sun in its place; and the new is the edition of Mark Twain made fresh again to a new generation; and imported ales to read Twain by, or to drink by.

"So what do you do out here to keep occupied?" I ask the barkeep, smiling.

"Swipe that leer off your face, you degenerate," she hisses and tosses her hair sideways like a mare kicking away a stud. And she gives me another beer as she

glances up at the boss, then sashays down the bar. She is smiling to herself like she knows a big secret. In the mirror, I notice her boss glances a little too long at her in a way a boss generally should avoid. But he is quickly turned aside by his guests, who do not exactly act like they are best of his friends.

"Now see here, Sam," one of them starts in with big waving motions of an arm, "as county health inspector, I'm telling you, yer violatin' county regs by runnin' a bar without two workin' bathrooms and by havin' farm animals closer than two feet from the premises," and he finishes with a flourishing twist of his grayed handle-bar moustache, he even leans over his pronounced paunch to deliver the emphasis. The second man, thin as train rail, takes this opportunity to register his own judgement.

"And you must remember, Mr. Butts, the Musician's Union will not allow more of the singing that takes place on these premises during weekends without due compensation for the artist's whose work your are appropriating in order to support this, this, half-way establishment, this

roadhouse." This last comment comes near to the bursting the owner's civility.

"A roadhouse! Well, a *roadhouse*, Mr. Pitibottom, would be a better addition to the heritage of the country and the economy of this humble county than the musician's union. These are just local people you're talking about—hell, they sing like rusty saw blades, you can't even recognize half of whatever tune they go and hack all to pieces. They are natural sons of this humble county. And just what instrument do you play, if I might ask, a bicycle bell?"

"Humble?" the musician's union man sneers. "*This* county is a privileged den of the upper gentry, if you don't mind my saying so, the very sort of clientele all musicians have had to suffer wages for centuries. *We*, I mean *they*, our members, that is, deserve to be compensated for their *art* in the preservation of this *toy store* for the *elite*."

"Mr," the big boss flicks out like a Reno card dealer, "I have a lot of property right out back, stretching up into these Pacific foothills, and I want you to be my very guest, why don't you take a hike? Go

play yourself a piccolo."

The county health inspector rumbles in his throat and pontificates some more,

"Sam, you have to keep the bathrooms in good working order if you are going to have what amounts to a bar in this area."

"It's a refreshment stand, Harvey, a sasperilla and soda stand, with a little brew on the side," Sam rejoins like he has rehearsed this point before. "It goes with the *decor*. Thought of it *myself*." And he turns away from the two of them pretending to take care of business.

"Betsy, come here a minute," he leans over the bar. She comes sashaying over. "Betsy, you got rid of that damned cow, didn't you? It's not still *around* is it?"

"Oh, don't you worry Sam, now you don't see her do you? You don't like cows, do you, Sam?"

"Well, that's not it, Betsy, you know that, it's just I trying to resurrect history, and you're part of it, really you are, but that damned cow of yours has caused me nothing but grief—I don't mind telling you—this county health guy is all over me because the damned cow was too close to

the place, and then it goes and breaks the damned pipe so the damned bathroom doesn't work, and he's all over me about that. Christ, all I want to do is re-create an old general store and all I get is nothing but headaches. *I was born in the wrong century.* Oh , for godsakes, get me a couple drinks for these assholes so I can get what passes for their minds off my back."

"You bet, baby, a couple drinks coming up," she tosses her head and cruises smoothly down the bar.

"Hey Betsy, let's have another drink over here."

"Keep yer pants on, there Shorty, there's plenty of time, you know what I mean. I only got two, you know what I mean." Shorty, under his over-sized cowboy hat, looks like he has just been told he will go to heaven. And I notice Betsy knocks back a jolt of the stuff herself.

"Got to keep the wheels oiled," she winks at me.

"Whatever do you mean?" I ask trying to raise an eyebrow. She ignores me and sashays down to the other end. How she can grind out so much bacon with such a short bar is more than I can figure.

"You can oil my wheels anytime, Betsy," drawls out Shorty.

"Aww, that's real sweet 'a ya, Shorty. Just fer that, hey, Shorty, come here, I'm gonna make you die, man," and she grabs Shorty in a waltz again with all their four arms vaulting down over heads all the way down the bar. They disappear inside the women's bathroom again, and soon some more squeals and hysterical laughter can be heard. Two sharp blows ring through the wall like someone is hitting it with a hammer or a fist. Loud grunting boomerangs through the walls. The boss's two official guests glance a little uncomfortably at each other, pretending they aren't hearing what they are hearing, and the boss glances darkly from under his slightly pompous brows at the door like he knows all-too-well what he is hearing. All the men wink, guffaw, and rib each other.

"You don't know Betsy," one of the winks again at me like he hadn't said this before, "but you might if you sweet-talked her some." Oddly enough, in the back of my mind, I suddenly "place" that unidentified smell I first noticed—a barn. After what seems like an awfully long few

minutes, the two of them tumble out of the bathroom laughing uncontrollably, and then try to compose themselves as they realize every eyeball in the place is raised their way. The boss is frowning. He makes a loud excuse to his official guests about getting them another round of drinks, and bends over the bar to Betsy all but containing a scowl.

"Betsy..." he tries to whisper, "Betsy!" She doesn't seem to hear him. "Betsy!" he says louder. She cocks an ear. "Three more drinks," he says overly loudly, and then, "what's going on in the bathroom? You're not doing what I think you're doing, are you—right here? Not while these inspectors are around."

"Now, Sam, give me a break," she leans over trying to whisper above the hub-bub of the place, although the hub-bub of the place is instantly curious and plays on cue just loud enough to pretend to mask the real conversation. Now Sam, I was just takin' Shorty and Charlie in the bathroom to see if they could fix it, you know, they do know construction, and you don't, that's for sure. I don't see you fixin' those pipes, now."

"I wouldn't need to fix them if you're damned cow didn't trample down the whole assembly. Why do you have that damned thing anyway? Why don't you sell it on the hoof and make a hungry family happy? It's useless, you don't have a place to keep it anymore, face it, your daddy lost your families' land around here gamblin' and carryin' on. Get a dog, get a cat—but a cow? Where is that damned thing anyway?

"Don't worry about my cow," she says not looking up. The boss seems to have hurt her feelings. "She's in a good place and you don't see her around, do you? So give me a break, Sam." and she tosses her hair.

"Hey, Betsy," Shorty calls from down the bar. "Whatever did you do with yer old cow, I kind 'a miss her."

"Yeah where's your cow," my neighbor pipes up. "We wanna hear her go, moo!" and everybody roars with riot. She throws a dish towel at them and scolds like a bluejay,

"Don't none 'a you sleazy cusses be makin' fun of my cow! I don't care what you say about me but don't get me riled about Jessie! She's got more character than

any three of you assholes, and that's a fact."

"Well, that's because," starts in the boyfriend of the moronic blonde, "that's because she has three times more the size of an aaa..." a sponge hits him squarely in the mouth before he can finish his joke. I turn to the guy on my other side an, try to fit myself into the hubbub.

"Say, how old is this place?" He is dipping his finger into a tin of tobacco. His face is a picture of a life spent out of doors—a frieze of red-brown dirt in setting sun.

"Oh, depends," he answers spilling tobacco over the opened cigarette paper he is trying to target, "the buildin' or the grounds? Parts of it go back a hundred years, parts goes back a few more. Take yer pick, you wouldn't be wrong even if you was wrong, if ya git my drift."

"Was this place always a general store, then?" I continued, genuinely interested.

"Wall, some say it was a little more than just general. Some say it was the best cat-house for fifty miles in its day."

"Some say it still is," pipes up his red-nosed neighbor, and the two of them

belly out laughs that would make horses sound foppish. They wheeze and elbow each other like school chums until they both are nearly crying. Betsy descends like thunder out of a cloud of motion:

"Will you two *boys* drool some place offa my bar, for Chrissakes?" She throws her hands on her hips and tosses back her red chestnut hair. "We sell bed pans on the other side of the store, \$13.95 apiece, you oughta get yourselves a couple and make some book ends outta yerselves." The whole place roars like a miner's camp.

