

# ***The Driftwood Beam***

A Jones Island Elegy

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## Table of Contents

<b>Act I.....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Parapet .....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Graphite .....</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Proposal.....</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>The Drowning.....</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>Act II .....</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>Draft Notice.....</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>Parapet II.....</b>	<b>21</b>
<b>Hospital .....</b>	<b>24</b>
<b>Stanislaus Wedding Bells .....</b>	<b>28</b>
<b>Act III .....</b>	<b>31</b>
<b>Return .....</b>	<b>32</b>
<b>The Socialists.....</b>	<b>36</b>
<b>Erosion .....</b>	<b>39</b>
<b>A Divine Comedy .....</b>	<b>44</b>

# Act I

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## Parapet

In my dream,  
Still was I- that boy,  
sweet and starry-eyed,  
waving my father and uncles off  
as they went to see  
what the sea  
would provide for  
you and me.

I remember,  
brushing my hand across  
the wave-battered-bow  
examining,  
all of the textures  
of weathered wood  
and chipped paint.

I smelled,  
the morning lake breeze,  
bread in the oven,  
sun-drying salted fish,  
and  
mother's patchouli perfume.

We played with the chickens,  
chasing them down the  
dirt street.  
You tripped  
and skinned your knee on a rock.  
The blood made me pass out.

When I came to  
you were hugging me and crying.  
We spent the last bittersweet weekend together  
seeing the sights  
of New York City.

I was clutching my orders  
as the whistle blew.  
We must have kissed for infinity  
but it was not long enough.

I felt bad that  
it was the first time you got to leave

our little island in the harbor  
to go halfway across the country  
just to watch them send me away.

I was lost staring into your watery eyes-  
They looked like home  
as if I was just staring off into the bay.

As I turned to go,  
for that final time,  
you grabbed my arm,  
untied your hair,  
wrapped  
your grandmother's rosary  
with your silk headband  
and placed it in my hand.

The whistle kept blowing,  
as I awoke to a shudder and a thump.  
Dirt from the ceiling dribbled on my face.  
Barely conscious, I grabbed the rifle  
that I was clutching,  
in my sleep,  
wishing it was you.

"Levez-vous! Levez-vous!"

Light blinded me as I emerged  
from our crudely dug  
French dirt-hotel.  
Thinking, this is  
the worst vacation  
I had never been on.

Immediately,  
I realized that the sun was not even up.  
A thousand flares lit the night sky.  
Thunder booming from the field guns.  
Flashes of flak cannons in the sky.  
The whirl of machines.  
Guns firing endlessly.  
Men yelling, running to and fro...  
Whistles.  
Smoke everywhere.

I joined the line with  
Anton,  
Johannes and Jacob,  
too scared to peer over  
the parapet.

The four of us were the only ones left  
from a group of 50 boys  
set out from home.  
Some were sent to other fronts  
but most of them  
were still out there  
in the ditches and craters  
just beyond our reach.

2 million men were fighting in this forest.  
It wasn't even a forest anymore.  
None of the trees were taller than me.  
This man-made hell,  
of mud, blood, and fire.

Why did I have to be here?  
I'm just a fisherman's son.  
I never even held a gun.  
Damn the Kaiser.

With that, all I saw  
was a puff of smoke and spark  
as I was launched  
from my hiding place.

Ringling and darkness.

## Graphite

I remember you laughing  
when I said I wanted to be  
an artist.

Neither of us had even had  
much schooling.  
The women came once a day  
to teach English and Algebra,  
but there was work to do.

Half us boys were out on the boats.  
The girls busy helping the women.

You sensed I was upset  
and withdrawn by your laughter.  
And you reassured me  
that I could be an artist.

Then you joked,

"After you drag the nets in, of course."

Do you remember  
when we took the ferry  
piloted by my Uncle Jon  
to the mainland?

That one time  
after church  
when we wandered together  
hand in hand  
to the shops?

You bought me a chunk of graphite  
and some fine papers  
and said,

"Now you're an artist,"

and,

"Now you have to make me something beautiful."

So, we sat in a park  
overlooking the bay  
all afternoon  
trying to draw  
seagulls  
and snails.

