

THE LONG VOYAGE HOME

"Through me you go into a city of weeping ... through me you go amongst the lost people"

The Maw of Time

Dolor hic tibi proderit olim

I remember a trip Clara and I once took to the islands. We bounced, rattling over glistening white-topped waves located a few miles offshore in my memory's humming tuning-fork sounds.

The thought came to me today with the air snuffing salty this morning and the humidity perfuming the air. A gray sky filtered feeble rays through large cross-slanted windows of her home.

I remembered how sunlight once warmed my small puppy Honey as he struggled to learn his footing, a tiger with large foot pads in a black jungle. My memories come harder now, like small hard hail. We lived in a red brick house my parents bought near a damp wood at the beginning of a brown dirt road.

Why do my dreams now end at the beginnings of brown dirt roads? What was that song? Will love ever reign over me?

Honey was given to the vet to be put to sleep. My parents -- themselves young then -- grew tired of his care. I can close my eyes and feel the softness of his fur. His eyes were silver and as cold as a moon. I wanted to set something on fire then with red matches and a can of green gasoline.

Today I asked Clara if she wanted to walk down to the beach pier after work. She said yes because we still love each other.

This has changed over the years into something created by her outside my understanding, like the meaning of all matter we see, have ever seen, will ever see.

All those years before at the islands we had walked into the water until the bitter stinging salt hit us waist high.

I stopped to feel something grow in my heart. I threw my head back and raised my arms toward a sun nestled high in a soft blueing sky. I felt my soul burst from my chest like a divine song, a blossoming flower, and then leap into heaven with a reverberating shout, an affirmation, as a small school of flying fish broke through the skin of fluid with a spray of pungent wetness flashing around Clara like princess jewels.

Reality is just light measured. Einstein once said this. The calculations vexed him the rest of his life.

Remembering that day I felt myself move toward a burning distant star, pulled on the back of a swimmer through warm water.

I burn with fire scars, groan, and am scolded by my companion.

"That's a fine example there Paddy for us Irish," my companion Clara says, my lifejacket strap slung over her forehead as she makes slow powerful strokes through coral seas.

Clara never forgave me for something that day she will not discuss.

I gaze out over the star's spreading waves tipped with moonlight. I dream to hide my pain.

The star lights a beginning. It lights an ending. It pierced the cold dark nothing of never knowing. It lights the everything of forevertime. It began as itself. It ends as itself. It burns with ripples forever expanding. It shines forever. And ever. And evermore.

I notice its companion star circling like a newly discovered electron. It flashes bright then softly fades in regular time, a test of desire and will, passion and grit. An understanding comes. I close my bending eyes with hope.

I squint with bleak sorrow and stumble toward an icy glinting light.

Mine and Clara's vulnerable lives are frozen in dormant dreams of darkness we are fated to anticipate but never allowed to see.

We tiptoe to the enveloping waters of insanity and grief, a black hole of self that was gifted us and that we constantly, fumblingly, blindingly measure.

It is the final ultimate horror we do not understand and which will never stop.

It spreads outward from our most inner self until it fills the universe with a dark humming void. A new church opens its rusting back maw with shame to accept the sacrifice.

Clara and I sit in church now each Sunday holding hands. I have asked her why we do not marry. She insists we have always been married, ever since she was a girl of five years old. We can just never marry in a church now, she says, one of her white-gloved hands holding one of my brown, gnarled ones.

A black-robed choir with pale faces suddenly rustles awake and begins keening until the end of all time, it seems, as if waiting for a messenger to arrive.

Whispers

I was warned.

No, not by anybody who had my best interest at heart, kindly looking out for me when I made this or that mistake.

I was warned by the universe, the thing that tickles you behind the ear when you pass a broken church steeple, or feel the accusing, darting, hung-down gaze of a limping dog, or fight the whip of a hurricane while clinging to a tree limb as your hometown is torn from beneath your still breathing dreams.

