

Marcoceanum

A short story

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THE INEVITABLE

Here it comes. The prophecy is surely being fulfilled. Acanorex swims toward it, as do at least two dozen fellow companions. The darkness of the night does not help, but the deeper darkness of the fast, relentlessly advancing vessel above does. Acanorex can see at least four dozen of his fellow volunteer kin swimming toward the smaller, yet equally speedy vessels flanking the first. The first: the one that is his. Acanorex comes up to the fast moving, dark, slimy oak surface, positions the top of his head against it, then expands the muscular sucking disc that crowns this part of his anatomy, creating suction against the surface of the ship. By now most of his slightly slower – it's not their fault -- fellow volunteers had done the same. More than slightly slower, in reality, reckons Acanorex, especially considering that it was him, not they, who was born with the slightly-yet-evidently crooked spine – he's still faster. But back to the prophecy. It is surely being fulfilled. And the volunteers could only do what they were built by nature and by time to do: Cling. The gradual evolution of their spiny first dorsal fin resulted in the sucking disk that makes their proud Echeneididae family stand out within the realm, stand out in this case for a purpose, and a noble one at that: Delay.

These were Acanorex's seas, and his kin's and ancestors', and if the prophecy was right, which it was, it's already proving to be, the taste of Huelvan oak on his sucking disk the proof -- not that he'd ever tasted Huelvan oak before, but... -- this was foreign for sure. A vessel this big? *Foreign*, and there he was along with his kin to stand by their famed name and delay this intrusion. Even if to delay it by only minutes. Even if to delay it by only seconds. But so if the prophecy was right, which it was, then at least live the rest of your years knowing you did something important, partook of this historical moment, did more even than the humans themselves did. The humans who have no clue, even -- even now -- what is going on, what's in *store*. Probably sitting on their asses, laughing, smoking, sucking at each other -- not the kind of sucking that he and his kin did -- he and his kin's, one endowed with nobility, honor, purpose -- no. These humans have no clue. Acanorex clings on along with at least seventy-two of his kin to the slimy Huelvan oak that proved that the prophecy was right on this dark night. Along his body's surface, the cool, tenacious ocean current resulting from the relentless forward energy of the dark vessel stirs within his soul an unshakeable sense of destiny. Surely, his at least seventy-two accompanying kin must feel that way, too. Acanorex clings on. No, these humans have no clue. The clueless humans that will actually get the rawest of the deals from all of this. The inevitable.

They, he and his kin, they're here just for pride. Not just, in this case, for the ride -- who said they couldn't be territorial? But will the humans ever get a clue? By the time they do it might be too late.

The darkness of the night does not help.

UNCHARTED WATERS

Where do you draw the line? Between 'charted' and 'uncharted'? Not that it really matters, of course. In the end, what matters is an as-scientifically-accurate-as-you-can map. He would make it one day. One day soon, at that. Where *do* you draw the line? Or, where do you label, on the map, that these are waters you had no idea existed? Just because you're just discovering them? Land's easier to document, of course. All you have to do is position that line where water gives way to land. The shoreline. The limit. Limits are easy. For sure, this did not look good. You worry about the blurriness of frontiers, and as if a neverending expanse of water was not enough to reinforce those worries, then comes along water, but in a more mysterious, witching form – mist – to further confound the worried mind. To further blur that line. Sagged sails, infernal heat, and – at the moment at least – silence.

It's the first time on this voyage, which is going on sixty-six days now, that she, his *nao*, encounters mist.

Juan is standing at the bow of the ship under the dark, moonless sky, hands on the railing, looking ahead into the few varas of sea surface visibility that the darkness and the mist allow him. Only the boy is awake, that he can attest to, and at the helm. An *imberbe* – Juan might have chuckled had he been less exhausted, less on edge – an unbearded, probably pubeless young bloke the old man had insisted on bringing along. Juan glances back to the aftcastle, and at the absent-minded young man at the helm. He gazes at him in relative disgust for a couple of seconds. Then he turns his head back to look ahead, shakes his head, scoffs. He'll bring shame onto himself, the youth will, soon enough. Both he and his mentor will. Well. His mentor, the old man, if he does get to his Asia, he will find glory, of course. But this *gargajito*... that's another story. He'll err greatly someday. If the admiral's favoritism continues, that is, and time off continues to be granted to the helmsman, in favor of this dreaming boy. Not that he's doing much, at this speed. Juan, at times like these, he just wants to... philosophize. He looks down at the rather – now that he thinks of it – unsettlingly still black water below. This calm? This calm is never good. He reaches for a slender slice of salted meat that's tucked at his belt, brings it to his sparse-black-beard-framed mouth, and

exposed are incisors and canines that to have called the color of wet, rotting lemons would have been kind. He bites into the dry, harsh meat and pulls, and strands and fibers reveal and some of them stay snug -- and will probably hibernate to death -- between his disorderly teeth. He reaches down for the bottle of wine. *Si tuviera la ostia la tomaría en vez*, he mutters under his breath as he swigs some cheap fermented grape juice down the way of his grateful gut. For some reason, the small hours after midnight were always the worst for his stomach. If he didn't get up and fill up his poor old belly at least partly, it would be his heart burning and puke-infused belching and a gut double its usual size and in short general misery all the next day. He'd go back to sleep soon. *These still waters and now this witching mist* – these did not make him particularly giddy. He tucks the piece of meat back in his belt, and offers a little prayer:

“Ave María, Madre Santa, abridnos paso entre esta niebla; guiadnos, que no vaia a atormentarse ‘ste tiempo ni la bestia apresurarse y abominarnos... Amén.”

After uttering these words he makes his way along an obstacle course of sleeping crew and storage trunks and bags of provisions and back to his hammock, which is down the ladder by the hearth, at portside. He likes his place by the hearth. Sure, ashes here and there blown in his face by the breeze

but... *ostia!* He forgot his bottle. He goes back for it and tortuously but momentarily appeased, returns to his hammock. Forget the cork, *that* got lost earlier today. The nao rocks tensely, slowly, from side to side. Rolls. But that he can hear the sound of the nearby caravels – inferior ships, of course – creaking as they also roll in place, unmoving, this is in no way appeasing. Why? Because they're not exactly a stone's throw away from his nao. His nao and its flanking caravels had grown further and further apart, and by now, their flanking presence was almost an afterthought. So under normal conditions, at this distance, maybe the neighboring crew could hear you were you to yell to them at the top of your lungs. But the quiet is so overwhelming now, you can hear the darned ships creak. Fortunately, at least, the salty smell of this vast sea, which for some reason is stronger than ever, is there to somehow mask, somehow cleanse, the stagnant, unholy stench of the men aboard, himself included. Plus, perhaps, that of the rotting dead rat or rats that no one seems to find. He looks back at the *gargajito*. Behind him, other than the old man's glowing window – does he ever sleep? -- the nao's gleaming beacon at stern is the only light in the world. It makes the boy's youthful, unruly hair look like some kind of halo. *Ángel*. *Ángel*, I will call this bastard. *Ángel*, I will call him. The youth now's looking like he's nodding off. He's – Juan is – losing touch too... that moment when you're dimly aware that your

thoughts are giving... way to... *dreamings... imagine if they were right... and the world's not round as... the old man and Pythagoras and... Anaximander and... Anaximenes or whatever... say... and there's no way to the East... via the west and... there actually is a limit, a line, the line's the edge, like the... the actual edge, like... edge on a map? The frame of this water world, el... marco de este océano?? The limit between charted and uncharted, this... Marcoceanum? And what it is, it's... a big, gigantic, gargantuan... water... fall... as they... said and... the beast... the beassst... Juan's out.*

MARCOCEANUM

Juan is woken by the racket all around him. He looks around. It's past daybreak. Still overcast. And while he's able to discern each of the caravels flanking his ship, they're not as easy to make out anymore. The mist is still there and Juan's whole world is painted in scales of grey. It appears that all of the men are up and about and, as a matter of fact, what's taking place is one hell of an argument.

"What's all this commotion about?" he asks one of the men.

"It was never no god-damned rat at all, Captain!" answers Yzquierdo. He's extremely distressed. "Someone has killed the bird! Jaco found it behind the

chest where we moved the crossbows to last week! Underneath the pillow! Whoever finished it, he was keeping it there, the lowly bastard, like some kind of unholy amulet!!”

