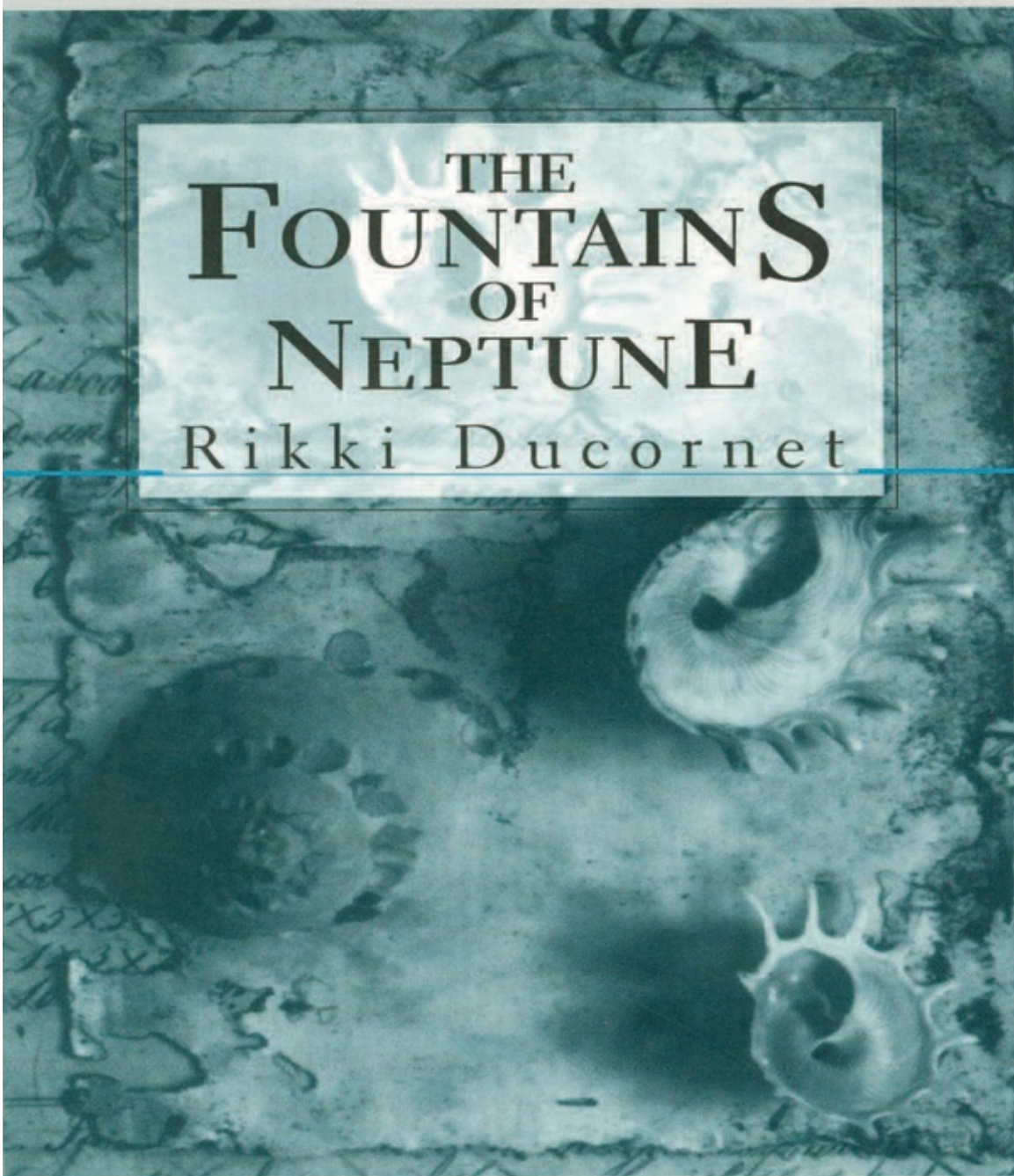


"I think the novel extraordinary."—Oliver Sacks



THE
FOUNTAINS
OF
NEPTUNE

Rikki Ducornet

fiction

- The Butcher's Tales (*short fiction*) 1980
The Stain (*novel*) 1984
Entering Fire (*novel*) 1986
The Fountains of Neptune (*novel*) 1989
The Jade Cabinet (*novel*) 1993
The Complete Butcher's Tales (*short fiction*) 1994
Phosphor in Dreamland (*novel*) 1995

poetry

- From the Star Chamber 1974
Wild Geraniums 1975
Weird Sisters 1976
Knife Notebook 1977
The Illustrated Universe 1979
The Cult of Seizure 1989

children's books

- The Blue Bird 1970
Shazira Shazam and the Devil 1972

THE
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Dalkey Archive Press

For my father, Gérard DeGré, Emperor of d'Elir, and for Martin Provensen,
Keeper of Eden.

Contents

Part I

- Chapter 1
- Chapter 2
- Chapter 3
- Chapter 4
- Chapter 5
- Chapter 6
- Chapter 7
- Chapter 8
- Chapter 9
- Chapter 10
- Chapter 11

Part II

- Chapter 12
- Chapter 13
- Chapter 14
- Chapter 15
- Chapter 16
- Chapter 17
- Chapter 18
- Chapter 19
- Chapter 20
- Chapter 21
- Chapter 22
- Chapter 23
- Chapter 24

Praise for The Fountains of Neptune

I wish to thank the Merrill Ingram Foundation and the Bunting Institute for their generous support. I also wish to thank Martha Cabral for taking me in when I had no place to go, Richard Martin for *die charybdische Sprudelbad*, and Ellen Seligman, Bernice Eisenstein, and Lee Davis Creal for their loving assistance.

Oliver Sacks' *Awakenings* came to my attention shortly after I conceived *The Fountains of Neptune* and if I chose not to make the book a medical history – having perceived it from the start not as a historical novel but a work of the imagination – his beautiful book has informed my own.