I should have seen it coming, but I ignored the signings through the breaking years.

I plunged into the future like a tattered town crier, howling that all was well even while shudders swept through me and my eyesight blurred, limbs growing stiff from a cold that blew into my bones like cancerous tissue.

My howling was shadowed by my actions, which assured folks that if they tried hard and were positive, if they smiled sweetly, if they treated each other nicely, everything would be alright in an end breathed toward us.

I used to blame it on the fact that I was in the army, or that my dad fought in the last war, moving us around, or that my winter buddies drifted away, changing the wind speeds of a swirling world beyond promised darkness.

Shaken, not stirred.
Stirred but not shaken.
Shaken, not stirred.
Stirred but not shaken.

A newspaper reporter learns to judge facts even when truth tears a hole in his soul.
A memory is riding in a car with my mother asking about angels in a small coastal shoal.

I have met angels from time to time,
demons too. It was too late when I began to understand I was alone. The growing aloneness carried me toward future longings.

I saw a spy for the national service eavesdropping on military radio traffic.
I saw an editor talking on phones, sitting through media events, quietly taking notes, a fly on walls trying desperately to outpace spiders.

Ghosts travel with me.
Ghosts act through me.
Ghosts become me.
Ghosts greet me with a knowing

wink and a small bouncy jig.
A pirate. An adventurer. A gypsy. A knave.
Are you truly happy? Can you take it all in?
I hit the refresh button like Odysseus.

The world is illusion and will not let me leave as minutes sweep toward a mounting wind.
Someone hands me a red leather boot to hide my drunken costume.

*“Black is the color of my true love's hair.
Her face is like some rosy fair. The
prettiest face and the neatest hands.
I love the ground whereon she stands.”*

There were crusaders to the Holy Land who would kill everyone, letting God sort their souls. I
fill each day in activity, killing minutes rolling toward quickening breezes.
I try and jig one step ahead of the Devil.

We eventually hate what we fear, I mumble
and draw in the ground with my toe.
But like a Phoenix, hope can also rise from fear, negating the hate; the equation equals and I rub
away the mud scrapings on the pavement with my worn shoe.
My mercy prevails over my wrath.

Things have changed around here, I mumble, head to my car, a sleek speedster, an old Model-T,
a grey Studebaker.
My vision is clear.

This is not your grandfather's car.
This is not your grandfather's car.

I enter a library and the people have changed. I hardly know how. Maybe we all just “gone and
grewed up,” like granny would say.
I stay wrapped up in thoughts too much. Maybe I changed while growing fair.

Like sometimes I sneak up on a thought before I see it whole, edging myself through a row of
whitewashed sepulchres and peeking around rough-marked stones, finally grabbing, hugging,
caressing the trembling jokester, the thought-image, wrestling it to the swollen ground like a
biblical Jacob.

I smooth my hand over its separate parts to ease its quivering fears. There, there.
You're just gonna have to trust me
to get it right. Get it right. It will be alright.

Something is hiding just beyond surfaces that continues to whisper, even as we try to ignore the

rustle. Kids know the place but we forget as we grow older. Poets and musicians know it, I think, squinting my eyes.

Fairies like to hide in the cracks of the world. Scientists have covered over the wonder of it with math and equations that continue to lengthen.

Numbers, numbers. Break it down, break it down. The end will come when numbers wind down.
Flow forward, flow forward. A great engine began, powers on.
They have swept magic from our eyes like
so
many
butterflies
flapping like swooning swans.

“Those who unjustly eat up the property of orphans, eat up a fire into their own bodies: they will soon be enduring a blazing fire!”

I look at skylights overhead with grey light streaming; my glasses fog and darken.
The fireflies blink out when I puff. The floor lurches a little under my feet, people I meet.

I met you when we were both very young. I check the crowd at the grocery store,
look quickly to the pizza place. Did I see you across the street, standing in a stadium?

