

SEASCAPE

"La barque est petite et la mer immense."

Theophile Gautier

On no man's memory time and tide attend;
Yet, twixt one night and next, a slow dawn pales
The shadowed shallows, where the frisking fish
Whisk the swift sand with sweeping, sudden tails,

And, in pellucid twilight's pallid ebb,
Bare, here and there, the pieces of the past -
Jetsam of emptied joys, litter of love,
All shell and shard into the bone-yard cast.

And, in the offing, through the seas smooth skin,
Split fractured bones of splintered boom and mast,
Heeling from hulks wrung from the heart of oak
And wrought by headstrong hands to breach the vast

And various reaches of the curving sea,
Which furled their sheets close to some fabled shore.
And shook its silent strands with strident barks
From out the muzzles of their dogs of war;

Cried holy havoc; woke those dreaming worlds
To nightmare days, and brought them to their knees;
Baptised with fire and fear defective rogues
And hanged their braver brothers from the trees;

But, pulled by iron fists in velvet gloves,
Their living puppets danced on other strings,
Voiced through dumb mouths in ventriloquial mime
The same old laws of new-made god's and kings;

And, sparkling sweets of victory in their grasp,
They nosed and nudged their ticklish homeward tack,
Swept by the swiping blows of wind and wave
Across the itching ocean's twitching back;

Until the salty taste of sickly death
Surprised their sucking lungs with flooding fright,
And thudding light exploded into stars
That flared and fell to black and bitter night.

Now relic wrecks, snagged on the snarling rocks
Beneath the smiling sea's beguiling lie;
Leaving their stranded spoils to scavengers
Who combed the unkempt beach with raking eye

And grasping hands whose greed can never learn
That treasure trove is always treasure lost,
That time has only lent what tide has left.
And finders keepers only to their cost,

Who, sinking fast, yield up their borrowed breath
And loose their leaseholds to the salvage sands;
All hands change cargo at the journey's end -
At journey's end, all cargo changes hands

Stark in the timeless dark of tideless deeps
High heaps the shell of mollusc and of man,
Which once held in, held up their flaccid flesh,
Whence with swift stealth, with deft and devious plan,

Time's famished fish and carrion crab stripped clean
Such mortal clay as man might call his own,
And, scoured the finished sculpture of defeat
To naked anonymity of bone.

No fame will claim these unknown knights who sprawl
Beneath the wooden walls of nameless hulls,
Where endless darkness washes in and out
The eyeless visors of their helmet skulls;

Yet each heart's song, flown from its cage of ribs,
Wilt throb in sobbing throats of dying swans;
And floating hair be strung to gloating harps
Of mermaid. myth and minstrel orisons;

Myth - that may tell such truth as history hides,
Not tales of men, only one tale of man,
A wider sea than one swan's narrow lane
That no near-sighted scribe could ever scan.

Nor tongue of failing bird nor wailing bard
Can bear the burden of their dying fall,
Where towering captains and their cowering crews
Flat on death's floor together level sprawl;

Who, out of sight, since dead men tell no tales,
Are out of mind of those who yet must die,
And yet must live, and, living yet must learn
That time and tide let sleeping sea-dogs lie.

On no man's memory time and tide attend;
Let no man bide, and yet let all men be;
And all the tell-tale rot and wreck of time
Sinks beneath the skin-deep beauty of the sea.

Yet locked in love, safe at his waiting berth,
Time's wanderer starts and stirs at tug of tide,
And blindly steers his bold and stubborn head
To where the heaving ocean opens wide.

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