

## SEATTLE TO BREMERTON

I first heard about Shane from the cleaning crew—Martha and Ronnie, in particular—who told me all about the regulars before I ever risked the whispers of whiskered Nordhaus under the dark canopy of salted night. Now I feel the fulness of time, the moment of artistic creation, engulfing me like a growing shadow on the fast-approaching shore. I walk through the heart of the ship to watch and listen and reap what I have sown. The passengers are shuffling sheep, afraid of burning in the heat of the seldom summer sun, and so they do not last long on the deck, though they last longer than they do in the icy rain of winter's nadir, when only Shane is brave enough to apprehend the choppy, slapping, displacement hull-rapping waves of the sound. I can hear them run—hear the beat of weak feet fleeing the deck and the labile look of the surface of the wet earth for the safety of a bag of vending machine pretzels sans wind.

Shane says, “Don’t run away, my friends. If the weather dares to mouth vertiginous verbs, won’t you dress up its words with natty fashions fitting for nouns?”

Is that what he says? Yes. Who listens? Few. He always speaks in aphorisms or parables. But I listen and write with wiser wrists. Inspire me, Shane. Don’t waver or blink. Won’t we devour the summer together with appetites thrice fasted from the exhausting fashion in which we cried out the spring? Shane looks past me, then back. I stop my poem and just listen.

“When were you happiest, my child?” Shane asks.

A stumped septuagenarian wrinkles brow. No answer.

“How about you there—the lady in the corporate robes?”

“Aren’t you the man who rides the ferries just for fun? I’ve heard about you.”

“For fun? No, for enlightenment!”

“Sure. Whatever. Well, to answer your question, I was happiest when I was young and traveling around the world with little money.”

“Perfect answer! Now, why wouldn’t you do that everyday? Keep it going?”

The woman shrugs. “Because life happens. I have a job and a family. A career. There is more to life than Bohemian pleasure.”

Shane nods. “Sure, sure.”

“Besides, wouldn’t it just get dull? Too much of a good thing becomes—”

“No cliches, please! Though there is wisdom here, yes. I can smell it. But to answer you, I don’t overindulge. I micro-dose. One trip per day. My own bodily vessel is not yet ready for everlasting beauty.”

The woman gets up and leaves, revealing an empty orange seat. And I go too, for now.

#

A heavy man sits down near Shane. He swings one pleated-pant leg over the other and itches his shin.

“You live in Bremerton, mister?” he asks Shane.

“I live here.”

“Seattle?”

“Yes, but *here* as well.”

“Say, that’s a funny answer, mister. You some kind of funny man?”

Shane smiles with a wink and shows his front teeth as he bites down gently to make a joke of a face.

“Nothing funny about our beautiful Puget Sound. Nothing like it in the country.”

“Been out to the East Coast though? Or—”

“No. This sound has the largest ferry system in the country.”

“But out East they have—”

“They have an errant conception of the West. That’s what they have. They think Colorado is the West. Denver’s a thousand-mile drive to the east of here. How about that?”

“But it’s far west out East.”

“They have no imagination. They have no empathy there.”

The man chuckles, and the lights flicker inside, dancing off Shane’s grinning face.

“I still think you’re being mighty ignorant.”

“Take your ignorance to the windows, go to the outdoor deck! What do you see? Cascade Range to the east, Olympics to the west. And we are on salt water. Where else can you have that experience?”

“Alaska prob—”

“Alaska! Alaska does not count, sir. Alaska would interfere with everything. Is Texas big? Yes, oh wait, Alaska! It disrupts the scale, it distorts conversation.”

“So, you don’t like the East and you don’t like Alaska.”

“We are Alaska’s Southerners, sir.”

“Canada is in the way.”

“Canada is whoring between us, yes, spreading herself right in the way, full bodied, nippy coasted. Let me tell you the lie about Canada, friend.”

The man’s exhaustion was pouring out pores now.

“Lie?”

“They say Canada is our northern neighbor, but did you know that Bellingham is further north than Toronto.”

“It’s still generally true that—”

“It’s generally false, only true about particular examples.”

“Enough!”

The man gets up, slowly at first. Snatches his newspaper.

“Go on, friend. Just trying to enlighten you.”

Shane’s monologue begins. No real audience today, just me, still leaning against the wall for now.