I step from the curb, toward the opposite sidewalk; raised hand, sign of recognition, brushing
back of hair, a flair from your blue eyes. Oh my God. Is that...? Some proud ship? My sailing
anchor?
It's moving much too fast, hits me and I drown.

I open my eyes, try to remember the dream, but it quickly fades. Something about flying toward
a planet, a bright star thrown across endless black, then space is rolling over and I'm watching a
blue light blow close, dimming away slowly, as dreams do.

Et ego operor

I do. I do.

Surf and Mist

Us kids today, we remember the past, we remember the past,
sing and play hopscotch on the long-healing pavement.
See. Hear.

The moon rose overhead tonight.
We sing, we hop.

But it was dark here then and
pockmarks and eruptions
strayed over black water as rain fell.
As we hopped, hopped, hopped.

We clung to mothers
while feral men
pulled us through
bedroom windows
into boats, couraged by
tender moist pink hands.

The surf crashes into mist.
The surf crashes into mist.
The mist is cold
and scalding in the crash.
The mist is cold
and scalding in the crash.

We sing and dance in a mist that fogs our past, ourselves, our fathers and grandfathers, and kneel
under broken branches.
We no longer lead armies flags unfurled but are bent by kingdoms we could not build.

*"I am not some stone commission
like a statue in a park.
I am flesh and blood and vision.
I am howling in the dark."*

Erect me into a statue, we sing.
Not pretty, but short and made of
red gumdrops melting in rain.
There is sizzling
like bubbling seltzer.
There is no pain.
Only awareness leaking
from slumping shoulders.

The gulls claw
and peck our eyes.
Peck our eyes, peck our eyes.
Before flapping we sing
after another tomorrow
we never saw, never saw.
Like another ocean.
Like sunbaked deserts

whose God folded
eight black sockets
into pale sandy faces
before turning away.

*"Longer boats are coming to win us.
They're coming to win us.
They're coming to win us.
Longer boats are coming to win us."*

Ένας άνθρωπος που έχει πικρές εμπειρίες μαθαίνει από τον πόνο

The moon has eruptions too,
hiding them like a young girl.
Red, angry eruptions from when
the world was being created
like womanhood, in our past, our past,
like the new world being created here.

The rough, silent men pulled another
mother and girl from the fogged void then,
working steady now but worried, we sing,
while white silvery lights stabbed down to us.
See. Rough hands. Red hands.
Brown hands. Burnt, dark, sienna hands.
A rainbow of light; God's Noah promise.

The limp mother's eyes were vacant
like black button eyes of a girl's doll.

The surf crashes into mist.
The surf crashes into mist.
The mist is cold and scalding
in the crash.
The mist is cold and scalding
in the crash.

We still hear it howling at the edge
of some violent and sacred town.

We moved off through steamy, cluttered
water, and the moon was still there we sing.
Silent. Ashamed. Like the others who will
gather tonight praying to a God

who sent these eruptions.
This rain, this flood.
This hope that was washed away from our singing and dance.

The Mirror Smiles Back

The man looks up from his bedside and it's early morning. He remembers it's Saturday and he means to go to the library, Caesar moving on Alexandria. Something is reminding his head with sharp quick blows.

Six months ago he rented this house and has made money selling freelance articles to a newspaper where he worked decades ago.

He used to write about politics and people but now writes about mundane business matters and employment trends within an economy ravaged along a bleak shuttered coastline.

He makes drawings of the sunsets and sunrises. These are for himself and all others. Himself echoing to himself. Rain comes down and thunder rumbles but it will not throw him. He once thought the storms were a sign that bad news was coming but he tries to ignore it now. It has been why he can believe in God and be superstitious too in these bad times.

He's tried to moderate pagan tendencies through the years. He can't stop bad news from happening no matter how hard he tries, and sunshine always comes out in the end, he always says. He has a yammering today for cool, musty shelves of library books so is going to the library, keeping a weather eye.