*“ . . . For here, millions of mixed shades and shadows, drowned
dreams, somnambulisms, reveries; all that we call lives and souls,
lie dreaming. . . .”*

- Herman Melville, *Moby Dick*

PART

I

It was Doctor Kaiserstiege who said that the world would perish because the accumulating traumas of human history were poisoning the human soul, just as morphine saturates the lungs and lunar caustic collects in deposits of metallic silver beneath the skin. It is true that Doctor Kaiserstiege's ideas were strange, but then nothing is stranger than reality; the reality of a life spent in dreaming. I am the one she called The Sandman, and I can only hope these hesitant pages, written by a phantom man, will shed new light on her bright volumes, those beautiful, moonstruck books some tried so hard to metamorphose into ashes.

My sleep began in the spring of 1914. I slept through both World Wars and the tainted calm between. It was as if I had been cursed by an evil fairy, pricked by an enchanted spinning wheel, and an impenetrable briar had gripped my mind. The Doctor put it this way: she said I had taken a bite of the poison apple. She chose that apple deliberately. Knowledge – as much as its denial – had precipitated me headfirst into the land of Nod.

The Sandman, she wrote in *The Fountains of Neptune*, the volume devoted to my case, *lives in a coma. In medicine, coma is defined as deep, unconscious sleep. In astronomy, it is that haze which veils the comet's nucleus. It is also the halo which wreathes an object as seen through an imperfect lens. In botany, coma is the silky beard at the end of certain seeds, even the whole head of a tree.*

I like all these definitions for the Sandman's coma. As any tree, he is a world unto himself; all that do to rouse him (the bells, the cries, the clapping hands) only serves to animate his dreams. The waking world is that optical clarity he denies; he has veiled life's ice and fire in the preferable nebulosity of dreams.



One gazebo remains standing in the Doctor's south garden. I come here in warm weather to reflect. Once her gardens were allegories. Doctor Kaiserstiege believed that just as nature, the body of man can be brought to a state of harmony and tranquil health, LOVE AND SCIENCE can still be read above the infirmary door.

At the spa – her ideal universe – the elements themselves were domesticated: the sand neatly raked, the earth carpeted with grass, the air perfumed with roses; water tamed in basins, bathtubs, and wells. Even the sun's fire is still masked by gracious trees, arbours, and green glass. My gazebo has a latticed roof. And if I have not seen this place as it was intended to be seen, so it is for all men who gaze upon the world.

Water, both real and metaphorical, is in evidence everywhere. As the sun seeps from one empty hallway into another, one hundred cannellated columns reflected in as many mirrors, ripple. Even the ironwork of the garden fences, the kiosks and the gate, look like an abstraction of a water oily with wheels. Her architects had created an aquatic maze of deep and shallow basins, secluded geysers spurtin in violent spasms wherein one could crouch as naked as a god. This maze – destroyed in the Second War – is still talked about in the village because it fostered promiscuity.

As I attempt to weed K's overgrown garden paths, so do I put order to my memories, disentangling reality from dreams, and Heaven from Hell. These days I do nothing but attempt to interpret those enigmatic wheels, those churning shadows, those cries beyond cries; the story beneath all stories: my own.

Even now I hear shouting. I cannot say if it is my father's voice I hear or my mother's, or the voice of her assassins. A great clamour has been hammered into my soul and with every breath I hear it even if – as the water's of K's crumbling fountains – it has been quieted; taught to murmur.

Nicolas, K wrote, is the survivor of a triality and the witness to his family's tragedy. His answer is coma. One could not find a more poignant example of the Ego forsaking Itself.



Late one summer's afternoon not long before Doctor Kaiserstiege died, we were sitting together in the spa's vast pitted hall enjoying its mirrored coolness.

"We forget," she said, "that other mental states exist. We forget that thought is a process which has evolved over the ages from anterior states. Just as our finger-bones still resemble those of the lizard, so at depths deeper than dreaming our thoughts may echo the lobster's."

"Do lobsters dream?" I asked. "And barnacles?"

"Barnacles," K mused, "are female. To reproduce they grow the necessary appurtenance. Which seems frivolous for creatures who spend their lives stuck to the bottom of a boat."

"I am a barnacle," I replied, perhaps more wistfully than I intended. "I have spent my life stuck to the dream's bottom." And I sighed.

"Our dreams, *Fröschlein*," K said, her mood deepening, "are islands. Floating worlds. But just as certain poisons pass through the protective membrane of the brain, so Trauma infects our dreams, transforming those islands of Paradise into infernal regions, the Hell of nightmare." With a sweeping gesture of the arm indicating the fading light of day she added: "Who breathes overhead in the rose-tinted light may be glad."

It was true that I was breathing in the rose-tinted light of evening, alive, awake, very much awake, my mind looping like a kite – and glad. As we spoke quietly together, the vocal cords of water frogs collided and rebounded in the air.

What is the sea for the man who has loved and left her? She is fire-water, whisky, rum, a roric flame. She is a green-eyed witch; she speaks in tongues. Her coral rings are forged of skeletons; her white shoulders glisten with the dust of powdered bones.

She is memory, the number of numbers, the eye of the world, the mirror of the sea. What is the ocean for the sailor who has loved and left her? The one lover who dissolves the night. A bottomless glass of moonshine.

And sailors? All sea-talkers. The sons of mermen.



Totor was more than a man; he was the perpetual glamour of the sea made flesh. Master of foam, of fish, of dancing ships, with humour and sadness (this aged shellback, landlocked in retirement, missing the sea), he told of opal mists and listing ships, the stuff of tears and wonder which took root in the flood lands of my curiosity and made me as sensitive to the marvellous as a jellyfish is to the sunlight.

Totor was a wolf, a sea-wolf; he stalked stories as an octopus stalks prey: goggle-eyed, on tippy-toes, funny and ominous. Son of a flat-fish! He'd curse sailor, he'd curse salty. Son of a Hindoo whore! Son of a gun, small fry, pass the cider! And with a wind-chapped hand he'd pour out two foaming mugs of liquid amber before launching into yet another tale.

