Yemaya

Captain Ulysses Quitman, born in New York, raised in New England, a seafarer all his life, sat in the cabin of his latest ship and tried to figure the profit when he sold his cargo. The numbers were confounded by the deaths, each death a loss: a child, $500; a grown woman, $1,000; a grown man, $1,200. The ship's doctor told him that the captives were packed so tight that he could expect ten deaths a day, perhaps more. A tight-packed slaver needed to hurry. Otherwise there would be no profit at all.

There was a knock on the door. It was Doctor Pereira. Jacob Pereira, known as Jack in the flash dens where he had gambled away his fortune, had been a rakehell and even in his diminished circumstances, was still a bit of a dandy. His people were Israelites, first from Portugal, then from Amsterdam, then from London. They had been physicians for centuries. His eyes were of a blue startling in a man descended from Portuguese Jews.

"How many today?" Quitman asked.

"Ten," Pereira said. "Dysentery and typhus, which don't respect anyone. If your men get sick aboveboard, they'll die, too."

"Can we stop it?" Quitman asked. He meant the deaths below.

Pereira shrugged. "I don't know."

On this ship, Quitman was careful not to breathe deep. A whaler hardly had a pleasant odor—the great beasts were rendered for their oil on board ship—but nothing had prepared him for the smell of the shit, piss, puke, and blood of hundreds of captives on a slaver, scores of whom were dying. He'd been told that other ships could smell the stench of a slaver on the open water when it was miles away, and now he believed it was true.

Early the next morning, Pereira descended into the cargo hold to count the dead. He steeled himself against the smell. Only ladies held vinaigrettes to their noses, and the strongest vinaigrette would be no match for this stink of shit mingled with vomit and blood.

The cargo hold was scarcely tall enough for a man to stand upright, even a man of middling height, as Pereira was. It was dark. Since the sea had been rough the night before, the portholes were closed, and the heat was suffocating. Pereira wiped his face as he descended the stairs. The smell was overpowering. It made his eyes water, and he gagged if he breathed too deep.

The slaves were tightly packed on two levels, one set on the floor, the other on a wooden platform about three feet above. There was scarcely room to sit upright. The human cargo lay flat, one's head at another's feet, to press as many slaves as possible into the space, women on one side of the hull, men on the other. The women were not chained, since some of them had children to nurse and tend to. The men were manacled, the ankle of one chained to the hand of the other. In the first weeks of the voyage, the slaves had cried out and cursed, and the hold was a babble of African din. Now they were so weak, and so despondent, that they lay quietly, moaning if they had the strength.

Since the slaves could not get up, they had to relieve themselves where they lay. Pereira had learned to gauge the health of the cargo by the nature of the filth on the platform and the floor. Pure shit was a good sign. Shit mixed with blood was a sign of the flux that accompanied the dysentery that was so often fatal. Today, the floor was slippery with shit that was slick with mucus and red with blood.

On the women's side, he saw a dead woman lying on the floor. Between her legs, in a pool of blood, was a newborn infant, also dead. He bent to take a look. The dead woman was

dreadfully emaciated—delivered of the child, her ribs were as prominent as a skeleton's—and her skin had turned the color of ash.

He had delivered babies, and the sight disturbed him. He had learned that some of the captives spoke Portuguese. He had a rusty version of the Portuguese-Hebrew dialect his grandmother had spoken to him when he was a boy. He asked, "Does anyone know when she died?"

To his surprise, one of the women answered. Her Portuguese was African-sounding, but he could understand it. "In the middle of the night."

She was young. Her cheeks were sunken, but her face was round. Before she was captured, she must have been pretty. He asked, "How do you know Portuguese?"

She turned to look at him, her face haggard with misery. She said, "My father was a trader and he traded with the Portuguese. In Whydah."

He touched her arm. "What is your name?" he asked.

She turned away. He repeated, "What is your name?"

In a tear-choked voice, she whispered, "Abeni."

