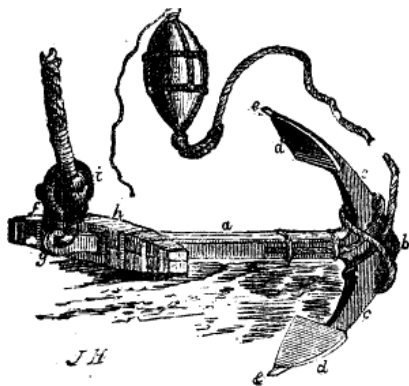


TWENTY QUESTIONS

for the

DRUNKEN SAILOR



Maureen Thorson

Copyright © 2008 Maureen Thorson. All rights reserv'd.

Published by flynpyntar press (Brooklyn, NY) for dusie kolektiv #3
Typesetting and book design by E. Tracy Grinnell

Cover image: Narcomedusae, from Ernst Haeckel's *Kunstformen der Natur*
(Artforms of nature), 1904. Public domain.

Frontispiece: Anchor image from *Nordisk familjebok*. Public domain.



* a dusi/e-chap
www.dusie.org



DUSIE

TABLE OF CONTENTS

The Parameters of this Relationship	• 5
Sea Theology	• 6
Constructions	• 8
Probability is All in Your Head	• 9
The Drunken Sailor at the Zoo	• 10
Blues in the Blood	• 11
Background Research	• 12
Twenty Questions for the Drunken Sailor	• 13
Doldrums	• 14
Prayers for the Occasionally Happy	• 15
Alter Idem	• 17
Valentine	• 18
History of Time	• 19
An Entrepreneurial Spirit Attacks	• 21
Lullaby for the Broken and Sad	• 22
An Ocean of Rejuvenating Lotion	• 24
Projections	• 26
The Climates of the Drunken Sailor	• 28
Revelations of the Bad Hotel Room	• 29
Disdaining Civilization, We Return to Our Pagan Roots	• 30
Tests of Balance and Hydration	• 32
In the Valley of the Shadow of Macramé	• 33

The Parameters of This Relationship

Kisses for the stevedores, kisses for the gangplank,
And for the drunken sailor,
Night's awkward, hundred-armed embraces.

Trawlers shift their moorings, pickpockets shoot the dark.
And for the drunken sailor,
The world revolves its backlight into something like an art.

Among my cares and critterish worries,
The sailor stands apart.
A watchman for lost hours, someone I can't help,

Who must make his way without me, by his own matchlight,
And fall over the pilings,
Or drag a way through kelp, through the boggy, rotten places

And does either and does both, and taking night into his arms
Lets it wash around him,
And accepts me for the nothing I can start.

Sea Theology

If the gods don't exist,
there's still giant squids

and the drunken sailor
makes wobbly obeisance,

pouring a fifth on the deck
in their leggy honor.

His catalogue of superstitions
forms a doorstep on his mind —

just the number of days that
are unlucky for starting

voyages practically guarantees
he'll never be drowned,

though you should never say
that word at sea, and the sea

is a bad man, you know,
by the way naked figureheads

cool it down, but clothed ones
piss it off, and all this

business about cats starting
storms with the magic

stored in their tails, so that he
feeds every stray in his path

just to keep 'em placid, is
driving the both of us broke.

Don't even start me on
"Pig on the knee, safety at sea,"

it's like knowing a Brahmin
who dreams of horses that

foretell high seas while clutching
lit cigarettes in their hooves,

who's got the winds mapped
in ink on his back so he doesn't

lose them. With gods like these,
the devils can't be far away, or

are the same as the gods, who
if they exist, are just buoy-light

shining or squid-flesh reaching
pale arms across the water,

drowning everything that doesn't
give way.

Constructions

The drunken sailor
and I go to inspect the build site,
but find this sign strapped
to the orange cyclone fence:

CONSTRUCTION HALTED DUE TO NOSTALGIA.

The stars that whirl over the abandoned
earthmovers are invisible
from other latitudes

where Orion's belt and sword are
fair-weather friends and not,
as here,
the heralds of winter:

thick November nights when
the drunken sailor's grin turns
toothless, dry, when

all the big fires die down,
and then
slowly, begin again.