As Totor speaks, curly-bearded Odysseus lumbers into the room to listen, and sea elephants, and Sindbad – the sinister Old Man of the Sea still clinging to the scruff of his neck. Many times do I, so to float upon the pure waters of Totor's love, nod off upon his knees, the quicksilver of his words spilling me to sleep. Starboard, I swear I hear the surf beating against the window-pane. I sleep in a room carpeted with sand.

In the late afternoons I awake from my nap, the house gently throbbing like a heart against my heart, bathed in the milky haze of the aquarium (for the windows are all paned in green glass), the sun of day receding along the floor like a woman's skirts, the air basted in the sweet smells of Other Mother's kitchen: melted butter, caramel, pigeons swaddled – like playthings or presents – in vine leaves, and seized in a gay fire.

Quick as a hazel-hen, Other Mother, her skin smelling of roses and her apron of starch, busies about her hearth among the silver laughter of her cutlery, her white dishes beached on her shelves like shells. I sit on Totor's knee in the green honey of the room, watching coals crumble to ashes, and listen to pigeons singing in their jackets. Totor pulls out his tobacco pouch from his pocket and prisms the shavings with fingers so sea-worn they no longer have prints. Outside, hail spatters on the glass and the room is plunged into darkness. Other Mother hurries to light the lamps and the prodigious promise of our supper is set out upon the table. For dessert she has made a floating island.

Here is the heartbeat of the house: the tidewater of light and darkness, a deepening green, a kind of knee, the smell of gravy and roses. God's own rain falls upon Totor's house; the firmament is high twilight and the moon. The house sops up stories like a sponge; the beams and rafters, heavy with adventure, creak. Other Mother is up to rise the sun; mornings, I too rise eagerly.

Other Mother opens her kitchen door wide, flooding the room with all the smells of a summer's night: flowering hyssop, sage, the sorrel patch, which threatens to invade our back stoop, gull flight (I swear their feathers leave a sweet smudge upon the air), the seaweed tumbled on the nearest beach, the water itself, yes, the sea. . . . The smell of sea water fills the house.

Drifting, I lie and listen to the waking city. Other Mother teases me out of bed with the sound of butter churning and a song about a stick, a cabbage, and a hole in the ground. Hypnotic, more bedtime than waking song, it is a fitting song for churning, too. There is much to do with walking in circles, digging a circular hole in the ground, prodding it with a stick and circling back again after dark to shoo away rabbits, beggars, and thieves – the Devil's own disguises. And now I hear birdsong, the market criers, and fresh milk splashing in the pan. Before my shirt is tucked into my breeches I am downstairs, barefoot; and before you can count to four, blowing into coffee so hot it has been known to melt a pewter spoon.

I stir in milk, making circles, planting lullaby cabbages, and dig into a piece of bread the size of a shoe. Her fresh butter hits the roof of my mouth like lightning.

"If I was a pig," I tell her, "I'd roll in this butter."

"If you was a pig, you most certainly would not!"

"Why can't people churn butter with their feet?" Her answer is to push a dish of apricots beneath my nose. I lick the coffee from my spoon and plunge it, still hot, into the fruit. It tastes like Other Mother has gone and stewed the sun.

Other Mother has her own stories to tell. She joined the Captain's household in 1883 – and that would be the man who discovered –

"The New Hebrewdees or some such. A mere girl I was, no bigger than the Pope's nose. I learned all I know from the cook, one Madame Pittance, a cut-the-gills-and-don't-slouch sort of a person, proud of her culinary talents – as well as she had a right to be – who instructed me in the arts of cookery and related matters: heraldry, marketing, pickles, and what have you. A stout woman, that was, not to say obese, and when at fifty she succumbed to auricular ataxia – and it was I who found her headfast in the vinegar barrel and never have I, Heaven help us, seen such various veins (how she must have suffered yet gave no wind of it)—I was dramatically propelled from scullery to kitchen. I hired a miniature *Parisienne*, old as my shoes but nevertheless up to snuff, to scull in my stead.

"I started off with pan-ash. For her birthday, Prince Osky had sent Madame –"

"Prince Osky?"

"His monkeyer. Name was something unpronounceable and posh – Obelnosky, Obbezotsky – so we just referred to him as Old Osky, not that he was *old*, mind you."

"What was his monkey like?"

"His monkeyer. His nickname in other words. Old Osky didn't curry flavour with monkeys. Had no pets of any kind. Kicked Madame's screwball dog whenever he got the chance. (On the other hand, he always played the gentleman with Madame.)

"Old Osky'd sent a jar of Castilian caviar – that's to say the overlays of fish – which was served the following Sunday. Abbé Whatsis was invited – and I know that Monsieur L'Abbé was unordinarily

fond of my eggplant pancakes. So I served the overlays with those and it occurs to me after, when I was blessed to find a greengrocer who could provide the ecstatic avocado, that the next time we should receive the overlays, I should serve them nesting in halves. This I was able to do sooner than expected for once Madame had written to Old Oskey describing my fancy, he, ever the galantine, *sends you another jar* by courier! (And this courier courted me but failed to win my heart; those days I was too busy pleasing Madame to be pleasing men.)”

Other Mother’s summer months were spent by the sea. . . .

“In a pink villa. The kitchen was small but sunny and a minute’s walk to market where everything that swims was up for action. I was able to prepare such dedicacies as turbot sauced with burnt butter – a nice, light supper if served with a crisp green salad.”

And it was in the summer of 1887 that she was “courted and sedated” by a sailor who sported a tattoo, the only vulgar thing about Totor.

“On a rare afternoon of liberty, the pantry well stocked for the captain’s evening meal (I had prepared potted tongue, potted eel, potato salad, and peeled tomatoes), I met Totor at the seaside fair. Up and up we went in that insomnic device the ferret wheel; I half expected my heart to run away with itself, instead it ran away with Totor. After, we fell head over heels in love over a terrarium of musseles (and to this day I always add tarragon to mine, although sometimes I do them in saffron, which is lively too).”

“Where is Totor’s tattoo?” I ask. Rose blushes and falls silent. I cannot get another word out of her all afternoon.



