

WHERE
LIGHT
MEETS
WATER

SUSAN PATERSON



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The greatest brightness, short of dazzling, acts
near the greatest darkness.

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe,
Theory of Colours

What a great heap of grief lay hid in me,
And how the red wild sparkles dimly burn
Through the ashen greyness.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning,
Sonnets from the Portuguese

11 June 1871

Pacific Ocean

N 4° 15' E 178° 53'

On deck the men are listless. The heat swells until the air is viscous with humidity. Sweat runs at their necks and temples. There is no wind, and they cannot stand it. Rough hands, iron stomachs, mouths filthy with fury and words as dark as starless midnight. Men of the sea. I share their passion, their dedication to the secure borders of this tough hull. A sheltered world, in the end.

Our sails now lie slack, like a woman's petticoats pegged loosely from the towering masts.

Five bells.

I practise my confession, but can see no clear point at which to begin.

I was born in a small village in West Lothian, Scotland, in 1819.

I stop myself here, for what fact of birth can describe the fact of being? Except perhaps for the damp. The winter flooding. The wet and sullen earth beneath my simple cradle. I remember the touch of cold, mossy stone; and such dark, a deep dark, a deep unbreathing dark that you could feel against your skin and inside your lungs. My constitution was made between the walls of that cottage, its humble door facing the sea. Water would become my solid ground, but it was the sky that I sought to hold.

Since then I've seen many seas and many lands, and now it is a final port I seek. This image you've gifted me guides my passage: a woodblock print, you call it. It shows a single, almost childlike barrel of an indigo-blue and white-clawed sea, curled atop with energy and about to release. I've known something of that. You chose it well, and with speed I could tell you so. But the absent wind has abandoned us to a deflated sea and feverish imaginings. My men show signs of disturbance. There are stories of what becomes of this.

Each night I am arrested by dreams. Emerging to take breath in the already-stifling morning stillness, what do I find? After all these years. Ghosts. There, in the hallucinatory rise and curl, press and fold, valleys and mountains of a vast silver aqueous motion.

Ghosts I must reconcile with the living.

PART ONE

London, 1847

1

A wailing gale riled the North Atlantic. One towering peak after another, marbled white and capped with foam. No horizon, just a grey wall of sea as the *Majestic* dropped into each wave's dark evacuated hollow.

High upon the mainmast, Tom bore the pounding of a savage spill, saltwater that hit as hard as granite. Many times the sea rose ahead only to twist itself and charge along their side. Strong sailors made slight by nature balanced on the yards. How small their bodies looked as they took in the sail.

The helmsman responded to the pull of the wheel, his body a curving counterweight, and the clipper was scooped up by another glassy crest. A boy gaped as his feet were swept from the ratlines, and Tom snatched at the lad's belted waist, quick enough to curtail his fall. Clawing them both to the rigging, he could almost hear the young heart screaming inside, indistinguishable from the storm. Terror taut at the lad's silent mouth as his hands groped for purchase. A face too tender and those eyes, so wide. One hundred feet and more they could fall from here, and there was a hard, fathomless depth beneath that.

Another crashing wave. Tom did not blink and the boy did not cry out. Already he was learning what every mariner came to know: death is ever a slip away.

‘We’ll see Gravesend soon,’ Tom shouted close to the boy’s ear. ‘Climb down now.’ Such certainty almost a thousand miles out from land was a lie, but it was the sole measure a mind could take to fortify the body’s strength.

One hand over another, each foothold staking the body’s weight, Tom descended to a gushing deck. The mast pitched and the prow dropped precipitously into another trough. Captain Martin roared from the quarterdeck; the chief mate echoed from the forecastle. As second mate, Tom followed every command. Even the cook had been ordered from his galley to add weight to the battle, his salt-beef supper saved from the teak by the sailors’ well-honed stomachs.

Up to his knees, Tom fought an icy surge, and suddenly a man cried out from above, hitting the shrouds as he plummeted. The rigging broke his fall, saving his life, but his outstretched arm shattered beneath him as he landed.

Through it all Tom moved on instinct. His actions were swift and efficient. Beneath this assured activity lay a calm in which his eye discerned the hue of violet-threaded clouds dropped upon the mainmast and the glimmer of a lamp across its distinctive wood grain. In the worst of the gale he knew that if he were to lose his life to the ungovernable sea, if he were to bend his head into the crook of an elbow one final time, he would accept his fate but for the regret he’d never have the chance to paint that terrible beauty.

The battered *Majestic* and an exhausted crew limped the last stretch of their crossing from Port Phillip Bay. Finally the mouth of the Thames was a single night away.

Three and a half months. Fair weather and foul. Whenever his duties allowed, Tom re-created it all in pigment – the foaming of an Atlantic storm, the inky Southern Ocean stretching beneath a long lip of lemon, and the exact orange of the sun that seared at the oarsmen's backs in Rio. All of it locked in memory and swept from wet brush to paper while so many rounds of the bells marked time and miles in between.

The clipper was Tom's home, the crew his only family. His sketchbooks were personal logs that recorded voyages in shaded charcoal and bleeding watercolour.

He slept like he was falling, woke renewed with expectation, and made his last climb to the mainyard as they eased into Gravesend. A brawny steamer came to haul the clipper upriver to the London Docks.

Now he was on the other side: twenty-eight years old and set to be promoted to chief mate on their next run. No longer would he haul and heave the way he'd done since he was a boy. His work would be with stars and sky, wind and compass point; his word would be second only to the captain's.