Juan looks around the deck. The men had just about had it. He knew that the conservation of such a mascot aboard would end up spelling trouble. *And* smelling it, too, it turns out. The bird – probably a double-crested cormorant, but Juan wouldn’t know -- had flown and glided alongside the vessel for a span of approximately four days – sometimes even above the vessel, not too high up – and during those few days the men had basked in sunny good weather, had been in good spirits; a robust, persistent wind had kept the sails swelled and aboard the ship, general good fortune dwelled. The food even seemed to taste better – or shall we say – less horrible – for that short span of time. Jokes had seemed funnier, the men’s seafaring tall tales less believable – whether that’s a good or a bad thing – and even the wine seemed to be easier on the men: much more benevolent, allowing them better buzzes for less of the coveted liquid – and their longings for their women left so far behind took a more positive quality, as instead of depression and longing, the general feeling was exhilaration and anticipation.

But then, upon daybreak one morning, the large black bird was found on the deck, starboard side, huddled against the base of the ladder to the upper deck.

Its magnificent bright green eyes did then take to mute, and the men assumed God's creature had taken ill. De Gallego took to the bird, but even Doctor Sanchez could not make it feel better, apparently, as he did always stress, he was 'no vet.' But the good weather, sail and fortune remained intact. And after a few days of pampering from the men and petting it and telling it tall tales and even including it in 'future' tall tales, as a protagonist, plus feeding it the best of the strips of salty dried meat and the cleanest of the water – whichever the admiral left over unconsumed; sure, slightly mixed with his saliva and thus probably too with some of his germs, but still – the bird appeared to fully recover. It, the bird, opted to, however, bask in its revered pet status and chose to fly very little again, almost not at all, instead keeping to the company of the crew, and was often seen perched tranquilly atop the shoulder of many a sailor; and even, at least Alonso "Ch." assures so, making the greatest of efforts to learn to speak, so as to become an even better companion and bird of good omen to the men.

But then, one night, the bird had disappeared. Most of the men suspected Marin, who was last seen with the bird – by the way, they named it "Ave" – the night before while drunkenly coming down the ladder with it on his shoulder and stumbling and landing face-first on the main deck and the bird – "Ave" – took off from the shoulder and batted its wings a couple of times,

landing composedly on the cannon, thus avoiding equal fate as Marin. But the thing is someone – the goldsmith, if it must be known – argued in all fairness to Marin, that Marin had been so wasted the rest of that night and most of next day that it surely couldn't have been him who had harmed the bird. “Ave”.

But what was for sure, is that at some time between that moment and noon the next day, the sails had begun to sag, the sun had begun to dim, clouds had started to appear as far as the eye could see and the color of the water had turned *grey*... and the grey water was still -- as still as the water of some sweetwater lake. But, a sweetwater lake that had been shrouded, by some malevolent curse, from end to end, in fog. And the ship had stalled in this windless, sunless fog. The admiral had even ordered the men to lower the sails -- *recoged las velas* – in a decision that practically all of the men had favored, as, they reckoned, altogether, deliberately, in the face of this windless rut, to remove the sails, as opposed to allowing them to sag, haplessly, pitifully, flacidly in the weak, haphazard breeze, at least slapped the curse back in the face by removing at least one, if not all, of the mockful symbols of its sadistic triumph. “*El tener las velas sueltas, caídas de esta manera, por tanto tiempo, constituye no más que la peor de las peores de las malas de las suertes,*” had even reflected to some of the men and later that night written in his journal Rodrigo de Jerez. Then had come this nauseating smell that the

less superstitious of the men – Juan among them -- had assumed was one of the many rats aboard, one that had died (perhaps while gnawing on the life-size wooden cross they'd brought, which was tossed behind some boards and drenched in stale water down at the *bodega*). For the more superstitious ones, of course, the extremely offensive smell was just part of the curse. But regardless, all of the men's spirits were running low. The mourning for Ave and the conviction that its disappearance had cursed them had them going about their duties woefully, and turning in early to sleep, in the hope of a better next day. And in fact de Gutierrez, the royal steward, always assured them: "Tomorrow will be a fine day." But that "fine" day had not yet come, for any of them.

And so this explosive concoction has finally exploded, reckons Juan.

He rubs his eyes then finger-combs his scantily-populated beard as he makes his way to the nucleus of the quarreling crowd. And loudly clears his throat, then loudly demands: "Men, *camaradas!* *Basta ya, basta ya! Qué ha sucedido?*"

"They've killed Ave!" a different Juan cries out.

“They? I’m saying I’m pretty damn sure I know who the bastard *was*... who killed Ave,” exclaims another of the men through gnashed teeth. It’s Alonso Clavijo. “Not ‘they’,” he spits. “He!”

“Hold on, hold on,” says Juan. “Let’s not start pointing fingers without proof here. Or do you have it, Alonso? Do you have *proof*.”

Silence.

Then Gonzalo Franco says, “What more proof do you *need*, Captain? With all due respect, of course.” He eases his tone.

The men lock gazes. A creak from the not-that-close-by invisible caravel down south could distinctly be heard.

“Well,” finally says Juan, “what’s that proof you posit I don’t need any more of, Gonzalo?” He keeps looking squarely into Franco’s eyes.

“You’re staring right into the eyes of the proof you seek, Captain,” says Pedro de Lepe, taking a step forward.

“How so?” asks Juan, as Gonzalo Franco yells to de Lepe: “What are you *talking* about? I did NOTHING!”

De Lepe goes on, to Juan, “They’re pinning this on the boy, Captain. And, considering the chap’s, a) incapable of killing a fly; b) gilipollas, all the time

thinking about pregnant little birds; and c) the admiral's protégé, it's clear that this accusation's business is solely that of undermining the authority of the admiral."

Juan considers this. Then he turns to de Lepe: "The only problem with your reasons is that they do not add up to an alibi." Then, to both Franco and de Lepe, "But more importantly... the authority of the admiral is warranted by the Queen, seamen."

Another creak from the invisible south-flanking caravel.

Then, Gonzalo Franco: "But presume for an instant that it was not Queen Isabella who warranted that, but Pedro's sister, for instance. Could I *then* say that I wipe my ass, all the way down from my stenchy, hairy balls, all the way up to my stinking Galician asshole, with her warrant?"

Juan: "Watch your words, seaman!"

Someone yells out, "Mutiny!"

Then Pedro de Lepe to Gonzalo Franco: "Don't you talk about my sister again or I'll..."

"I'll talk about your sister all I want," interrupts Franco. "In fact, when you see her, recite her this ode I wrote for her:

A whale in the sea, could easy believe

The love I have for thee

Fine, fine! That's a lie! But heere's a fact,

Thee weighs as much as he!"

Pedro: "Yeah? And how do you *know* that?"

Franco: "What, that she weights as much as a whale? Cause I *did* her you numbnuts!"

Pedro: "Not that, you woman! How do you know how much the *whale* weights!" Then, his face in Franco's, hurling a finger at his brow, "'Cause it did *you*, you diminutive piece of shit-smeared Galician *rat* brain!!"

Franco: "Well, it may have done me, but at least it didn't do my mother... like it did yours!!"

"How do you know the whale did his mother?!" someone yells.

Franco: "It never came back to sea! You know what it says about this fucker's mother? It says,

From Palos to China

No tighter vagina

Than Pedro's mom's

Own pride

No he-whale snugs tighter

Inside 'er, just ride 'er

Take Pedro's mom

Tonite!"

Pedro says, "Fine! You win..." and smiles, turning his back to Franco. And as Franco is smugly chuckling, and pointing at Pedro and saying to his pals around him, "Can you believe this *gilipollas*," Pedro spins around and lands his right fist squarely on Franco's jaw, dropping the older sailor squarely on the deck. Then Alonso Clavijo charges at Pedro, pushing him halfway across the deck and finally falling on top of him, and they start trading punches. Juan de Medina tries to separate them, but probably since Pedro's getting the worst of it, de Cuéllar comes over and lands an illegal elbow on the back of de Medina's neck, instantly dropping him to the floor beside Pedro. Upon seeing this, Lope comes along, and literally kicks de Cuellar's ass -- no one understands why -- literally just lifts his foot furiously towards de Cuellar's ass, kicking it -- then de Cuellar turns around and viciously kicks Lope's balls, which proved far more effective, and when Lope reflexively leans forward

with his balls in his hands, brutally headbutts him and Lope, stumbling as a result against the edge on the starboard side, still holding on to his balls, almost goes overboard. Meanwhile, with Pedro almost going on unconscious, Alonso grabs a wood plank and bashes it against Pedro's forehead, sending further imaginary little birds circling and chirping above his head as his *tocallo* Pedro Yzquierdo then avoids a second plank on his friend's forehead by landing a large, heavy sack of grain on Alonso's head as Alonso was about to bring the plank down the second time, and Alonso's momentarily stunned. But then Pedro Yzquierdo himself is perhaps left a tad more than stunned after Juan de Moguer -- a hefty man -- picks him up and holds him high above his head and then throws him down, full force, down on hapless, sparkless Pedro no less, on whose forehead is already rapidly growing a mother of a bump from that first plank hit. All in all, about fifteen more men join in the fight, and it ends up being a savage, noisy proceeding, in fact the most vicious fight that Juan has ever witnessed -- at sea, at least. To try to physically engage and separate them all, he had thought, would have been futile, so he resorted to repeatedly crying out, "*Parad de pelear, parad de pelear, hombre!*" which of course everyone ignored. Then someone cries out, "*El admiral, el admiral!*" and everybody immediately stops fighting. And everybody looks up to the upper deck.

