

Alecto

by Oliver Smith

Out here on the never-ending ocean, the sea draws spiral patterns in the foam and driftwood, its sentient currents sketch arabesques in swarms of by-the-wind-sailors and men-o-war casting filamentary nets of poison jelly through the soupy life-rich waters. Our old wooden sloop is sailing before a hot south wind scented with myrrh and allspice; the crew, my tar-stained brothers, are resting their brown muscled arms on the high-carved prow, their hair draped in stiff black strands; charcoal-powdered and pitched against vampyric ticks and contaminating lice. The filmy waves break in white horses before us, turning the reflections in Alecto's eyes emerald green. From the depths, silvered fish return our observance and take on strange allegorical forms. As I assume my service behind the wheel, I see her, an angel wrapped against the sun in thin muslin covers, her dress dyed yellow by passing years and abraded to lacy rags in the sandpaper wind.

Alecto sits at the prow, a fine halo of gold and violet blown about her wrought glass skull. Behind us lies an archipelago of sheer green islands where the palm groves hide hairy scarlet land crabs and cruel black scorpions, while the estuarine areas conceal violet rays, feeding on the larvae of reef fish and crustacea in the steaming mangrove clogged shallows.

In those green groves, we have roasted and eaten the wild pigs and slept replete and happy. I had a dream of an impatient ghost enduring leagues of emptiness in its mission to impress us to hurry. I said, in the lagoons we ought first to make ready, that this was the devil's vision to send

us unprepared, we went to fish with lines and spears where tumbling pelagic life came dressed in red and silver; fishes all clamorous and bright as the flaming sun. Gardens of kelp in the bay made a second flowering forest rich in edible beasts. Leaving the happy isles, our masts decked with sultry blossoms, we sailed quickly eastward. We made our way before the wind, meeting soon the strange boundaries where the waves break on invisible obstructions carved through our history. There we encountered a hideous wind blown craft, blackened and ragged with a burnt fleshed crew immobile and grinning as they drifted lost in their glass walled world. The bulk of the crew, devout men, kept to their stations and prayed for salvation.

Excepted was Kelley with the neck, who howled like a frightened child and unslung the small boat, whereupon he took to the oars, and fled through the foaming cauldron of the sea, pursued by the dark and blighted form. Spouts blew from out the whale's lair as he rowed wild with fear, all the white surf fingers reaching to drag him through the barrier and claim his soul. He was overhauled by the black wreck, which ran through his boat so it sank twisted and broken. We saved not the cowardly one as he tried to swim away; may the Merrow beneath take him.

In the impending storm, I felt my laughter echo in the ocean's thunder. No rafts of serene flowers trapping us now, but a wind, which filled sails and drummed in them like the beating heart of the whale. When the light spills out as dirtied green luminosity in the clouds waiting to burst in tempest, what joy I feel. We're far from slack water, we came here together as comrades, and we felt ourselves favoured now, sailing all the night with fine-boned Alecto curled

upon the aft deck amongst mirror-embroidered cushions as she inhaled the dry smoke of the poppy.

The Cape is far away, but before me, the guiding lights float, leading us safe through the squall. Pursuing the friendly lamp, we were assured and my intended cried no more, ah, just smile with thy red mouth, in which all die eagerly; the axillary tendrils of the jellyfish or the ray-clustered head of the angler are not more cruel. Then a voice screams about the figurehead shaped in the gale's breath. The hawsers and rigging agitated and vibrating, the strings of a harp about her gilded lips. reflected in the glazed skin of the water; the sea her looking glass. In the air the blackwings arc and circumnavigate the boat, streaming away towards the land as we sailed beyond their range marker written in the tide. I bid them good luck on their returning, only it seems to me now they are human loves changed to birds. This thought came to me when I saw her dressed in all her perfumes: Come Alecto, say sweet words to me in your tender voice.

Strange that the plants we observed, lightly floating beneath the surface in the eastward current, smell of both the sweetest poison and foulest nectar.

Setting sail and sending a prayer soaring, carried home by the high birds, revives the wind. Swaying on the waves, the foams maddened horror forces the ship in ragged leaps. We travelled in the roaring fury eastward bound for steamy southern seas, carried before the squealing wind. During the easiest passage in the meandering current, purple scorpions are apparent beneath the wild water. The jellyfish surround us, impeding our journey, floating

parasol-shaped with prodigious masses of digestive or generative tissues betraying their umbrellas. Points break the waves where sharks and scorpions pursue their prey, leaving trails of white spume. Then beneath us rise rocky palaces in helical configurations of crimson and gold. A fish like a woman covered in macabre scales of diamond and jasper stares up with green jade eyes as we pass. I asked the birds perching on the mountainous waves; the priests ascending the pitching water ziggurat, for aid in this undertaking, as the odour of flowers draws insects, so the soul of Alecto adheres to the flesh of my heart. As the wave tunnel engorged the ship she returns to her cabin with a pout, I urged her heart to lie as stone. It was in the Straights of the watery Main, our course running parallel to the coast, afterwards, driven by the breeze, which shifted to storm, to set the sails on seas, where meadows grow on the whale's dead bones. On course, sailing past the Goddess of the Gulfs, the colossal image carved from the living rock rising from the ocean dressed in bright and fastidious garments, and as reef scrapes the hull, we saw that which quiet had lain. She favoured the much more beautiful green sea against us, driving in the stampede of blue striped mackerel. Fearing the dashing rocks, again southward, and wonderful now our route, come hard deeds or with difficulty, we were never far from the course of the chisel headed eels.