When we took the ferry back home  
just before dark  
your Father scolded me  
for keeping you out  
past your chores  
and for letting your  
church shoes get muddy.

I tried to tell him  
that YOU were the one  
who kept ME out  
but he just said,

"It is the man's responsibility."

And I never forgot it.  
And I never tried to blame you again.  
Even though,  
you always got me into trouble.



## Proposal

At Julia and Joseph's wedding  
maybe the third or fourth day  
you stole me away  
along with  
a couple of Blatz  
so that we could  
sit and watch  
the big ships  
far off on the horizon  
nothing more but little lights  
and an occasional horn  
but we knew what they were  
and we just sipped our  
lukewarm beers  
and guessed at  
the contents they were hauling.

You grew cold  
and demanded my jacket  
then I grew cold  
and butted up against you.

Together we sat  
and watched the sea  
like we did  
our whole lives  
but this time  
you looked at me  
and asked,

"When do you think we'll have our wedding?"

My mind went blank.  
I had not even considered.  
We never discussed.  
I paused to think  
and I couldn't remember  
a single time  
when we were not together  
laughing and playing  
and dreaming  
together.

I was lost in a daydream  
and you just got up,  
splashed your beer at me,  
stomped your foot  
and yelled my name  
as you stormed off.

I just stayed there a while in silence  
until I heard  
Jacob, Johannes, and Anton  
stumbling down the street  
from the wedding  
laughing.

They saw me,  
drenched in beer,  
and with no jacket.

They stopped,  
looked at me quizzically,  
and just burst out laughing again.

They teased,  
"Struck out again?"  
"She has thorns."

That night it stormed, and I dreamt of you.

When I awoke, the men were shouting.  
The rain washed out our road again  
and a handful of boats floated freely  
broken from tethers.

I didn't have a chance to apologize.  
We spent the day rebuilding  
and when it came time to celebrate  
the wedding again  
I did not see you at the tavern.

Despite your Father  
grabbing me by the ear  
and asking me  
what I did to you,  
I did not seek you out.

I just drank with the boys.  
We discussed the rumblings  
across the ocean  
and were sure we would stay out of it.

When I did see you again,  
it was an early morning.  
You had just gotten off the ferry  
carrying fresh bread  
from some mainland bakery.  
I tried to talk to you  
but you just  
stuck your nose up at me.

I didn't know what to do.

When I got home  
Grandma Pearl asked me  
to help her with the fish  
since my sisters were  
nowhere to be found.

Instinctively, she said,

"Now that Julia and Joe are wed, you and she are next."

I blushed.

She wiped her hands on her apron  
and took off her ring,

"Your Grandfather gave this to me."

"It was his Grandmother's before,  
from the Old Country."

"I don't need it anymore;  
His bones may be lost at sea,  
but he lives in my heart."

"You should give this to her."

I thanked my Grandmother and ran off to find you.  
You weren't out on the island,  
so I ran to your home.  
I didn't even knock.

I just ripped open your door.  
And I saw you  
there at the kitchen table,  
knitting something.  
You looked at me,  
standing in your doorway,  
covered in fish guts,  
panting,  
just holding out this old ring.

You got up  
and sprinted to the door,  
kissed me and hugged me.

I heard your Father sigh,

"God help us."

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## The Drowning

You always made a point  
to see us off  
as we boarded in the morning-  
Sometimes even before  
the sun.

You always made a point  
to see us in  
as we disembarked in the late afternoon-  
Sometimes even after  
the sun.

Every day,  
you packed my lunch  
of bread,  
and cheese,  
and dried fish.

Even if I went out drinking  
with Johannes and the boys  
you either tagged along  
or stayed home  
but always  
making sure I got in  
and was ready  
for tomorrow.

Every night you helped  
mend the nets.

Sometimes you helped  
mend me  
after a tavern scuffle.

When we got back  
that day at sea  
when we lost Joseph-  
You never left my side.  
You never blamed me  
even though I knew  
it was my fault  
when the bowline split  
and we lost control.

Nobody said a word,  
except you,

"That's life at sea.  
All sailors know it."