And I can't help but notice from my vantage point, that a steady stream of miner's gold seems to flow across the bar into Betsy's cash register like filings to a magnet. And each ring of the cash register is flagged with a toss of red hair. In the mirror I can see the boss noting each deposit with eyes black and level as decimal points.

"Now, don't get me wrong, Sam," starts in the pompous health inspector again, pretending to speak in a man-to-man undertone, "nobody objects to what you're trying to do here, hell, I'd like to do it myself if my family had the money like

yours does, it's just that this isn't the eighteen hundreds anymore, you can't just fire up a saloon and store—we got rules, we got regs, this county is too precious anymore to just let it get tainted by any old body with an idea. There's a whole slew of people around here puttin' in septic tanks and dozin' their own roads. You got to have licenses, you got to have permits, you got to have two working bathrooms, and most of all, you got to have no animals on the premises! You can't have the livery stock all mixed up with the farm hands, there's no tellin' what's likely to breed from it, this is the twentieth century! People can get diseases. And another thing, you and I both know that this building couldn't pass any building code known to man today. If you hadn't got it qualified as a historical building, you'd all be history yourself..." Sam himself is simmering up to boil like a chile pot of beans at all this, and finally he blurts out,

"The Cathedrals in Europe couldn't pass one of your building codes today, and they have stood for centuries, long before this country was even settled, don't give me that malarky about building codes. People

crave a sense of history, *this place* is putting *this county* on the map. There may be a movie shot here next year, and they want to use this place as a *set*! That's money in your pocket full of permits, what do you say to that?" he glowers with all the drama his busy eyebrows can muster.

"Is it always this lively around here?"

I try again to corral Betsy. She turns from her high-trotting over to my little spot and looks me in the eye levelly.

"Funny you should ask, sugarbunch. Things have been gettin' a little too lively, accordin' to some. So the new rule is we got to be careful and shut down *on the dot*, too many parties have been goin' on after hours, according to some rumors," she winks, "so we have to shut down exactly at, exactly at," she is looking around for the sign, finds it and points to it, "exactly at six. *No exceptions.*"

I beckon to her as if I have a secret. She leans over and I show her my watch. "It's, uh, past 6:30, Betsy."

"Yeah, well, I go by the *sign*, not the clock," she jerks her thumb, "the boss is here, and this sign says *open*, so we're open until further notice." Then she rears back

her head and bellows out like a barker at a wrestling match, "laaaaaaaast caaaaaaaaalllllll fer alchyhaaaaaallllll, you allll llll!" and a replica liberty bell overhead rings with the timbre of the announcement. She looks at me with a gleam in her eye, and for the life of me, I can't tell if the gleam is just for me or just one of her features. "That's the further notice," she winks. "You want another drink?"

"Buy *you* one?"

"Sold, baby!" and she bangs down two fresh glasses."

"Let's have another round for my guests, Betsy," I hear over my shoulder. I turn and see the boss standing behind me. We exchange nods.

"Hang on, Sam, I only got two you know what I mean?" she answers not even breaking her rounds of quick movements enough to glance up. She shoves my beer at me, swipes up a shot of tequila and tosses it all back with a chestnut-red flash. And slams down the glass on the bar. "Thanks, sweetie. Now, Sam, what did you want, another gallon of booze? Comin' right up."

"Betsy, can I talk to you?" Sam

intones gravely. He moves one space down from me so that he is talking over Shorty's head, which seems to give him a bit more privacy—about as much privacy as your likely to get at a counter full of women in a Macy's half-off-off sale.

"Betsy, when everybody clears out tonight, can you stick around for a little while? I'll buy you a drink," and from my seat before the mirror, I see him give her a wink—a wink that just might pass for currency in a herd of goats—maybe. Of course, every other eye in the place is looking in the same mirror.

"Sorry Sam, I got things to do."

"You don't really like me, do you Betsy?" he asks slightly forgetting where he is.

"I told you, Sam, I don't get mixed up with my employers. It's bad business."

"I'll take care of the business," he baahs like an ram in rutting season. "You go off and get mixed up with any body *else* you want to, and right under everybody's' noses at that, seems to me."

"Doesn't matter. I told you the way I look at it. And that's that."

"Well, we'll see about you working

next week. I might have Josie take care of the bartendin."

"You do that, Buster, you just do that! See if I care, you go ahead, you fire me again, Mr. Boss, if you're going to be like that—I'll clear out 'a here right now. **Right now!**" And with that, she marches over to the women's bathroom that reads,

out of order

throws open the door and disappears inside. The boss looks after her a little perplexed. Strange grunting is heard. Betsy yells,

"**C'mon pumkin**, let's lam outta here!" Betsy's butt is the first thing appearing back into the room. She is pulling unladylikely, but very Betsy-likely, on a rope. "C'mon Pumkin! C'mon! Let's blow this dive!" Out into the room ambles a large brown cow which blinks its big wet eyes at everybody in the room and let's out a resounding, "moooooo!" Betsy pulls the cow out into the room and starts leading it to the door with business in her eye. The place is a roaring miners' camp.

"Hey Sam, are you going to add a

line of pets?" blurts out one of the customers.

"Hey Sam, is that your new bartender? I'll bet she can lick the bar cleaner than last year's debts," chimes in another.

"Hey Sam, do you pull on her tail to flush the toilet?" guffaws a third.

The two guests Sam has been courting have their jaws dropped lower than a minus tide. The county health inspector begins flapping his lower jaw like a grouper out of water. Betsy leans determinedly toward the door.

"C'mon Pumpkin, let's lam outta this durned old PLACE! Let's go stomp on the pipes for the goldurned *still* this asshole *manager* has hidden around the damned *trees*. Thinks he's so goddamned *authentic*."

"MoouuoOOOO!"

One of the men politely gets up and opens the door for the cow and Betsy:

"After you, ma'am," he bows. "I mean the four-legged variety, of course," he leers at Betsy. She wheels and kicks him in the shins, which sends the gentleman hopping off to knock over a stack of

books—quite loudly.

"C'mon, Pumkin! This ain't the proper company to be keepin'. You and me are goin' to find greener pastures! And I do mean greener."

The entire entourage, the entire tree house of yahoos and cowhands watches the two of them slog on through the door into the dusk. And from my vantage point looking through the mirror, it seems like the light of life is leaving us all—that is, if faces in a mirror measure any truth.

And I see my chance. I jump up and stumble out after the shifting haunches of Betsy and the cow.

"Hey, Betsy, hey, Betsy, you need a ride anywhere?"

"Wall yeah, sugar, I don't mind if I do. I'll go anywhere. I got to get drunk. I got to get laid. Where's your car?"

"Right here, the van!"

"A van," she licks her lips lustily.

"Yeah, that's it, sure is. Hop in."

"With a side door?"

"Huh? Yeah, I got a door. Here it is, both these doors open up, see?"

"Yeah, Pumkin, see, side doors, here lift up a hoof and get in, c'mon get in, now

the other hoof."

"Hey Betsy, wait a minute," I cave in. "I don't want a... I mean, hey ya know, I just remembered, I got a very important appointment back over the hill, in fact, I'm, late, I got to hit the road, sorry I can't give you a ride after all, here, I'll help your cow down with the other hoof, here' just close the door after I get in, alright, yeah, thanks for the hospitality and all, and I... No, wait a minute, Cow, you can't get in, hey c'mon, hey is this thing house-broken? Oh, man, how do I get into these things?"

"Well, what's the matter, Sugar, don't you like cows?" she challenges as she slides in the passenger door and turns to pat her cow, now chewing away inside the van with its big head gazing out the windshield between us. "They kind of grow on you, you'd be surprised. There's a soft spot in my heart for anybody that takes a shine to a cow. I get all hot under the belt about a man that loves animals. Bessy, baby, Pumkin, this is ah, this is, what's your name again, sweetie?"

