

The Ships in the Offing

by Robert Slattery



The ships in the offing would sink, and we would gather and watch the black souls of those wooden vessels rise and dissipate into the so often fading light.

The richest boys would ride their horses along the waterline at these moments, simultaneously blocking the views of those not standing atop and racing the clouds moving along the horizon.

I can recall the flickering of a weakened sunset between the horses and the sight in clear view, the kicking and animal breathing underneath.

As I got older, the bodies began to wash in, rotten, rotting, swelling from the stench itself. I looked to my father for advice. He quietly led me away from the shoreline, and it was from this I learned civility. The bodies never moved but for the rocking of the waves, confined seemingly to a pocket against the shore, then carried some distance away by townsfolk and dumped.

When, in a particularly harsh summer, a child of the town, one I had grown up with, died, I feared that I would cross by the water or the ever-growing hole where the corpses were amassing and see that boy's face. Sometimes I imagined his face in the bodies themselves, sometimes in the oily runoff. This did not happen outside of my dreams. In the mornings, when I made to walk alongside the hole, to prove my dreams a reality, my father would tug me away from it all.

The boy was buried in a small grave where we had kept our own separate from the collection of the never-met. Eventually, the hole expanded to the edges of the cemetery, and the bones of a long since forgotten man collapsed into the pit, caused by vibrations from a ceremonial procession.

At this point, whatever idea of dignity in passing I may have had before mattered little, for it seemed we were surrounded on both sides.

The ships continued to sink. Black clouds drifted up into the air, and on one low day when there was no wind, over that distance of sea, a small portion of the blackness remained.

The bodies continued to drift ashore, more and more, or if not more and more, at such a steady pace as to become natural. All men, and eventually the women, would take shifts dragging the bodies onto the carts and pulling them across town to the burial site.

Time continued to pass in steady heartbeat.

When I came of age, I, too, joined in this procession of labor.

I grew in strength. Only on occasion would I recognize the body in transit. My father and I would talk when it was a face we'd once seen smile or laugh, but when the faceless, stupid, ever-gathering unknowns came, we would simply buckle to the duty.

Forgetful as I might have been about the husks that made their way from the water to the hole or from bedrooms to the hole—forgetful as I was, I was not unaware that at some point, considering the endless supply before me, I would not find myself in the arms of others, flat on canvas, swung back and forth, and hurled onto the pile.

To free my mind on those breaks when life's other obligations and the procession of death did not knock on my particular door, I would mount one of my family's horses and ride through the high grasses. I would do this at first with friends, then alone, out in search of the animals that bucked their heads in a way I could not—the alertness of prey, something that I could never have even feigned an understanding of.

On a night of something toward my middle years, I saw a vague, then precise, asterism peaking from the horizon. It was so dark that I could not see the ship, but steady motion across the nothing horizon answered any uncertainty. There should have been no light from those billowing freighters.

I slept uneasily and awoke to find my father had passed in the night. At that moment, among the faceless others, he stood out. He was all, and I alone dragged his body from the shore and into the pit. I washed my hands, and I cleaned my face, and I mourned.

At first, I saw only his face among the dead, then gathering with others, and then, before the significance of his face threatened to disappear in the same way his features had, I set off on my own, to carry him with me and find my own place to wind down, to find or make another soul to bear the burden of my own inevitable passing.