Wapping was more fetid than he'd remembered, the Thames a slow-moving sewer of murk and waste.

That first morning brought hard news: the *Majestic* was to be dry-docked and the crew given leave. The rudder they'd patched up at sea would need replacing, along with its fittings. They'd need a new mizzen and rigging, and the sternpost repaired.

Tom braced himself with folded arms at Captain Martin's announcement. The shipwright was behind schedule, which would only add to their delay. A ship had caught fire during refitting that week, requiring significant repairs ahead of them. It could be three weeks before they were ready to load for the East. It could be a month.

Captain Martin clapped him on the shoulder in mutual consolation as he went below. ‘Soon, Mr Rutherford. Soon.’

Tom simply nodded.

Setting his feet down on the docks after so long, he felt himself waiting for the roll and lean, the falling away. Stilled now, he reset his balance against firm ground.

‘You joining us, Tom Rutherford?’ The watchmen spat into their palms and smoothed their salt-thickened hair. Faces bright with thirst.

He shook his head and let them turn away to the taverns, almost as one in a wave. ‘Later gentlemen, perhaps.’

Beyond the high walls of the docks, the streets closed in. Already the orange light in Rio was a far-off imagining. The sky here a lid on an airless box. He walked until he found a sign for an artists’ colourman, from whom he purchased a new sketchbook, and from there followed directions to an affordable tailor, who measured him up. His old shore suit had worn thin and he wanted something befitting his new rank. Retracing his steps, he continued past the taverns, having settled upon a different escape.

By mid-morning, Tom was packing his paintbox, sketchbooks and brushes. Seamus Regan, the ship’s surgeon and Tom’s good friend, leaned in at the cabin door.

‘It’ll be good to focus some of your frustration, Tom, but Richmond? I thought you incapable of being three miles from sea.’

It was true Tom rarely slept without the lap of water at his ears, but if he could not go downriver, he would go up.

‘We’re further than that now, Seamus.’ He shrugged. ‘The colourman recommended it for a picturesque study of the river, and I’d do well to find some distraction.’

Once before he’d discovered something unexpected inland. He was reminded of the terracotta gleam that had washed over him in

Siena when he was not yet twenty. Entrusted with the delivery of a valuable parcel from port, Tom had found colour was his reward, worth the isolated days on the road away from the coast. He had never forgotten its power, the way it momentarily relieved him of himself.

‘You’re sure you wouldn’t fancy some country air rather than this cesspit they call the capital?’ he added, pulling the cord tight on his bag.

‘Indeed, but I need to replenish supplies for our next run – damned fever fleeced me of every drop of quinine – and there’s a surgeon in Oxford I wish to consult with.’

‘I don’t think you could have saved the arm, Seamus.’ Tom measured his words, holding his friend’s gaze.

‘At the time I was certain the infection would kill him.’ The doctor’s easy-natured face strained with renewed calculations. ‘But there’s no joy in taking a limb.’

‘He was in a hellish mess. You did your best.’

Seamus smiled, quickly resolved. ‘I’m sorry you have to wait for your promotion.’

‘With luck, the shipwright has overestimated.’ Tom hoisted his bag to his shoulder. ‘As soon as we get the word, I’ll be ready.’

When the next passenger steamboat headed upriver, Tom was on its deck, watching the Thames riverbank loose itself from the city’s claw and regain its natural state. Richmond was some sixty miles upstream from the sea by his reckoning but the water was tidal.

Disembarking near an arching stone bridge, he continued on foot from the landing, following the riverbank a short distance until the air grew quieter. At the base of the grassy hill, he dropped his bag and sat to look out at the various launches plying the Thames, automatically estimating beam, capacity and tonnage. He followed the riggings of

cream-coloured sailcloth barely filling in the calm afternoon. The passage of skiffs under oar. Canopies of bright parasols. He sketched a quick study in pencil, marking the slower cut of the river craft through the water, but felt he rushed to capture something he didn't yet understand. After a while he simply let the unfamiliar quality of the grass and the river soak into his bones, wondering at how he could ever stay still for so long, watching the wake roll itself to the riverbank. Recede, and roll in again.

Fifteen years at sea had made Tom expert at navigating swell: standing perpendicular to the deck one moment, judging a wrenching shove from the ocean the next, stepping up against the bulwark as the ship leaned to its side. The ground became whatever was under his feet at the time. Here, the earth beneath him was steadfast. It didn't sway or tilt, this grassy English riverbank, lush with summer sunshine. The sea possessed many greens but this, this colour, was something else. He wanted to stretch out along it, rub his bare feet among the silky blades. This wonderful rarity.

A light slap across his face. Tom awoke, batting away the imagined offender, and sat up. A bird? A hand? The wind had got up and played upon the river. He reached for his hat but it had scuffled several feet down the bank and was close to drowning.

Standing, he discovered the culprit. A solitary lace glove on the grass at his feet, its fingers motioning in the breeze. As it lifted again into the air, he caught it and scanned along the river path.

Down by the landing: two men holding their hats in place at the brim. A couple of young girls in crumpled calico dresses and an older boy scrambling along the water's edge.

He couldn't see any obvious origins.

The lace was brilliantly white, with a diamond motif along each finger and a pair of irregular pearls for buttons. A delicate thing,

entirely impractical. It lay without weight, queer and exceptional in his hand.

He raised it to his face and was startled by the unexpected scent. How familiar it was.

Turpentine.