“They don’t appreciate us out here in the *other* Washington. Oh, but they want to move here once they discover our purity, our Christ-like air. Then there’s no stopping them. And the only thing to do is make for the foothills. Seventy inches of rain—that’ll stop them.”

He’s grown darker, more irritable now. Swinging at windmills.

“Live in Marblemount,” he says. “Jack Kerouac couldn’t handle it past Marblemount. Sixty-three days on Desolation. He was weak. He was Eastern. His beatific vision wasn’t eternal; mine has been decent, so far. Just Nordhaus though.”

My eyes fasten to his face at the sound of the captain’s name. “Go on,” I want to say.

He obliges. “Seventy wet inches will keep away the communists, the capitalists, the TV preachers, the karma reapers. Won’t keep him away though, not the damp soul of Nordhaus.”

Nordhaus really gets to him. Disrupts his serenity. Risks his mission. Will he tell us why?

#

“What’s your favorite ferry,” a little girl asks Shane.

“Not Vashon, though great for a quickie. Nothing quick about its windy wary roads though. Dark and nippy. Chill me good, they can, like a songbird sullied by grief.”

She looks at her father’s distracted face for help.

Shane continues, “San Juans? Beautiful, of course. Hard for me to get to that one these days. Bremerton is the right length, and I can bus to the dock.”

“Why can’t you go to the San Juans, mister?”

“They won’t let me drive up there, little girl. They took away my driver’s license because I’m too holy to drive a machine. I’m enlightened, you see. I’m a wandering philanthropist like Jesus or Buddha.”

The girl’s father gives Shane a dubious look.

“Daddy, what’s philanthropy?”

“Riding the ferry for fun every day is not philanthropy, Kaylee.” He says, quietly. “It means—”

“Do as I do and give it all up.”

“Sir, I’m sorry, but if everyone stopped working and just rode the ferries all the time for enlightenment then there would be no room on them. They’d have to build a thousand ferries.”

“Me?” Shane asks, exuberantly. “I have the face that could launch a thousand ships?”

The man pats his daughter on the head. “I’ll explain it to you later.”

“It’s not the quantity,” Shane continues, “of the disciple, I seek, but the quality.”

Cliche, Shane.

“Go get your sister and bring daddy a coffee from the machine, and you two can have hot cocoa. Don’t spill. It’s hot!”

The pilot’s voice speaks; we’re almost there.

“Clearly the captain has never heard any of Zeno’s paradoxes about motion,” says Shane.

“I hope that coffee comes, paradox or not.”

“You’ll get yours, but they won’t get theirs.”

“Come now?” The man leans in.

“The hot cocoa machine is broken again. Been thirty-eight days since it last broke. Was fine for 219 days before that. Must be declining, deteriorating at a faster rate.”

“That’s a shame. Now it’s just a dumb boat ride for the kids.”

“Oh, don’t say that! Say, *Cue the search for meaning now that you’ve felt the draftiness of empty love.*”

The man leaves to find his daughters. His wife looks up from her magazine.

“You must ride this particular ferry quite a lot to know the duration of—”

“Every day, yes, it’s my calling, my holy vocation, the only thing that makes me happy.”

“Is that so? Do you ever see any celebrities?”

“Do I ever? Why, I’ve seen Ed Greiner ten times at least.”

“Who’s that?”

“He fixed this ship and two others many, many times, single-handedly, with just a plus screwdriver. No man on Earth has done that!”

#

I pieced together the backstory on Shane from several reliable sources: crew members, regulars, even members of the local press, and from my own inferences. He works at a grocery store on Queen Anne. He rents a bedroom in a house nearby. He walks to the ferry every day. He has little money.

“I accept alms for stocking shelves at the little market,” I overheard him say. “Tickets for the ferry are my only expense. I’m sent money from time to time from some charitable people who raise funds online. They know my story and believe in my divine calling.”

His proselytizing so far has otherwise been a failure, though it has been useful for me. He may have success yet. Even the Gnostics had converts to their religion of no sex. Tough sell.

What would Shane say to that? “I have lived a home life of voluntary isolation in devotion to my god. Even my cat ran off to Nebraska to escape boredom.”

There’s a sound now—I hear Captain Nordhaus alighting the silver stairs.

“Try not to scare the children today, Shane.”