"My name is..."

"This is Sweetie, Pumpkin. Pumpkin, don't go lickin' on his ear like that, he's

trying to drive us to a new home. By the way, Sweetie, where did you say you live? You got grass around don't you?"

"Just my neighbor's," I groan. Betsy takes in a deep breath, turns and smiles at me like sun coming out from behind a cloud. I just groan. The things you have to do in this day and age to find a woman.

Five Miles Out

"Got the bait, Bernie?"

"Got it, Tim"

"Got the beer, too?"

"Freddy's got it"

"You got the beer, Freddy?"

"BUUUUURRRRRRP!!"

"Yeah your right, Bernie, he's got it. Ok," Tim barked, "hey Freddy, shove us off. Stop scratching your big belly—just throw the rope and hop on. C'mon, let's shove off and have some fun. We deserve it, don't we?"

"Buurrrp! Yeah, yeah, a day off finally! Fanallieeee! I'm so tired of working all the crummy time,"

"Freddy!" Tim chomped over his cigar, "I said 'the rope,' unlatch the rope!"

"Oh, yeah. Right, jolly right, old Captain Tim. Hey Timmy, what did you name this here old bucket? What does it

say?"

"You're staring right at it, what does it say?"

"It says uh, 'Leak-i-n-g De-e-s-i-re. Leaking Desire,' what's that mean, ole Cappy?"

"Are you going to marry that rope or are you going to come along with us?"

"Oh, yeah! Why didn't you say so?"

"Alright now, men," Tim knit his heavy brows as he lit his cigar, "let us proceed to catch some fish. I'll just push the throttle ahead a little, keep to the right of this sailboat coming up, and we are underway! Good. Now listen, Crabherd-the-Swede told me the salmon have been running at about 100 feet three miles out. With any luck and strategy at all, we should catch our limits in no time flat. That is, if the salmon are biting. After all, you can't catch a fish that won't be caught. "

"I like that, ole' Cap'n Timmy," Freddy gestured like a kid with his big workman's hands. " You can't catch a fish that won't be caught. That sounds like it ought to be a song almost, ya know?"

"Hey Bernie," Tim called as he worked his cigar, "you're thin enough:

squeeze around that seat and that junk, there, and turn on the radio, we want to hear if other boats they are catching anything, and where. Ah," he waved grandly to the sky, "it's good to get away from the shop and relax. Let's see, we need a strategy. We'll start troll-fishing first, we'll just cruise along slowly. Here, I'll start tying the hooks and bait. Can't catch a fish that won't take the bait, right Freddy?"

"Yeah, Timmy, HA!—you said it—can't catch a fish that won't be caught—HA!"

"OK. I'll tie the hooks and bait. Then I'll check the reels to see if they've gotten crusty from the salt air. Then I'll start making us all a few sandwiches. Yessir, it's damned good to get away from chores and just take it easy. I bet you're glad to get out of the office too, eh Bernie?"

"Glad? To be free of papers? God, the papers. . . The papers—cogs made of papers. Papers weighed by the ton. It never ends. You just...get away for a little while. It's good to be out where there are no papers, no deadlines." Freddy clapped Bernie on the shoulder.

"Aww, it's just plain good to get

wiped-out, right Bernie? Right ole Cap'n Tim? Ha! Sure, I'll have one 'o them beers, just *tcbrow* me one, ole Captain Timmy. It's good to get out where there's no cement dust, I say! Gimme the salty salty sea. And six beers. Which ole way do you think we should go ole Cap'n' Tim? North? Or south?"

"North, men. Definitely north. Crabherd is as good as the bible. I'd stake my fortune on his word."

"Fortune, ole Cap'n, what fortune have *you* got,?"

"Well, if I had a fortune. But at least I have a boat, Freddy my grubby cousin. Now let me tell you a story. No, let me tell you a story. Before I managed the store, I was a lot like you—I know you remember, Freddy. Happy-go-lucky, living for the day—hey, watch out there, Bernie, we're heading into the wind and the spray will come from your side in these swells—there!—see, I told you. Well, you didn't get too wet, did you? Hang-on, men. Well anyway, I started to say I was just like Freddy. Not that your bad, Freddy, now don't look at me like that, but, you see, one day I realized I was a stow-away in life—I

had no plan, no goal. I'll never forget the day I asked my girlfriend to lend me \$50 for my laundry—it caused a fight and she ended up leaving me for another man! Let me tell you," he poked his stubby fingers at Freddy, "from then on, from that day on, I swore I would never want for laundry. I buckled down, I took my job at the paint store very seriously, I began to pay attention to strategy, paid attention to every procedure and product, and slowly, I rose."

"Yeah right, Cap'n Timmy," Freddy blared, "you rose from the gutter to the curb, HA!—isn't that right, Bernie, from the—*buurrpp*—gutter to the curb!"

"Sure, you go ahead and laugh at me, Freddy," Tim blustered taking his cigar out of his mouth for emphasis, "and where will that get you? That's all I want to know."

"Well I hope it gets me someplace where I can catch a salmon, ole Cap'n. C'mon, Timmy, when are we going to put some hooks in the water, eh, my old Cappy?"

"When I say so! Ahh yeah, I guess we ought to, Freddy you big goof-ball. Here, we'll slow down then. What's that,

Bernie? What did you say?"

"On the radio, Tim! Someone said they are catching fish!"

"No kiddin'? Turn it up. I didn't quite catch it. Yes, uhmm, yeah—right:—" Tim frowned, "they seem to be catching salmon hand over fist at Bugman's Cove."

"Where the hell's Bugman's Cove, ole Cap'n?" Freddy boomed.

"Well, it's sort of south of here, Freddy. Quite a bit, well, it's basically south."

"But I thought you said the fish was all north?"

"Well Crabherd-the-Swede told me..."

"Aww, Jesus, let's turn around that way, c'mon Cap'n—if they're catchin' all my fish I'm gonna be pissed."

"The fish obviously moved, Tim," Bernie counselled. "They do swim you know."

"Ah well, of course, you're right, Bernie, we'll just swing around and head down that way. The bait-fish must have foraged down there, the salmon follow the anchovies, you know."

"Oh, no shit, Cap'n Timmy?" Freddy laughed. "Wow, hey look, guys—hey how

come there's so many of these jellyfish in the water around here? Look at them all, they're all purply and stringy. And there's another—lookee—there's another, and another. Look at 'em all, Bernie. Look at 'em, Timmy. Is there always this many?"

"There does seem to be quite a few of these, doesn't there, Tim?" asked Bernie with an almost scholarly interest.

"I really have more important things to do steering this boat than worrying about jellyfish," Tim glared over his upright unlit cigar.

"Yeah, but look at 'em all, Cap'n Timmy," Freddy insisted. "Just look, they're all around us. You can pick them out no matter where you look. All cock-eyed and upside down and right side up—big purple bells made of jelly. Hey, how come, Cap'n Timmy? Whad'ya think?"

"Are there always this many, Tim?" Bernie echoed. "It does seem surprising. There seems to be a convention of them. Have you ever heard of such a thing?"

"Well, I've heard they're seen in bunches, so to speak, no, but I've never seen so many in all the six months I've been cruising out here."

"Hey Bernie," Freddy winked grandly. "They look like a bunch of goddamned eyeballs, don't they?"

"I suppose one could look at it that way, Freddy," squinted Bernie over the side.

"Now that's the last way I would look at it, Freddy" Tim just rolled his eyes. "Jellyfish are about the lowest form of life on earth. Everybody knows that."

"Oh really, Cap'n Timmy, how do you know? Did you ask 'em?"

"Really, Freddy, you come up with the craziest notions sometimes. Of course I didn't ask them. Everybody knows that."

"Who's 'everybody', ole Cap'n?"

"Well, you know, ah, that is, everybody, you know, the common scientific knowledge. Freddy, sometimes you're impossible."

"Ahh, that ain't possible. Heh heh—aw, Timmy don't get mad at your ole cousin, I was just pulling your leg. Ya know, Timmy? Ya know, Bernie, you know, right, Bernie?"