The whole island turned out  
in a somber procession  
carefully carrying  
an ornately decorated  
driftwood casket  
onto the ferry  
and continuing on  
to the Cathedral.

At the viewing,  
one by one  
we lined up  
to put a token in that chest.  
You knit him a sweater.  
I tried to give him my good boots,  
but his father objected  
said that was a nice gesture  
but foolish  
so I just left him  
my tear-soaked handkerchief.

All the men wore black,  
always,  
black jackets,  
black hats,  
and black vests.

You never were quite sure  
if it were a funeral  
or a wedding.

The accordion played  
and the drinks were poured  
regardless.

Maybe they were all the same.

All those nights you stayed up with me.  
I kept dreaming of him.  
Waking. Yelling. Scared to get on a boat again.

You told me it's okay  
and we took baby steps,  
just slowly rowing along the shore.

When it came time for the men to fish again,  
you pushed me out the door,  
handed me a sack  
with bread,  
and cheese,  
and dried fish,  
and you said,

"You weren't made to stay on land.  
Be free with the gulls and the waves.  
It will be good for you."

So reluctantly,  
I boarded my father's boat-  
And it was good for me.

Though  
from then on,  
they kept me on the nets.  
Because everyone knew.  
*But that's life at sea.*

---

## **Act II**

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## Draft Notice

I'll never forget that day  
when the postman came to our island  
and from his satchel  
he handed out letters.

He walked the rows,  
being one  
of the only mainlanders  
who could navigate  
our winding dirt paths,  
and allies,  
and find each and every home.

Almost all the young men  
received the same letter,

"Greetings."

We had a town hall at the tavern  
and the old men wailed,

"God damn them!"

"Don't they know we left the Old Country BECAUSE of this foolishness?"

"We're half a world away. They already take our steel and grain, now they want our boys!"

The mothers and children cried.

I just sat  
silently,  
in the corner  
with Johannes,  
Jacob,  
Anton  
and the others.

We all kept looking at our letters.  
Maybe hoping the words would change.

No consensus was met.  
They were Federal orders.  
We had to obey.

Modernity violently  
thrust itself upon us.

And so,  
I still remember  
leaving you on the platform-  
Crying and kissing me  
and saying you'll write me every day  
as we boarded that train to Texas.

Most of us  
had never been away  
from the island  
for more than a few days.  
Now we were gone for weeks  
maybe even months.  
I stopped counting.  
I stopped reading your letters.  
They just made me  
too sad,  
and I had to focus.

I never rode in a big truck before.  
I never even shot a gun.  
I never had to crawl  
in the mud  
through barbed wire.

I never saw an explosion,  
except that time  
the old steamer blew,  
entering the mouth  
of the Kinnikinnic,  
but this was different.

There was no sea.  
Just arid dirt  
and low hills.  
The trees were different.  
The stars seemed different.  
But looking up  
each night,  
I thought I could still  
navigate us home.

They did not like our snickering  
in Kashubian  
and took offense  
making us run up hills  
or dig holes-  
They made us speak  
only English  
so that all the men  
could understand.

They taught us  
a lot of horrible things.  
We joked about it.  
No one really expected anything.  
We were still too young and dumb.

We laughed at each other  
about how awkwardly  
we handled our rifles.

They wouldn't let us go home.

They said  
we were to depart  
for the troop ships  
in the New York Harbor.

I finally wrote to you,  
and you met me there-  
Just so  
I could make you cry again.  
But at least we had  
a moment.

We joked about  
setting up a new community  
in this even bigger harbor.

We wondered about the big ships.  
Making a game  
of guessing  
their contents.  
Though we knew  
they all held men  
so many men.

Anything to take our minds  
off the fact  
that we were probably  
never coming back.

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## Parapet II

Ringling and darkness.

The ringing persisted  
even as my vision returned  
though I could not see much.

Shadows danced in the flames  
and bursts of light  
from the machine gun fire  
illuminated  
the men strangling each other.

Some had clubs  
some had knives  
or short swords.  
Some used their rifles  
to bat each other away.

The ringing persisted  
but now was drawn out  
by screams,  
shouts,  
moaning,  
and groaning.

I called out to  
what I thought was Jacob  
but I could not  
hear my own voice.

