

The LITTLE BOAT

I.

THE SUN DROPS DOWN BEHIND A LONG GREY CLOUD.
THE BREEZE THAT COMBED THE WHITECAPS
FROM THE WORRIED AFTERNOON SEA
RETURNS TO REST (BUT NO MAN CAN SAY WHERE).
OUT ON THE POINT THE LIGHTHOUSE SENSES CHANGE.
OBEDIENT AND UNNOTICED NOW
IT BEGINS ITS NIGHT'S UNCEASING LABORS
ITS FIRST TASK THAT OF AN ANCIENT PRIESTHOOD:
TO BID FAREWELL AND SAFE RETURN
TO THE SETTING SUN.

AND IN THIS TIME OF ORANGE TURNING BLUE
AND BLUE THROUGH DEEPER BLUE TO BLACK
A BOAT STEERS SLOWLY HOMEWARDS
SAILS GATHERING IN THE FAILING BREEZE
AND MASTS SOON LOST IN STARS
THAT ALWAYS SURPRISE AT THIS UNCERTAIN HOUR.

THE OLD SAILORS WATCH THE LITTLE BOAT MAKE HER APPROACH
AND HAVE NO NEED FOR WORDS.
THEY KNOW HER WELL: THEY RECOGNIZE HER STRUGGLES
AGAINST THE LACK OF WIND AND THE TURNING TIDE.
"SHE IS TIRED," SAYS ONE AT LAST,
AND THE OTHERS NOD:
THEY KNOW OF YEAR UPON YEAR OF VOYAGES,
CONTENTIONS WITH ANGRY UNFORGIVING SEAS,
CROSS WINDS, DENSE FOGS, HIDDEN SHOALS,
THE ELEMENTS THAT ARE BOTH LIFE AND DEATH.

BUT BRAVELY TIMBERED AND STRONG OF HEART
(OF STOUT DANISH BUILD, MEN SAY - NONE BETTER!)
AND GIFTED WITH GOOD AND LOVING CREWS
THE LITTLE BOAT HAS PREVAILED, AND NOW
IN STATELY EVENING PROGRESS DOWN THE CHANNEL
CELEBRATES HER VICTORY - CALL IT SUCH AT LAST OVER
THOSE FEARFUL DEMONS OF SEA AND SKY
WHOSE NAMES ALL SEAMEN KNOW BUT DARE NOT SAY.

AND IN THE HARBOR TWILIGHT, HOME AT LAST
THE LITTLE BOAT IS MADE FAST TO THE QUAY
SAILS FURLED AND LIGHTS EXTINGUISHED
ONE BY ONE.

The LITTLE BOAT

THE OLD MEN WAIT TO GREET THE CREW
WHO HAVE BROUGHT THE LITTLE BOAT SAFE TO BERTH.
THEY THINK: WE WILL SEE PERHAPS AN OLD COMRADE, A FAMILIAR FACE,
OR RECOGNIZE A WORD, A SMILE; THEY ARE AFTER ALL
SAILORS LIKE OURSELVES, MAYBE MEN OF THIS TOWN,
BUT ALWAYS MEN OF THE SEA ...

THE OLD SAILORS WAIT IN VAIN:
THOSE WHO DISEMBARK ARE QUIET AND UNSMILING
AS THEY MAKE THEIR WAY ACROSS THE PRECARIOUS GANGWAY
THEN TURN DOWN THE QUAY TOWARDS THE TOWN
WITHOUT A WORD OR BACKWARD GLANCE.
THEY CARRY THEIR HEAVY SEABAGS
AS THEY WOULD CARRY DRUNKEN STRANGERS
ON TIRED SHOULDERS:
THERE IS NO LOVE IN THEIR UNFAMILIAR FACES.

DEEP IN THE HEARTS OF THE OLD SAILORS, UNSPOKEN,
IS NOW THE CERTAIN KNOWLEDGE: THE LITTLE BOAT
VOYAGES NO MORE.

MOMENTS PASS, SOUNDLESS
BUT FOR THE SILLY SONG OF LITTLE WET WAVES
AGAINST THE IDLE GRANITE AT THEIR FEET.

“NOW SHE RESTS,” SAYS ONE OF THE OLD SAILORS QUIETLY.
“MAY GOD BE GOOD TO HER,” SAYS ANOTHER.
THE THIRD SAYS NOTHING, BUT RAISES A HAND
AS BROWN AND HARD AS A MAINMAST
IN GESTURE OF SALUTE AND FAREWELL.

II.

THE GENEROUS MOON, WHO KNOWS NEITHER AGE
NOR SORROW, POURS SILVER ON THE TOWN
AND ON THE QUAY, DESERTED NOW
EXCEPT FOR THREE OLD SAILORS
WHO ONCE, LONG YEARS PAST, FAR FROM LAND,
WOULD HAVE BLESSED THE MOON'S BRIGHT CHEERFUL GIFT.

BUT THE GIFT IS NOW UNHEEDED - HAVE THEY NOT WITNESSED
AN UNEXPECTED SHADOW FALL ACROSS THE LITTLE BOAT
FROM SOMEWHERE IN THIS RIOT OF MOONLIGHT
SO THAT SHE ALONE, OF ALL THE VESSELS IN THE HARBOR,
SITS IN DARKNESS AT HER BERTH?

The LITTLE BOAT

THE OLD MEN CLOSE THEIR EYES, AND SHUDDER,
AND THINK OF STORIES TOLD BY SHIPMATES LONG DEAD
SHADOWS NOW THEMSELVES.

WITH THE SAD EVEN PACE OF MOURNERS
AND FEWER AND FEWER WORDS
THE OLD MEN REACH AT LAST THE TAVERN
A SMOKY WARM PLACE
LOUD WITH DARK RUM AND SAILOR-TALK.

THIS IS THE PLACE TO HIDE THEIR BROKEN HEARTS,
AND IN IT ARE HEALING AND DEEPEST LOVE:
THEY WILL DRINK LATE INTO THE NIGHT
AND TELL STORIES - SOME OF THEM TRUE -
ABOUT THE LITTLE BOAT.

THEN AFTER THE TAVERN DOOR HAS CLOSED
WITH ALL GENTLENESS BEHIND THEM
THEY WILL STOP FOR ONE LAST LOOK
ACROSS THE PEACEFUL MOONLIT HARBOR.
“MAY GOD BE KIND TO THE LITTLE BOAT,” THEY WILL MURMUR
ALMOST TOGETHER.

THEN THEY WILL TURN THE DIM CORNER
AND BE GONE.

- 1997

= o o o =