"A week ago I would have said, 'sure Freddy, I know.' But this week I realized, actually, that I know nothing. Nothing I counted true has worked. Rather,

just the opposite. I lost fifteen years worth of investments in a week. A week! All the indicators told me that I was slowly getting rich, until, last month, a fluke of the market occurred. A scandal over rent control caused the bottom to fall out of the rental real estate market in New York—an impossibility!—property I bought on the margin couldn't even return the utility payments. I sold all my utility stocks thinking interest rates would rise and I'd invest in CDs—but the rates fell and the value of those stocks are rising! I've lost hundreds of thousands of dollars! Fifteen years worth of planning. I will never make it back. Never. I don't even know how. What could I trust to recoup it all? The same methods? They were level as decimal points, I thought. Bankrupt. I cannot trust anything to work the way I've thought. What do I know, I ask myself? Nothing, really. Everything I thought true is bankrupt. It's all a game with no rules."

"Gee," Freddy sympathized, "that's a cryin' shame there, Bernie. I feel for ya, ya know? Sometimes I think it's really better to have nothin' almost, ya know what I mean? Ya can't lose nothin' if you ain't got nothin.'"

"I had no idea, Bernie," frowned Tim. "Everything? You always gave me the best advice. But you do think you can keep handling my own stock portfolio, then? It has some of the same stocks as yours, isn't that right? Oh, but, I didn't mean to bring up business. This is a day off, isn't it?"

"Hey, Cappy, hey Cap'n' Timmy, let's stop and ask this old fart up ahead here if he caught any fish. Pull up to him, what d'ya say Cap'n Tim? Yeah, that's right, slow down. Hey brother, did you catch any? Let's see it! Hey, that's only a rock cod, isn't it? Where's the salmon? Out further? How far? A few miles? How deep? Don't know? Thanks, buddy. Hey Cappy, hey Timmy, you heard him, huh?"

"Yes, Freddy, I heard him, I heard him, I do have ears. I suppose we could troll further out that way."

"Yes, Tim," agreed Bernie, "let's get out a little way more from the land. I would like that."

"OK, Bernie, what ever you say. This is our holiday from the troubles of the land, isn't it? Of course it is. You know, I heard Abey and Feeder is a good buy for stocks right now, have you heard that? Do

you think we ought to sell my Consolidated Frump issues and buy while it's low? Oh excuse me, Bernie, there I go again about business. I read that in the paper yesterday. Did you see it?"

"Of course," Bernie nodded like a sage.

"But you don't believe it."

"Perhaps. You obviously didn't see the 'Investor's Rag' today discussing that same issue—the stock will stay low because rare salamanders on the property suggest a probability of earth slippage from artesian upwelling. Further geologic investigation. No construction for at least a year.

"Uh, why no, I didn't. Do you think that's true?"

"I no longer know what's true, Tim, Perhaps I never did."

"But do you believe the news or the rumor?"

"If the truth be told, I think they are the same. It is all a shell game, Tim, after all is told."

"Ah, give me the—*burrp*—salty salty air!" beamed Freddy. "The salty salty air—no cement dust. And gimme another foamy beer there, Cap'n Timmy. You

shouldn't oughtta get down about all that stuff, Bernie. It's good to get out where things are real, ya know, take a day off—things sort of reset themselves, ya know? Hey, how come the water is all bluer here? Hey Timmy, how come the water is bluer now, right here, huh?"

"Oh Freddy—if you just *have* to change the subject, it doesn't look blue to me at all. It looks green."

"Yeah, well, you know what I mean. It's different all of a sudden."

"For Chrissakes, that's just because we're in deeper water now. It's no *great* mystery."

"HEY Timmy!! I got a fish! Cut the engine, ole Cap'n!"

"My word," Bernie hovered, "you have one there, Fred? "

"Yeah, Bernie, I got one. Look at my pole bend! Naww, wait. Wait. Naw, aw I got snagged. I got caught on the bottom. Aww, it ain't deeper here, it's shallower."

"Freddy, Freddy," Tim waved smugly, "that's impossible, this chart here says it gets deeper, I just bought this at the Marina boat store last week, it's the latest. The bottom can't have raised in a week."

"Aw, I'm cuttin' my line," Freddy pouted. Let's go further out, ole Cap'n. Way out further. Whad'ya say?"

"Freddy, now it's plenty deep enough right *here*, oh, but what-the-hell, why not? Actually, I've haven't gone more than a few miles out myself. Yeah, let's go about 10 miles."

"Aw, let's go twenty. I want to go wayyy out, ya know Timmy? Far away from women—ya know I broke up with Josie last week, didja know that, Timmy?"

"Why no, Freddy, I didn't realize. You were with her for a couple years, weren't you? Weren't you going to get married?"

"Yeah, three years and a half. A long time. Let's go a long way out. You know, let's go way out *there*," he pointed, "huh, ole Cap'n Timmy?"

"Allright, allright, we'll go out, Freddy. I'm sorry to hear about you and Josie."

"Yeah, well, you know. But then again," Freddy shook his shaggy head and closed his eyes, "you know what? I'd do it over again. I always lose. I've lost everything to some woman twice, now.

Maybe more if you want to really want to count. Damn me, but it's fun, now, isn't it really? Gettin' mixed up with a woman and messin' up your whole life is what it's all about, isn't it? Aww yeah, I'll fall again. Hurts like a bastard, it does, but what the hell. We're all just fools, right? Yeah, I'll fall again, damn me. Aww, I gotta shag another beer below. You got a handkerchief down there, Timmy? I need a Kleenex or somethin'. Gotta blow my nose."

"Yeah, on the counter. There's more beer in the 'fridge, cousin Freddy. I'm sorry about you and Josie."

"Yeah well, you know."

"Tim," Bernie blinked as he gazed out over the sea, "this water is very alluring out this far, don't you think so? It's quite a different quality to it. Quite peaceful. Almost *rich*. Wouldn't you say?"

"As soon as I get rich I'll get back to you on that, Bernie. Give me another two years. Then I'll definitely get back to you on it."

"You know, Tim, I recall from a physics class that the surface of water has a very peculiar quality to it. For example, someone falling from, say, the Golden Gate

Bridge and hitting the water would find that the surface—for a fraction of second—is as hard as cement."

"OK I'm back!" boomed Freddy.
"Hard as ole cement? Really, Bernie? I know cement. That almost doesn't make sense. Hard as cement. Hmm—that's something, ya know?"

"Well, crew," Tim squinted, "I guess we can stop here and just 'mooch fish.' We'll change our strategy. They're not biting at our trolling strategy. And you can't catch a fish that won't bite. We'll just let our lines hang over the boat. That's called 'moochin'. You can't catch a fish if it won't be caught. But then there's always a way."

"Yeah, I like the sound of that, ole Cap'n Timmy," Freddy guffawed.
'Moochin.' Say, look guys, I found a bottle of whiskey. Anybody else want some?"

"Now don't over-do it, Freddy," Tim frowned.

"Why not, old Cap'n?"

"Yes, why ever not, Tim, this is a holiday for us."

"Oh sure, Bernie, you're right, you're always right. I just feel responsible out here, you know what I mean."

"I suppose," Bernie agreed dryly.
Freddy looked up at the sky.

"Hey lookie here at this fog coming over us, Cap'n Timmy. Where did it come from? It was a clear sky a minute ago. Right, Bernie?"

"Yes, Fred, there does appear to be a fog drifting over us. And you're right, there *was* only a hint of it a minute ago, far to the south, or so it appeared."

"Hey Cap'n Timmy, look at this fog," Freddy insisted, "it's so thin you can hardly see it moving over us, but out south there, where it's coming from, you can't hardly see a thing. And look up north there, it's all beginning to fade out of sight. It's all kind of pretty, ain't it?"