He breathed too deep, and gagged so badly that he thought he would vomit, and add to the filth on the floor. He controlled himself and rose. The dead woman and the dead child needed to be cast overboard. That was two. He moved quickly along the walkway between the two halves of the ship, looking for the dead. He counted twelve. Aside from the woman, all were dead of the flux.

When he ascended the stairs and smelled the odor of the sea, it was better than the finest French perfume. He sat on the deck, his eyes watering, his gut sick, trying to compose himself for his report to Captain Quitman.

The captain sat at the table that served as desk, his ledger open, his inkwell and quill ready for the news. His hair had come loose from its queue, and his eyes looked bruised from lack of sleep. He looked up at Pereira and said, “How many?”

Pereira told him.

Quitman asked, “How many are sick?”

“I didn’t count the sick.”

Quitman said, “We need to throw the sick overboard.”

“It won’t stop the contagion.”

Quitman said flatly, “I don’t care about the contagion. I ain’t insured for them if they die of the flux. I’m insured if they drown.”

Pereira said, “I’m a poor excuse for a physician and a poor excuse for a man. But I won’t murder the living.”

Quitman said, “You have a tender conscience for a man aboard a slaver.”

Pereira shook his head. He had signed on to escape imprisonment for debt. As a penniless man, without family or friends to pay for his release, he would have gone into the deepest and darkest place in Newgate Prison, to be starved and beaten and chained to the floor. He said, “You’ll have to throw me overboard first, if you’re going to drown people who are still alive.”

Abeni lay flat on her back. The woman to her right was too weak to walk to the pot, and her waste made a sludge that now coated Abeni’s skin and caked in her hair. Abeni didn’t know her name, and couldn’t speak to her, even if she wanted to. She was Fula, and she knew neither Yoruba, nor Portuguese, nor Arabic.

The woman to her left had gone mad. She sobbed quietly for everyone who was now dead to her. She was asleep now, too exhausted to cry any more.

Abeni stared at the rough timber of the platform above her. If she closed her eyes she would remember. How the Fon bandits overpowered them, two merchants and their families traveling from Oyo to Whydah. They had killed her father and her uncle. Before they killed her mother and her aunt they raped them. They wanted Ayotunde, her betrothed. They took her, too. On the march to Whydah they yoked Ayotunde to another man, and chained her to Ayotunde. At night they took her away and raped her as well. How they sold them both, she and Ayotunde, to the red-faced men who put them on this ship.

Was Ayotunde still alive? She had no way to know. Ayotunde, beloved younger son, whose name meant "joy has returned." Ayotunde as he was, his face bright, his skin gleaming, his laughter easy. Her beloved, and her intended. Their families planned to announce their betrothal when they arrived in Whydah, and to celebrate the wedding when they returned home.

She had become so thin that she could feel the pressure of the platform on the bones of her buttocks and her shoulders. She tried to move. People who lay flat developed sores, and if the sores were bad enough, the movement of the ship ate through their flesh, exposing the bone. They died, but they suffered agony first.

Twice a day, the red-faced men came downstairs to give them food to eat: yams, and beans mashed to a paste, and rice. She had been in such despair, the first week, that she had not wanted to eat. She saw what the red-faced men did to people who stopped eating. They opened their jaws and forced the food down their throats, and if they continued to refuse, they touched hot coals to their lips.

Yemaya

Every day, people died. Abeni thought that those who died were more fortunate than those who lived. Where were they going? What would happen when they arrived? She closed her eyes, even though remembering tormented her. If she died she would never see Ayotunde again.

Why had the red-faced man asked for her name? What use was a name to a slave, soon to be a corpse? She tried to turn her head. She wept.