I couldn't move  
and I wasn't even sure  
if I had a body anymore  
as I watched  
men  
or maybe monsters  
spilling over the parapet  
into our trench.

Each time I blinked  
the scene changed so drastically.  
I thought I saw  
Johannes felled  
but I guess it could have been

anyone in the darkness.  
I thought I saw the sea again.  
I thought I saw you.

The next morning  
as I opened my eyes  
some boys were digging  
around me.  
I remember thinking  
they were digging my grave.  
It was calm  
smoke still hung thick in the daylight,  
the ringing persisted,  
and so did the screams,  
though no one I could see  
seemed to be  
yelling anymore.

They picked me up  
and gently  
carried my body away.  
I saw your face  
among a pile of rubble  
laying there  
with Anton and Jacob.

I lay in a field  
an endless field  
of stretchers  
filled with  
dead and broken men.  
Endless rows.

We were no longer Americans  
We were no longer French.  
We were no longer Boche.

Together now as casualties-  
Just another statistic  
for the parliaments to tout  
to justify  
stealing more boys  
from their mothers  
and bread  
from our tables.

To justify their lust  
for land and power.  
To prove to their Gods  
that they were right  
all along.

Men and women made their rounds  
trying to treat us  
however they could-  
Taking away the bodies  
to pile in craters  
and bury en masse.

Eventually,  
they would load me on a truck.  
And that is all I can remember.  
After that darkness.

All the while, the ringing persisted.

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## Hospital

Had it been a day, a year  
or more  
since we stood  
together  
on the steps of the cathedral  
smiling and laughing  
as the pigeons ate  
the grain  
that they threw around us?  
Or were we walking in  
somberly  
as we tried to make it right  
with Joseph  
by placing trinkets in his  
cask?

I thought maybe we were  
still  
just those kids  
in the park  
drawing birds  
and playing  
artist.

But I knew,  
when I kept dreaming  
of Jacob's laughter  
that he was gone.

Some days were-  
Okay.

Lying there  
in the ward  
stuffed with  
pillows  
and needles,  
looking about  
to no familiar faces  
just white  
and splotches of red.

I thought I heard the birds chirping  
outside my window,



but maybe it was still,  
just that damned  
infernal  
persistent  
ringing.

One day,  
I was dreaming of you  
and I could  
still hear your voice  
even after I awoke.

This place had no  
concept of time.  
Sometimes I would open my eyes  
and it would be the day  
and others  
I would be swimming in the lake  
or playing with chickens  
all while  
lying motionless in my bed.

The unfamiliar faces  
would come and go  
as men healed or died.  
I didn't pay much mind to it.

It stayed that way  
until one day,  
I really did hear your voice.

I awoke to you  
sitting in a chair  
by my side  
silently mending  
someone's jacket.

How you were able  
to make it  
across the ocean  
and find me here  
in Purgatory,  
I will never know.  
I just  
admired your courage  
and felt

like crying from your love  
but I did not think  
my eyes could shed anymore.

For the rest of my war  
in that ward  
you either  
stayed by my side  
or helped the Sisters  
tend to the men.

We said very little.  
I don't think I could even speak.  
But you were there  
with me  
and it was  
okay now.

You wouldn't leave my side  
for the rest of your life.

Seeing me there,  
and seeing the men  
about us,  
you really understood  
what we had done  
to each other  
and why  
none of us had  
any voices left.

You didn't seem  
to mind  
that in those  
trenches,  
I lost  
your headband  
and your  
Grandmother's Rosary.

You read to me  
in Kashubian.  
Reminding me who I was.  
You read to the men.  
Though,  
nobody could

understand your words,  
everyone appreciated  
it nonetheless.

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## Stanislaus Wedding Bells

Saint Stan's bells  
were ringing-  
Over and over,  
persistent-  
For days.  
For us.  
For love.

Bronze tuned in perfect harmony  
with each of our  
family names  
etched upon them-  
As if our Fathers already knew  
that one day we would be  
together,  
in perfect harmony.