"Sure, Freddy, sure. Oh Jeez, where did this fog come from? Not that it matters, men. It won't spoil our day. I have a radio-beacon receiver and a compass on board. Fog is nothing to us. But say, it is getting awfully hard to see the shore. How strange." But Bernie turned to him and said,

"It actually is quite beautiful, now, isn't it Tim? I'm glad we came out here. Look, you can see the sun above us as if

nothing has changed at all. And it is casting a nearly angelic brightness around us all, isn't it now? For twenty feet or so, it is all quite as bright as day, quite fully illuminated—and yet one cannot see further than one can cast a sinker, as they say.

How strange. How beautiful this is. I'm glad we came out here, Tim, truly glad."

"Yeah, you said that already, Bernie. Oh, maybe we should start back in. I don't know. I'm not afraid, but this does seem a little uncertain. What do you *really* think, Bernie?"

"Hey Bernie! Hey Timmy! Lookee over here at *me!*"

"FREDDY!" Tim bellowed, "you get back in this boat, stop fooling around, stop hanging over the side, get your feet back in here!"

"Hey Bernie, hey Timmy, look at me! I'm gonna prove that this water is hard as cement for just a second. See? It's holding me up, see? I bet I could let go and it would hold me up long enough to pop this beer!"

"Freddy, *do what I tell you*, get back in here! I swear, your impossible! I'm not bringing you out here again. Get back in

the boat."

"Hey yeah, look at me, ole Cap'n—I'm defyin' the laws of gravelly. Hello down there, all you jelly-fishies. Tap, tap, tap! What do you all look at down there?"

"Oh, let him go, Tim," Bernie said with a pontiff's wave of the hand. "We all need to go crazy sometimes. The whole world's cock-eyed, after all. The whole world. Just don't let go of the sides there, Fred. We couldn't lift you back in."

"No need, there, my good friend Bernie," Freddy guffawed. "This here water will hold me up! I know cement. Cement will hold you up. Hard as cement for just a second, right Bernie? Look at me, guys, I'm as fast as a second!"

"FREDDY!" bellowed Tim.

"Oh my word, he slipped," Bernie gasped through his hand at his mouth.

"FREDDY! Oh Christ, Bernie, here, hold this pole. Jesus Christ, I don't see him; Bernie, where did he go? He should float up. Where is he, do you see him? Look on the other side of the boat. FREDDY!"

"No, I don't really see him. But then perhaps that doesn't mean anything either, I

can't see a thing in this fog. It's all so uncertain, isn't it really? Don't worry, he's probably there—or then maybe he never was—it's hard to really know what to think sometimes, isn't it Tim? Relax Tim.

"FREDDY!? I don't see him, oh God, Bernie, what do we do now?"

"Relax Tim. Things are not always what they appear. It may be alright. It is so peaceful out here."

"Damn it, Bernie, will you pull your head out of that intellectual garbage can and help me?"

"Well yes, of course, Tim. Uhm, what do you want me to do?"

"Well, *look* for Chrissakes, LOOK AROUND. Do you see Freddy anywhere?"

"Well..."

"How could he do this? How could this happen? This can't be happening. It's not real."

"You *do* see what I mean, then, Tim?" Bernie asked with the look of a man who has made a point.

"Oh shut-up, Bernie! Don't start that line again. I swear you've gone and lost your moorings completely."

"Oh, I quite agree."

"Damn you, *don't agree!* Just look! You can still do that, can't you for Chrissakes? Look!"

"Look, Tim."

"Goddam it, Bernie, if you parrot me one more time, I'm going to punch you in your smart little nose!"

"No, I mean *look there, Tim*,—isn't that Freddy's hat?"

"Huh? Where?"

"Floating over there."

"God, it's Freddy. HEY FREDDY! WE'LL BE RIGHT THERE! DON'T MOVE!"

"Why—heh, heh—were did you think he would go, Tim?"

"Oh shut-up, Bernie, just shut-up. Keep a watch on him while I reverse the engine."

"Certainly, Tim."

"Where is he now? I can't see. Oh yeah, there. Now Bernie, grab the net with the long pole there, yeah, that's the one, now hold it out for him to latch on as I get closer. That's the strategy, that will work. Now, guide me."

"Alright Tim. My word, Fred, you really *are* in the soup there, aren't you? Oh Fred, you. . . are alright, aren't you?"

"Do you have him? What did you say, Bernie? Did he latch onto the pole? I can't see from here."

"OK, easy, more to the right, Tim."

"What? Can't you ever speak up for Godsakes?"

"To the right."

"What? Oh, I'll see for myself."

Freddy! Oh, Christ, he's still there. I'm going to back up to you! Grab onto the pole! Freddy, I thought you were a goner. You're scaring the hell out of me, damn you! Why did I ever bring you out here, anyway? You always do crazy things. Well, never again. Never again! Do you hear me? Let me back up some more and save your sorry ass. Tell me how much, Bernie."

"More to the right. Yes, there, we got him, he's grabbed the net. Hold on, Fred, we'll get you in somehow."

"Just hold on, Freddie, damn you, I even got to save your life for you—oh, useless, DO YOU HEAR ME?—YOU'RE JUST USELESS! You're nothing but problems! PROBLEMS! YOU'VE ALWAYS BEEN A PAIN IN THE ASS, YOU ALWAYS EMBARRASS ME. BUT NO MORE. NO

MORE. NO WONDER JOSIE LEFT YOU. NO WONDER YOUR WIFE LEFT YOU. A BIG KID, THAT'S ALL YOU ARE, DAMN YOU TO HELL!"

"Oh, Jesus," Bernie exhaled as if he had been punched.

"What, Bernie? What now?"

"Tim, come here, he's, he's let go. He's floating away."

"What!? Let go. . .? Freddie!

Freddie! What the. . . Oh Jesus, oh damn you to hell and back, Christ, he's doing this on purpose, I know it. Oh, my god, he's going under, what'll I do—I don't know what. . . Bernie, what do I do? What...do I...? I'm going in. Here, just hold onto the rope of this life preserver. And don't let go, whatever you do, don't let go of the rope. OK, I'm going in after him. Just guide me."

"Yes, he's more to your left, Tim, hurry up, Tim, he's really starting to sink. You might just make it. Except the sorry truth, I'm afraid, is that, well, you know—it just seems one can't catch a fish that won't bite, Tim..."

AUTUMN PLANKTON

plankton vanishingly small
fill the tide and brim
the vanishing fall.
in the night, in the tide,
phosphorous creatures ride
and gleam a numinous language
spoken late, spoken late,
spoken, whispered late,
spoken dreaming, luminous late,
sibilant whispers, vanishing fall,
flaring gleams and all the lure
of night time
shapes fantastic light, luminous night,
shapes the vanishing fall,
shapes the vanishingly small
coastal flotsam, slapping flotsam:
shrimp and plankton, larvae like pearl
gleaming in the night time swirl,
rolling in the dreambright lees,
feeding greatly, great heaving seas.

FORGIVENESS OF PEREGRINES

A little dumb yet with boldness,
A little brazen atop the cliff
Where she ventures out the opened hack-box
Along a perch over nothing
Knowing not how quite to fly. . .
She is clumsy yet with youth,
Flexes high swiping wings
High above Pacific shoulders

That lunge against the headlands.
Five hundred campaigns attend her wing beats,
Five hundred prayers
Preen in the Pacific breeze
And blink up at gulls and ravens
Like the first time, like new life;
Flapping, flapping, in the June afternoon.
Already she glowers at darting sparrows.

Two falcons more peer out the hack-box
Over the chasm, watching, watching.
Two weeks more will find them all,
With luck, hurtling after sparrows and gulls,
Leaves and pelicans, discovering daily
This gift of stunning speed that turned
Kings to fawning boys through the centuries.
At the near ridge, a dozen eyes witness

The emergence--new souls and old hands;
Young faces and weathered; inheritors, bestowers--
Five hundred, now, this, five hundredth
This falcon release over all the state
Over all the years of rappelling down cliffs
For brittle eggs--our summed carnage
Of farming poisons--to snatch them up like embers
In cupped hands, to hatch them, almost, from earnest breaths;

Hatch them; replace them; or wean them
'Til the falcons fend and hunt, rekindling
Through all the vacant eries
Of the West, wild peregrines.
Two of the fledglings clack beaks
On the perch in the balmy afternoon,
Ignorant yet of hunting, of starving;
Curved beaks clack in the reddening sun. . .