On Sunday dressed for church, Other Mother smells of pepper. “My splendour!” Totor calls her. “My fat pullet. My own Rose.” And she: “Pig!” because he’s pinched her. But Totor is more an eel or a quick, yellow fish with a tongue of fire and turquoise eyes. He is small, shorter than Rose, but he carries himself loose and square-shouldered like a man twice his size. Every step Totor takes is a step taken in grace. Sometimes you’d think he floats – so even his stride, so even-tempered the man. Thinking of him now, my heart pulses like a full-fed river.

“God bless Other Mother,” says Totor as we walk down to the port and our little boat *La Georgette* “she doesn’t make us go to church. I can’t bear to be anywhere I can’t see the sky; I can’t abide the church air’s sickly hue, that everlasting smell of foggy, foggy dew! Besides, I figure that God is nowhere near that featureless bog they call His House; but Rose insists the prayers ‘keep her fit,’ and those churchy hours are her only quiet time, though I do believe she goes for the salty taste of gossamer she gets after. However, the woman has her own mind and needs to plunge it in Holy Water now and then, else it gets yeasty, or so she says – did I tell you the time?”

For a moment he is occupied untying *Georgette*’s knot. I clamber aboard, seeding bubbles in the thickening water. In less than a minute we are gliding as comfortable as kings, Totor handling the sails and I readying the tackle – today we’re eeling. . . .

“Did I tell you the time I saw the Vouivre?”

“The Vouivre!” The Vouivre is a woman and. . . .

“She’s amphibious too. She haunts the limpid eyes of the world, Nicolas: oceans, lakes, pool ponds, and rivers. It is she you hear tapping at the window in the rain and breathing in the rushes by the river bank. She whispers in whirlpools and in the ooze of marshes, crouches in the shadows of drowned logs.

“She is enchantment – a warm-blooded aquatic animal. Crab and girl, serpent and siren – see the froth there? That’s her suds; seems she’s been up early washing her pretty hair – and see that foam That’s her cream. She’s busy mornings, just like Rose, churning. She talks to the fish, knows all the oysters by name. It just may be, unknowingly, that you and I have fished her friends.” I look concerned.

“Don’t worry, Nini. I have an arrangement with the Vouivre.” He winks. “She don’t mind we take an eel or two – just as long’s we take no small fry and don’t get boisterous. She lives a peaceable life.”

“Where does she sleep?”

“Makes her bed on the sand beneath the water; just lays down and the snails’ conversations put her to sleep. Would you, too! Shellfish haven’t all that much to say to one another. And sometimes she sleeps in a room.”

“A room?”

“Where the sea has swallowed the land, there are cities carpeted with skulls and iron spoons and coins. The Vouivre ignores the treasure and the bones; currents and the filtered moon interest her more than the riches and destinies of men. If you look well and hard, Nicolas, you may – if you are lucky (and I believe you are) – see her, see her *just once*, for she can’t be seen twice, else you pay for your curiosity with blindness or your life. And,” he adds out of the blue, “*never* let me catch you peeing in the water. She’ll grab you, Nini; she’ll pull you in by your impertinence!” I laugh and look up in time to see a hundred clouds sailing in the sky.

If I never miss an occasion to be out on the water beside Totor, I have never caught a fish. I have caught hunks of water-logged driftwood, well-barnacled and black, but the only living thing I’ve ever caught are blue crabs on the beach and clams. But his prowess is uncanny. Smelts, in their dozens, none bigger than crickets (that Other Mother drowns in batter and deep-fries, and that we gobble down whole, heads and all), long, luminous eels that she stews in wine, tuna sweet as suckling pig.

We eat our Sunday dinner in the dining-room. The doors of frosted glass are closed, muting the kitchen sounds. I admire the sooty paintings of continents announced by breakers, of lone lighthouses assailed by lightning. We eat the day’s take, a dorado stuffed with our stoop’s sorrel, Rose rarely sitting but spinning from table to kitchen and cellar, a whirling dervish of domesticity.

“Pig!” Rose’s Sunday *décolletage* framed in taffeta and masked in lace excites Totor. And he:

“For God’s sakes, *sit down!*” But she has already bustled off.

“There’s a bottle to be filched from the pantry and the pie –” Pie! Totor complains: it’s plum and she’s left in the pits; he swears he’ll crack a tooth.

“Or choke. And you’ll both be back in church and Nini fatherless twice over –”

“Hush!” There is a moment’s embarrassed silence I pretend to ignore.

“You were going to tell me about the time you saw the Vouivre. . . .”

“Ah! She was green but beautiful, Nini, enough to cut your heart-bone to the quick, a singular creature born of the deep’s blackest flame. I saw her wading, her hair streaming, and taken by surprise I cried out. Blast it! I startled her!”

“What did she do?”

“She turned and when she saw me, laughed. ‘Follow me,’ she said, ‘if you have the heart.’ And she was gone. If I had the heart to follow, son, I swear I didn’t have the guts! Not to lie – I was scared!”

“Out of his fits!” Rose cuffs him on the ear.

“And if you see her again?”

“Damned if I do! Turned to stone! Just like the starfish in the pavement. Why, I’d become a shell
hollow and hard; put me to your ear and hear the voices of cuttlefish! Dearest, ever since, I keep my
eyes peeled for the smallest peculiarity and should I get a hint of her, I screw them shut fast as fast
can, else be struck –”

“Blind as an old puss!”

“Blind as Oedipus, Rose, but never mind.”

Our favourite corner of the city, Totor's and mine, is the Ghost Port Bar, a smoke-filled, shadow-spooked hole-in-the-wall no bigger than an oyster on the half-shell. Like Rose's kitchen, its door and window glass are green; Saturdays we leap from one aquarium into another. I'm a little young, eight, for such a place, or so nags Rose, but the Ghost Port Bar is Heavenly Mystery and Hellish Nightmare too; I could not have stayed away had Rose bribed me with a thousand-egg floating island.