As we kissed before the altar  
and beneath  
our ornately carved  
driftwood beam  
before all of the islanders  
and our related mainlanders  
before God  
and before the Devil  
and before  
all of the angels  
and all of the demons  
I knew you were  
the entire universe.  
There was nothing but you.  
There is nothing but you.

For days on end,  
Toast after Toast-  
Endless *nostrovias*.  
We danced.  
The accordion band  
played and played.  
You danced  
with your Father,  
with my Sisters,  
with Jacob,  
with Johannes,

with Anton,  
and all of our other friends.

I did not think  
our wedding would ever end.  
The island must have known  
it had to make this  
the grand finale.

Warm  
buttered bread  
and fried fish  
and Blatz  
and Pabst.

We danced in the tavern.  
We danced along the shore.  
The children raced on foot  
along the length  
as we clapped  
and laughed  
and cheered them on.

It was so wonderful there.  
To be able to  
sit and think  
to talk together  
to watch the moon over the lake.  
You never stopped reminding me  
that because you bought me  
that graphite and those papers  
so long ago,  
despite all of our drawings  
that I still owed you  
something beautiful.

Our fathers worked together  
to strike a deal  
with the old Dettlaff's widow  
when she left  
for the mainland  
to live with her sisters-  
To furnish us  
a house,  
with a fence,  
and a coal shed.

Our wedding gifts  
of chickens  
and a cat  
finally had  
their own yard  
to play in.

You cleared out  
a spot,  
beside the shed,  
and declared  
that one day  
when we buy a boat  
it can dock here.  
You intended  
to make your brothers  
dig a channel out  
of the marsh  
so that we could  
come and go  
by land or sea  
as we pleased.

For some time  
we were happy,  
together,  
and home-  
Until that mailman  
delivered our doom.

---

## **Act III**

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**Return**

After the war-  
To you,  
I still barely spoke,  
unsure if  
I was even  
still- a Kashubian.  
Unsure if  
I could look  
at the faces  
of the families  
of our friends.

Silently,  
we crossed the Atlantic  
aboard the hospital ship,  
holding our breath-  
Ever weary  
of a final attack,  
but we were together  
and if it were so  
that would be that.

When we returned,  
I laid in bed  
for three days or more  
before even  
seeing another soul.

While we were gone  
Grandmother passed  
to join Grandfather at sea.

A few families had left  
for the mainland already  
including my oldest Sister  
who married a German.

The first day  
that I had the strength  
to hobble out the door  
clutching my cane,  
struggling to walk,  
you found me by the shore-  
Running my hand



along the stern  
of my father's boat  
remembering  
the textures  
of weathered wood  
and chipped paint-  
Breathing deep,  
the cool lake breeze  
and trying to take in  
the smells  
of salted fish  
and baking bread.

You stood with me there  
for what seemed like  
forever-  
And I remember  
asking you  
where were all the boats?  
The harbor seemed  
to only have  
some big ore haulers  
and just a few  
steamboats  
coming and going-  
No more schooners.  
No barques.  
No brigantines.  
And all the makinaws  
seemed to be  
derelict upon the shore.

In the tavern,  
the accordion still played-  
It played for you  
and it played for me  
and for  
Johannes,  
Jacob,  
Anton,  
and the others.

The old timers  
poured me a glass  
and poured out  
50 or more

for the gone  
and missing men.

We drank to our health.

*Nostrovia.*

Thankful,  
that at least  
a few of us  
returned.

I knew I should  
want to dance  
a polka with you,  
but my leg  
was on fire  
and my ear  
was still ringing.  
And you knew,  
so you just sat with me.  
All those nights.

We tried to make work where we could  
the fishing did not seem to be  
as good as it should-  
As it was  
when the sun was still bright.

They say that,  
because of the war  
the Mills  
were working overtime  
for so long  
and they were  
careless and hasty  
and put  
too much dirty water  
back into the sea.

The new Coast Guard  
was sick of  
spending their time  
helping our  
aged and ever  
distressed vessels  
so many were  
condemned.

You just couldn't float  
on whatever you wanted  
anymore.

They said that  
the mouth of the rivers  
was too important  
to let us do as we please.