LOOK THERE!

the blue sea ahead roils white.
plunging birds? clowning seals?
torpedo shapes lunge and dive—
a hundred common dolphins vault our way,
then are all around us,
shedding hummocks of brine,
hurtling out, hurtling back;

glistening grays slipping sheaths
of aquamarine
and lagging along our raft.
I plunge to shake their hands—
but vanished to shadows,
silence surrounding,
not a dorsal splits the surface. . .

GRAY WHALE COVE

No luck.

He hadn't a bite in an hour. Once in a while he'd plunge his head in the surge where he floated beyond the breakers and glimpse shadowy silvery forms.

But no luck.

Nor was there any surf.

"Can't catch a fish and can't catch a wave," Flint muttered. People strolling the beach would laugh at him fishing from his surfboard, Flint could see, but he could cast another 25 yards or more and paddle after tell-tale terns and pelicans that plunged from the sky into the sea.

Flint slowly reeled in his line to check the bait. Still there. He flipped the bail on the fishing reel and cast seawards again with a satisfying arcing sidearm of a throw, the hooked smelt and sinker sailed cleanly over an approaching swell and plunked from sight. He set the bail of his fishing reel, putting one finger on the line to feel for strikes that would telegraph instantly up the line from the hook. He knew the salmon were cruising the bay. Were they hungry or not? Dumb fish.

Flint pulled a beer from his kidney-belt pouch as he laid the fishing rod across

his legs. His numb hands fiddled with the aluminum tab for a moment, and, in the space of a burp, his rod disappeared—yanked underwater—he gaped incredulous at his empty lap.

"You got to be kidding!" he yelled to nothing. He began to sputter and fume, but just sat there shaking his head. "What else? What else?" and he just floated in the swells sipping at his beer while the sea around him seemed to breath, seemed to inhale and turn opaque in the whispering sibilant foam. All he wanted to do was catch a fish for a decent dinner, maybe sell half of a 20-pound salmon to the restaurant on the highway. That fishing rod was about all he had left to call his own.

But then again, he didn't really care if he caught anything. And he was half-glad the gray swells seemed half-hearted. He even wished the fog would thicken a little more again. No, the sun was not all that welcome with its thrust of color and news: it seemed to require something. And Flint hated even the hint of a duty today. He'd been given—or rather backhanded—this day off from work. "Because you blew it!" his boss had screamed. "I don't want to see you for a couple days, you understand? Take a powder! Lose a few rocks in your head!"

But it wasn't his fault, Flint grumbled in the waves. It wasn't his fault that Flint's cigarette ashes flitted out the window of the pick-up and set fire to all the empty gunny

sacks in the truck bed. Just because the truck looked like a goddam fire ball in front of the county building inspector and three fire trucks came screaming down the street with a few cops. It could happen to anybody. The stupid sacks weren't all that important. His boss could still carry the stupid plants in something else. Dumb old man.

The sea rose and swirled around his hips and surfboard, churned on past whiter than snow, slipping him down a trough. The ocean here was never clear—never clear as, say, Monterey water—he never knew why—just wasn't.

"Ah, this whole place is a poke in the eye," he muttered and felt once more that he should be in a different place altogether, doing something else with his life. "Twenty-six next month and I'm doing nothing, nothing. I'm blowin' it!"

Flint leaned his lanky body over the board and laid his scruffy blond head over crossed arms. What was to keep him from leaving? His wife left last month; his father had died six months before that. And he wondered, when was there ever a time he could say he was happy? Just then gulls screamed overhead and triggered a curious memory—that sound of children screaming and laughing over the playground years ago:

He remembered running in a game of tag with the girls at lunch break. One girl

chased him all over the asphalt, through knots of children playing and around the bars and the swings. He vaulted over a log and through more children, laughing, laughing, all the time. And for several minutes he felt strangely intrigued that he could be who he was.

He felt completely enchanted with life—how lucky he was to be alive—to be here—alive this instant—the warm sun and the sounds of laughing spun and spun as he dodged and dodged. Did everybody know how lucky it was to be alive, he wondered that day, as he gazed at the playground golden with sunlight?

How long ago was that day, he wondered? And when was the last time he felt such a thrill with mere existence? He smiled a little at the idea as he stared fixedly seaward.

And so, lost in thoughts like this, he did not fully grasp what rose enormously before him—the heart-shaped blast of white breath merely carried his eyes skyward. But when he brought his gaze level once more, a mountain of flesh studded with barnacles loomed twenty feet ahead.

For moments he could only stare in disbelief.

The whale floated oddly in the swells, unmoved by waves which seemed to issue almost politely around its mass. Under the silvery cast of the sky, blotchy white barnacle patches glistened, indeed,

fairly sizzled with intensity over the beast; appearing and submerging, appearing, submerging. The great gray mound of the whale's back was the most visible part of the creature. The rest lurked beneath the surface. The thing must stretch a good fifty feet, thought Flint. Bumps like great knuckles sloped down its dorsal ridge toward its submerged tail.

Flint had seen Gray Whales migrating up and down the coast before, but never had he witnessed up close a thing with such presence. The elemental power of the creature simply exuded from it—half seen, half unseen—without it even moving. The whale seemed entirely weird—of a different order—here but not here. But then he realized why: Flint couldn't see the whale's eyes. The huge flesh seemed so unworldly because he couldn't really tell what, if anything, it actually saw. And somehow this needled Flint, bothered him, seemed, in fact, monstrously wrong, and he wouldn't rest until he could see this creature watch.

So Flint leaned over his board and began to paddle around to the front of the whale. He kept a thirty-foot or so distance as he skirted around it, unsure of which was the safer course—in front of a possible charge or behind a possible slam of flukes.

As he rounded the head end of the whale, he was struck by the lines of the animal—tapered like a torpedo, like a submarine—like the inspiration for a submarine made flesh. This thing had just

swam up from Mexico—he knew what they did, they swam from Mexico to Alaska and back every year—swam! No rides were hitched. Great White Sharks and Killer Whales haunted their journey. He saw, in the scars and barnacles and nearly perfect lines of the Gray, the yawning fathoms of the Pacific Ocean, the thousands of miles and terrains undersea, enormous rounds intimately known.

And still, Flint could not quite make out the animal's head nor eyes; still, the massive hump of flesh seemed ungrasped—as if it was too big for any notion of dimension at all. He continued paddling around to the seaward side. There was something funny about the whale, Flint thought, as he paddled with lanky arms through the water with his feet crossed upwards in the air. There was something absorbed about it—and he suddenly felt, as he rounded the creature, quite safe. This thing would not hurt him. So he drew a little nearer to its seaward side while he perused the whale's length. And as he paddled by, he could make out an odd pattern over the whale that seemed incongruously familiar. He stared. What was wrapped over the whale? He sidled closer. All at once the puzzle set. A net—of fish line—was wrapped over the damned thing! It was, it was—yeah—"a gill net!" Flint mouthed to himself. The whale was wrapped in a gill net!

"Aww, poor baby," said Flint loudly.

"What a rotten thing to happen. Get rid of it!" But the advice obviously didn't help. "Aww, poor baby!" But what could he do? The whale must obviously be handicapped by the thing. In fact, it might not be doing well at all—in fact, what if it was dying? He drew even nearer. And as he did so, he felt again there was something odd about the whole shape. As the whale rose and fell in the surge, there seemed to be something else. What was that beside the big Gray? As the next swell crested in snowy froth, a dark form condensed from the shadow of the animal. "Another whale! A baby!"

And in the same breath that Flint realized mother and baby were wrapped together, the seaward eye of the big whale surfaced to regard him. . .