The atmosphere is thick in there and juicy; I must agree with Rose, there is not much oxygen. Down under the tables it smells like stale tobacco and feet and monkey fur, but higher up the air's embalmed with fresh burning "navy cut," the fumes of rum, zinc polish (and the zinc bar gleams in the half-light like the prow of a spanking new clipper), and the proprietress's underarms.

"Her husband," says Rose, "is a foul-tempered hyperbolic." And the victim of bad teeth and black bile. Saturdays she's the Ghost's one queen, leaves him grouching somewhere in the unimaginable dimness of the second storey sucking a rum-soaked rag. I ask Rose: "Why doesn't the Cod have his teeth pulled?"

"What would it change? He's used to sitting on horns." She sees my confusion.

"A saying. Means he's on the spit, *smarting*."

Saturdays I can never quite forget that upstairs the Cod, once a gentleman and a sailor, is *smarting* while downstairs his wife is laughing with Totor, Toujours-Là, the Marquis, the other men and me.

There are many nice things about the Ghost. Not the least is the chimp who stands in a large cage at the back of the bar, pulling at his fundamentals – a thing I've not done in public since the age of three. To warm things up the Cod's wife lets him weave around the room shaking hands. His hand is hot, his handshake congenial, and his teeth, very fat, oblong, and yellow, look like piano keys.

The chimp's relations with the Cod's wife are rumoured "seditious" by Rose. I ask: "Why suspicious?"

"He does her laundry, even sleeps in her bed and if *that's* not Peruvian!"

"But he sleeps in his cage! I've seen his little nest!"

"I'm just repeating what the people say."

"After church!" Totor cries, losing patience. "The monkey's innocent; his fingernails the proof he's never touched soap. It's Gilles-Gillesbis what keeps the Cod's wife in tune."

"Gilles-Gillesbis and Aristide Marquis!"

"Rose!"

"I'm just rehashing what I've *heard*, Victor!"

"And Totor? Does she take Totor on, too?"

This is the first time I see them fight. I want to cry but I also feel like laughing. It is Rose who runs to the sink, sobbing, her apron thrown over her head. All this is the fault of the Evil, the Heavenly

Ghost Port Bar!

“And PETOMANIA!” Rose wails, hiccups, and wails again. It is true. Last week the chimp, wearing a fire helmet of red paper, had snuffed out a candle flame with a fart. “He could have set the place on fire!”

Totor kisses Other Mother tenderly and dries her tears. He says: “Rosie, it was only a small wind. An oyster sneezing makes less wind.” Putting his arm around her he coaxes her back to her chair and patting her hands, continues:

“Once I witnessed a *big* wind!” I’d heard the tale on Saturday.

“Oh, yes!” I cry. “Tell her about the *Dolly Siren*!”

“She was approaching Cape Horn and crawling because the sea was set like a jelly. As I was looking out over the water I saw the most fearsome apparition sliding up from the horizon and spitting sparks –”

“It was a dragon of smoke chasing her tail!” Leaping from my chair I spin across the room whistling.

“I heard a roar, and with one breath the moon was blown clean from the sky –”

“And the *Dolly Siren* sent up just like an aeroplane!” Despite Other Mother’s protests, I climb on the kitchen table.

“We saw the sea beneath us and men scattered and thrashing and sinking fast. The wind was so bad on deck a sailor was knocked down dead by a sawfish; an orbiting water barrel tore off the boatswain’s ear. Meanwhile, in Tunisia it rained anchovies; tar pots fell from the sky in Tasmania; the sun was so cold above Cairo the Egyptians all turned blue. The ship’s cat slid off deck, her rats screaming after her. The captain’s hair turned white –”

“There were icicles hanging from his nose thick as tusks! Did he look like a walrus, Totor?”

“He did. The anchor scraped the peaks of mountains we couldn’t see; we heard it tolling like a bell. ‘To the hold!’ I cried. We stumbled under. A chest broke loose and squashed the chief mate flat. We heard the monster panting after us and chewing the mastheads to shreds. She could smell us, I swear, and her icy breath near froze us dead. Every time she arched her back the *Dolly* pitched and our skulls went slamming; the sounds of breaking bones so bad Cook himself went mad! There were brains –”

“For Heaven’s sake!” Rose shrieks, “Enough!”

“I’m coming to the end. . . . There were squids piled up in the forecastle when we were set down again, battered but still floating, all green and more marine than human. Nothing was left of us but a toothful of gutter crusts, shaking and gruelly, not fit – Nini darling, dearest Rose – *to hold a candle to!*”

Totor has told me that long before the city I know and love was built the sea possessed the land. When the waters evaporated the landlocked creatures were so petrified they turned to stone. The paving stones, stuck like puddings with the fossil pentagrams of starfish, prove Totor tells the truth.

Stranded himself, Totor spends these last years of his life liberating the spirit castaways. The landscape of my boyhood is haunted by ghosts armed with tridents, decked with cockles, tooting twisted conches. When it rains, as it often does, I can hear dogfish barking in the thunder, and lightning clearly see the claws of catfish striking at the body of Heaven. Evenings the alleys are surging with pelicans and tiger-faced sharks. There is a great hunk of shadow looming like a finned camel just behind the courthouse, and, in the sewers, good (and evil) whales.

Once on my way to school I find a ring fallen, Totor tells me, from the body of a fish. I would not

have missed a tribe of pious tuna reading psalms as they vanished two by two down Fools' Alley had been quicker.

“Didn't you see them? *Run*, lad, and look! Hasty! But *hush!*”

The scales, tails, tongues of sea monsters are secreted, then revealed in the shadows of the floating clouds; the smiles of mermen are scattered on the water, and above the doors of houses Totor points out impressions of webbed fingers.

After, dark-finned dwarfs cavort and if I haven't seen them, I have seen where they've kicked up sand. When the light is right, a solitary head, surely Neptune's, looms half-mocking and half-hidden in the parlour. Did nine man-sized mackerel march on their tails in full naval regalia up and down the street three times on my ninth birthday's eve as Totor insists? I do not doubt him; the air smells of mackerel all week.