Probability is All in Your Head

Frame 12 on cosmic night.

Two lanes over, teenage girls
with chicken legs
that go all the way up.

The drunken sailor crooks
his wobbly fingers
as strobe lights turn the place

negative and the fat men
in the back
smooth their tshirts.

Sweaty hot wings
can't bring
me back from a 3-7 split, but

the sailor leans into the purple,
swirly ball and shivers,
head bent to show the compass

slung round his neck. His arm
drops like an anchor.
He looks like he's dead.

It's his twelfth strike of the night.

The Drunken Sailor at the Zoo

Is beside himself with glee,
Popcorn and monkeys.

He roams exhibit to exhibit,
Body angled over the railings,

The better to stare —
And there's such camaraderie

To the zippy wind, its taint
Of sunburnt hot dogs

Children with skinned knees
The humidity of giraffes

And everything else on display
And everyone else gawking,

Stomping about carelessly
With legs and open lungs,

Their civilized skin stretched over
A confederacy of hungers,

Eyes and feet and stomachs
Effervescently contained.

Blues in the Blood

The drunken sailor sings it
With his body, having taken
Between his lips a fifth
Of something murky. It will be
The death of all rapscallions
Should the chorus play again
Over his red and twirly ears,
With me standing stock still
To the side, the stiff pivot
On which the needle slides.
Heel-toe, heel-toe, he taps
His morse code combo,
One thimble to the sky, and
He brings the matter home
With deep knee bends recalling
Cossack dances, chargers
At their lances, some sorry
Fellow most compelling
In his story's telling,
In the breadth between
Performer and the act
He only could perform.

Background Research

The drunken sailor and I enter the library.
His bellbottoms are stained with bilgewater.

His wet shoes make sucking sounds
as he shambles over the linoleum.

I ask the librarian the way to periodicals,
to the section for fabulous monsters.

The drunken sailor doesn't say a word,
just breathes, slowly. Deep inside him,

a brittle star, limbs waving with the fluid motion
of the Second Generation of Mechanics,

turns him into its ocean, etches
a way through his lungs.

Twenty Questions For The Drunken Sailor

Who glasspacks a Chevy pickup? If you find the sound of steel drums arousing, did you first notice this before or after the release of the Girls Gone Wild series?

Do you collect scrimshawed walrus teeth? Do you collect ships in bottles or bottles with ships on them? How old is the whiskey in those bottles? If a freighter Leaves Rangoon at 20 knots NNE, and a tanker . . .?

How come you never answer? How come you always Follow? Or do I follow? Do you follow me? I've got So many bones to pick with you, it looks like the ship's Picnic. What's the square root of, "Hey, fuck you, too,

Buddy?" Do you know what mama always said? What's The passcode to get into the wardroom? Were you The one who stole the Lieutenant's socks? What the hell Would you want with another man's socks? How

Much longer is your watch? Are those peanuts? Can I have some? Do you feel that chill? It's strong Off the bay and I can see the rain off the windward side. Make it fast, why don't you? There's water coming in.

Doldrums

when the moon gets low and matches
its one headlight to the one headlight
of the lighthouse on the cape,
the drunken sailor whistles
like a kettle gone to seed, wandering
through windless air, hands jammed
in his pockets, and all you hear
is his wet hiss growing tuneless
as the ocean squeezes limp fingers
through the jetty, adding up the numbers,
all the debits and the figures,
all the drowned men and the oysters,
all the kelp-beds and the otters,
all the oil-slicks and liquors, and
finds it's just an oyster off.

Prayers for the Occasionally Happy

Pancakes, kiddo,
'Cause it's a Sunday

And we gave up church
A thousand years ago

To lie indolent in bed
Or else, stuff our faces

With quickbreads and
Slummy, whippy syrups.

Hoo-boy for the strawberries,
For the icing

On the cinnamon rolls
That can't be separated

And the sailor wiping one
Long hand against his mouth

While spearing a Mickey
Mouse head with the fork

Stuck in his other, and
Meanwhile, dawn goes

On expanding into day.
I've got my sassy spatula;

I've got the tinny radio
Tuned to bluegrass whistling

Out onto the porch, and
We are sorely blessed,

The mess, this food, my dress
With its tiny blueberries,

Our lives all gone astray.

