1967

Somber dolphins

Frederick M. DeMarinis

The University of Montana

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SOMBER DOLPHINS

By
Frederick M. DeMarinis
B.A. University of Montana, 1961

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts
UNIVERSITY OF MONTANA

1967

Approved by:

Chairman, Board of Examiners

Dean, Graduate School

MAY 31 1967
Date
Acknowledgements

Voices International for "Kodak Blue"

Nexus for "Mirage 1"

Epoch for "Dore's Vase"

Little Review for "Monday Beach" and "The Day After Words"
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Old Man Walking

When his dying heel bit gravel on the shoulder he counted swamp birds to himself. Not stupid in his season or out, just bent, he likely knew the proper names to birds we called gray lunks deranged by swamp and oil slicks. Eighty years of modern history stormed his brain with scenes no one else would tour. Though he likely had a lover chances are she died before this road was paved. Diesels bulled him inches west.

We knew his leather, saw it gnarled in Butte where copper binds skin to flesh a way that calls to mind this sea-brazed weather. Here none ask what tide beached you first, spun your inner ear with swelling dreams, cracked your eye with salt.

Cars spin down freeways to streamlined junk, too fast to be curious for what seems tied down. We ask our maps for answers, and you, as usual, disappear in rear-view scenes, curving into space. Our explosive cars go their roads away, led by asphalt turns. We are young and free, they say, those strange birds are tied to swamps.
Svengali Fading

We cried, or wanted to, in spite
of make-up made for 1930,
when Trilby, so blond and white, fell.
We smelled, or thought we did, the incense
that must have stung your eyes, fading
in one last try to pierce
the loud cabaret, blind smoke of hookahs,
the sallow lears of near-east deadbeats,
sailors of the world --freighter steam
cold in their palms-- shouting,
On with the bloody show! _la blonde_
and you, sagging to the stage,
no strength in your baton.

Memory, how its glaze sweeps your eye
at the far end of sight, and how it dims
public noise in the roar of slow blood
seeping from your brain --this is how it ends,
those last scenes, cut to tip the heart
with telegraphed cues, drugged Turks,
smoked wisdom coiling from their smiles,
the close-up camera posing the impossible
question you answer without a twitch.
Your despised magic is dead
and everyone knows it.
The dive clears out
as alarmed sirens warble
certain trouble, and placid Turks,
practical in a pinch, leave
Trilby's chiseled loser
heroic in English tweeds
holding the bag as usual
but spoiling for a clean fight
above your tired face.
Once Lonely Son

His room above the war surplus store, his Luger, captured in a famous battle, waited for his knock. In yellow light from the dark wall he identified the peeling door he admitted finally as his own and it opened on the empty room of his only bad dream.

But when he put the big blue barrel to his mouth and heard the dry trigger click that sent his brains spreading through the universe he hated, and later, coming to on the same barroom floor where several familiar faces hovered over his, and he heard himself sing in the voice he admitted finally as his own, "Kiss me sweet, kiss me now,
for once I was a lonely son,
the barkeep merely said, "I'll stand
the old bum one more shot,
then out."
Dore's Vase

That neo-classical rape scene
killed us in the gallery, and now
this romantic vase in the vestibule.
Look, satyrs with Clydesdale hoofs.
Those profiles, so jovial,
like silent film Romans
playing up one last orgy
before the quake. Bacchantes
on slopes writhe against the slide
downhill. At bottom, huge bugs
fight a losing war with cherubs.
Silenus is too fat to fall.
Everyone's stoned except the cherubs
who are too young, and the bugs
who'd rather eat leaves.
Gravity is the final aphrodisiac.
Cherubs have wings, bugs are weightless
even in bronze, but the bacchantes
are clinging to vines
hoping for a sober hero.
Through all the uproar
each fig leaf stays put
like a matinee cowboy's hat.
With things so screened
no lover can single out his goal.
No stopped act strains against
the frozen bronze. Look,
the mice are moving up.
But wait, this is nothing,
in the next room
two wild-eyed rococo unicorns
are spoiling for the goldsmith
who wouldn't cast their balls.
Jungle Queen

From the flesh-eating fish of the river
he saved the blond queen of the jungle
(lost daughter of a famous explorer)
and on luxurious moss in the moonlight
did not make the pass she expected.
Tuned to the highly uplifting
he quoted his favorite author
until she fell asleep uneasy
holding his transistor short-wave.