I believe that spiders are the fishermen of the air, and bluebottle flies the not-so-distant cousins of flying fish. I am visited with the certitude as I lie in bed, that all nature's infinite combinations are divine. That the spirit of the marvellous permeates all things, even, at supper's end, the eel's spine coiled upon my dish.

Above the stairwell Totor has painted:

Rejoice! All Things are Born in Foam!

and inscribed upon the wall above their bed:

*Had Rose been finned,
Totor
could not have loved her more.*

Saturday and pissing vinegar. The old port has vanished in the rain; port and sky and sea all smeared together like a jam of oysters, pearl-grey and viscous. Our heads bent against the wind, Totor and I make our way to the Ghost and trample in sneezing, arrested by the hot fumet of drinking men and their smoke. The place is packed with faces, some sinister, some sad, some joyous; some slashed and tattooed, marked by frostbite, fever, liquor. Toujours-Là is there, his blue eyes blinking, and Aristide the Marquis, and the chimpanzee, his simple face pressed to a mug of punch.

The punch is strong and hot. I get some too, with a nice, fruity slice of lemon peel.

“And nurse it, Nini, go slow. That’s sailor stuff, see, made for men equipped with solid copper piping.” The Cod’s wife slips me a gritty stick of peppermint to stir with; there is monkey hair stuck to the sides.

“And my love is as vast as—” the Marquis moans boozily, and Toujours-Là, through smoke and drink, cuts in:

“My arse!” Which almost causes an incident. But the Marquis is easily coaxed back into felicity and soon the two are singing together. The Cod’s wife joins in fortissimo – leaning over the piano and holding her breasts with both hands – and Totor off-key, with a song, though none of us know it, shamelessly lifted (and scrambled) from Apollinaire:

“... The star above your garter
as tight as a nut cracker;
your mouth my delight, my nectar –
O Lu-Lu! Lu-Lu!”

The tiddly chimp, rocking alone on the floor, but carefully, so as not to spill a drop, quivers with excitement as the Cod’s wife sends the song cascading with a voluptuous treble:

“OOOH Lu-Lu, Lu-LOOH!”

Outside the fog is like a fine dust rising. The familiar street surges with shadowy figures before a gust of wind blots it out altogether. Inside, we are warm and cosy. The place is packed, the air palpable with all that breathing. Toujours-Là and the Marquis leave the piano for a game of dominoes. The chimp and I continue to nurse our punch, sucking drop by drop from our swiftly dissolving sugar sticks. Through half-closed eyes I admire the domino constellations and thrill to the sounds they make as they snap against the table. I lust after Toujours-Là’s white clay pipe barely perceived in the semidarkness; it is shaped like a mermaid with nipples and eyes of gold enamel: they twinkle.

I intuit a connection, perplexing and profound, between those eager eyes and nipples and in the

oblong skies of darkest night pierced with planets. The Ghost's constellations mirror those in Heaven

~~My head foggy with rum, my mouth swollen with sugar, I imagine holes in the sky through which~~
the sleet comes sliding (a quick glance out the window shows that fog has turned to rain, and rain
ice; the streets are paved with it and outside, drunken men tumble like skittles). We are marooned.
The Ghost Port Bar has become our island.

The Cod's wife brings out some herring for supper, boiled potatoes and slices of bread. The taste of
salt herring, hot potato, rum, and bread so good I savour every particle. I do not think of Other Mother
anxiously prodding the Sunday roast.

The Marquis has finished eating.

"Toujours-Là," he says, "last Saturday Totor told us a famous story; it started badly but it ended
well – the *Dolly Siren* waking in an inlet off the sunny coast of Sumatra and ever sea-worthy despite
her detour in the sky. I'd say it's up to you to tell another, but this time start it well and end it in
disaster."

Toujours-Là pulls his pipe from his lips and, scratching a jowl, says:

"This story is disastrous from start to finish; no way getting around that." The chimp has fallen
asleep on his feet, his body bent in two, his cheek resting on the floor. But I, I begin to wake up.

"I hope it's about a mermaid!" I whisper loudly to Totor. Toujours-Là says:

"Yes, it is. More or less. Yes, it is, hah! *In its way*. But then it isn't, neither." I fear he is asking
riddles.

At the other side of the room a few men are leaving; Toujours-Là waits for the scraping of the
chairs and the clatter of their clogs to cease. As they go a gust of cold wind slams into the room and
the chimp shivers in his sleep.

"Our bloody hulk, the *Annabelle Lee*, had sprung any number of leaks and was forced to dock in the
port of an aborted rock pile not fit to be called a city, so ugly it burned the eyes." Toujours-Là begins
with a voice like a barrel rolling down a road. "This city was famous for its kilns and crockery.
Figurines no bigger than a starving man's turds sat in all the windows. I hated them worse than the
bugs which overran the beds.

"I killed time drinking a sooty whisky. The bar's proprietor had a collection of the peculiar pottery
– a dozen stood on a shelf, and, as the Devil would have it, were reflected in a mirror, which made
them twice as many, as if twelve was not enough, Goddammit, and I was forced to look at twenty-
four. I saw bad luck in it. Figured they was telling me I'd be stuck there for as many months.
swallowed the bastard's poison, trying not to inhale, and blasted those clay birdies from their perch
with the pistol of my mind.

" 'I see you admiring my collection,' said the arse-hole barkeep. 'Some are very old. These days
they ain't so nicely glazed.' He showed me a piece of crap which was supposed to be a starfish. I lost
my temper and sent it to the floor where it didn't shatter, but rolled with a tinkle that sounded like
laughter. He threw me out, but I was eager to go, sick to death of his cursed bric-à-brac damned with
nine lives. I was even missing the pissing *Annabelle Lee*.

"Now, this place was known for more than its crockery. I'd heard rumours that a mermaid had been
seen swimming in the canal. So I stopped a fella and said: 'Hey! Where's this mermaid I've heard
about?'

" 'A myth!' he lisped. 'A fairy-tale!' But shame hid his eyes like slime. He was lying. 'A myth!
Make-believe!'