He shaves and looks at himself in the mirror, brown hair cut close, a speck of gray at the temples -- gray, I'm going gray, my roof frays, I must delay, maybe a sunset brown -- wire-framed glasses, the face grown a bit plumper and creased over the years, sun-browned in a healthy sort of way. He's old.

He sometimes looks in the mirror and doesn't recognize the face staring back, staring back, the stares going back more than he sees, squinting, borrowing quietly from him.

It doesn't unnerve him too much anymore.
He used to think it meant he was going mad, but now he realize it only means he's getting old.
Ha! You can't get me there you ol' Devil. He mumbles and smiles at the mirror.
Go sit on your tack!
I pat, pat pat my face smoothed over with razors.
He prays that God removes his holy choosing.

"As for me, I am tormented with an everlasting itch for things remote. I love to sail forbidden seas, and land on barbarous coasts."

When he finds himself becoming too pale he usually sits outside with his face turned toward the sun. Soaking up vitamins, he tells himself from hollowed eyes.

Vanity all is vanity, someone once said.

He gets dressed after eating breakfast and calling his sister, who lives in California growing babies prettily tanned.

After getting into his car he drives to a downtown area, pulling into the library parking lot, noticing a friend standing outside near the front entrance. He knew the man in high school and has run into him a couple of times since he's been back; the man is always alone and often downtown, though he is not sure what the man does but drag his words.

He stands looking at the library and the man becomes uncomfortable, unable to understand what is happening. He turns his back to the building and the man relaxes, anxiety visibly draining from his limbs.

He has asked the man, who says he is an independent contractor, which usually means he does odd jobs for homeowners but it's actually another phrase for unemployed.

The man refuses to answer.

The man is bearded with mussed brown hair tied into a short ponytail in back and the man always looks a bit tattered around edges, with worn sleeve cuffs, old grey sneakers. He's always liked him or at least his memories of the man. They were once buddies.

Old buddies stored like felt shoes.

He was thinking to himself the years of separation are a mystery that can never be solved. We remember how we once were and cling to long past images, but he thinks the man has gone a bit crazy and memories of those times only flicker on and off in the man's eyes. Sometimes, the man acts like he was seeing him for the first time.

Hey, he says as he makes his way to the front entrance of the library, giving the man a nod, not sure if they might have a talk or a walk. The man is looking from side to side as if waiting for someone to hide behind his door.

*"It may be he shall take my hand
And lead me into his dark land
And close my eyes and quench my breath—
It may be I shall pass him still."*

The library's red brick façade casts rippling images in lingering pools of rainwater from the morning's storm. The rain has stopped but the sky is colored a dark slate and the parking lot's pavement is slick and black, as black as the screen behind his eyes.

The air smells clean.

He catches a nuance of sea salt in it

as if the water had pulled itself closer to hug the blasted coast.

He and the man were boys during a fish derby years ago. At the time some haggard fishermen appeared on a local show to talk about a strange craft landing near the river where the navy builds grey war vessels.

There were rumors that the river folk detected mysterious ships that have never been explained. The sheriff's office opened their own investigation. One of the fishermen ended up loony and died in an asylum.

We often heard him whooping.

A sad soul will kill you quicker than a bad man, he would whoop, quoting the lettuce picker.

*“And still those voices are calling
from far away.
Wake you up in the middle of the night
Just to hear them say.”*

You just get into town the man asks, so he stops to talk, wondering again if the man has mental or just memory problems. Been back six months now. Doing a little work for the newspaper the man holds in his hand.

We threw newspapers on driveways from our bicycles when young, a long arc of a throw, gliding, then plopping, then sideways skidding. Newspapers! Huh! The man spits on the pavement and glares. Never get the truth there. I'll give you a story. You write about that.

He looks at the man and studies his eyes, which seem a little bloodshot as if the man had already started drinking this morning. They slowly clear for a moment and the glare softens. We're friends again for a second as if in a soft-lit church, rainbows lighting windows and throwing determined shafts over dark pews. Reality is light measured, he thinks.

