

As Above, So Below

By Cal Ristic

It was dark. and cold. And breathtakingly, hauntingly beautiful. I could not see the sun, yet there was a glow around the rotting debris surrounding me. As I watched my body sink, deeper and deeper, I thought to myself, “for all the years i spent battling the sea, she will now greet me as her child.”

I am unsure how long i watched my stagnant corpse. it was so strange to see myself outside of my own eyes, even stranger that my body was no longer habitable. It felt like only minutes ago that I was thrashing in pain, in agony, in despair. I could feel the echoes of water entering my lungs, burning my throat and eating at my life. My mind was no longer in a primal state of fear, of survival, but peace. I felt detached, a completely unbiased creature watching the world impassively. I had no earthly attachments. No breath, no sense, no pain. Everything that made me human was gone, and i was now stripped down to what was left of my soul.

I observed my self with a morbid curiosity. My eyes were open in wide surprise, still remembering the shock of the cold water. The skin appeared marbled, a myriad of purpled veins and blue cold. There was a sallow quality to my skin, my teeth yellowed and my hair limp and sparse on my head; signs of my failing liver and the scurvy that had plagued me in life. Perhaps it was fate that I had died struggling through the cold water, and not succumbing in a slow and undignified way. It was an honour for a sailor to die at sea, fighting ‘till their last breath, and humiliation to give in to sickness and the plagues of land.

After a period of unknown time, my body was ready to begin ascending. I could see the bloating begin, my stomach puffing like dough, my fingers inflating. Slowly, so maddeningly slow, I was lifted. Despite the decay already eating at the carcass, it was majestic. with my head tipped back, my hair splayed around me in slow motion, i looked like a dying angel, taken up to Heaven for its final resting place.

The darkness faded around me as I ascended with my body. At the rubble and detritus of my boat, I had seen only the dark flicker with strange beasts and their eerie calls. but here, where the lit-up waters met the dark abyss of the true ocean, I could see so much. Odd creatures that

never ventured higher than this twilight zone swam languidly past my floating corpse, sometimes pausing to inspect the peculiar being floating through their habitat.

There were tiny plankton and fish clouding my bruised face. I reached to bat them away, trying to protect my earthly body, but it was futile. They chipped away small bits of my flesh, creating strange dips, pokes, and craters in my once unmarred skin. I felt an almost comfort as those small beings feasted on my eyes. Perhaps this was the purpose all sailors served at their death. Nothing but food for the fishes.

I was truly gone from the corporal world. I could go anywhere I pleased, and I would no longer be tethered by debt or expectation. But something stopped me from leaving my old self to rise alone. I wanted to see it to its final resting place. Even though I no longer lived inside of this body, it had held me, carried me, supported me through the heaviest and coldest of storms. It deserved companionship through its last stretch until rest.

The sea was a cruel and frightening tyranness, taking what she pleased, spitting out ravaged boats and abandoned souls in her frightening wake. But she also hid unknown beauty and kindness in the folds of her jewelled skin. So many things surrounded the body, so bright and alive and colourful. The contrast of the decaying corpse and the illuminated fauna was stark. A large, plump jellyfish circled the carcass, its long tentacles caressing the gaunt body. It's tentacles were reminiscent of lace, delicate folds and creases giving shape to the watery colours of the jellyfish. The body's skin was peeling back, revealing dark meat and splotched bone, embraced by the long, flowing limbs of this creature.

This image was so strange, so absurd, that it made me pity the humiliation the corpse was going through. This beautiful creature circled the rotting body, taunting it with every touch and every flutter of its many silky appendages. The body was paralyzed, had no choice but to continue floating and stay an ugly, emaciated skeleton with nothing but chunks of flesh and rotted gunk to cover itself with. The appreciation that I held for life crumbled into a small, ashen pile. I was only one of those fish that had stripped away the skin from my bones, feeding off of others and dying just as easily.

Could a life that was taken so easily hold value? My mother and father were long gone, my friends and family abandoned, all for the ocean. I had given everything to the sea, and the repayment I received was decay and death. The ocean, she is a neutral thing, uncaring of the trivial beasts passing through her territory. How godly that was, to give life and beauty to every crevice of the Earth, and yet be so wholly alien to the inhabitants of that Earth.

I was near the surface. All these strange notions and cruel thoughts would no longer matter once I broke the surface of the churning ocean with the skeleton. I would be free of my moral obligations to the almost-gone body. I had only a small stretch left.

A strange anxiety filled my chest. I had no clue how long I had been drifting the sea, had no idea where I would be or what the world above would look like. Were my kin dead, never having known what had become of me? Was I irrelevant, no longer a celebrated sailor but a ghost in the history books, forgotten by the minds of the new generations? These questions gnawed at me as I and the body drew nearer and nearer to the surface.

The moment I broke surface, I knew that my fears had come true.

All around me, strange metallic beasts of a mammoth size drifted past me. Along the horizon, land peeked out, packed with trailing silver fingers that brushed at the sky. There was no open space, no greenery, nothing but smog and metal and silver. Everything was so foreign, completely unrecognizable from the small towns I had once travelled. Giant contraptions and machines ate at the land, extracting and razing and collecting brutally. How could this be my home, when the soil I had once treaded was now covered in marble and concrete?

Despite every worry, every horrible revelation I experienced as I watched the plumes of smoke and cacophony of sound rise into the sky, this was my home. A warped perception of it, but non the less, my home. The land and rocks underneath these new inventions did not change, no matter what was built on top. That earth held my mother and father, my friends, and my lovers. Now it would hold me. The sea may have been my cruel and unreadable mistress, but the Earth was my loving mother. I was ready to finish my journey at last.