"I roughed him up, which was easy. He was as limp as a dead snake. He begged for pity and insisted
he had *nothing to do with it*."

The room is quiet; everyone is listening to Toujours-Là. The only sound is the chimp's gentle snoring. The Cod's wife is standing between Toujours-Là and the Marquis, one hand on Toujours-Là's shoulder, the other playing with a lump of amber the Marquis has hanging from his neck.

" 'You're lying!' I yelled. 'I want to see her! Take me to her!' He fell down sprawling. I was drunk evidently. I pulled him up by the ears.

" 'No!' he sobbed. 'She'll kill me!'

" 'Who?' I said, giving him a slap. 'Who? *Who?*' But in a sudden frenzy he kicked me in the shins and scuttled off.

"The night swallowed him whole. I walked on, shadows thieving around me. I lost my way. An hour went by and I didn't know where the Hell I was. I walked into puddles and I stepped on something queer; I lost my matches and my shin was hurting. Then I felt someone tugging at my pants – a dwarf. He came up to my knees. Said he knew a place where we can get island rum. For a drink he'll tell me all I want to know.

"We went off together, the dwarf tugging at my pants, first this way, then that. Then I saw a bright light shining – a place what calls itself the Scheherezade. I set the little fellow up with a bowl of flaming punch the size of a sink. I know Heaven exists, Nini! It's that place – the Scheherezade.

" 'She was born a beauty,' the dwarf began, wiping his lips with his wrist like a gentleman, 'perfect to the nails of her toes, dancey, all sparkle, a little fairy-child, truly. When her mama died her father married a diabolical female, happy only when she heard bones breaking beneath her shoes. A witch this was, dim-witted. Liked to smash roaches between her thumbs. A calamity, really, not a woman. More a precipice. When the old fool died of melancholy she savagely mutilated the child. Cut off her hands and feet and cauterized the wounds with fire.' "

Totor cries: "Toujours-Là! Nini's just a boy!" I kick him, not wanting to be babied. Toujours-Là continues:

"Now when the child's wounds were healed, the ghouls threw her into the canal. Set her to paddle the best she could with her lopped-off limbs. 'And so she lived,' the dwarf said to me, 'like a pale carp of nightmare. Like a pale carp of nightmare bobbing for crusts.'

"That's how the stories began: bargemen sometimes saw the yellow hair, her white bottom as she dove after her dinner, poor angel, and no one doing a thing. Too scared of the ghouls. But the dwarf looked for her until he found her. And when he had some supper he slipped down to the water and shared it. Because she was so afraid he could never get near, he'd toss her a peeled chestnut, an onion. He said her skin was scaly and her hair gone green.

"The Scheherezade was closing. The dwarf took me back to his dismal room. He lived in a cellar below the port. It smelled of tar. I was surprised to see no furniture, not even a pallet of straw: only packing crates and all of them empty.

" 'I tamed her,' the dwarf continued, 'although it took time. I wrapped her in my threadbare coat and brought her here. All night I kissed her and held her and rocked her. I sang the little scraps of songs I remembered. I promised her dolls with wee cabinets. At dawn she smiled, a dazzlement, and gasping like a fish she died. I fear she died of too much tenderness. And now she haunts the city. Just as I do myself.'

"The dwarf had come to the story's end. Dawn dispelled the night. To my surprise, I saw that as the shadows lifted he dwindled.

" 'The Ogress,' he spluttered as he vanished, 'the Ogress found me and now. . . .' His voice was a diminishing trickle. 'I haunt the night like a candle. Days I die. . . . Thanks for listening. . . .' I could barely hear him. 'I hope we'll meet again. . . .'

“A ghost!” I gasp. Totor squeezes my knee. Toujours-Là continues:

“I stumbled out into the mazes of the streets until I found myself back at the first bar. The infernal pottery nodded at me just as if we shared a secret. . . .”

My mouth drops.

“Now, Nini,” says Toujours-Là, all at once concerned, “don’t have any nightmares on me. The story was the fault of Master Punch and no reality. The Ogress but a figment of my addled brain.”

But the sailor’s apologies and explanations only convince me the tale is true. The story of the maimed maiden has struck a deep and sonorous chord in my heart. Never have I been so famously entertained, nor so frightened.

Outside the sleet is transformed to a heavy fall of snow. The chimp licks a domino and tries to stick it to his nose. I suck my candy thoughtfully.

“Tell me about the Ogress!” I plead. “What happened to her?”

Totor sighs. “I fear, old salt,” he says, “my stories pale beside your own.”

“I’ve never been so scared!” I admit. “I could tell the tale is true!”

“Hah! My truth,” Toujours-Là insists, “is whisky’s. Son, my brain is yellow like Hook Head in the moon and not always navigable. My tales, boy,” he spits, “are born in puddles of rum.”

“And that,” the black Marquis cries, “is the truth!” Is Toujours-Là about to cry? Just then two tears like yellow grapes, roll off his nose.

Dressed in the Cod’s tassellated nightcap the chimp rocks over and seizes my hand. He looks like a little person in the cap. He lays his head down upon my knees. The feel of his furry face and its surprising warmth is, like the tepid punch and the soft fall of snow, delicious.

“The Ogress!” I insist. “What happened to *her*?”

“I heard,” Toujours-Là whispers, setting a flame to his pipe and sucking hard, “that someone tied a rock around her neck and threw her into the canal.”

“It was you!”

“Not so fast, son – you’re as fast as planets, *whoosh!*” He makes a circle in the air with his thumb.

“She’s dead!”

“I saw a face once in the Arctic, shining white in the black water. A woman’s face, following in the ship’s wake, following fast. And *angry*, Nini; with eyes of phosphorus. I figured she was after me.”

“Brrr! And since?”

“Oh, since. . . .” He sends the Cod’s wife to the bar for a finger of whisky for everyone but me.

“Could someone swim like that in the icy water?”

“Not *someone*, Nini. Like I said – this was a calamity. She was without a body – just a lonely head bewitched, riding the inky foam after my sanity. Her head was like a ball of ice with eyes, intent on doing harm.”