And there is silence again as the air itself about the still nao has all of a sudden changed.

The old man has emerged from his quarters.

Juan again experiences that unpinpointable blend of jealousy and admiration he often felt about the old man. Who did not, really, look like an old man in the least. As the entire crew turns to regard him, Juan recognizes that the sheer height, straight posture, commanding gaze, denote the presence of a man not feeble at all – the only “old man” stereotype you could pin on the admiral was experience and olfactory acuity – *olfato* – one only at home in the most sagacious of the most seasoned of sea-wolves. With his shoulder length, straight, grey-yet-vibrant hair that reposes aloofly over the cloak’s collar – fur, a wolf’s, one he claimed to have killed himself in ‘self-defense’ while trekking across the Andalusian mountains northeast of Seville – and his bright amber eyes and tanned and lined -- yet tight -- skin, the ‘old man’ also projected strength and immeasurable energy... which translated to authority. Juan could understand this. The only sustainable kind of authority was that which stemmed from strong leadership, and the old man had that. For now at least. Juan not only had to admit, deep down, that he himself did not look half as handsome as the old bastard. But he also had to hands down concede that regardless of his own technical prowess, it was probably inarguably true that

his nao and the crew were in better hands under the command of the admiral.

Hombre! It's one thing to sail about a well-defined coastline on a carrack with a forty-man crew – quite another to venture into the unknown in a carrack with a forty-man crew!

Crew which was doing at the moment nothing other than watching the admiral make his way, pacedly, dominantly, to the railing abutting the main mast, the *palo mayor*.

The admiral plants his hands on the railing and looks down at the crew. He finds Juan and locks eyes with him, and nods lightly. Juan knows that this means that the old man would like to have a word with him. Juan lets out a hasty sigh as he makes his way among the frozen-in-mid-fight and spectating crew along portside to the ladder to the upper deck and to the waiting, towering old man. He tilts his head up to talk into the admiral's ear, and the admiral in turn tilts his head down to his side slightly to listen.

Juan says, "The men are nervous because of the mist, and the fact that the water is still and the sails were sagged, and after the good omen with the bird we kept, no more good news have come; on top of that, what we thought was a dead rat – remember about that?" The admiral slowly, slightly, nods three times. "Well, it turns out to be someone actually killed the bird, and it was

rotting underneath a sack of sawdust they were using as a pillow, and..." Juan clears his throat. "And, they're blaming, well, *some* are blaming – and that was really what set off the quarrel... some are blaming, the... ah..." The shipmaster licks his chapped lips. "Some are blaming the boy, Admiral. Some are blaming the boy." The old man slowly turns to meet Juan's gaze, and shakes his head lightly. Juan says, "I know, Admiral. It's preposterous." "Ridicolo," scoffs the admiral, staring into Juan's eyes.

"Yes. Completely. Admiral." Juan complies.

The admiral then looks down at the men. And after a moment he asks the captain: "What do you think I should do?"

Juan considers the question. Then, decidedly: "I think you should talk to the men."

The admiral looks back down at Juan. "And what do you think I should say to the men?" he asks his second-in-command.

Juan turns his gaze to the expectant, sun and ill-health and hunger and worry and now fight-ravaged, attentive crew below. There, among others, were Maestre Juan, his *tocallo*, along with seven other of their *tocallos*; and also Jaco, Diego Bermudez, Doctor Sanchez, the goldsmith, Luis, the interpreter; pilot Pedro Alonso Niño, Bartolomé and Chachu, Rodrigo (last name Triana,

he thinks), Rodrigo *Sánchez* -- who no one likes -- Pedro Yzquierdo, Jacomel Rico, Alonso Clavijo, Lope, Diego “The Painter,” Escobedo, “The Secretary,” and, at the bow looking straight ahead, watching the grey, still ocean as all this ensues... the boy. Juan notices that the fog had begun to get heavier, and he can not at all see any of the two caravels that flank it, let alone any much further ahead at the empty, interminable sea.

“I think,” starts Juan, “you should tell them something along the following lines, Admiral.”

The admiral slowly cocks his head slightly further toward Juan, while looking straight into the impenetrable mist, towards there the portside horizon would plausibly be, serious, heedful.

Juan whispers into the old man’s ear: “Dear crew of the Santa María. I know that the journey we are on has been long and difficult, and that the challenges we have faced have at times been overwhelming. But I must remind you all that we are on a mission of great importance. We set out to find a new route to the Indies, and that is a goal that requires all of us to work together and support one another.” Juan pauses to see if there’s any reaction from the old man – there is none. The captain clears his throat, continues: “I understand that tempers may sometimes flare and that disagreements are bound to occur.

But I implore you all to remember that we are a team, and that our success depends on our ability to work together and stay focused on our goal.” He again looks for a reaction from the old man, and he gets it: the admiral is slowly making a winding motion with his right hand, index finger extended, gesturing, Juan guesses, for him to go on. He again clears his throat, does so: “Quarreling and bickering will only serve to undermine our efforts and make our journey more difficult.” He regards the admiral. He’s still slowly doing the winding gesture with his finger. Juan clears his throat again, continues, “So I ask you, please, to set aside your differences and stay calm and attentive. Let us all do our part to ensure that we reach our destination safely and successfully. Together, we can accomplish great things.” He checks; the admiral’s still slowly winding air with his finger. Juan coughs once, concludes: “And, also. Lay off the boy. It was not him, I’m sure, who killed that bird. Thank you.”

The admiral then turns his head slowly and stares into Juan’s eyes without saying anything for a moment that’s long enough to become uncomfortable. Then, never breaking eye contact with Juan, he finally gives him a single, slow nod. And turns away to address the crew.

And the admiral thus speaks:

“My brave men.” He glances about the crew, yawing his left foot along his heel axis in an apparent attempt at cementing comfort footing, which he apparently attains. He goes on: “I commend your unwavering attention. And I commend you again for constituting an unbreakable, fundamental part of this most sacred and important of missions, one that we’re on the verge of procuring, for our Lord Savior, for our King and for our Queen, and for our country, our families, our honor. If we are, as we must, to act together as a unit, and not quarrel amongst ourselves as we were ordinary, unworthy, lazy street *beggars*! Who have *no idea* about the *importance* of what we’re doing here! Are you lazy street beggars!? Do you not *know*... about the crucial moment in history that you are, as you stand there, being a part of!? We *will* find a new route to the Indies. Together. We *will* attain to the Crown and to ourselves and to our children and grandchildren and to their own – our own – after them... the honor, pride, glory... of having *succeeded* and our *women* and our *children* and their *own, our* own thereafter will *respect us*! Together! Our *countrymen* will respect us. But for that we must stand together as one. And that is not all, men. The treasures that await us – if honor’s not enough for you, maybe? Huh?” For the first time he smiles now, widely, and looks around, catching the men’s gazes, and a few of the men chuckle, and some start to let go of their fellow combatant and others get up from the deck floor

and brush the dust off their guises, even poor Pedro tries to do so, his own smile pathetically or is it hilariously now buck-toothed and lopsided, and some start laughing loudly, some saying, “No, it’s not enough!” -- the admiral goes on, “the treasures that await us, then, *will* be, will be enough. The treasures that await *you*. *If* honor’s not enough for you. No one’s judging!!” He’s grinning furiously, glancing nefariously among the men’s faces. “It will be more than worth your time, worth your hardships, worth not laying by the side of a warm woman on a roach and mite-free cot, and instead being laying by the side of a warm rat... or a cold one, at that, huh? Haha! And... anyway, I promise you that. For country! For honor! For soon laying by the side of -- not a rat -- but a woman! For *treasures*!!!!”

