

Scouring the Plumes

(first appeared in *The Raleigh Review*)

I see images I've never seen before, unless I've started forgetting things from my past. Like bright red fish trying to swim in shards of crystal; Mother knitting on her rocking chair that groans and squeals, groans and squeals as she rocks back and forth. I see images with my eyes open. They vanish when I shut them as if the images need light to come to life.

Only when someone whispers close to my ears do I return to the dead bird in my hand. Cold, wide-eyed, its feathers cling to its body, syrupy, shiny, like a bronze statue that has fallen off the display case.

I hear, "Drop it, move on," but moving on has never been something I've done well. My mind is still flush with scenes of the bird diving into the water, its cheer instantly smothered by gluey ripples. Flapping, weaving, it drowns, dragged down slowly by heavy plumage, the once-airy wings that powered its jaunts.

My life has been uneventful, meandering around cul-de-sacs. I wish my mind were as barren, instead of trapping nuts, bolts, and cheerless dregs from forty years. My self-esteem is so hurt that my Gods are godlings, my fervent prayers, whispers.

It is not easy to tell whether the new images I see are unrecognizable manifestations of the past I hold on to. They could be from the fumes rising from the water. The official watching us from the rock says they don't have enough respirators for all of us. The ocean is sick and smelly, like Mother who wrestled with a distorted vertebra and a cancerous esophagus, lying neglected with bed sores the size of ruptured fruit, till she finally stopped moving one morning. My brother, Tim, and I lived with the smell for many weeks after that, the smell sweating from walls, the bed, the closet, the smell of her struggle, her death.

They hand me a live pelican, toothbrush, pet dryer, and a bucket of soapy liquid. A bald guy with a loud voice shows us how to scour the feathers, peeling back every little layer and rubbing it delicately between our fingers. They give me a few more buckets of clean water. I scrub the bird, rinse it in the next clean bucket, scrub again, next bucket, till there is no more black dripping from it. I think of Mother's back, her blisters that bubbled and oozed, the blood on my fingers as I tried to wipe down her wounds with a wet cloth, her screams ringing in my ears.

I wonder if all this labor along slick coasts is worth it, if it is just one way of feeling human, less guilty, of showing the world the battle can be won, that we care. What good would it do to clean a hundred birds when the real damage is invisible, skulking beneath the water surface and seeping into land, into smaller life forms, killing them, maiming them, sterilizing them, their brood? It is so obvious that it is not: the blight will get to us - all of us - into our houses and

on dinner plates, and linger like a sour memory for years.

I know what a lingering moment is. I have many stashed away, have seen them collect like trash floating in the backwaters. But for a man who has achieved nothing, loved no one, made love to nobody, not even with cash, this tragedy is a landmark. I am part of history, even if it will be recalled with scorn and horror, even if it is not like losing an eye in battle, or running away from the rising fumes of falling buildings.

So these new images - red fish and rocking chairs - flickering in my head don't bother me, the fumes and tar balls, the lack of gloves or proper clothing doesn't bother me, the bald guy yelling into my eardrum asking me to stop daydreaming and hurry my ass up doesn't bother me. I touch history when I run the toothbrush on the bird's head. I am living in it, the moment that will be chronicled forever, something I can be remembered for being part of, even if there is no one I know who will think of me in the years to come.

I wish Tim were here. I have his letter, my only piece of love, of kinship. He did better in life than me, caught a home-run ball during a playoff game, ran into the mayor when he was waiting tables at Gloria's, and in death, paved the way for my job here along the shoreline. His employers probably felt guilty having lost him to the explosion on the drilling platform; I felt terrible for him but worse for myself, having missed a chance to be part of a celebrity eruption.

The old guy next to me coughs, and sticks his hand in his pocket. His handkerchief falls to the ground as he tries to catch it. He swears, and coughs again. He sat beside me yesterday during lunch. I forget his name, not his story: a shrimper, widower with five children, he came to help with the cleanup to make whatever money he could. They pay more to work with Corexit - some junk they add to disperse oil. He said that every night he goes back home preparing to throw up all he ate during the day. His kids then watch him lie stunned on the bed not unlike the creatures he helps clean. The officials made him sign a contract that sealed him inside his world of pain.

He has asthma but cannot complain; he needs the job, he came for money. I came for glory, and don't care if I die here coughing, lying among ochre-colored crude and dead migratory birds.

I've been hearing stories and plans. Some say they will bring microbes that eat grease; some are sure they will flood the plains and force the fat to rise; some say they will ignite a patch of oil. I like the fire plan, the possibilities; sounds like a dramatic effort, an in-situ burn they call it, setting it ablaze within large burn-proof rings before it reaches the coast. I will be one of the volunteers, if they need one, to boat to the site center and start the fire. They will want me to return to safety, small explosions raging in the background, heart racing, air acrid. But I won't. I will fling myself into the reaching flames as the world watches, my lone figure fading behind screens of wet, sooty smoke. I will dive into my brief moment of renown, and perish without a trace, becoming part of the combustion, becoming history.