The crew dream pleasantly, their imaginations floating in a world of flood as symbolic fish chase through their sleeping forebrains. Still more of the Main, of gale incised sea where Alecto's reflection is a goddess of the deeper waves; and broken earth spikes vomit fire and ice.

It must have been in the cabin's brass framed mirror I dreamed. I thought the black craft doomed us in the darkness. I feared foully I could hear its muffled sails beat in its lost night. Closer the razor beaks of marlin fish came, wicked rapiers improvised from shards of some primeval mirror. The turtle's back, all mottled shadow, rose above the waves; an island, then its great armoured head emerged sucking down a swarm of revolting jellyfish. I thought the keel was slicing through fair water but some spirit shark hunting in the air rumbled afar. I was above, the wind a rolling vortex lifting me higher in turbulent arms, and there I heard the dreadful sound of breakers rolling on some rough uncharted reef. By luck a fine winged guardian lead us safe; carrying a lantern in silence before us, the wild waves, which were that world of fear, are calmed.

If once again I could hear the waves shatter on the toothed shore then I would be content. For many days, we had affright, the sea voyager's delirium gripped us all, caused no doubt from miasma breathed by the well of the deep. The fumes drive them to sickness; like the wine sodden wretch, they lean over the bows where the waves ring bells in the drowned land. We are swept for endless hot days beneath a swollen sun and spend humid red nights beneath the bloated, amber moon. The swollen reflection on the darkening surface marks the whale's festival of death, the great mammals lie strangled beneath in pits of darkness, bound by invisible tentacles. The constellations wheel about us. Time becomes meaningless, broken by the blue gaze of the cold stars, until at last the travel-ruined boat rests amongst league-long strands of emerald weed in a glassy cerulean pool, the limpid

water troubled only by bubbles of gas released from the azoic depths.

Beneath the greasy rainbow refractions of the surface a multitude of pallid worms writhe like serpents, their jagged jaws peeling back layers of the wooden hull. Foul filaments of ooze scraping with calciferous awl heads, burrowing among the barnacles and weed.

Still at night, the angel light hangs before us. I suppose the dry earth is lost but say nothing to the crew. For two days have westerly dark spirits contorted on the horizon; what harbour will recognize our flag in this world? The drowned one knows and he blinks his swollen fisheyes at me from below the waveless mirror, he floats in midwater attended by a surly-faced priestfish in a black cassock.

The next day we found ourselves looking down upon a perfumed land. Only in another world, this ocean could we have found. We drifted in waters where white flattened blooms hung beneath green algal meadows, pale flesh flowers quivering. Fish painted like butterflies hang with human lips on stalks of comb jelly forests, which grow about the bell towers below. Multihued creatures of protoplasm eddy above the ooze-bound country, rare treasures concealed in shells of urchins spines, piddock grooved skulls rest amongst the golden cups of Egyptian Kings and green beryls from the deep land are scattered there. In greed, another of the crew was lost to the Merrow, from up out of the dark she came to fetch him as he vainly dived for the treasure far below. Now no more will he tread beneath the golden sun but forever rest without flesh in the darkling garden of twisted seaweed and carnivorous blossoming coral.

Why did my senses form me into a fish coated in silver and sky with a gape of ivory sabres. The fever has infected Alecto, bewildered and raging she fell hard upon the aft-deck and I carried her below, shutting my ears to her raving song. We are becalmed, my hopes drowning in the indifference of the tepid sea. How can I leave this place? I caught a sliver of shining metal in my eye and through the sea of sanguineous distress I glide as a barracuda; I am death coming now my sweet, I am dressed in azure for you and my teeth are sharp as sail-prickers. I skulk awhile in midwater where pain and love are not and Alecto's lips crying cannot reach my heart. I caught a glimpse of that which in its hundreds had reached up from the all afire reflection, the star of night will not be still, it wanders everywhere a curse on this journey; were these thoughts mine? I see her laughter, her eyes shining for me, she lay self-assured, recovered now, her chalky bones will be the root of fine coral arbours. Some men long for the ice of the north. I will bear this monstrous amber light and pain, to prove my blood is warm: and like none living. Black-feathered; a slow mangy cormorant is bleeding in the still water, receiving my prayer its head limp in the current. I am held fast on an iron table in the flames of the monstrous star. By lip she has given her pledge and my heart was listening: a way in, through the pin-prick centres of those green eyes. My longing for Alecto is a force so great it would gorge the slack main-sail and carry us free from these doldrums: worms all over the ship, foul. I thought that she kissed me on my paper dry eyes, the worms are scraping on the surface of my sleep and the sharp-spined fish scratching in the dreams beneath, the rats are very thin, their eyes glimmer red and hungry in the shadows, they

want to go from the ship, but there is nowhere for them to leave for. At least we shall have something to eat.