Juan looks down and around to witness that the men have gone berserk, cheering, jumping up and down, hugging each other, raising their arms up in the air madly this way and that; all eyes are on the admiral, now again even Juan’s; all eyes except the boy’s, as he’s absently standing, still, on the bow -- where he himself stood earlier this day with his bottle, during the dark, quiet small hours. And the boy’s still got his back to the ship, staring dead ahead. “Yes,” continues the admiral, wild-eyed. “I promise you! I promise you this, I promise you that!!” He laughs. The crowd laughs. “Look around! Our Lord Savior is with us! Look!! The fog has started to clear ahead!! See?!?!?”

The men look to the west. It was true, at least the fog *had* started to clear ahead. How had Juan just now not noticed? About the men continued to give rise a powerful sense of hope and relief. “Now,” the admiral finally says, “enough of this old sea-wolf talking! Everybody, go back to wo...”

Juan can see that the admiral’s eyes have suddenly shifted to a place in the sky ahead of them, seemingly, and he can see the admiral’s jaw drop slightly open. Juan turns his own gaze to the west, since he had never seen that look on the admiral’s face, and thus gets a glimpse of what the admiral’s seeing, beholding that way the most extraordinary thing he had ever beholden before in his life. Out of the sky was coming down a gigantic blue hand, down toward the vast ocean ahead of them – maybe a league away. There was an odd quality about it, as it was smooth and even, like a strange humanoid creature’s, yet shiny, simple – no bones, hair, veins, nails, wrinkles of any kind. Except for the serpents. The palm of the hand was populated by what looked like tens of thousands of radially-disposed, furious sea serpents, tightly packed next to the other like a phalanx, jutting out defiantly, menacingly from the palm. This giant blue hand is descending from the sky and it splashes gargantuanly into the still ocean, and makes an incredible splash – maybe a splash equivalent to that of a thousand breaching humpback whales crashing back down as one into the ocean. Dumbfounded, Juan is only now starting to

process the wildly extraordinary scene before him. He suddenly notices, too, the combination of excitement, hyperawareness and raw fear that's a part, though he's not familiar with this phrase, of the so-called fight-or-flight response. As he slowly becomes aware of the screams of dozens of seasoned, sea-toughened sailors all around him he notices also an unsettling quiet – that kind of quiet that you're treated to before all hell breaks loose -- and Juan takes notice too of an odd pressure in his chest – not a heart attack today, Juan's lucky, but nonetheless the lament of a heart subjected to an autonomic response the kind that no human heart is supposed to endure. At half-speed, he turns his gaze back to the old man, who's expression is frozen in the same exact visage Juan saw seconds ago; while regarding him, out of the corner of his eye, he can see some of the men, inexplicably perhaps, jumping overboard into the still, grey water – but what can possibly be inexplicable now? Many of the men are yelling prayers at the now half-underwater, unworldly-sized monstrosity to the west. Several, Juan can see, have even collapsed – malnourishment, insolation, ill health now coupled with a level of stress they knew not existed, reckons Juan, the formula for even a seasoned seaman to faint like a woman. He looks ahead again at the bow. The boy is in the exact same position Juan last saw him, staring straight ahead at, assumingly, the towering, sky-blue, ill-defined form of what's purportedly the arm of the hand

that dove into the ocean ahead moments ago, and probably, too, at the tsunami-caliber waves that Juan now also notices are frighteningly making their way toward the nao and – no, he has not forgotten about them, noteworthy – toward the two smaller, distant caravels at port and starboard, respectively. More of the men jump overboard now, and Juan still cannot understand why. But it doesn't matter. He now yells at the old man: “Admiral!! Admiral!!” But the admiral is frozen; in fact the only detectable movement in or on the old man are the dead grey wolf's hairs on his cloak's collar and the old man's equally dead, yet vibrant, grey sea-wolf hair -- which are, Juan notices, increasingly agitated by a breeze that started seconds ago and is now, along with the waves, growing mightier, progressively, unstoppably. For a split second Juan wonders if he *himself* is frozen, too. Why has he not moved? But then in a split second, also: move and do what? He feels delirious all of a sudden; all of a sudden, he hears a voice, a female voice whose source he can't quite place – *is he going mad? In his head?* It couldn't be one of the men -- who's terror would plausibly have done in the masculinity of his vocal chords: the voice is all-encompassing, saying, *Marco... Marco...* Is it some friendly East Indian female deity, thinking it is not the Genoese but the ancient Venetian mariner, the honorary son of the East who's closing in on her coast, but more importantly now closing in on trouble,

and she's in some outlandish form attempting to get his attention, trying futilely to pledge for him to go on no further, vying futilely for him and his crew not to encounter the abomination of a foreign hostile monster deity whose powers surpass even hers, as said monster deity's hell-bent on him not approaching from the east? But does she not know that the golden boy of Kublai Khan has been dead for almost two hundred years? In another split-second the image of a certain young woman with the warmest of hearts (and the warmest of loins, may he also point out), whom he left back in Cádiz -- the only woman who'd ever looked into his eyes with true devotion and admiration, although he could not give her her place -- comes to him in a flash as now, all at once, from the west, starts falling a kind of rain he had never witnessed before -- it's as if these drops were bigger, faster, heavier -- all of a sudden, the smooth, deformed giant "hand" emerges horribly from the sea, violently unchaining as it does a new series of massive waves their way, and with what look like hundreds of millions of gallons of water flowing rabidly down along its surface and along the hundreds of thousands of protruding sea serpents that stem off its palm, down to the now wickedly turbulent sea all around the nao. Those of the crew who're not overboard or fainted or frozen as the admiral is, are now running for cover from this treacherous, vicious rain and, of course, the boy is still unfazed, wet hair, cloak, thrashing violently in

the incoming wind, but he remains unfazed, still looking dead ahead – or, *frozen as is the admiral, maybe*, thought Juan as he himself started to run for cover, then stopped, slipped and fell on his back – the viciously heaving and rolling and pitching and yawing don't help -- and gets up then, and gets back to the unmoving old man, and grabs him, yelling, “Admiral, come, come, we need to get cover!” but the old man is still unresponsive; Juan tries to pull him back toward his quarters astern but the rigid admiral literally topples, just like a statue, falling on the wooden deck in the exact same body position he had been in when he trailed off -- with, probably due to the bizarre chaos of the present conditions, a dry, soundless thud -- and Juan's forced to leave him and finally makes his way to the admiral's quarters – *his* quarters, actually, Juan thinks offhandedly – and as he closes the door behind him and crouches behind a window, the nao is pitching violently now – Juan reckons due to a huge incoming wave – and the bow keeps rising as the incline is at present, estimates Juan, at least an eight of a turn of a vertical circle. And hanging on with both hands on to the windowsill, his body's length diagonal with respect to the horizontal now, he can see through the window that the boy at the bow is, now *majorly* inexplicably, still standing upright just as before, back when they were level, over the once-still water. The laws of physics are not strictly applying to the boy, Juan thinks – other than that maybe those few laws involved in

making the wind violently thrash about his black hair... *Marco...*

Pandemonium keeps drawing out on deck, and he can no longer see either of the two smaller, escorting vessels surely not now due to fog but to wind, the rain, the sea spray all around assaulting the nao which is now leveling back, and but soon after it starts to again pitch, this time pitch ahead, heavily, having passed, reckons Juan, the crest of the wave... and but the bow, it's now pitching further even, and as he now, through the window, can make out past the boy at the bowsprit an incredible precipice of seawater that the ship is now skimming along on, falling forward fast, Juan feels a terrible pain as the admiral's, or rather, *his*, heavy wooden bureau, clashes against his right leg, pinning it to the wall flanking the upper deck, but hopefully not breaking it; some maps the admiral had been working on fly out the window, some of his own, too as the nao now crashes bow-down onto the water, miraculously still staying in one piece, and but Juan now realizes that – *Marco...* -- the waves are giving way to a much more horrific phenomenon... the nao is rapidly approaching the edge of a truly gargantuan maelstrom – it looks to be, from where Juan's standing, at least a half a league in diameter, and Juan loses consciousness; then regains it, to behold that the nao is *falling* inside this monster of a maelstrom and he can eventually see, across its vast diameter, one of the caravels also caught in it, which looks tiny across this megalomous,

apocalyptic void, and, wait, there's the other one, too; and, look, the boy; the boy, too; still at the bow, still by the sprit mast, black hair thrashing wildly in the wet, salty sea wind; looking ever forward, into the void now, into the uncharted, into the vortex that's spiraling along with it these three helpless ships, ever so rapidly, toward the aquatic cypher, toward the residential, family-of-three, one-and-a-half-inch in diameter, chrome-plated bathtub drain.