From the dark of the wild Orinoco
they emerged into lights of the city
where sambas from underground nightclubs
tickled the soles of her feet
and rhythms she knew from the jungle
licked at the flame in her hips.

When at last in the museum of Rio
he showed her a bust of her father
(the great bird-watcher from Vienna)
she quoted her favorite author
whose hard unsyllabic slogan
aroused the guards of the city
who found her alone in the plaza
washing her mouth in the fountain.
Bulletin

The mayor of Buenos Aires has been arrested.
Athens is under siege once more.
Orbital bombers are being tested.
Palomar's watching the sun's tight core.

Athens is under siege once more.
Our local beach has been Geiger-counted.
Palomar's scratching the sun's tight core.
Peace in Athens has been discounted.

Orbital bombers are being tested.
Our sunburned brains are tight with news.
Widows in Boston are being molested.
Sun can be cancerous say medical reviews.

Palomar's watching the sun's tight core.
Our local beach will soon be tested.
A convention of heroes has called for war.
Sunbathers in Boston will be arrested.

Sunbathers in Boston will be arrested.
On Palomar they're reading medical reviews.
Arterial highways are cracked and congested.
Athens no longer is in the news.
Mirage I

we hear trawlers
    in the fog

the absent screech of gulls
    muffled in the fog

and the bomber's drone

and sly submarines
    passing for whales
    among whales
    too bored to care

in the fog

out of fog
    coast guard cutters come
    searching for contraband
    cutting up the bay

throwing lights on outlaw lovers
    who sabotage the beach

where dark men
    with Spanish innocence
    net the surf
    for parcels
marijuana in their hollow heels
    while
    on the cliffs
Russian priests
    zero in with eight pound balls
no vodka from the czar
    and
all the cars are pulled
    aside
    and
all the jets are down for keeps
    and
only you
    and
I
are left to see and hear
conspiracies
    in the fog
Mirage 2

Shoreline whitecaps applaud
    our winded stagger.
Fire in the air
is doused by fog and we say
let's go back to the hotel,
duck this salt fog spray
    or spill vermouth
until that sea
gags in grief.

Wind like this so arctic
    should give some details
of certain snow.

Blizzards channel down
our knowing bones and we
like mallards bluffed
    to break formation
lean our shaky parts
on misread cues
and
flop.

In Montana, mallards
    would delta south
from northern skies
and we would say, Of course.
Here, our roles are upstaged
by smart gulls, beach crows
and the Packard roadsters
of forgotten stars
restored to perfect chrome.
The Tacticians
(after Eugenio Montale)

Against the hot sun-baked wall
old men score the kills
of blackbirds, or watch grass snakes
slide through cropped lawns toward water.

They watch long columns of army ants
infiltrating the weeds, and call them
"unconscious tacticians." Or they peek
through the fig tree's leaves to see

the moving wrinkles of the ocean
demolish themselves against the cliffs.
And as you walk, Bikini girl,
held lovely by the bronze sun,

they are reminded that life is war.
Unaware of us, you merely follow
the slow serpentine climb
of the high white wall

topped with the razor brown
of a million smashed beer bottles.
Mendocino

The town tacks down the hill.
Wood frame homes lean and rot
paintless into the green wind.
Today the sky and sea are twins.
A trawler floats by corking buoys
that hum history to themselves.
The fleet is out, the town
could be land-locked in Dakota
cocked for tricks sky might work
on ripe wheat. By ordinance
the chalk beach was made
the public dumping ground.

These days artists call it Maine
and sell clay at San Francisco rates.
A contradiction of currents
that sends surf in sharp deltas
to the crescent shore, is snared
in certain oils. As ever, the milk
horizon cancels the eye.

The town, no eye for quaint decay,
waits. Oil and clay have lost
all defeat. Alone,
the Foursquare Lighthouse church
confirms: men decay. The sea
is never older than a day.

