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Three Poems

by Robert Joe Stout

Seaman Richard Saupold, Midnight Watch, 1897

So calm you can hear the moon
slithering through the clouds
 hear whispering
waves caress the hull
 nothing out there
(an eternity of ocean)
 the deck heavy underfoot
 fo'c's'le voices
--grumbings, coughs—
 eerie the filtered light
trembling the water's surface
--millions of units of energy
 going no place, doing nothing
but repeating themselves
 over and over again—
while we do nothing
 wait
 wait for the wind

Sometimes at night
on watch
you hear singing
but it's not
 not voices, that is
nor the wind
 nor the waves
Once a sailor told me
It's the music of the Spheres
 and cited some Biblical thing
He was an odd duck
 prayed all the time
a Swede
 not really a sailor
 a farmer
 from *Min-knee-sot-tah*
he heard the singing
 claimed
 it was from God
who made the universe
and around the earth
 were circling orbs
that gave off sounds
 and if you listened
(and if you believed)
they'd send you into a rapture
so sweet

you never could sin again.

I guess
I don't believe
but sometimes here on watch
you sense
there's something Big
out there somewhere
and all you are is a sparkle
on one
of the waves.

My Daughter with Her Mother in the Kitchen

Songs knife
the distance
separating child
and mother. Water
timpanis
the movements of their hands.
I stand apart,
groping for the years
that thread
this counterpoint,
dance they've rehearsed
since birth.

I cannot touch again
the wagon
that she rode
up curbs
and over driveways
through New Orleans rain.
Nor pet the kittens
that she had to give away
the day
we moved. Nor hear
the older children screech
that she'd fallen
off the porch
Nor listen to the songs
she sang to dolls
--melodies
that enter into every
phrase she sings today
and in days future
past my grasp.
Her hopes invoke my own.
Oh, there are angry
cadences and silences
that break
but do not change
this harmony
I push
through tightened lips: a heritage
she wears. And hers

my own.

John Ross Comes to Oaxaca

the tiny room so crowded
only the first arrivals
have places to sit,
everyone else
crammed against walls,
peering over shoulders,
as John Ross
squints
through a magnifying glass
(he's almost blind)
to read
poems
written in big letters
on sheets
of white paper,
his voice squeaky
but his smile
gracious,
inclusive,
as he advocates
overthrowing
the government
the way
Marcos has done
in Chiapas,
poems almost limericks,
cute,
well-intentioned,
toss the bastards
from Big Business
out,
rise up people from Below
tugging strands
of his white hair,
shrugging, smiling,
mentioning his books for sale,
John Ross
--gringo Zapatista—
stepping back to let musicians
arrange mikes
and fill the room
with Veracruz
that throbs against the walls,
again applause
a feeling good,
together one and all.

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