Alter Idem

The drunken sailor sits at the window, napping.
His jaw works stiffly, but no sound comes out.

I'm asleep, or I'm pretending to sleep. I'm pretending
To dream what the sailor dreams and my dream is about

A whale calling himself Jorge. Jorge's wee Cuban mustache
Tells me I should go for a ride with him and the fellas,

But when I try to climb into the sea, my legs stop working.
Jorge, voluminous and white, dives into an ocean

Of cardboard waves. I open my eyes to see the sailor
Still lipsynching into air grown briny and dark, the floor

Pooling with thick water. Jorge's laugh recedes behind me.
Words gone unspoken, he says, taste only of salt.

Valentine

Because who wouldn't fall
For a scrimshawed cowrie, that having
Roundly plied the waters
Of a distant island, now fills
The drunken sailor's hollow fist?
If words liked him, he would say,
Like a robot Teddy Roosevelt,
"I am nothing if not my 700 pounds
Of pure amour, my metallic impossible
Buoyancy." But instead his silent offering
Encloses your image, and bobs it
Gently along, meaning: Please.
Please don't feel menaced by the giant auk,
Stuffed and cowering beneath the bar,
By the hoochy stank of trawlers
Dribbling blessed diesel into sunset.
His shellwork invites you: just look
Into its grenadine and egg, that sappy yolk
Over which the shells break, and darkness
Smooths its dress, and where, with a moon snail
Hung lightly round your neck,
You rock all night on the sailor's lap.

History of Time

We're beached in our own minds,
the drunken sailor and I,
on this Sunday afternoon.

The kitchen clock, six minutes slow,
utters its shivery tick.
The sailor tries to pretend he doesn't exist.

First he gets real small,
and then he seems to melt — his bellbottoms
into his denim shirt, his crinkly,

tinselly hair laying flat, then turning goopy.
But he can't lose his tubby heft,
spread out along its side

on the bathroom floor, anymore than I
can get this stupid song —
the big baboon, by the light of the moon —

to stop running through my head.
Never say the blind tedium
of molecules, with their pure lack

of awareness, is an achievable
goal for human beings. No matter
how drunk, we know how bored we are

of time, its endless police procedurals,
its physical evidence, the way
its fingers are all pointing to us.

An Entrepreneurial Spirit Attacks

A dim brass buckle and a fearful
noise. The drunken sailor and I
are again without a clue,

in possession of many talents
and much ambition, and not
a customer in sight. He adjusts

his thousand knobs and ornaments;
I busy myself with inspections
of the neighborhood trees;

their bobbing limbs akimbo. We've
many services to offer: just propose
and we will answer, and

if not now, maybe later. If there's
anything we can tell you, it's
that there's more than one way

this can go down: easy peasy
on the eyes and on your wallet
or like an ocean in November,

one gray wallop that overtakes you
and lifts you up to shake you
free of all your money till you drown.

Lullaby for the Broken and Sad

Following seas
And always remembrance.

In the cabin
Cramped as tinder,

The drunken sailor and I
Groan with the punches.

Please, please, please
Let us forget.

Let us forget that
The sea smells like bacon,

The sound of the gulls
Over the capstan

Doing their vulture impressions,
Wheels over wheels

Over wheels.
Let us forget our eyes

Like chips of marble,
Glassy and suspended

In their solution of flesh,
The weight of them

On sagging timbers,
The lure of the bottle

Winking in the sun's
Harsh light. Let night

Fall upon us, our restful
Home, let sleep come,

A dark curtain of kelp
Falling downward.

Let us cover our chins
With the tide.

An Ocean of Rejuvenating Lotion

This sail would match your
eyes if your eyes

were white, this uniform your
heart if your organs

were crisply starched. And
with coffee filtered

through a diesel engine,
with the invigorating

and pervasive eau de stanky
pier, we'll begin

the morning's samba,
it's lurching, driven rhythms.

The drunken sailor has resolved
from a puffy indistinction

into something markedly more
solid, as though the air,

crusted up with salt, had
in it something we could bottle

and purvey. Hand us a patent,
then, that we might skedaddle

with its protection, to sail
seas of commercial peradventure

our colors flown and golden
in this decreasing, tonic light.