The lights are dim in the bathroom, but count on their incandescent glow to surge nonetheless throughout that steamy ambiance and valiantly grace its shiny moist surfaces with the rarest of existential candors.

And the whole place smells like salt.

“Marco! I'm talking to you!”

And the mother is yet again yelling at the boy. The boy, who's in jeans and a t-shirt and sneakers on his knees on the floor with his arm over the side of the bathtub, takes his eyes off the three corks still spinning in the whirlpool in the tub toward the drain to look up at her through thick dank bangs of black hair. She's taking her blue rubber dishwashing gloves off – the kind with the ‘scrubber bristles’ on the palms – and now throws them down and they splat wetly on the residential, family-of-three, inch-and-a-half square, yellow-and-brown mosaic bathroom floor. For an average-height woman – they say he

gets his height from his father (whom he will never meet) – the mother’s nonetheless a towering presence inside the steamy bathroom. She turns off the shower as the rest of the steaming-hot water flushes out and away.

“How many times have I told you!?” Now with her hands on her slender waist. “Do! Not! Use! My! *SALTFORTHISSTUPIDNONSENSE!!!*”

The practically-empty bag of kitchen salt in question is lazily resting against the side of the tub, just as the boy is. Actually, the bathroom smells like salt *and* his mom’s deodorant. She thinks it’s her perfume that’s the aroma. It’s her deodorant.

“Sorry.” He goes back to the three corks twirling around, now almost at the drain.

“You know what?” she says. “I’m done. I’ve had it.” She’s taking her apron off. “*You* clean this mess up.” She’s kicking off her slippers as she walks over to the walk-in-closet bordering the bathroom’s far end. “I’m taking some *fucking* time for myself.” She sits on the ottoman she’s got in the closet. She mutters, “Some *fucking* me time.” She’s putting on her pair of tall strappy high heels. The blue ones. Her legs are so, like... *curvy*. *Why??* And kind of like thick at the ankles but why the heck do those huge *balls* form at the back of them, especially when wearing her heels, especially when she walks? He’d

asked her once what those were. And she'd told him what they were called. He can't remember what it was, only that it was the name of an animal. Or animals. Farm ones, he thinks. Baby farm ones. His question: why do they bulge *out* like that? His question: how come her entire legs are always so *shiny* like that? It pisses him off. It's, like, embarrassing. Meaning, she's probably going to the shopping mall, and *he* sure as heck is not going with her. Not unless she puts on like jeans or something. Like, it's not fun having to put up with the *embarrassment* of having all of those misters – and some misses sometimes -- all the time staring so strangely at her, in general, and, like, if she's on a skirt, let alone a *miniskirt*, let alone *freaking shorts*, and god *forbid* those *heels* thrown into the mix... then their attention for some reason's all directed at her *legs*. Meaning, is there like... something *wrong* with them? But the misters' look is always like one of either utter nervously seriousness or a kind of utter pissed-in-your-pants admiration. And the misses' is like sometimes a kind of utter nervously pissed-in-your-pants admiration and sometimes like they just want to bash her head in. Fuck'n *weird*."

"And *you're* not *coming!*" she hollers back at him, but her tone's softened down to a kind of playful. "You go out and play, too. Jesus Christ, Marco! Get some fresh air, run about, laugh your guts off, yell your lungs out, have *fun*." She's saying this as she's at the mirror applying mascara to her already

mascara'd eyelashes. "Go roller skating, the arcade, whatever, just step outside! Take my Walkman! I've told you a zillion times, you can't stay here all day, playing with your food, staring at the wall." Now applying lipstick to already lipsticked lips. "It's not good for your mental health. *Be* with people your age; hey, why don't you go down to Quique and Meiryen's? Oscar. Will you, honey?" Now spraying breath-freshener into already breath-freshener-sprayed mouth. Now kissing his head -- hair, to be precise. "Bye now, hon." Now grabbing her purse. Now out the door. Now shutting the door.

Now gone.

"Okay," says the boy. He looks down at the half-inch-thick field of wet, light-grey table salt that's collected at the bottom of the once-alabaster, porcelain, family-of-three tub and that's whiter, actually, than said tub; at present, at least, at least in most places. Then he glances back at his three corks, which are disorderly collected at the drain. He grabs them.

And still sitting on the residential, family-of-three, inch-and-a-half square, yellow-and-brown mosaic bathroom floor by the tub in the damp, still-dimly-lit family of three bathroom that smells of salt (and his mom's deodorant), he wonders about Juan. What will be his fate? Will he draw, after all, his

famous map? That picture he saw before, in that big book in the den... that sure was one heck of a nifty map, there. It even had his name on it, and all. 'Marco'. Sure, it also said 'Juan' somewhere. But Marco was bigger. But some men -- not all -- back in the Late Middle Ages, could be very unpresuming. But maybe not Juan. But that's O.K. Imagine, and still... I mean, did *you* know about Juan before you read this? But back to the map. Yes, nifty, but an old kind of nifty. But still nifty. But... what will be of Juan, now with that whirlpool thrown in? Will he be blessed? Will he be damned? Will he just... be?

Anyway.

He gets up and puts his three corks back in his jeans pocket.

Play for some other day. Perhaps.

--The end--

EPILOGUE

The film of residual soup on the spoon on the table by the bowl is drying, crusting, attached to wetter kin in the form of a drop that has left a now also drying, crusting, soupy wake en route to roughly the center of the stainless steel concavity, where gravity now tugs gently at the liquid, patiently. A fork had replaced said spoon in the boy's hand, and the utensil's leftmost tine is now futilely, but deliberately, attempting to stab right through the irremediably boring plant anatomy of one of only three other shriveled-up green peas which are independently, lonesomely, floating along on the agitated surface of the dark grey ocean. The night thunder keeps hitting the bright green canoe that's making its way across the water, again and again, as the seafaring warriors aboard it valiantly row into the storm regardless, ever forward. The special magic potion that Loullourou, the witch doctor, had had the men drink prior to their departure is protecting them from the full charge of the relentless whiplash of the lightning blitzkrieg the rival gods have sent their way, but, alas -- the men row on, their powerful shoulders and backs and heads and arms glowing blue as that noblest of fires, the one of St. Elmo, would have it; as again and again lightning strikes the men and their green canoe, and the firebolts seem only to further energize the rowing warriors, as

they row on and on, as lighting strikes the green canoe, again and again, and again and a...

“Marco? Earth to Marco?” the voice said.

Silence.

“Yo, yo... *gargajito*. I’m *talkin’* to you...?!”

The boy looked up from his pea and his fork and his grey soup and he regarded the man across the table from him. “Yes?”

The man looks back at him quizzically. He raises an eyebrow. “Yes, *sir*, you mean.”

“Yes *sir*, sir,” immediately responds the boy.

The man looks back at the boy strangely for an instant, seemingly caught off-guard, then relaxes his look, laughs, and loudly says, “I’m just *fucking* with you, boy!” The man shakes his head, still smiling, says, “Yes sir, sir. Yo! Why don’t you finish that soup up for me? Huh? No need no beef from yo mom, now... enough for one day with that stunt you pulled with that *salt* in that bathtub, yo. Yes sir, sir.” He’s shaking his head, eyes open wide as he smirks, looking back down at his own plate now.

This supposed babysitter – which, by the way, what’s with his mom thinking he still *needed* one – the boy was pretty sure was, in reality, truly truly truly, actually deep down, really really really, banging his mom. He’d take anything he said with a grain of salt. No pun intended, of course.

The boy goes about finishing his soup, but with the lackadaisical lethargy of the acquiescent.

“So when cha gonna grow up, homey? Gonna hav’ta haul yo sorry *ass* ta a couple ‘em *hot* spots, right, *namansaaaayn*? Meet some *fine* ass bitches, yo! Ya daaaon mofo?!?!?”

Homey’s sho crankin’ ‘em ebonics up, reflects the boy.