Captain Quitman, who slept badly at night, put his head down on his desk after Pereira left, pressing his cheek to the ledger. When he woke, neck stiff, eyes bleared, he was aware that someone else was in his cabin. She sat on the table, her bosom at his eye level in that cramped space, which roused him and shamed him. She filled the room with a briny odor, not at all unpleasant, strong enough to drown out the stench of the hold. She was brown of skin, to his eye a comely color on a table or chair, but not on a human body. Her face was covered with the delicate, even, vertical scars that were considered a mark of beauty among the Yoruba. Her hair, cropped very close to her head, was the finest black wool. Her eyes were large and heavy-lidded, the irises so dark that they melted into the pupil in a uniform black. Her lips were brown, tinged with pink, and very full. Her breasts, which he could see so plainly, were round, high on her torso, and firm, like the breasts of a bowsprit. She had the navel and the hips of a woman, but where her sex would be, she had a single thick limb, covered in a moist hide, a darker brown than her skin, and where her feet would be, she had a great fin. It put Quitman in mind of the tail of a shark.

“Who are you?” he asked.

She spoke in a language he had never heard before, but he understood her perfectly. She said, “My name is Yemaya. I’m the mother of the ocean. I protect all women who are mothers, and women who will be mothers. I protect their children, who swim in the sea of the womb, and who have tails and gills before they are born.”

“What do you want?” he asked.

“Set my captives free.”

He said, “I’ll be ruined. I can’t.”

“Set my captives free,” she repeated.

“If I don’t?”

She smiled. Her teeth were very white in her dark brown face. They were a woman’s teeth, but they made him think again of the shark, whose teeth could tear a man to death. “You’ll see,” she said, and as suddenly as she had come, she disappeared, leaving the briny smell behind her.

By mid-afternoon, the sky began to darken, and the sea, which was dark blue in the sunlight, had turned as dark as the sky. The wind came up, and the waves began to curl and crest. The ship bobbed through them like a cork from a bottle. Aboveboard, the sailors felt uneasy, casting their gaze at the sky. Below, in the cargo hold, the captives groaned in pain as every movement of the ship tugged on their manacles and rubbed their raw flesh.

By evening, rain began to fall, gentle at first, then stinging, then lacerating for those on the deck. The wind increased its velocity and began to howl, shaking the masts and tearing at the sails. The rain pounded into every crevice on the ship. The waves grew taller and taller, until

they towered over the gunwales and washed onto the deck. The men on deck held to the rigging with all their might, fearing they would be swept overboard with each new wave.

Captain Quitman stood on deck, unable to see his own hand before his face in the pounding rain. It was useless to try to guide the ship. The wind took the tiller, and the waves turned the rudder. As the sailors held on for their lives, as the captives lay in terror below, the ship made its own way, far from the course that Captain Quitman had charted for their voyage.

Below, Abeni felt the ship heave up and down, and like everyone below, she could hear the bellow of the wind and the roar of the water as it rushed over the deck. The portholes were closed, against the storm, and the air was hot and foul. Everyone, even the weakest and sickest, began to cry out, a babble of African tongues, no one language clear in the din of fear and plea and prayer. Her eyes open, fixed on the platform above her, Abeni thought, We will die here. All of us.

Even though the portholes were shut, a breeze began to blow. The hold began to fill with a new smell. A strong, fresh smell of brine, like the sea on a fair day. The smell overpowered the stench of the hold. For the first time in weeks, Abeni dared to take a deep breath.

Above the din came a voice. Not the voice of a red-faced man. A woman's voice, deep and rich, speaking in a language Abeni had never heard before, but one she understood perfectly. "Oh, my children," she said, her voice full of sadness. "My poor children. You called to me, and I came to you."

Around her, people were stirring. The madwoman to her left sat up, blinking. The sick turned their heads, hoping to hear better.

"I've come to set you free," she said, and on the men's side, everyone could hear the sound of iron manacles snapping open and chains breaking. The men rubbed their necks and

ankles and wrists in astonishment, crying a little with the pain of their raw flesh. They began to sit up.

On the women's side, those who were strong enough, like Abeni, sat up. They saw her, as she twined herself around a timber in the middle of the hold: the beautiful face, with the scars of a queen; the great breasts of a mother, to suckle children; the great tail with the fin that could cleave the sea.