“Aye aye, Cap’n. Can do. Yessir. And Cap’n?”

“Yes.”

“Try not to—”

Shane judged him in silence. He beheld the bleached-blank stare from Nordhaus like it was the earthworm gaze of an unrepentant lout.

“Stare long enough captain and there will be a spider dangling from your head in no time at all.”

It’s all better than planned. I can write, I can write it all down. Does he scare the children, yes, sometimes, he’s getting worse. But he is also kind, and he shares his parables with them gently.

“Consider the barnacles on the pier, little child. Consider our marine meet-and-greeters idling on the night-black water-burnt legs of the docks. They cling so publicly to the infrastructure, to social rot, avoiding the surprise of sumptuous wealth.”

The kid scratches hair-thick head.

“And Reagan said welfare was unnatural!” Shane continues.

The kid has lost interest and stares now at the refreshments. The vending machine has stale temptations waiting. Then there are tide chart cards lined up in dirty plastic sleeves—a favorite for the children. Shane is aware of my presence now. He whispers loudly about the crew to a sleepy soul nearby.

“Johnston over there—he’s second in command. The chief mate. Do you see his misanthropic mien? Those clean and clingy cheeks? Here is a man fond of sugary worms that come in toxic bags.”

He gazes long and hard.

“Say hi to Nordhaus for me, will ya?”

#

A young girl is coloring in her book of empty landscapes.

“Have you ever seen an Orca whale?” she asks.

“Yes. An Orca once breached right in front of me, spouting off. I was the only one on the deck. It was all for me. She spoke to me in a voice like my mother’s, then she switched to a deeper register, like the Southern Baptist-preacher bass of the foghorn sounding over the baptismal waters. She said I should be wearing a white hat with my blue jacket, not the blue hat because it has this clashing effect. Orcas hate such things and any garish wardrobe surprises.”

“Did the whale say anything else?”

“Not a whale, my child. I’ll let the first error slide off the blubber. Blubberer’s blunder. Rather, a dolphin, or dolphinesque creature. That movie about Willy the whale was a goddamn lie. It was full of shit. Okay, goodbye.”



Shane crossed the line there, but few would complain. The regulars all believe he is harmless. Ship is fuller than usual today. No one is on the deck because of a summer rainstorm. When it's windy a horrendous howl comes through the poorly greased, creaking, self-closing lever-action door. It covers up the sound of the slop of choppy salt-rock water and its foamy creamsicle of top-notch heavy pitter patter.

Shane mumbles to himself. "Nordhaus knows not justice, that ticklish liar. He sends his crew out scrubbing the deck clean like Turks in a geometric bath when he could just wait for a storm."

#

I'm up on high.

"Bill, why does he hate you?"

"Shane?"

"Yep."

"Can I confess something?"

"Confess what?"

I prepare to drink in his words and let them fill my pores like oils. Nordhaus becomes the wheel before me with flexed wrists.

"Gotta get something off my chest, something silly I once did. Seems stupid now. But I would never confess to Shane. I'd rather throw him off the boat myself. Or, out of weakness of will and love of bureaucracy, I'd have him banned for agitating the passengers."

"But the paperwork—"

"Yes, damn it all."

I hear the instruments humming. Nordhaus lines his gums with more chew.

“He caught me, Johnston, that is, he suspects me, and he’s right.”

“Go on.”

“Don’t say a word about this. I’ll deny it.”

“You know I won’t.”

“Well, he caught me doing a lady, few years ago. She walked out while he was snooping around up here. He saw my captain’s hat on her head. I was clumsy. Should have reached out for it, but I was lazy.”

“A little reckless, Bill.”

“Yeah, a little foolish. Stupid. Not very professional and everything’s about being professional these days. Everything is a matter of morality now. Can’t even buy duct tape without the hardware store telling you what they’re doing to help the environment or whatever. I just want my goddamn duct tape!”

Fist slams, and I lick my lips.

“So, Shane knows, then?”

“Yeah, he knows, but he’s never said anything about it.”

“Shane wouldn’t let something like this go.”

“No, no he wouldn’t. He’s planning something, for sure. He’ll announce it to the world, somehow. He’s waiting in the shadows, always, like a beast. Plotting, scheming, dreaming. I know it. The way he looks at me with that twisted childlike face. His rump is elevated on his high horse—”

It’s music to me.