Flint regretted instantly his bravado. This eye he stubbornly sought was not of any mother he ever knew. It glared fairly through him with with malevolence; with fright; with weariness—a withering look such as Flint might fling at a wasp. He floated there, stunned, and a chill shivered up from his kidneys. Slowly he drew off the way he came, shrinking back more than paddling back, yet facing the Gray nevertheless. He grew more certain with every sculling of hands that the whale would plow over him—all those tons!

Suddenly its head lifted from the water like a nightmare revealing a barnacle-encrusted nose—or upper jaw, or whatever

it was—tapering forward from its massive body to a near-point. Immediately beneath the nose gaped a mouth like a half-open seine net with panels of cream-colored baleen extending like washboards back along the inner walls of the mouth. With these, Flint grasped, the beast strained all those uncountable barrels of water for plankton and krill. It all curved upward and backward in some lurid elephantiasis-plagued smile. Where the jaws joined, smallish eyes glinted. And as Flint watched, the whale's flesh began to crawl! Positively crawl! Flint panicked in revulsion and flailed at the water for escape like some wet bird. The whale lurched and Flint paddled at air, screaming.

But the whale head lurched seaward—without really traveling—and as he screamed, Flint glanced reflexively seaward along with the beast to see a tall, black, triangular fin slice through the water a hundred yards out and then slip from view. Killer Whale. And just as reflexively, Flint's panic passed—he just stared—stared without a sense of being there. He saw, in this slightly different angle, small white crabs or something skitter over the barnacles on the whale's head—"oh!"—that's what made the flesh seem to crawl.

He stared at the Gray, now, like some deaf-mute. He knew the whale had only glared past him at the greater threat. For uncounted minutes he just floated there

and watched her. Positioned now ahead of the Gray, the baby was hidden from Flint's view and he began uncertainly treading around again to peek at it. The big whale submerged and lifted, sank and lifted in the sea—almost laboriously. The fog abruptly thinned a little to reveal glinting monofilament wound around the mother's middle and most of the baby. It was a gill net alright, Flint mused, the kind Asian fisherman introduced here only within the last few years; used in these waters to catch kingfish and rockfish. Maybe this little clown had gotten caught in the thing, maybe trailed it for awhile and the mother had stuck close—trying to help—becoming ensnared as well. He'd always heard female Gray's protected their young and would even attack boats that cruised between them. In fact, Grandpa recounted how whaling crews he hunted with in his prime could be sure to catch a big Gray—harpoon the baby and the mother would charge in.

Well, what in hell could he do? He looked around. What in hell could he do? He paddled around to look at the shore for help and felt helpless, ridiculous. Nobody was on the beach now. How long would it take to go for help? How long would "help" take to get here? And what if the two whales tried to swim off? This net would never just slip off—he could see where some of the lines cut into the mother's flesh. What if the killer

whale—the very thought of the killer whale made Flint shudder—he felt his feet dangling in the water. He reflexively plopped them on top of the surfboard and began to imagine the predatory whale a few feet below—which it might well be. Killer whales were nothing to mess with. They attacked blue whales, the biggest swimming things in the ocean. And perversely, the more the whole cove now shivered with menace, the more flimsy his small surfboard became. With both feet atop it, he wobbled sloppily, until finally, he plunked like a lumpy sack into the water.

Flint frantically regained the board again and laid on it with his feet in the air.

"I'm cuttin' out of here! Sorry whale," and he began back-paddling to shore. As he did, though, the baby Gray happened to roll up in the surge and cast a beleaguered but curious eye at him. Flint hesitated. The two youths locked eyes.

"Aww, man," he sighed at it. "Why'd you go and mess up like this? What did you go and get caught up for? You blew it, man, you just blew it," but as he spoke out-loud he heard his bosses' refrain—"you blew it, you just blew it."

The young whale exhaled sharply in the busy sea-chop. He seemed to watch Flint and everything else without concern; tired perhaps, but too dumb to know it—like a puppy. Flint, poised to leave, watched it, sighed again, put his forehead down on the board and closed his eyes.

"It ain't right. It just ain't right," he muttered. Slowly, he sat up on his board with his feet dangling in the water. A quizzical look crossed his face. He gingerly paddled nearer.

"Well, you guys got any ideas? I sure don't," he blurted out-loud as he raised up to put hands on hips. A moment passed. Floating there thinking, he unconsciously reached behind him for the last beer in his belt pouch. He popped the can open, took a few sips, and examined the gill net closely. The thing needed to be cut alright. There was no other way. He gulped some more and looked around. He had no knife. Nothing with any kind of an edge was even around. And he wasn't about to try and bite through the line. Floating there some more and glancing restlessly about, an idea came to him.

He laughed loudly. The mother glanced. He hoisted his beer to the sky in a toast to her and gulped down the rest. He burped. Chuckled. Began twisting his can deliberately in half, back and forth. The aluminum piece soon broke and Flint stuffed one half in his pouch, then started treading closer with his dangling legs toward the whales. But he hesitated.

"You don't really know what I'm goin' to do yet, do you?" he said softly to the whales. "No, you don't." He backed off and paddled deliberately around to the other side of the mother away from the baby, and again carefully treaded his way

up to the mother whale's side.

She floated massively before him, seeming to grow more immeasurable in size with every stroke. Floating only an arm's length from her, Flint shivered with awkwardness. He didn't quite know what to do. Did she know he was even there? Would she let him touch her? He reached out like in a dream and touched the great animal. No reaction. How beautiful she was, how incongruous a thing she was. How strangely familiar—and yet remote. The charm of her flesh—smooth, warm, glistening in the cold water—made all the more monstrous this impact of her size. And it began to produce a bizarre effect on him. He felt, there in the surge, his very senses slipping over the contradiction. Flint could not even lift his hand from the beast. He needed to touch her, as if the act was simultaneously working to heal the disjointing of his senses. And as he continued to feel the mother whale, she turned somehow inwardly immense. And abruptly he saw—like through an opened window—this whole unreal scene—the suffering whales, the lashings of netting, the surf and the fleshiness, saw the whole scene, as his own, as himself. He smiled at it all.

Idly, Flint pried his fingers under a snarl of netting. He pulled out one of the can pieces from his pouch and began to cut at the lines with the broken edge. But the handful of lines resisted cutting. They were

unbreakable. He cursed and tried sawing more determinedly at a single strand. It snapped! He tried two strands at a time. But the can bent and collapsed; yet he could make it work if he persisted, if he found the right tension, the right angle. One at a time, as he leaned and worked against the floating hulk of the whale, the filaments broke.

It only took an instant. There was sky above the mother whale and then there wasn't. The hulk swamped his entire sense of dimension and then was rolling down on him like a hillside. An entire mountain plunged him yards under the surface and further, further. Flint held his breath against the bone cold panic. He could not see, he only instinctively held to a vague sense of direction as the whale bore down on him. He tried to crawl up the whale as if it were a rolling log in the water. The pressure from the depths he was being pushed to squeaked in his ears like a bizarre reedy music, and he barely equalized the pressure by yawning with his mouth shut. Only his years of surfing saved him. More than once he'd been slammed to the bottom by an unforgiving wave he lost. Blindly clinging to the bottom while the malevolent white water tore at you was an instinct you discovered very quickly.

Flint kept crawling blindly as the whale kept rolling until it stopped rolling and he himself paddled into the sea water.

He opened his eyes, which immediately stung. A vague dusk lightened before him and he swam beseechingly toward it. His lungs cried. Then he was belly-half out of the water into the air. His lungs clawed for air.

He lay on his back thanking the heavens for his wet suit's buoyancy. The whales could have been watching him on tip toes with a magnifying glass for all he cared. Slowly, he regained his breath and composure. Soon he even looked around for his surfboard, which was floating fin-up a dozen yards away. He swam to it, clambered on, and regarded the whales for a long while. The bitch. Damn near killed him. What the hell did he think he was doing trying to help a stupid beast? He hadn't put the darned net on them, it wasn't his fault. Yet he stayed, watching them. As he scowled in the heave of the swells, he noticed the mother whale roll again in the water.