Projections

At the matinee, the drunken sailor and I
Share popcorn. While I gasp at car chases,

He sucks the salt off every kernel
And spits the wet husk on the floor.

In the flicker of the screen,
His skin is as pale as the skin

Of the drowned, then dark, then pale again.
His eyes are glassy; they swim

Against the images, and when
The lead actress turns on her pointed heel,

Seamed stockings doing a black-and-white
Rumba out a stage-prop door,

He doesn't exhale his salt-stung breath
With any greater force than if the credits

Were rolling, or the previews playing, or
The movie were about puppies instead

Of crime, and passion, of every last kind
Of betrayal. He's past betrayal, past feeling,

He's become the rock bottom bed where dark,
Sharp things glow and angle, feeding in silence

Linking their animal dreams into mine.

The Climates of the Drunken Sailor

Come from the land of ice and snow,
The drunken sailor shrugs off
A walrus coat, forsakes his sealskin

For the blubbery light of an arctic bar.
Else, swarthy with permanent noon,
The salt spray of the Triangle,

He steeps the quay in his longing
For autumn to ride the ocean
With its speeding winds, its snaps

And birds that wheel by thousands
Over the face of the ship, checking
The stocks of kelp reviving as the sun

Begins to linger longer daily,
Flowering along the coastlines
Pricked with coves and manatees,

The tropical warming system
In which he sometimes finds his skin
A-prickle, exchanges his whisky for beer,

And drifts through dockside latitudes,
Falling now and again, then rising,
A barometer moving in time.

Revelations of the Bad Hotel Room

The drunken sailor faces down
his six o'clock brush with mortality
by making himself visibly instructive.
He's gone and drawn crescent moons
and swivelly arrows all across his arms,
a schematic for informing the vast
and pliant moonmen who'll discover
his body how best to repair him,
even though the only person
who'd want to is me, and even I
would put the pieces in a different order.
There are things we could de-emphasize
in Sailor 2.0, and he always did want
robot eyes. Hey, wake up, sailor, and see:
laser peepers, just for you, honey. And
the glass liver? That's something for me.

Disdaining Civilization, We Return to Our Pagan Roots

All the able seamen gather in back rooms
To play cards but the drunken sailor
And I can't be held to such.

Instead, we lounge
Inside a dewberry patch deep in the city park.
Our mouths are red from berries and our arms

Are red from stickers, and we are slumped
On a bed of pinestraw, listening
To a pickup softball game —

A slew of work buddies working
A couple positions apiece. They all yell, “Hey,
batter-batter-batter. Hey, batter-batter, batter;”

Stupidly again and again. Each of them is just barely
Aware of where his body ends and where
The game begins, just as

These two bodies
In the berry patch, sanctified against penny antes,
Start to slide into the leaves like lizards, red and thorny,

While strong men hit little things with sticks and everything
Goes swishy: the whole world awaiting
Its return to a green

And touchy tidepool: the forest, its mouth open wide.

Tests of Balance and Hydration

The drunken sailor appears
on the rooftop at night. Flanked

by the cedar water tower,
he's an unavenging angel,
bedraggled,

his dark dumb eyes glass-fronted
beneath his crew-cut hair.

I stand beside him as he waves
his torso in response
to the pulse of the traffic below,

lets it blur with the too-fast tears
of the sentimentally drunk.
His face runs with salt.

We're far from his home. He waves
and he cries, this unbalanced tide.
I stand very still, thinking,

he'll cry an ocean, you know.

In the Valley of the Shadow of Macramé

At the flea market, the drunken sailor
wonders what happened
to all the girls he's kissed.

I wonder why everything I knew fell
away to leave me staring
at a framed flyer for Fantômas,

at a chair shaped like an open fist.
The first green peas in spring
please everybody. Windchimes

made of rusty forks please
the people who buy them, but
the sailor and I please only ourselves

with the promise of our company:
no guarantees, but it winces
if you poke it, and will try
to remember your name.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Drill: Sea Theology

Cannibal: Prayers for the Occasionally Happy

Small Town: Valentine

Typo: History of Time

Foursquare Special Edition: The Parameters of This Relationship, Revelations of the Bad Hotel Room, In the Valley of the Shadow of Macramé