We already knew  
that  
the mouth of the river  
was important-  
To our way of life.  
That's why we lived here,  
because our Fathers knew  
it was just like the Hel  
from whence we came.  
That's why the Algonquians  
lived here before us  
as what would have been  
the first Milwaukeeans.

We didn't need  
strategy and calculations  
to know what we had.  
We just watched the way  
the schools went to and fro,  
the way the waves came in,  
the way the birds flew-  
How the wind felt.

Now they were telling us  
what to think  
and what to do.

## The Socialists

For as long as I can remember  
we had been  
pestered  
by  
the city  
who seemed  
ashamed of us.  
They wanted us  
to go to school  
to use machines  
and electricity.  
To be one of them.  
We just wanted to fish.

For as long as long I can remember  
we had been  
pestered  
by  
the Mills  
who wanted  
our land  
and our sea.

They claimed that we had no deed.  
No rights to the homes  
that our Grandparents built  
with their bare hands  
from driftwood and wreckage  
and a few good sawmill planks.  
We had been here for lifetimes,  
many of us lived not far from  
where we were born.

They said they bought the island  
from the city  
all too eager  
to erase us.  
They thought we were  
just  
more Polish laborers  
but we were Kashubians  
from Jastarnia  
and Jarata  
and Hel

people who  
enjoyed a well-earned  
calmer freshwater sea  
than the Baltic  
which our forbearers fished-  
lived and died.

We left behind  
a world where  
a King could sentence  
Stanislaus to death  
for being a good man.

We came to America  
for freedom and democracy.

But now just as before  
they want to sentence us  
to death  
over land disputes  
and rights of ownership.

I fear  
that this time,  
the Great Stanislaus  
will not  
be able to  
resurrect Piotr again  
to testify  
that we were rightful,  
and we had paid  
for what was ours.

The best we can do now,  
is work with the Sewer Socialists  
to fight in the courts  
against the Industrialists  
and the Capitalists  
who would rather  
we didn't be free  
but toil in their enterprises  
for nothing more  
than some milk and bread  
and honey  
and enough money

to maybe pay the rent  
but nothing more.

Trial after trial.  
Some families were spared.  
Some were ejected.  
Some were allowed to stay  
but made to pay rent to  
the Steel Company.

But how could we pay rent?  
The men were old-  
or gone.  
So many were widows.  
And the Capitalists  
would say  
the water was theirs,  
the fish in the sea were theirs,  
and we would have  
to pay fees  
just to live.

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**Erosion**

You tried  
to stay strong  
as we loaded the last  
of our possessions  
onto the ferry-  
To cross for the mainland  
this last and final time.  
I saw the tears welling  
in those eyes-  
The same wet eyes  
I saw in my dreams  
that reminded me  
of the lake,  
and of home,  
when I was  
sent away  
to France  
to fight  
for our freedom  
and our island.

The man  
from the Mill  
with the briefcase  
who oversaw  
us leave our  
lives behind,  
checked us off-  
Just a note  
on a paper  
to satisfy  
their rite  
as they took from  
us the last  
of what we had  
worked so hard for.

Dispersed now,  
we would still  
pass by some islanders  
or meet them  
at church  
or the tavern,  
but now we lived

among the other  
people in our  
little Polish flat-  
Just a basement  
apartment  
with a bedroom,  
and a kitchen  
and a stove.

No more chickens  
but we still had  
our wedding cat.

Though we were Kashubian,  
and they were Serbs,  
and they were Germans,  
and they were other Slavs  
and Poles,  
and though we had  
been in Milwaukee  
for nearly a century,  
in their eyes  
we were all just  
an immigrant community.

I tried my best  
to work for us  
but my leg  
never ceased  
to let us down  
and my ears  
never stopped ringing.

Though maybe I was just  
hearing  
all of the hammers  
and the saws  
from across the river  
as they tore down  
our old homes  
and cemented over  
a thousand years  
of people's histories.

The little pension  
they paid us



for my leg  
and our freedom  
was not enough  
and was subject  
still to delay and disruption.

The promised bonus  
that they legislated into law  
never came.

Funny how those in power  
get to choose which laws  
apply when and where  
but we men  
just get what we get  
no matter how we vote  
or how much that we give,  
or what we fight for.  
What did we even fight for?

