

RITE OF WAY

The skipper called the new hand up to the wheel,  
Said, "how ya doin', kid, think you can drive a boat like this?"  
"Not sure," says Rolf, "I'm not sure if I feel---"  
"Nothin' to it, really, stay alert and you can't miss.

Here's the plotter here's the compass  
Here's the pilot here's the throttle  
Keep the cursor on the A-B  
Line right here, there's not a lot'll

Trip you up. I gotta rest, I'm on my sixteenth cup of coffee  
Though it's barely been three hours since I let the mate go off, he'd  
Been standin' at the helm straight through from four to midnight  
And I knew he'd be a wreck so even though I'm still wound uptight

From not sleepin', from the stress of tryin' to get these fish to town  
Before this storm hits and the fleet runs in and knocks the dock price down  
With 20 tons of black cod here we've got a lot to lose  
Instead of smilin' at the bank we'd just be blubberin' the blues

So I gotta get some sleep. Just an hour or two  
Till I get caught up, then I'll come and take her back  
Remember, move to starboard is what you wanna do  
If a boat is comin' at you, and you're on the same track

Port to port, that's red to red  
Is how you want to pass her  
Here's the radar, here's the jogstick  
Turns us port or starboard. Yassir

Then, sport, I don't see too much congestion  
But I'm right there in my stateroom if you got the slightest question."  
The captain hit the rack, leaving Rolf a deer in a spotlight  
Peering into the pre-storm black of the Southeast Alaska night

With a total previous history of about two hours steering  
And that in broad daylight---now, with confidence disappearing  
With minimal expertise, and with zero frame of reference  
He hurtles into the vast and dark expanse of Dixon Entrance

There isn't the smallest comforting glimmer of light out there anywhere  
And Rolf gets an unwanted flashback of his mom, and a teddy bear  
But there's no bear here, just a roaring Cat in this 60-foot longliner  
And 20 tons of black cod. Well, our man Rolf's no whiner

And after a bit he starts to check out the radar, the plotter, the charts---  
Well, here's Cape Chacon, there's Rose Spit, and down there Chatham Sound starts...  
Here's the course line the skipper set---it's starting to make some sense  
And sitting there in the pilot's chair, he gathers confidence

And before long he's become Rolf the Mighty Helmsman  
The course is set, the coast clear---hey, this is kinda fat---  
Rolf pulls out his iPod and cues up a selection

A bit of fishy smelling rap by Snoop Channel Cat---

*Toes two timin' in my Xtra tuffs  
Feel the heat on the street while I'm chasin' down muff  
I'm the squeakin' wheel that's gettin' the grease  
Come up short, go report it to the pelt police  
A tight piece of candy on the arm is no harm  
Too young, but don't send me to no prison farm  
Take that Adelman con, made the cash disappear  
To the fat cat's pocket in the election year  
He'll do time, yeah right when the sun turns green  
Special prosecutor part of the same machine  
Blood on those suits that won't never come clean  
But the faces are grey, ain't no high in that scene  
Off that CNN, better turn up the sounds  
Wipe the frown, kick it down to the ground, hit the town  
Don't let the creeps drive you round that bend  
Cause livin' large---that's the best revenge*

The beat's got to Rolf, he's in a near hypnotic state  
His face plastered with an oblivious smirk  
When intruding on his reverie, a sense of impending fate  
Punches out the hip-hop muse, and he comes to with a jerk

What's this now we're looking at, a whole city up ahead  
But what's that on the edges, a green light and a red  
That can't be Prince Rupert, we're still forty miles away  
Could that be another boat, all lit up as bright as day?

Let's see---and Rolf peers into the radar screen  
Counts four rings up to a big green splotch  
That's closing so fast Rolf too turns kinda green  
Shit! How come I'm the one that's gotta be on watch?

Calm down now, keep it cool  
Think what the skipper said  
How'd it go now, come on, fool---  
Damn---oh yeah, red to red!

Pass his port light on our port, that's how I want to take it  
I'll just come to starboard, let's see, twelve degrees should make it  
That looks good, the radar course line's well off to his right  
Whew, that was close, I don't want to get in a fight

With a boat that size, look at all those lights, it's a cruise ship I'll just bet  
A geezer liner full of folks from Ohio, playing roulette,  
Eating king crab and drinking margaritas---hey, that'd be pretty trick---  
On the other hand, maybe they're all just miserably seasick...