I shudder, enraptured.

“I saw the head again off Bloody Foreland, but – it’s the Marquis’ turn to tell a tale.”

“Something romantic,” Totor hastily proposes, “else the lad get warped notions of the fair sex.” For this he gets another kick. I will not be babied!

“Cool down,” Totor says to me, “the night has just begun.” Meaning I’ll be up very late, and the salves my bruised dignity. “Though,” he adds under his breath, “Rose will bread our ears.”

I look up. The windows of the Ghost Port Bar are crusted with ice and the world beyond extinguished. To myself I breathe: “Hook Head! Bloody Foreland!”

Around his strong, black neck, the Marquis wears a knob of amber knotted to a blue string. Catching my eyes fixed to his throat he lifts it to my face and I see, caught like a seal in Arctic ice, a tiny, green bee. My astonishment amuses him and he laughs broadly, straining the spindly body of his chair. I ask:

“Have you been to Hook Head and Bloody Foreland, too?”

“Ah!” he says warmly, his voice cinnamon. “I’ve been to Bûr Sa’id, Shāhbāzpur, and Hooghly; Crooked Island, Easter Island; I’ve been to Corpus Christi.” To my delight he repeats this in song:

“I’ve been to Bûr Sa’id,
Shāhbāzpur and Hooghly,
Crooked Island, Easter Island;
I’ve been to Corpus Christi.”

Then, bending over imaginary oars, the Marquis rows himself right out of his chair and around the room in an invisible boat which dips and rises, dips and rises, dips and topples over. Holding his nose he tumbles extravagantly into deep water, and sinks. He surfaces, spitting, and shading his eyes as if from the sun, peers about until he sees me. When he does, he waves madly and paddles over to my chair where, on bended knees, hunched and breathless, he raises the amber sphere to the level of my eyes and both gentle and mocking, whispers:

“Does Tit-Nini
love my bee?
Her name is
Tit-Erzulie.”

I blush with pleasure. I have never met anyone like the Marquis.

“Listen! Listen! Tit-Z’oreilles . . . Tit-Erzulie is telling you a *story*; *buhz* . . . *buhz* . . . *buhzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzz!*” He holds the sphere to my ear. I could swear I hear the bee humming very softly.

“It’s magic!”

“Everything, Tit-Z’oreilles, is magic.” He springs into the air and, grabbing a phantom can, executes an engaging soft-shoe before shuffling over to his chair and sitting down.

“I’ve seen the sea swarming with painted turtles; a sky so full of flying fish the face of the moon was veiled for hours. These fish whistled as they flew, and because, like parrots, they repeated everything they overheard, recited verses from the Koran, the Bible, and even *Moby Dick*. Imagine Tit-Nini,” and he fingers the bead as he speaks, “imagine a thousand fish flying in the sky and all crying out at once:

“There is one God and His name is Allah!

— O how beautiful is my beloved. Her eyes are doves and her lips a scarlet ribbon!

Of all divers, thou hast dived the deepest!”

And yes, I can imagine it.

Toujours-Là raps his pipe angrily against the table:

“Out with it, Marquis!” he cries. “Cease this convoluted foot-scraping at the door, the perambulatory —”

The Cod’s wife arrives with more punch steaming in a pewter pitcher. Stroking the Marquis’s handsome face she sighs:

“It’s not every man goes in for the perambulatories.” The Marquis brushes her hand away as if she were a fly. I ask who Allah is. Is he any relation to the old fogey in the sky Rose calls Gee-hover: *He who Hovers Over?*

“One and the same! Cursing folks with boils and brimstone. Now, boys, my perambulations are nearly over, but not quite. There’s a bit more. That is to say *if you don’t mind*.” He looks at me and his tiger’s eyes twinkle. The amber sphere glows against the deepest nightshade of his skin like a planet in space.

“Oh! No! Not at all! I don’t mind at all!” Despite the hour I’ve forgotten to be sleepy. My belly full of herring and my mind alive with talking fish and the humming bee, I’m wild for another tale and jiggle impatiently in my chair.

“My ancestors were traders in gold and ivory and wax,” the Marquis continues. “They bought and sold madder and rose water, quicksilver, and gold on strings. They knew all the bright sapphire ports of Africa’s eastern seaboard; they sailed the swiftest ships the world had ever seen – from Sofala to Mozambique, to Ras Hafun and even to Ceylon.” Taking a turquoise pencil from his pocket, he lightly draws a map of mediaeval East Africa on the oily table-top, including the ancient city of Zimbabwe, the Congo, the Nile, India, Ceylon, and the great island of Madagascar which hangs on the sea like a shattered tear. He draws ruffled mountains, fulminating volcanoes, forests and deserts, and even a black wind whipping up from Cape Horn and roaring across the Indian Ocean.

“They bartered with Persians and Chinese and Arabs; they brought jade from China into Africa, some worshipped Allah, some Gee-hover, some wedded the women of the Sabea, some settled in Ceylon where the girls are as graceful as gazelles. King Solomon himself traded with my ancestors. His throne was built of their ivory; he ate fruit from their ebony tables and the peacocks —”

“You’re bragging!” Toujours-Là growls. “And the tale’s too flow’ry. Nothing is happening, just a lot of twitteration. Gazelles! Peacocks! Ivory! This is the twentieth century and we don’t give two hoots for your ancestors – all niggers too!”

“I do! I do!” I cry, startled by this outburst.

“Ah! Maybe Toujours-Là is right, Nini,” the Marquis says gently. “All that’s gone. Frozen in the past like my bee Erzulie. My ancestors, their blue cities clustered like blossoms, their oceans, and the blazing candles of their ships, their charts set with stars, their latitudes and longitudes of knotted gold, their joyous feasts and their deep, cool wells. . . . Now nothing remains but the silent, dusty hills tufted with scree and graves raked over by antiquaries. My people have become scavengers, without boats without dreams, tending fires of thorn, fires of dung. They eat locusts. They die of thirst.”

“But why?”

“Slavery, Little Ears. Africa’s Black Death.”

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