“So yes, Marco,” the man begins. “Your mom and I, we believe... and we’ve spoken about this before, haven’t we, son? We believe it’s time you... you start to do more useful things with your time. Look around. Look at where you live. You got all you need here. And all of these books. Why not grab a book, every so often? And read, and discover the treasures literature, the great classics, the gothic, Verne, Hemingway, García Márquez, Kipling... can offer? Instead of messing up your mom’s plants? Filling the tub up with water and your mom’s salt? Or simply sitting around all day, staring into space, sporting that slightest of grins of yours, I mean. What is it? What

occupies your mind so? Is it the opposite sex? Is it you're thinking about women? *God* I hope that it. Girls? Someone at school? Who do you like? Or is it the teacher? Female, I hope?"

"The headmistress."

"Heard she's got *ass*! Haven't had the pleasure yet of laying *eyes*, or anything *else* on it for *real* bruh, damn shame, homes... damn, *damn* shame... So? How bout 'em honeys *your* age, playa??"

"No. Just like... normal."

"Marco. You'll be thirteen tomorrow. *You'll* be... *officially* a *teenager*, you know? Time to..." the bespectacled man across from him, the residual natural light seeping defiantly through any uncurtained slot it can find providing not only a silver glow to the hundreds of thousands of specks of dust that give said light geometry in this dim, dark, stuffy, upholstered, burgundy velvet and navy blue carpeted living/dining/den filled with old pictures of a young girl, then teenage, ballet dancer, and more recent pictures of the boy against a lush green background then of the boy and the parents against a lush green background, but also providing a greasy-skin-aided specular three-dimensionality to his joyless-yet-condescending features, is now snapping his fingers repeatedly, "... you know, man up! *Hell*, boy!" He now brings his

hands together in front of him, in front of the boy, with a really loud clap that the boy thought would make his eardrums snap, and glares at the boy with his dark, bulging, crazy eyes: “Instead of godforsakin’ thinking about *making* the salty seas, you should be godforsakin’ thinking about *doing* the salty *seas*!! You catch my drift?!?!”

This supposed father – which, by the way, what’s with his mom thinking he still *needed* one – the boy was pretty sure was, in reality, truly truly truly, actually deep down, really really really, leaving his mom. He’d take anything he said with a grain of salt. No pun intended, of course.

The boy goes about finishing his soup, but with the lackadaisical lethargy of the acquiescent.

Juan opens his eyes. All he sees are fuzzily-demarcated, maddeningly bright patches of light blue and green – a color he hasn’t quite laid eyes on in a while – and he offhandedly perceives that he is being dragged. About to lose consciousness again, his mind seems to subconsciously race against whomever or whatever’s dragging him along, to gather clues as to what the situation is; he finally realizes he’s on shallow water, clear shallow water on white sand... now some of the blue patch is largely blotted out by a patch

that's mainly the tone of copper – a man? Black hair? Naked or almost so?

What... the...

Juan might have tried to get up, but simply, there's no energy left. He's unconscious again.

He opens his eyes. He realizes he's lying face down on the sand. He feels stronger than before. He can clearly distinguish each grain of sand beneath him, sprinkling in the sun, inches from his eyes, scintillating. His feet feel warm. He realizes his feet are still close enough to the water that the gentle rolling waves come back to caress them – maternally? -- every few seconds. He starts to sit up, and as he's doing so, notices the man who's squatting in front of him on the sand, looking right back at him. Juan is startled, and gives out a hoarse grunt as he instinctively crawls back away from the man -- the man who's, in turn, of course, unflinching. Juan remains frozen in position, halfway between laying face-down on the sand and sitting up. After a painfully long moment, without changing his stance, the Castilian's the first to break the silence.

“God be with you,” says Juan, looking squarely at the eyes of the man in front of him. The man, however, responds only by maintaining, completely unfazed, the aloof, bordering-on-stern look on his face.

“What is the name of this place?” Juan asks. The man in front of him does not even blink.

“You do not understand me,” says Juan, “Of course.” He scoffs at himself. Then he points to the sand thrice and then rotates his wrist so his palm faces the sky, repeatedly, resignedly, asking in what he hopes is universal sign language for, ‘where are we’ or, at the very least, ‘what is this place?’ He tries to cross his legs as he continues his action of sitting up. For some reason, he flinches, then leaves his right leg extended. Now still again, sitting on the wet sand, he has to lean slightly forward due to the beach’s moderate incline towards the ocean. He looks back intently at the man squatting in front of him. And he looks around then some more. To his left – the man’s right – a large beached tree trunk is slightly sunk in the sand. Next to it, several straight, sharpened, rod-like sticks of differing thicknesses are laid down in the sand. Looking to both sides he also realizes this beach they’re at is limited left and right by low, also vegetated, rocky outcrops. He reckons that walking from one end of it to the other would be a relatively short walk – it might take a fifteenth of an hour, at most. He looks then past the man facing him, and at

a beach behind the man that inclines up to a series of dispersed brownish-orange boulders, beyond which there's a brief belt of tall grass, then lush tropical savanna forest populated by medium-height trees and tall palms, some of them the likes of which he might have seen along the African coast during a time that to him now seems even more far away than this strange land and its stranger seem to be from his beloved Andalusian coast. He looks back at the man facing him. Then turns his head around to look behind himself, towards the sea, and in doing so catches glimpse of a dark, convex wooden object that's two arm lengths away from him at his right, partly laying inside the shallow water and which, in fact, looks like a man-sized piece of the hull of the ship he now more clearly remembers having at some plausibly recent point in time been aboard of. Then he sees movement and some faint splashing toward the edge of the wrecked piece of wood. It's a remora almost the length of his extended arm. He notices that its spine, while slightly, is nonetheless evidently, crooked. It -- the fish -- keeps now undulating its caudal fin, apparently quite placidly.

Juan scoffs at himself again, wondering where his head's at. Then he gestures -- as best he can, as he's done quite a few times before on expeditions to foreign lands to communicate with many a non-Indo-European individual

along the way that he may have needed to, as now, communicate with -- for drinking water.

It works. He thinks.

The man in front of him after a few moments relaxes the sternness of his countenance ever so slightly. Just enough to hint at Juan that the man had just then and there made some sort of a decision that was to be in some way pleasing. Without leaving his squatting position, he reaches back and retrieves a kind of bowl, and turns back to Juan, offering it to him. The man is looking straight at Juan, genuinely grinning now, and repeatedly raises the bowl toward Juan's face, bowl which Juan can now attest holds a few fingers of crystal-clear water, which glitters playfully in the sun. The man says, "*Tuna.*"

The man's voice is raspy and much deeper than Juan expected. Not that such a voice would be at odds with the psyche of the man in front of him – just that it seemed deeper than most men's. He accepts the bowl – a deep, very round, rigid, very thin dish that seemed made out of some dried-out, large endemic fruit – and he tastes it first – lest this foreigner be offering him seawater – then upon confirming this is precious, God-sent fresh water desperately gulps down

the entire contents of the bowl. Juan hands the empty bowl back, says,
“*Más!*”

The man squatting in front of him, who’s serious once again, intently looking Juan in the eyes still, slowly shakes his head. Juan looks back at the man in dismay, but quickly resorts then to cupping up seawater from between his own legs with his hands, and then splashing it on his own face, several times. Juan, sea water dripping down his hair and face, now looks at the man more closely. He looks back at the unfazed, aloof man in front, who’s still squatting; his large, thick, angular fingers jutting toward Juan, at ease, in front of his body; arms extended, resting on his knees; torso leaning slightly forward; buttocks resting against his heels. Barefoot, the only garment on him below his shoulders are three rows of stringed white seashells right above his ankles, then what look like a red and white cord tightly woven several times around his lower leg right below each knee; then what look like a series of straw cords that provide skimpy privacy for his rather exposed gonads, and also serve as waistband to which what looks like a straw sheath with a knife in it is attached; then more red and white string woven around his arms right above his biceps and similarly around his wrists. Also a bracelet made of stones and/or shells of tones of color Juan had not ever seen before. A pair of apparently artificially-connected canines, probably some late big cat’s, are

being used as a nose ring and more shells as earrings while feathers – long, blue, black, green – adorn the mane of black, shining hair. Several rows of white stringed shells serve as a necklace. A small red pouch hangs too from his neck, while last but in no way least, dark grey markings like Juan had not yet seen – geometrical dark grey markings – were drawn, symmetrically, orderly, carefully, along his torso and limbs.

Juan finally gestures, by drawing together his right fingertips and pointing several times with them toward his open mouth, for food. “*Comida*,” he says, to the unresponsive stranger.