"Yemaya!" someone cried out.

She smiled. How white her teeth were in her dark face! She said, "Don't fear, my children. I'll keep you safe in the storm, and I'll protect you." She began to flick her tail, getting ready to swim away.

Someone cried out, "Stay with us!"

Water poured from above, drenching everyone. Yemaya smiled again. "I'll be with you," she said, and she rode the deluge and disappeared.

The storm remained fierce through the night. The men, freed of their manacles, stood upright. The women, newly hopeful, rose from the tightly-packed floor and descended from the tightly-packed platform. Those who could stand, stood in the aisle between the two halves of the hold. They grasped the timbers as the ship madly rode the waves. They murmured among themselves. Abeni, upright for the first time in a long time, felt dizzy. The ship pitched and hawed. But she was no longer afraid. She was curious.

In the hold, the captives never knew whether it was day or night. But they could hear that the wind abetted, and that the rain slowed, and they could feel the waves diminish. And they heard the sound of the crash, then the sound of timber splitting asunder. The ship came to a halt. Daylight streamed in through the great gash in the hull, and a great gust of cold air followed.

Yemaya

They had run aground on a shallow. The shore was close by. If you could walk, close enough to walk to.

The captives stumbled onto the sand. The water was very shallow, but it was cold. Abeni had never felt water so cold. She helped the madwoman, who had not wept once since the storm began, to walk to shore. They supported each other, shivering, surrounded by a crowd of people, all of them walking slowly on their sore, bruised, wasted limbs, towards dry land.

The beach was fine white sand that felt good on the soles of the feet. Set back from the shore were tall trees, narrow at the top and wide at the bottom. The air smelled of brine, and fish, and something sharp and resinous. Gray and white birds flew above, cawing. Where was this place? Abeni wondered. She had never known the air could be so cold.

In the crowd she saw Ayotunde. He was filthy and emaciated, as she was, and he had a great collar of raw flesh around his neck from the pressure of the manacle. Tears rose to her eyes to know that he was still alive. “Ayotunde,” she called out, extending her hands to him.

He stared at her with flat eyes. He said, “They defiled you.”

Still holding out her arms, she said, “They defiled all of us.”

He shook his head and turned away.

Abeni walked back into the water and let the waves clean away all of the filth of the ship. She let the water wash over her, despite the sting of the salt in the places on her shoulders and her buttocks that had been chafed raw. After a long time in Yemaya’s embrace, her hair and her body were clean again.

As she stood, shaking the water from her hair, she saw Ayotunde beside her, letting the waves wash over him. She waited until he stood and wiped the salt from his face. She held out her hand. He took it, and they both began to weep, giving Yemaya the tribute of the salt of their

tears. They embraced each other, weeping, letting Yemaya's ocean caress them and comfort them, until they were ready to walk to shore together.

Jack Pereira and Ulysses Quitman sat together on the beach. Quitman, his hair wild, his clothes torn, his flesh bleeding, stared unseeing at the horizon.

Pereira, sore from bruises and shaking with cold, saw an apparition rise from the waves, brown as the captives were, with the face and bosom of a woman and the tail of a fish. She held out her arms to the shivering people on the beach. He listened as she spoke. Yoruba, Ibo, Fon, Fula: all understood her, as did Pereira. She told the captives that she loved them, that she would cherish them as a mother cherishes her children, and that they would be safe. She looked directly at Pereira, with her great heavy-lidded eyes and her bowsprit's bosom that roused every man who saw it. She said to him, "Help me to protect them and keep them safe."

He said, "Yes. I will."

She beckoned to Quitman, who was still staring at the horizon. He rose and walked into the water, past the wreck of his ship, the waves coming to his knees, then his privates, then his navel, then his chest, then his neck, and finally over his head, the waves washing over him to cover him, without even a bubble to show that he was still alive. Yemaya smiled. She dove into the water, flicking her great shark's tail, and disappeared into the sea.