

END OF AN ERA: THE BALLAD OF BALEFUL BAY

In the Great Auk Inn at Keelsontown,  
The old salts toast the warlock winds  
Then tell their tales of love and sails  
And watch the birds dive down.

The sea still hums old threnodies  
For a green-eyed girl, Noreen,  
A clipper ship, the Petrel,  
And her captain caught between.

Their portraits hang above the bar;  
Men stare at hers and talk of him.  
The frames are carved from the Petrel's spar,  
Her binnacle brass as trim.

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

His name was soft like a sleeping surf  
But his will was anchor strong.  
Noreen was afraid of his fancy tongue  
And his eyes 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 see a new world on your wedding trip,  
You'll get a new feel in your feet.  
You'll learn the ship with your ears and nails  
As you lean from the Petrel's rails.

"Her teakwood is smooth as 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 tied 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 as she chastened her heart,  
For her mind was as fixed as a buoy bell,  
Long before a boy hastened her heart.

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

"Oh sailor, you're already married to spume.  
Go back to your termagant love.  
Your 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.

"I'll even drop anchor for good some day;  
I'll build a house wherever you say."  
He poured out his heart and his gold-filled purse,  
A song and a classical verse.

But rigid she stood and he raised her chin.  
"Still jealous of water?" he teased.  
"Of course. If not husband, then bastard son.  
And you'll never forsake your kin."

He turned her squarely to protest,  
"I'm telling you, girl, I'm free.  
Unlike some men, I'm not obsessed--  
Except by your sorcery."

"And how many heads have you beguiled  
With 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 mistress, sister, mother, nymph,  
She'll claim you quarry yet.  
She'll pull you down on her altar rocks  
Where skulls like yours are set."

"With rotting ropes and coral beads  
She'll weave your mossy shroud.  
And blazon your bones with turtle dung,  
And crown your grave with weeds."

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

"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 rats, hardtack and rust,  
A drunken lamp, a creaking floor,  
The hidden claws of the lurking reef,  
And that green eternal door."

(cont.)

"Your frothy gifts have the stink of bait  
Too long in the trough in the sun.  
The hook is plain, I know 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 husband's worth."

Noreen stayed long on the fog-struck beach  
With fringes of foam round her knees  
While staring for years at each square-rigged ship  
Slipping in on the morning breeze.

Her 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 the side.

None ever heard of an owner named Woods.  
She was bought from a Captain Krayle.  
One man remembered a rumor about  
A master who vanished-- a gale--

Noreen kept on swimming beyond the shoal,  
Her eyes on a distant gull  
Skimming and circling quicksilver patrol  
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 squint 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.