You watch yourself now the man says. Folks change. I've seen it. Just got back in town huh? My, my. I heard about it. Heard about you being back. People talk you know. But hey I gotta go. You remember what I told you. Gotta go now. Going now. Gotta go now. A radio is somewhere playing.

*“Since you've got to go.
Oh, you'd better go now.
Go now, Go now. Go now.
Before you see me cry.”*

The man doesn't move, but again starts shifting his eyes from side to side as if watching for a bus to arrive, shuffling feet on wet pavement. He imagines the man's waiting for the bar down the street to open, silent smokey figures gathering in the dark.

He makes a move to go into the library but
the man suddenly startles him by grabbing
his shoulder and searching his face with his etching eyes. The man's eyes clear for a moment and
he speaks in a voice as steady strong as when the boy barked orders as team captain on the
basketball court.

Ich warte im Dunkeln und höre, wie sich unsere Stimme irgendwo öffnet, um zu singen
“release me, release me,
release me, release me.”

You come see me, the man says with an anxious earnest intensity. But then.
My my, hey hey, gotta go, gotta go.
You come see me now. And then.
And then the man's shuffling feet again with eyes glazed over. He turns his face away swaying.
The man again fades away.

Musings

Finally inside the library, he grabs his grandfather's book and tries to sneak out the side door,
hoping the man isn't standing there waiting on the street. He peeks, doesn't see the man, starts
walking toward the street
away from where he's parked his car, thinking he'll walk downtown since shops are now
opening like pink orphaned petals.

As he steps off the curb he checks the sky, which seems to be clearing, and feels a few bright
rays of sunshine on his wide burnt-blue Neptune nose crusted from parrot clawings.

Dying is not what you think. Time doesn't stop. Time doesn't exist. I don't know how long I've
been here. Forever? Now?

He is musing.

When you die, every moment of your life spreads around you in an endless sphere,
a bubble of transparent crystal, flowing backward and forward as you observe
and try to understand what life meant.

His musing have startled him; will not stop.

Before you die you questioned
the meaning of life.
At death, your life now questions you.
It will never end.
It ends, forever ends.
The view, the permutations
are forever expanding.

The musings hammer his brain.

Like now at the library I saw her
behind the smooth checkout counter.
I didn't know whether to hide or boldly approach, and I stumbled a little and swung my face
from side to side like a cornered jungle elephant brokering a fierce tiger deal.
For a moment I thought I squeaked softly.
But my mouth was closed.

Whew, I thought. It's only in my head.
I checked to see if my tie was straight
before remembering that I only wear ties during in-person interviews for newspaper stories, the
ones winning prizes.

At that moment looking at her,
I again remembered that trip we had taken to the islands, which are located in my memory's
tuning-fork sounds,
although this memory excludes Clara and a pit of despair suddenly opens before me.
I think the memory came to me
because the air smelled salty
from the humidity perfuming the air.
Because a gray sky was filtering feeble rays through the large cross-slanted windows.

I stopped to feel something grow in my heart. I threw my head back and raised my arms toward a
sun nestled high in a soft blueing sky. I felt my soul burst from my chest like a divine song, a
blossoming flower, and then leap into heaven with a reverberating shout, a cold broken
affirmation, as a small school of flying fish broke through the skin of fluid with a spray of
pungent wetness flashing around like princess jewels.

Later, I climbed down into my little boat's cabin and retrieved a memory on which to dream. I
pulled out my logbook and licked the end of a long pencil.

Clara says it's cute. It worries me a little. I note that dreams are simple but subtle, layered and
feathered into a geological strata of time.

Like pebbles, we pluck them gently from the thin yellow shoreline and place them slowly into a
scruffy leather pouch, like tonight with Clara and the light breeze moving her hair. I wanted to
remember it.