A few times,  
I tried to work in a factory  
but every time I entered  
I would hear  
those overbearing noises,  
the ringing in my ears,  
the whirring of machines,  
the flashes of sparks,  
and I would be  
reminded  
of Johannes,  
and Jacob,  
and Anton,  
and the tanks  
and the planes  
and the trucks  
and the bombs  
and the bullets  
and the gas.

I never had to tell you-  
That it was just  
much too much...  
Because you had seen  
and you had known  
and understood.

We scraped a living  
as best we could  
though we rarely  
set out to sea.

The doctors said  
that due to your work  
in the textile factory  
the persistent cough  
that you developed  
to match the  
persistent ringing  
in my ears  
was natural  
but then those  
long hours  
to keep us afloat  
took their toll  
and you grew fatigued  
and the doctors no longer  
knew what to say.

Even though you stayed home  
and I went out  
and swallowed my pride  
and tried to get a job  
in a more peaceful setting  
for whatever pay  
your condition never  
bettered.

Then,  
you were the one  
lying in bed  
not saying much  
while I read to you  
in our tongue  
trying my best  
to remember  
what some of  
the words meant.

It didn't seem like  
the sun ever shined  
as bright anymore.  
Maybe it was

just the smoke and the fire  
from the industries  
and the constructions  
that served  
only the elites  
and further condemned  
us.

I sat by your bedside  
trying my best  
to draw you birds  
from memory.

I thought maybe one day  
we could go back  
to that park  
and look out  
at our old island  
and be those kids again  
but it was not to be.

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## A Divine Comedy

Our Fathers left Europa  
abandoning the whims of the Kings  
just so that their sons  
could return and die  
at the whims of Kings.

Though we fought bravely  
in faraway France,  
those of us who did return-  
Returned to no home.

The war did not touch our soil,  
yet those same Industrialists  
who built bombs  
were not content with  
just taking their homes, there.  
They also took ours, here too.

They treated us  
like *barefoot peasants*  
but couldn't put us down  
with their guns,  
so they killed us  
with fountain pens.

They took our sails  
by regulating our vessels  
out of compliance.

They pumped our sea  
full of runoff,  
poisoning the water,  
killing the fish,  
and used lawyers  
to take our land  
and our dignity-  
So that we may  
no longer be free.

Our way of life,  
living in harmony with the sea-  
fishing, laughing, drinking...  
And weddings that spanned  
a week or more

were gone-  
just like that.

They made us use English  
and forget our own tongue.

By taking our freedom,  
they forced us into their factories  
so that we too would be poisoned  
and maimed just like they did  
in Europa,  
and like they did  
to our beloved sea-  
For wages that didn't even meet ends.

Though,  
the Socialists put up a valiant effort,  
on our behalf.  
Two decades in the court  
delayed the expulsion  
from our little strip of land  
in the harbor.

The old ones got to die  
the way they lived.  
The young ones left as they do.  
Holdouts lasted quite some time.

Once you took ill  
and it was all that I could do,  
but watch and wait-  
Looking up at our driftwood beam,  
I prayed to Stanislaus  
to give me the strength  
to oppose this *immoral world*.

And he did,  
and I knew:

*I could be like him, too.*

So, once you passed  
and we said our Mass,  
I sold everything.

With the proceeds,  
I was able  
to furnish a small  
fishing boat.

Beautiful tree bones-  
Wave battered,  
and in need of repairs,  
with torn sails,  
and faded paint-

*Just like we used to know.*

For that final winter,  
I worked and lived  
in the harbor  
as was my place,  
fixing her up-  
The best way I knew how.

Many a polski lent a hand,  
or a hammer,  
or a bucket of paint.  
Everyone knew.  
No one objected.  
Nobody questioned  
how an old man  
with the Kaiser's shrapnel  
embedded in his leg,  
who could barely walk,  
would pilot this vessel.

It was our way of life  
*and death.*

So, come spring,  
when  
the Great Michigan thawed.  
I set sail.  
Passing the Industrial Dump  
that used to be our home.  
Out of the mouth,  
past the Breakwater Light,  
and into the open bay.

Finally, free,  
I never saw land again.

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