

Winedark

a short story
by Michael Descy

Homer couldn't see the winedark sea. He could smell it. Dark, heavy. It creeps down the airpipe like molasses down a spoon. It coats the inside of your lungs like Pepto Bismol lines your stomach in the commercials. The sea. I live there, now, on the winedark sea. No one knows why Homer called it that. The undulating green water, and the froth it spits, have so little to do with the flat, red surface of the Burgundy in my glass. When I peer out at my stretch of ocean, the tales of mermaids and mercantilism spring to life. But I can't imagine wine there. Homer! A blind man, raving. No Teiresias, was he. Not a seer, but a Poet.

Napoleon had a mistress with perfect breasts. Tens of thousands of years of breast evolution had conspired to create two glorious orbs that hung just right, and they were his to hold. So, of course, he had to kill her. No one really knows why he put her to death, but I like to think Josephine found them out. Napoleon's hands went numb with the memory of those mammaries. He was, after all, a man—a short one, at that, with terrible hemorrhoids—who couldn't believe the luck at having the most perfect breasts of the world all to himself. So he had someone take a mold of one of them, for him to hold forever. As his mistress lay her head on the guillotine, her bared breast dropped into the bowl of plaster of Paris waiting just beneath her.

From that, the wineglass was born. Homer never had anything that elegant to raise to his lips. I stand, ankle-deep in froth, and fill the remembrance of that woman's breast with cold, green water. I lift it up to contemplate the struggles encased within, but they are too insignificant for me to see. The waves lick my feet with mongrel tongues, but without a microscope, their passengers elude me.

I remember when I was little, my parents took me to a lobster house by the sea. By the docks. At low tide, it smelled like dead things there. Dead things and clam chowder. It was always low tide there. Black piers erupted out of the mud like fairy-tale beanstalks. The docks. Old men wearing yellow raincoats hobbled about, looking like they just stepped right off the cover of a fish-sticks box. Or was it only in my memory?

Thoughts foam up on my mind's great shore, then are drawn back into the uncertain sea. If you cupped your hands, you could scoop salt right out of the air. Solid. White. Salt. That much you can't forget. It tasted good, and must have preserved all those dead things, somehow, because they never went away.

While my parents finished dissecting their lobsters at the table, I wandered out to the end of the pier, and climbed down to see the boats. There weren't many. Wooden docks, tied together with bowlines and wishful thinking, bobbed about on the surface of the water. They looked like rafts to me. I jumped from one to another, over chasms too wide for seven-year-old legs. The waves beneath reached, but I always slipped through their fingers; their giant arms bowled over each raft instead of dragging me full-fathom-five. The docks were wet, and you know what that means. I should have fallen through the space between, sucked into the winedark sea. I should have lost my balance. I should have slipped. I should have joined the smell of the dead things and clam chowder. But I couldn't stand still.

No one was watching. Perhaps that's what protected me.

My father emerged from that restaurant well before my mother did. She was freshening up or something, he said as he collected me. In one hand, he cradled the remains of his after-dinner drink; with the other, he took my hand. We left the pier and walk to sea's sandy lip, leaving parallel trails for the wind to erase, for me to forget, and the water never stopped moving. After a while, just looking out at the lighthouse across the bay, my mother appear on the dock above us, and waved. My father tipped his glass toward the foam, and let whatever remained drop where the waves licked the sand. He never explained why.

Napoleon sipped orange juice from the wrong end of that tit every morning. Josephine didn't have a clue. I like that. Every morning his soldiers drank brown water out of their boots. If there was water. If there were boots.

My father wanted to be the Homer of the Second World War. This was, I fear, to console himself for not being the next Napoleon in the First. Not much of a general, my pop. His whole troop was cut to pieces on a nameless field in France. But, thirty years later, he returned, landing in Normandy six hours after the main troops. There he was, filming the aftermath, body over crumpled body, a sea of blood—winedark. He sought to

capture its essence, its importance. What it meant to be an Allied soldier lying face down in seaweed, face down in sand. A still-ticking watch washed over by red waves. Wine. Dark. Time mocks the un-ticking heart. Maybe Homer was onto something after all.