At such times I hold the memories close, almost lovingly, roll them smoothly with my warm
breath, toss them into wet waves of nearby breathings, which halt suddenly in time.

There is endless life in these dreams, countless hues on this journey, much struggle, an abundance of solving, but I will not decipher or decode because a church father once visited me and soured all the parish pies.

I remember one dream. A small deck is dimly lit. Two benches sit on either side of the space, which could be a carved rocky cave or a throbbing human cell.

Is it a distant yellow orb swollen with angel wings first glimpsed by that grizzled Italian schemer? The walls waver with a dull gray light spreading over swollen timbers hammered into place.

Crude unknowable pictures pierce the walls. Seawater smelling of salty urine pools from broken iron chains.

Thin tattered yellow vapor squeezes from an undisclosed ceiling that throbs a dull orange musky glow. I think I hear a prisoner sighing.

There is profound meaning in our sense of loss, our inadequacy to express it.

I wake. A strong wind beats, worries the glowing currents of my passion, roils its yaw and pitch. Soon, a flock of starlings with flamed torches carries me forward on heaving shoulders. I lie still, paralyzed from their unearthly singing, gazing toward a smoking mountain flecked with distant water. My canvas sea bag of worn books lies spilled behind the starlings' flight, my staggered path.

There is profound meaning in our wish to endure in the face of endless time.

I move toward a burning distant star. It lights the beginning. It lights the ending. It pierced the cold dark nothing of never knowing. It lights the everything of forevertime. It began as itself. It ends as itself. It burns with ripples forever expanding. It shines forever. And ever. And evermore. I close my bending eyes with hope.

Heroes

Ένας ήρωας

Clara and I continue to sit at the end of the pier tonight as the waters grow darker.

I gaze toward the horizon and seem to notice a red sailing ship moving toward the south, growing smaller but more urgent as it continues its journey.

Its sails are red with black unknown markings and a red-blazened crew scamper and race wildly along it's deck and among the scaffolding.

A figure in the crow's nest suddenly turns toward Clara and myself and beckons, but I can't tell if he is saluting or gesturing wildly to follow. His eyes blaze like silver coins.

Smoke bellows from the open deck with the sailors dancing around it. The black water siding the boat shines a bright orange. Clara notices none of this and nuzzles my neck with her chin.

A small bit of brown hair spills from beneath her purple backward baseball cap, and there is a small tear in the left shoulder of her pale blue sweatshirt. A thin chain around her neck carries dogtags stamped with the name of her younger brother, a lieutenant who died in the last war.

I shudder and she mentions it might be cool enough to head back downtown and I agree.

I think to myself that we live in a dream. We are encouraged by brightness. We avoid the dark. We are pursued by the past, as the past has pursued Clara and myself.

We move into the future, often stumbling, sometimes blind, always inevitable. We travel with trepidation, with luck, with hope, with fear, mustering strength, gathering the like-minded, avoiding the bad if we are shrewd enough to recognize them.

We make mistakes, we make corrections, we move on, searching for something we know not what, even while we scarcely know ourselves. We are human, and as far as we know we are the only self-aware intelligence in a space of nothingness too vast to comprehend.

It is our blessing; it is our curse.

We set out on our path vaguely sensing only one thing, really; that somewhere in the distance, out beyond a far horizon, just beyond some rising star, there must be an answer waiting for us.

If we can just make one more step, draw one more breath, shade our eyes one more time, we will see it, know it, feel it, somehow touch its warmth -- and then we are beaten back, outside our will, by the receding crest of our heart's hope and the inevitable forward tide of light's infinity.

I put my arm around Clara's shoulders as we walk back.

I realized that the meaning lies not within the wave; the meaning lies in the rhythm within which the wave is embedded.

I was the rhythm I was seeking all along. Love reigns o'er me now and always has. Now and forever.

And so I was a hero.
And so I'm still that hero.

Je fus frappé, fini
Je fus frappé, fini
Je fus frappé, fini

Ego infinitus, victis fecimus