Suddenly, the man in front of him points to the fish attached to the piece of the hull of the lost wrecked ship and looks at it and back at Juan, pointing then with his other index finger at the fish then Juan, the fish then Juan, repeatedly. Juan nods, seemingly meaning, *yeah, sure, whatever*.

Ballatagle regards the stranger, the *foreigner*, cross-legged on the sand in front of him with the sea behind it, the sea from which it came in, from which he, Ballatagle, himself, pulled it out of, a sea he, Ballatagle, won’t ever again be able to view as exclusively his and his people’s and foes’ and gods on account of this... intrusion? Of this... of whatever this alien being in front of him that cannot yet be considered animal but can’t possibly be *man* either, this being

that's barefoot as him but with skin that's pale as the moon when it's full at places; at others *pona* like the chest of the red-chested bird seen in bright sunlight, not to mention the pouches under the eyes the color of the rotten pepperfruit; but that's nothing, because this somehow-speaking creature with teeth the color of piss that has dried on a mound of cottonstring seen at dawn has animal hair in places you would not expect to see – chest, face; legs; apparently arms too; hands; *fingers*; *ears*; *earlobes*... then this kind of papaya-meat-gone-stale-a-turkey-has-pissed-on-seen-at-dusk-colored *second skin* covering its legs and groin area... then a wide, gods' apocalypse night-sky-colored belt with a huge, shining, square frame on it under where its navel would be, then a white cloth covering its torso and arms that's ripped in several places. This... whatever it is, came out of the sea that he thought was his, his people's, his foes', his gods. This sea, he now understands, is not -- *may have never been* -- what he thought it was.

Ballatagle gets up, and Juan regards a man far taller than he had perceived him to be while squatting. The man walks over to the splendid vegetation bordering the beach, around the boulders, another beached log, and across the narrow expanse of wild grass. He comes back with some dry brush and leaves in his hands, which he drops on the sand at the spot where he was previously squatting. Then he grabs some of the sticks at his right, and drives them into

the sand. He produces a smaller stick from somewhere around his straw waistband, to which a small pouch is attached. Then he also retrieves from his waistband a flatish piece of wood that he puts on the sand at his feet, and again he squats. He sets one of the ends of the smaller stick against the piece of wood and rapidly twirls it against it using the palms of both hands until an ember appears. Then, carefully places this ember on the tinder bundle of dry brush and leaves and fans it with his hand until it soon produces a more-than-competent flame.

Ballatagle gets up again, and walks over to the placidly-swimming fish, which he yanks off the piece of hull with a violent jerk. The hull even raises slightly off the sand in the water from the force of the yank, even falls back down with a little splash. Expertly then, he makes a quick cut at the fish's belly and with two fingers guts the fish clean. Juan notices that the man has not at any moment that he could notice actually done anything – other than maybe the yanking it off the hull – or, come to think of it, gutting it -- to deliberately kill the animal. He sticks it then whole, lengthwise, through one of the sticks, and puts it over the fire. And finally squats back down in front of Juan.

The light breeze, reckons Juan, makes the unyielding overhead sun somewhat bearable. He notices, however, that he's perspiring profusely. He focuses for a minute on the millions of moist grains of sand beneath him. A sparkling

drop of sweat drops from the tip of his nose onto some of them. The tide is ebbing seawise. With hardly any energy now, he feels, to even think, his memories wander back to Cádiz, and to a certain young woman who had warmed his heart. Ever the adventurous one, she had been the first to learn of his endeavor with the Queen-mandated expedition to the Eastern shores. And however adventurous, however, she had pleaded for him not to go. But onion-headed bastards like him don't listen. *Bonita situación en la que me he metido, Señor mío...* His wavering eyes shut on their own. A sudden pang of vertigo hits him. Will he see his beloved Seville again? The countryside around it? If only he...

"Tubu."

Juan opens his eyes when he hears the voice. The man is now standing in front of him, holding the stick with the fish on it up to him. Juan accepts it from him and then starts at it like a madman. The man squats back down, two arm's lengths before Juan. And watches as Juan devours his meal.

After a while, the Castilian's water and sugar levels seem to have replenished enough that his brain can again have at its disposal the energy required to allow its non-reptilian portion to also go about its business. But he may not know it yet, much less the other man, but Juan is not entirely "there" at all, at

least not yet. The injuries to his head sustained during the wreckage may have affected his judgment a tad. Juan smiles, pieces of fish in both hands, and looks up at the stranger. “*Gracias,*” he says, gesturing to the food in his hands, chewing contentedly.

The man squatting in front of him just stares back.

Between mouthfuls, the Castilian asks, “Good man, may I ask? What is the name of this place? Is this some part of China?”

No response.

“This is actually quite good. Do you not fancy any?” Juan offers back a long pinkish-grey strand of remora meat to the stranger who’s feeding him.

But the man in front, never taking his eyes off Juan’s, slowly shakes his head.

Juan changes tactics. He says, “Me. Need. Go. You. King.” Each word, punctuated by a gesture or several of them.

Juan, one of the ones of the group that wouldn’t immediately yell out, ‘Yeah!!!’ would another in the group suggest, ‘Let’s play charades.’

Juan, not exactly looking too patient right now.

But ultimately, Juan guesses, the man in front of him catches his request, after not too long. At least, the man in front of him nods three or four times, not breaking eye contact with him.

“Good,” says Juan, taking a big bite out of the side of the fish. Chewing, “I would not want you to believe that I am not, God is not, the Catholic Kings are not, perhaps an entire country one day, is not, grateful that you pulled me out of the water, basically *saved* me... *digo*, I mean, not that I *remember* it, but I did have the presence of mind, somehow, while getting swallowed up by that maelstrom, to grab that...” – he points with the fish in his hand to the stranded piece of hull at his right – “glorious piece of her right there. The ship’s real name is La Gallega, did you know that?” Juan spits out a pin bone that lands on his by now ember-red right ankle, scoffs, “Of course you don’t know that.” He tenderly breaks out a piece of the cooked-beige fish flesh and puts it in his mouth.

The man squatting on the sand in front of Juan with his arms resting, above the elbows, on his bent knees, raises the index finger of his right hand and points directly at Juan. Then he extends all five fingers, exposing his palm, which he then quickly turns upward. Then he turns his palm again downward, and points again at him, and then, extends his fingers and turns his palm

upward, again. He's coupled that gesture with a quick nod upward and to the right, with a sort of light scowl, and lightly raising his eyebrows as he does.

"What am I, you ask," concludes Juan, relatively fast. "Well, East Indian Man, I am a man that has from an early age taken to sea, a man who's dedicated his life to God, Crown and Country. A man with a wife and a daughter. A man who will one day draw on parchment the very line that now dances before our eyes – pushing onto the intrusive landmass, then heaving lightly back home to the uniform, wondrous, mysterious whole we call *Oceanum*. A man who's not sure how he got here, in fact, and Father and the Son and the *Virgen María* and the Holy Spirit are his witnesses. What I saw before is... well, it was not an edge, after all, but... is the alternate, possibly quicker way to the East that the old man first talked to me about over wine at that whorehouse in Palos... is the quicker way really past that great monster – which I believe spared us, by the way – and that crazy, gargantuan – you have seen this? You don't really look like a seafaring man. But, anyway, if it is that, then... I think we might just have to keep going around the Khoikhoi and the Bushmen and up past the Indians. If the Silk Road remains closed, that is, of course." Juan spits out another piece of bone. "Then we'll use Bart Dias' sea-road. The sole aim is to better do business with you guys... I'm hoping to my God Savior that it was all just a dream and that what it was is we

hit a rock or something. While I was sleeping.” He shakes his head. “Damn pubeless *gargajito*. I *knew* he was going to err an err the size of a whale *turd* one day. I knew it!” Rhyme or not, that last line worked better in Castilian. He goes on: “What do *you* think? My name’s Juan, by the way. Did I already mention that?” Juan’s talking with his mouth full. He offers some of his meal to the stranger. The stranger slowly shakes his head, expression unchanged. Eyes fixed on Juan’s; on Juan’s mouth, hands.

Juan shrugs and puts the offered piece in his own mouth, chews some more. He shakes his head again, goes on, “Thinking things through a little bit better, Tuna, I think I’m soon going to be majorly depressed. I mean: if it *was* a dream which I had, then the Crown will surely order another expedition... maybe this time, a *real* expedition. Not the mess we threw together. And will find me. I hope to God.” The Castilian is licking his fingers and hands, the remora’s grease on them all that’s left of his meal now.