I have no physic and the smell of the deeps again sickens me, though the light pleases me today, rising to surface where she waits rapturous, blacker than ever in my dark monstrous eyes reflected in the cabin mirror. Alecto is lying abed in the cabin below, she eats and drinks so little I fear she will be gone soon.

We are caught under a sun that burns a man to a sooty animal until he lies upon the deck with loose organs and parchment skin. Sun-bright the scent about her. Alecto, recovered enough and on deck again. Those needle-hole eyes looking over the side to where her daydreams are; transported by her reflection in the still pond beneath us filled with dead temples. The drowned one is laughing at me, about him shadowy forms writhe, hinting at their true shapes only to taunt or tempt me. Were we so tangled and charmed, I think, beyond I would run as a spirit, with her in my arms over white tops of the waves to the Isles of the Blest; The Merrows call to Alecto in shrill fluid voices. Or was it to violet rays beneath a league-long shoal she was singing? Something rotten and fleshy was eaten at that banquet in the deep and I measured how flickers an unholy red disc where ere had been sun. There between black night and black sea it appeared we sailed among sickly and corrupted stars falling in foul globules of marine luminescence, the waters faltering beneath the hull seem to burn. The crew accused one after the other of bringing bad luck aboard. Of crimes and sins which had doomed us, I bade them silence but their voices rose to a thunderous bawl and they fought among themselves. I feared that the noise would call some monster of the

deep upon us and to calm the racket, I was compelled to close ones mouth with a lead shot. I hanged his corpse on the mast with the withered garlands of the lost green lands; we found we dwelt in dry pain burning ceaselessly.

How many months have I held here? The crew have all passed over; one by one they sunk beneath life, the souls seared from them in the amber light.

One by one, our diminishing band of comrades laid the brothers to rest, weighted to sink quickly to their beds in the cool deeps. I sent the last to his grave unassisted, while Alecto slept, comforted by her incense. It took many hours to sew him tight into the last fragments of rotting sail canvas weighted with shot and stone from the ballast. The open sea lies so close but the universe is turning to cold ash where time seems fractured and disjointed at the boundary and the ocean breaks against the impenetrable frozen mirror.

The cabin is dark; I hear the creak of the hull as slivers of timber peel away in the onslaught of the chisel headed parasites. I lie here in the hot darkness; a heaven of sorts for I can hear Alecto breathing beside me, her soft dreams fill the air with scented poppy smoke. I fell away from conscience and dreamed I was a barracuda filling the blue waters with breaths of red hunger. I rose from the sea again, on the bunk finding I dreamed alone; from outside I listened to the fluid songs from the deep joined with the voices of the crew. Below I hear the hull disintegrating. She was adorning her hair before the great mirror, her body dressed in white; beneath that dress, this goddess carved the sound in living expirations. She combed her hair, each motion a slow dance. She bent her head as she caught the measure of the chorus raised by the dead below.

Singing to me, still combing her beautiful hair and her body swaying with motions of liquefied grace; a blessing, forever she and I, shall be together here on the endless sea. I floated on lethargy and she tossed her hair, flying in long black clouds of typhoon spray; her body an elegant curve of serpentine marble. Again, she combed her wonderful hair, singing me the sweet song of desire. I approached, my teeth growing as sharp as the sharks hunger, dressed in my perfect scales of blue and silver. Then at last I wrapped my arms about her, we danced a while to the music of the sea, until together we stood before that mirror. I looked in her beautiful eyes, expecting my desires returned, expecting peace in this fever of sea and light, expecting her assent. Instead, I saw reflected within the great mirror her beautiful hair framing her crystal boned face, I saw reflected within the great mirror bounded with bright brass, mirror eyes of sea-green love that became as luminous gems in her pale, faultless face. Then sounded the tolling bell under the mirrored waves. The Copper frame shuddered in sympathy on the fine dark wooded wall. A strange fire burned in Alecto's reflection. I saw the desire light in her soul. In that looking glass waiting for me were eyes as green as tangled seaweed gardens below. Waiting there was paradise, waiting there was the end of this journey. Waiting where her perfect mirror mouth should be was the sea's red butchery dripping from the swollen lips of a Merrow.