This line of thought which could have led to existential dread  
Gets cut short as Rolf, with a sinking in his gut

Sees the ship is once again directly dead ahead---  
Oh my god---didn't turn far enough, now I'd better cut

The crap and get us turning  
To starboard in a hurry  
Cause this guy is really burning  
And so Rolf in a flurry

Of action cuts the pilot, puts his back into the wheel  
Gives it thirty degrees this time, which for a moment lets him feel  
Some relief, until he finds that the red light is gone, oh how  
Am I gonna get past to his port---he's right in front of me now---

Rolf cranks hard right but the horrible circus of light refuses to pass  
On the radar a large and a much smaller blip merge and form one sickly green mass  
Rolf tries to yell for the skipper---the cry gets stuck in his throat  
One last yank on the wheel is all he can do in his final few seconds afloat

The green light goes out... a white light appears...  
And Rolf's eyes see, through fought-back tears  
The stern light of the cruise ship receding to the west  
And he stands transfixed---by God, I must be blessed

The boat, its wheel still over, makes a full revolution  
And yet one more before Rolf finally shakes off his confusion  
And straightens out her heading on the former compass course  
And, trying to dig himself out of a quagmire of remorse

Steers by hand for two straight hours, till he hears the skipper's voice  
Say "How'd it go, kid?" leaving him to make a choice  
As to how much of the truth his answer should allow  
In the end decides truth is kinda relative, anyhow...

"Not bad---saw one other vessel  
Passed us going the other way.  
That was it. Well, now I guess I'll  
Go below if that's okay."

"You bet, and thanks for taking the watch, it helped a lot."  
As Rolf turns in, the skipper checks out the plotter. Well, what've we got---  
He did fine, track line's straight but for this little nick  
Still on the fifty mile range, though, I'll just zero in real quick

Hits the button and zooms to the ten mile range, five mile, two and a half  
Eyes the two donuts they'd turned twelve miles back, gives out a small puzzled laugh  
The hell's up with this, trying to make art on the plotter, thinks he's Toulouse Lautrec?  
I should blister his ass!---but I'll just let it pass. He's way too good out on deck.

THE KESTREL

Eighty-five miles off the beach  
With a waypoint entered for home  
Cruising through heavy grey mist  
Grey the sky, grey the seas, grey the foam

The cabin is warm, and the engine's hum  
Drones on, leads us into a kind  
Of torpor, an easy continuum  
The season's travails left behind

When suddenly there's a flurry,  
A panic of wings off the bow  
It's a sparrow hawk, lost in the fog  
And trying to figure out how

To perch on this alien platform  
That rolls back and forth in the swell  
From the mast, to the pole, to the gunwale  
It flits, then flies off for a spell

Till at last the exhausted bird lights  
On the foredeck, just in from the rail  
And ruffs up its feathers, and hunches  
As on through the greyness we sail

Now a headwind is throwing up spray  
That's soaking the hawk where it stands  
And as time passes by it's collapsing  
Its fate, I see, rests in my hands

I creep forward, holding a towel  
Optimistically thinking I could  
Wrap it up and convey it inside  
Where the warmth might do it some good

But just as I'm ready to move  
It senses me, springs up in fright  
And, frantic, collides with a backstay  
And plummets astern, out of sight

I run aft, but nothing is there  
Just the wake fading into the fog  
So I toss the towel into the cabin  
And gaze around, sick as a dog

At this tragedy. But now a ruckus  
Erupts from just inside the door  
Where the hawk, who'd flown in for safety  
Was knocked by my towel to the floor

It's not hurt, though, and after a struggle  
I get it set up on a pile  
Of rope I've arranged as a perch

Where it's dry. At last I can smile

And go back to the drone of the engine  
And my dreams of the summer that's flown  
As the lids of the hawk, too, grow heavy  
And it nods off to dreams of its own

Hours go by in this reverie  
As we gradually bear in toward shore  
Then, at forty miles off, the hawk wakes  
And hops to a step by the door

And fixes my gaze for a moment  
Then purposefully leaps into flight  
By the time I get back to look out  
It's lost in the fog, out of sight.

Hawk, it's forty miles over the waves  
Before you can cross to the coast  
If your strength doesn't flag it should take you  
Two hours or three at the most

May your sixth sense plot a true course;  
May you daydream of shore as you fly,  
Of a perch in the sun, by a field full of mice,  
And of updrafts in clear warm blue sky.

AFTER YOU MISSED THE LAST BUS OUT OF WESTPORT

It's all right here, on the verge of the harbor:  
All that you need to rebuild your dream.  
A sudden cut in the tidal marsh  
Dry at low tide with occasional pools  
Clear as the air when the wind veers northwest  
And strewn on the brown sandy bottom  
The remains of small crabs and clams  
Skeletal shroud for live buried brethren.

Above, on the bank, a fist of feathers  
A bit of bone and a compact scat  
And there, looping over the reeds, flies the predator  
Hushing the odd bits of birdsong below.  
Then, like a knife through the air, a gull's cry  
The drone of a plane, the murmuring wind,  
A hammer, the tires of home-driving tourists.

Just off the shore, a loon appears  
Shivers its wings and dives again.  
Farther out, vestigial seas  
Reduced after crossing the Grays Harbor bar  
Reborn as small breakers that chase one another  
Across hidden sandbanks to weaken and die  
Subsumed in the deeper blue water beyond.

Yards down the beach, two sad trollers conspire  
Ungainly, abandoned, slowrotting away,  
Days of full fish-holds now just a reverie  
Planking and frames a haven for barnacles.  
And the wind sighs low in the marshgrass  
Small wavelets lick at the shore  
The tide turns and makes its way back up the channel  
Your heart fills with sorrow and hope.