

A BALLAD FOR JASON AND MAUREEN

At the Great Auk Inn on a jut of town,
The old salts toast the warlock winds
Then tell their tales of love and sails
And watch the birds dive down.

There's a pair of portraits over the bar;
They stare at hers and talk of him.
Their frames are carved from the Petrel's spar,
Her binnacle brass on the rims.

His name was Jason Wesley Woods;
He owned a sailing ship.
He ran her tight and always fast,
Her hold packed full of goods.

His name was soft like a sleeping surf,
But his will was anchor strong.
And Maureen McCrae was afraid of him,
Knew his thoughts when he looked too long.

She fled but he caught and kissed her well.
"I've vowed to be rich," he said.
"I'll ply every port from here to hell,
But I must have you in my bed."

"You'll meet half the world on your wedding trip,
 You'll know a new feel in your feet.
 You'll learn to see with your ears and your nails
 As you lean from the Petrel's rails.

"Her teakwood is smooth and her ribs are sound
 And she's soaked with a salt-spice smell.
 We'll take you and wake you to things unbelieved
 By folks who are chained to the ground.

"I'll teach you to handle both her and the crew,
 To respond to the wings of the sea
 With rhythm as heathen, caresses as light;
 I'll teach you to love only me."

Perfumed spindrift pervaded her head,
 His images, promises, touch.
 The heat of his flesh was against her cheek;
 She caught herself hearing too much.

She wrenched from his arms and tried to unspell
 Them both, harshly chastened her heart.
 For her mind was as fixed as a buoy bell
 Long before a boy hastened her heart.

She forced her stare back where a wave came to break,
 For this was no boy but a man—
 As tall and as sure as his Petrel's masts;
 She was swamped like a skiff in his wake.

"Oh, mariner, cast off fast from this shore,
Go back to your brine-bitch love.
Your pale ocean eyes and your nimbus hair
I'd never be willing to share.

"Take your ripe words far away from here,
She owns you brain and beard.
Why, even the taste of your kiss concurs
Your thoughts at the wheel are hers!"

He laughed, "The ocean's part god, part nymph,
Most scornful of mortal blades
Who waste their sighing fantasies
On any but live young maids."

She frowned so he said, "It's my livelihood!
There's much to both love and hate.
Whatever I am is completely yours;
I'll be a dependable mate."

But rigid she stood and he raised her chin.
"Still jealous of the main?" he smiled.
"Of course. If not lover then bastard son.
And you'll never forsake your kin.

"How many heads have you beguiled with your
Pirate's mouth and mahogany chest?"

"Far fewer than you with the lift of your
Lip and the up-tilt of your breast!"

"Oh sailor, go follow the farthest tern,
 My father invented your creed.
 He lured my mother out there where she died.
 I know all about your breed.

"And sister, mistress, mother, myth,
 She'll claim you quarry yet.
 She'll pull you down to her altar rocks
 Where skulls like yours are set.

"With sequin flash and colored beads
 She'll weave your mossy shroud,
 And blazon your bones with turtle dung
 And crown your love with weeds.

"What can you give me but cold and storm,
 My face full of freezing rain,
 And a heaving house and a rolling bunk
 For my swelling belly of pain?

"You talk about flowers and gems down deep,
 All mine if I'll be your bride.
 It's slimy sand and chains of kelp,
 Shell-cuts on my shins in the tide.

"You offer spume, hardtack and rust,
 A drunken lamp, a creaking floor,
 The hidden claws of the coral reef,
 And a green eternal door.

cont.

"You'd bring me squid and a stillborn child
With your nets and sails to mend;
Serpent horizons of swallowed stars,
But my cage would never bend.

"Your frothy gifts have the stink of bait
Too long in the trough in the sun.
The hook is plain, I see the price,
Good Captain, I can wait.

"I'll wait for a man with bags of seed
For the sureness of the earth.
Where salt from sweat and not from spray
Weighs up a good man's worth."

And Maureen McCrae stayed long on the beach
With fringes of foam round her knees,
While staring for years at each square-rigged ship
Slipping in on the morning breeze.

All hope reached the depth of her scuttled pride.
But one day the Petrel returned.
The barque lowered sails, her captain waved,
The crew scrambled over her side.

None ever heard of an owner named Woods.
She was bought from a Captain Quayle.
Then one man remembered a rumor about
A master who vanished—a gale—

Maureen kept on swimming beyond the shoal,
Her eyes on a distant gull
Skimming and circling quicksilver free
Over a half sunken hull.

The ale is strong at the Great Auk Inn
Like it was when canvas was king.
The years wash back if you close your eyes
And listen to figureheads sing.

The old sea dogs gaze out at the bay
Each dusk when the water looks brown,
Then tell their tales of love and sails,
And watch the birds dive down.