Juan does not know it, but what the man had meant when he pointed at him and turned his palm upward was not, “What are you,” but “What are you doing here.”

Juan does not know it yet either, but...

Ballatagle says, in a language completely incomprehensible to Juan, “This place is not what you think it is.”

Juan, “Come again?”

Ballatagle, lightly scowling, sizing Juan up, just says, in his tongue:

“Foreign.”

Juan: “So, if you’ll let me borrow a hammock, we’ll be friends.”

Ballatagle says, *“Ibaouanale.”*

“Indeed,” says Juan, having no clue what this stranger that saved him, this stranger that fed him, has just said.

Ballatagle now takes his right arm off his knee and points energetically to the ground. Then he shakes his head and with his index finger extended, his hand following the motion of his head, moving lightly, but firmly, from side to side. Then finally he slowly points his big, rectangular finger dead square at Juan’s forehead.

“What?” says Juan, a pang of fear suddenly hitting him. “That I’m not welcome here?”

Ballatagle says, in a language completely incomprehensible to Juan,

“Ibaouanale.” The corners of his lips curve slightly upward, toward his

hardened, protruding cheekbones, then says, in the same language, a language completely incomprehensible to Juan, “Tomorrow will be a fine day.”

Behind the stranger then Juan sees movement. It takes him a moment to realize that it's two women trotting. The women are spitting images of each other, and they're rapidly, but pacedly, making their way out of the forest and around the rocks and boulders behind the stranger seemingly toward where he and the stranger sat. The women are young, surely half Juan's age at most, and both have long shining black hair and, contrary to the man still staring at him, no loincloth or bracelets or necklace or even markings on the skin of any kind. No other hair of any kind, either -- just copper-toned skin. They are the most beautiful creatures Juan has ever seen. Born athletes, unquestionably; however possessing the perfect softness and curvaceous generosity that female sexual attractiveness is so fundamentally dependent on. Tall. He unblinkingly continues to watch the women as they focusedly, silently, keep making their way to them -- evenly, deftly, without slowing down, advancing toward them, but indirectly, avoiding obstacles -- turning, skipping, hopping over rocks, another beached tree trunk; the second one repeating the first's movements, as if choreographed; they did not make it difficult for him at all to fantasize that they were actually *performing* for him, actually dancing, which

he almost believed, were it not for the blatant deliberateness of their assertive path forward.

The man squatting before him says to mesmerized Juan, “*Ibouinetobou?*” and smiles widely now. Had Juan been paying attention, he might have wondered if it was his imagination or some optical effect or the angle or the lighting or did that man’s teeth all look like canines, but Juan is not paying attention; he’s still transfixed, enchanted, eyes locked on the newcomers. Not that it really matters anyway. The squatting man goes on, still smiling, “*Tiamatu Teiha. Erenli.*” But Juan’s not listening. Instead, he’s just saying, over and over again, “*Qué majas. Que majas, hombre... qué majas de verdad.*”

His senses betrayed by stupor, Juan hardly registers that the man has gotten up and grabbed a large, dark green, angular stone from behind him. And that he’s now savagely swinging his hand with the heavy stone at him, and the stone has now viciously struck just behind Juan’s left temple, putting the Castilian on his side. The Castilian instinctively brings a hand up to the wound, the immediate and utter pain unbearable, the exorbitant degree of his confusion further crippling him. In front of him, twin copper alien deities stride along the face of a wall made of sand, but how can they do this? They’re walking *on their side*, their slender sinous bodies propelled gently forward by light feet and muscular legs that follow the creeping lead of the

dark, shapeshifting cyphers at their feet also moving along the wall toward him, and they are almost upon him. Are they coming to get him? Are they angels from God? Is this – all this around him, all this here before him -- what heaven was always supposed to be? Juan then feels upon his head a second strike, and now it all goes dark.

The woman standing over him is quite taken aback by the Castilian's aspect. For a few moments she solely regards the downed man in apparent awe and cautious reticence. Without taking her eyes off the late navigator, she seems to ask something to the man standing across from her; to which he briefly answers as he drops to the sand at his feet the now hair-and-scalp-and-bloodstain-garnished green stone he has just put to good use. The woman looks back at the man lying at her feet on his side on the sand in a position that looks almost fetal. Then she gets on her knees and starts to remove the felled Castilian's civilian clothes: first his 'white', weathered, linen *camisa*; then his belt, then his breeches, then a leather bracelet. As she did this, the stern-faced man across from her with the shiny seashells along his neck had squatted down once again but by the late navigator's head this time, and with a long, flat bone that appears to have been filed to make it an extremely sharp blade, proceeded to cut the late navigator's head off, which he is now holding by the hair from the scalp, with his left hand -- he has gotten up and has dropped the

bone-blade down and picked up the remaining stick by the beached tree trunk, the thickest one, and has shoved it into the ground with his one hand and then vigorously, now with both hands, rammed the late explorer's head onto the sharpened stick, producing a brief, extraordinary sound. By now the woman has started to pull, from the ankles, the felled Castilian over; dragged the naked felled explorer over across the sand with perhaps surprising ease over to the side of the beached trunk as the man with the feathers on his head, caninish incisors, slick copper skin turns now toward the beached like Juan, bare like Juan, felled like Juan, late trunk of a great tree beyond which the woman has just released her grip and dropped the Castilian's feet heavily back onto the now-disarrayed sand beneath her; then the copper-toned man reaches over the felled tree trunk and grabs an ankle and a wrist, one in each hand, as so does the copper-toned woman at the other side of the trunk, and at his signal they cooperatively heave the broken mariner's body onto the trunk, face up... or rather, chest up. The woman is now making her way over to the where the man with the dark markings all across his skin had dropped the knife as said man has now grabbed both of the late adventurer's legs, just above the ankles with his large, powerful right hand and is now pulling the entire legs back, bending them at the pelvis towards the crimson-hued, grey-matter-splattered late mariner's white chest, fully exposing the once-captain's

gonads, perineum, and anus, and the woman now with the sharp bone, blade turned upward, now makes a cut the length of perhaps her index finger vertically up the perineum from just above the bygone adventurer's anus to the base of his scrotum. What ensues is simply, as of now and for the next few moons and suns, without going into too much further detail, the late mariner, late captain, late nao owner, late Castilian's 'field dressing' and butchering, which includes gutting him, de-hiding him, and the cutting of his once-able body into manageable pieces for later consumption.

The image of the Castilian navigator's head on a stick fills the screen now. Beyond it, the horizon; and beyond that, across that great ocean, one thousand two hundred leagues away in Cádiz, a young *morena* wonders how he is. And, as nearby man and woman continue about their handiwork, perhaps she would rather not know. And perhaps she would rather not see, in fact, see what the boy has seen.

The boy now, from his place on the sand, lifts his gaze up from beyond the horizon, beyond the Castilian's head, beyond the man and the woman and the felled Castilian's body and turns his sights to the eastern sky above all of that, as said sky now starts to go dark. And he shoots up then from his place on the sand and is instantly *in* that sky, and very soon no land is visible below anymore, only water. And he looks down upon that majestic ocean, that

grandiose ocean where an adventure began with ninety men that chose to sail into uncharted waters. These grey waters below, kilometers below him that fill the screen now; these majestic grey waters which dwell at the threshold of the known and the unknown, the West Atlantic and the Caribbean, a zone which the great Castilian Cartographer Juan de la Cosa would one day, one better day than the boy could imagine, one real day in the reality we sometimes call ‘consensus’ -- one better, real day -- label simply:

“Marcoceanum”.

This great ocean which is looking darker now, is looking flat, is looking blank; as blank as a blank, white plain – in fact, as blank as a blank, white artificial plain assembled from mass-manufactured calcium sulfate dihydrate boards which are then assembled on site then skim coated with joint compound and painted over... in fact as blank as a blank, white, residential, family-of-three drywall ceiling seen at night with the lights off from the vantage point of a twelve-year-and-364-day-old about to set sail into the unknown himself. As blank as the ceiling atop the boy’s bed, ceiling which the boy is staring unblinkingly at right now.

The boy finally stops staring at the blank ceiling above his bed: he closes his eyes. But his mind again starts to go adrift, but then he grabs hold of it, pulls

it back, keeps it close to home. There are important things to consider, too, here, close to home. It's true: he'll be a teenager tomorrow.

Talk about choosing to sail into uncharted waters. But is it really a choice, in his case?

Of course it is. Everything's a choice.

His lips are sporting the slightest of grins. Yes. Tomorrow will be a fine day.