"Ha!" Ya missed me!" he shouted at her. A percussive exhaling came from her other side, and he realized, now, that she was pitching and rolling in the water to allow her baby to breathe. "Oh," he sighed a little sheepishly. And with what he had done so far with the meshed lines of the net, the whales even seemed to have adjusted themselves a little. With the passing of a swell, the mother raised her head above the water. She looked straight at Flint. Yet it did not seem to be a look of

alarm, he surmised; rather it seemed to be a look of, a look of. . . expectancy. "Whad'ya want from me?" he blurted. "Do I look like a shoeshine boy? You expect me to get squashed like a snail twice? Forget it," and he folded his arms in defiance. But as he continued to glare at her, the whale imperceptibly seemed to loom closer to him. Flint himself made no move in any direction, and there didn't seem to be any strong current, but almost magically, the Gray was soon half the distance to him. The beer can he had been cutting the lines with bobbed in the water between them. A reflection caught his eye in the netting half way down the whale's side. "My pole! My fishing pole! You took it," and yet he knew it wasn't a question of the whale taking his gear. The two of them sort of caught each other. Flint couldn't help laughing. "I gotta be out of my mind," he said loudly as he scooped up the beer can and paddled back over to the whale.

After ten minutes, Flint pushed off to rest his hands. He began to wonder what would happen when he cut all the lines on this side. The baby might still be caught up in the gill net. And what if he tried to approach this little guy apart from mom, would the mother let him?

Leaving off, he paddled around in front of the two again, musing, singing some snatch of a song. Maybe they liked country music. Maybe this would work.

He paddled up gently to the baby's side. A blast of white breath from the mother, but no other response. So far so good. Flint wished he had another beer to dull his nagging fear. He began cutting again trying to select a pattern that strategically lessened the restraints, so that only a few tangled lines remained to be cut, and he could back off quickly if they bolted. He saw, though, that meshes had to be cut between the two. "Damn, I don't want to be in the middle of you two." But slowly he maneuvered over to the knotting near the baby's head, singing so they would be sure to know he was there. Its wet black flesh splashed and glistened against the navy gray of the mother. After a few minutes of work, the netting began to slip away. The fish line dropped strand by strand to turn invisible in the dark green water.

The sea water frothed and chirped and seethed around them all. Flint virtually forgot the two whales as he cut at the net with increasing fury. The gill net snarls began to give way as if he brandished some wand that dispelled them. The bound-up baby whale abruptly shifted in greater freedom, yet like the first tremor of a quake uncertainly felt. He kept cutting. The baby Gray shifted again—and then, with the finality of a landslide, was gone. The wash of its flukes swept Flint instantly up atop the mother. And the mother now launched into motion. . .

Flint slipped several feet down her

back before he instinctively gained his balance. For a delirious moment, he rode through the sea in victory. And how much nicer it was on top of the whale instead of below it! He looked around unbelieving, laughed, yelled, screamed, he patted the whale and yelled some more:

"Yahoo! Yaaahoo!" he shouted like some rodeo idiot. Gently the gill net began slipping backwards, peeling like a skin of tinsel from the cruising whale and, Flint slipped back some more in the wash as she surged after her baby. He bundled his feet under him, and stood up for the grandest ride of his life, surfing on a Gray Whale! "Go baby, go baby!" And with each second, he felt he surely would wake up and find this whole scene gone as well. He held his breath against the possibility, then stole breaths in silly gasps to keep this delicious delirium a little longer, just a little longer. His heart pulsed on every sweep of her flukes, his heart swelled out like a conch from its shell and fluted on out the rivulets of the whale's wake, winnowing through the swells—so intimate, so tactile, that every splash, gleam, lurch, was a touch, was a taste, a taste like the taste of game meat—full, dense, wild. What a thrill to be alive! How lucky to be here now! this instant!

"Go, baby, go, baby!" he cheered the mother and he sprang into the sea, surfacing boisterous as a sea lion to watch them cruise away, grinning with a

fulfillment only mercy bestows.

As he treaded happily in the surge, though, something wrenched at his legs. Something yanked him feet first. The killer whale? No, the net! The goddam net! He reached down and struggled to loosen its grip, but the invisible filaments only cinched tighter around his ankles.

He gagged at a gulp of icy saltwater. His arms sculled wildly as best they could in his back-sliding position, and the whale cruised slowly, unheeding, along the surface. He fought to keep his head above water—Flint knew she might dive at any moment and drag him with her. He slipped beneath the surface. The ocean tried to funnel up his nose and he tried to ration out a stream of precious air through his nostrils until none was left—he pinched his nose shut—the cells of his lungs wept, implored squeamishly for air. He broke surface again to gasp for breath like a prayer from one condemned. From deep inside, panic like vomit erupted to wrack him acidly and he gaped to the sky with pitiful extended lips, moaning out in gasps and croaks.

The Gray's flukes lifted up before him in the clearing sky like a benediction and Flint knew the whale was about to dive and drag him from life. Yet his terror strangely passed like the fog clearing. And the sun burst from a limitless blue sky. The sea, in answer, glinted and winked a net of highlights over all its blue-green body. The whale's great frond-like flukes flipped

upward and sank down beneath surface and Flint surged in tow through the placid print of water stilled by the whale's sheer bulk; waited to descend as well. Time stopped.

And stayed stopped. Nothing happened. As seconds stretched out to a lifetime, and then a full minute, his wet suit continued to float him. The net had slipped off! It must have slipped in the final stroke of the whale's flukes! Flint's mind leaped to presence and he reached clumsily down for his feet to rid himself of the murderous net. But, hunching and bobbing for air, he could not free himself. He was, in fact, so drained and dazed he fairly pined after his whale, and was tempted to just slip under the waves. If he hadn't spied a rock peeking barely above surface a dozen yards away. . .

With his feet bound, Flint couldn't really kick, so he splashed limp arms and undulated bound legs like a retarded dolphin closer to the rock, to finally inch himself, slug-like, up onto the kelp fronds and sharp gooseneck barnacles.

He rested a long time on that rock without even a thought. He just watched—neither idea nor desire flitted through him laying half-in, half-out, of the sea. Soon enough, though, the sun warmed him uncomfortably through his wet suit, and he pulled himself out of the water to stare at his bound feet. A quarter mile away, he glimpsed the blotchy white hulk of the Gray

Whale's head pierce up out of the sea, look about a minute, seem to watch him, and hurl over sideways with a great splash. Then nothing. The sea rose and fell like breath, rich, sensual, knowing. Absent-mindedly, Flint reached back into his pouch to pull out the other half of his beer can and started to cut away at the mesh of monofilaments with a smile, as if he had done this sort of thing all his life.

BLUE WHALE

A

glistening mountain
heaves up starboard;
blue-black; a mountain; flesh,
blasts out fleshy orifices
white geyser-breath,
but plows not a splash
its way on
and on
at ease
absorbed
self-moved and self-leaving.
it rolls on under an acre of water
to gleam up blue pearl
and leave great glass tailing
placid as sleep.

TOMALES POINT

You sense them scanning from the ridges
Before your own eye is certain of its catch—
The symmetry of antler racks
In the straight and rambly spikes of chaparral
Triggers, surely, the recognition of "creature:"
Recognition of the elk that have this peninsula again.
And you sense that all the swept grasses here
Once supported grazing herds more fleet
And less voracious than our cattle.
And supported cruising clans of hawks
That danced over the grasses and hills. . .
Up ahead, a hundred elk forage on the hill
As the sun reddens near the ocean's edge.
Yet scarcely a forb or weed appears diminished
Within the tall fences of the park
While just over the twelve-foot wire
The ground is stubbly as an old man's face,
And blank-eyed cows chew numbly
The channeled fodder of their genes.

SONG TO OSPREYS

very nearly we have lopped
the branches off supporting us all.
so branch by branch then;
by feather by fish and leaf
we must retrieve them all,
renew them all
because the thrill of wild things
is a measure of our pulse.