“Nose low enough to smell shit though.”

“Yeah,” I say.

“Yeah.”

“You know what, Bill?”

“What?”

“I thought you were going to say that he caught you snorting coke.”

“Damn it, Johnston, you say the funniest shit. No, no snow here. Just up there on Baker.”

I look up and squint through the window and see the glistening glaze of white on the northern king.

#

One afternoon I find Shane in tears.

“What does it feel like—to lose happiness?” he asks.

I wish to speak as a poet. “It feels like every single amino acid molecule in my body has been removed and one-by-one pounded with a hammer.”

Shane outdoes me with his own answer. “For me, it feels like my throat burns with unquenchable thirst. The eyes of my spirit bulge out like a frog. I’ve lost my senses of taste and smell. While on the deck, an osprey defecated on my nose and my mouth. My head was tilted back in practice of supine surrender to its winged-wonderous ways. I could neither smell nor taste it.”

His words—or my poetic rendering of them?

“Regarding stercoraceous matters, even Nordhaus is now indistinguishable from my own form in my mind.”

“What is he then?” I ask.

“A name, like Angra Mainyu, but an essence no longer separable from Ahura Mazda.”

“A poetic nonduality?”

“An abomination, but what would you know of such things?”

“More than you think.”

“Nordhaus and I are joined now. His head is united with mine, through our bodies and the tragic floor, like a two-headed snake in the shape of a *U*.

Shane illustrates with his full body, drawing the tight letter in the air with his heel lifting off the ground at the end, like he was executing a gym routine.

“But you are still alive.”

“As an appendage to Nordhaus, no doubt. My own heart is thin, like it was a wheel-squished squirrel.”

“Sever this tie,” I think, but dare not say it. Nordhaus has poisoned him. His evil deed has sickened Shane, demonstrably. But instead, I say, “Won’t your teachings live on. Can’t they? Through an act of historical significance?”

“All of my teachings about happiness and contentment, through owning nothing but a single repeated experience—an eternal recurrence of the same—appear to me as filthy rags.

“You’ve transcended them. That is a good thing, maybe.”

“What—?”

“What if your work is done. You no longer feel happiness because it is time for action, for something new.”

“And what, just leave Nordhaus?”

I pause and think. Can’t be too direct here. Must lead him to it carefully.

“Perhaps he has learned your teachings, hence the unity. Your senses are giving you good, rich things, Shane.”

“But he has not paid for his crime, his life of crime, his life of inauthenticity.”

“How can you remedy that?”

I watch his eyes, his hands, like he is my creation.

“I have only ever been a man of suggestion, of persuasive power,” he says.

“But you feel different now, remember? Go, go meet him on the deck. I will send him downward—down, I mean.”

Shane silently consents with shrugged shoulders, head and chest bowing before me. Arms and hands floating outward in a mockingly serious symmetrical wave.

#

It occurred to me years ago that my failure as a writer and poet came down to lacking direct experience of worthy subjects. I couldn't write about love because I never loved anyone. But then I discovered Shane by chance, years after I started piloting. I, like Abraham, like Kierkegaard, had to sacrifice what I did love to receive it back. But death—

“Bill, Shane wants to see you on the deck.”

“Huh—what for?”

I shrug. “One of his stunts I suppose.”

“I don't have time for his nonsense.”

“Humor him, Bill. He's having a rough day. He says the trips don't make happy anymore.”

“That ain't my problem. Good riddance if he decides to stop.”

“He's a dull rudder, mind guttered. Just go.”

Nordhaus spits in a cup. “Okay.”

Death, to bait death is to challenge Donne. Can I take on the bard as well? Am I greater than Blake? I look out the window toward haughty Mount Rainier. No sighting. No sign. Just

enough haze to conceal it. It has grown dark outside, but the weather is still too warm and pleasant for death. But I can't be greedy. It's time to recover my investment. Yes. In a manner of speaking. Not the five hundred I paid that woman to sleep with Nordhaus.

“Wear his hat. You must wear his hat!” I said, so that Shane would know the truth and become soft clay in my hands.

My poem will soon be finished. My heart races. I look out at the deck and see no figures. Two for one? Christ on the water. My work is done, but I feel alone.

##