As ever, the wind retains
its green. Houses lose
their paint. Uncertain Russians
break for Sitka or glacial steppes
where the fatal trick Slavic dreams
from a spiked samovar.
Walk the spit a mile until the town has charm, --west, where the sea pounds abstractions out of paint, and otters for the czar crowd the dead hotel with endless talk of home. Relax your stare and sea becomes sky. Ghost trawlers track the milk expanse. Easy to believe a sudden balalaika, the hills turned arctic and dangerous with Siberian wolves.

Vodka, when good, drums the south wind out of mind. When rare, robs the ancient wisdom a squaw's contempt puts on. Wisdom in a stoned man's face could gag a sage. Your name screamed in sea-turned caves comes back strange, no alphabet here like yours. Hands, cruel without identity, spread rough on shaking thighs. Your terms are hard. Home is what you lost this hand before you learned the rules. Now you know,
get out means please die somewhere else.

The sea breaks mean, too. Otters can't mate when survival means keep on the move, don't get caught. Listen, these caves were not planned for love, and we agreed, those hills are cut by wind that drives syllables down your throat.
Pacific Shore

Volcanic stones ram the phased roll of tidal drifts. From shale cliffs we watched each white burst fill stale tide pools where hermit crabs scrape for the safety of shells.

Past the jammed collapse of wave on wave, pelicans comb the swells for catch. Gulls stand sentinel on high peaks, and one plover tests stones for shaken clams.

Look, that closing fog could fool a rigged ship, cloud it for a day then set it free near those shelves of grounded rock splintering sea.
We give ourselves Spanish names, mourn the loss of sea-caught brothers, then cast these borrowed ghosts to the tide. Battered logs pound themselves to splinter like grieving fists. Love,
we must climb those cliffs,
the tide is reaching every peak.
We must drop our Spanish names, find
high ground where memories we know
are real will try to make us mourn.

We must climb those cliffs,
this battlefield of stones,
raise once more our worn-out names
from littered drifts of wounded words
and the groans of a wrecked guitar.
Night Beach

Waves collapse at dusk. No sound of tide. Jellyfish sink like flags. Kelp flies lose interest. Gray, deadbeat gulls scrounge east. Fold the blanket now. That dark wind is hard with salt mist and this beach is older than belief.

Fold the blanket now. If we stay we might see water blacken to sky or a freighter's lamp ghosting that void.
Monday Beach

Fog has shortened the western horizon.
Absent shills give odds this flat stone,
spun across the chop of charcoal swells,
will slice that sea near its Midway Islands.
Aware that I am aimless today, two gulls edge
toward ankle-deep water. The wind changes
first in speed, then direction, stops, begins.
Baffled cormorants are pinned against the sky.

On the northern edge of this vacant beach
the blowing silhouettes of two old women
whirl a peasant dance. Coastal music picks
a rhythm from the wind that planes across
the rise and fall of dunes. Sun is a bulb
locked inside milk-thick sky. No shadows.
The hemmed-in day is scaled to please the eye.
I print the sand behind the quick slip of foam.
My prints dissolve. I slide across the dark
curve of a stranger's eye, then disappear for good.
Old Story

Venus, the shamming bitch, 
ducks out when sirens raid 
the plans lovers think are pat. 
Courage, that myth of ghosts, 
goes up cold in smoke and leaves 
the yellow smile that saves 
your real face. Survival, 
that mad-eyed fox, stalks 
in every automatic smile.

And lovers, when bad times 
come around at last, when 
the walls of their private Troy 
are down, also choose to live. 
Or saying, "We choose to die," 
Fortune, decked out in fine 
Greek smiles, ridicules 
simple hearts until they smile 
themselves, and the armies smile

and everyone agrees, Greeks 
and Trojans, that life is short,
no one keeps his winnings
in this game, and when we rape
all your brides we will sigh
philosophic in our beer
telling you the only winner
is the man without a stake.

And Venus, the shamming whore,
palms her bait, her trump
of spades, and wheels away
to some new Troy
where lovers have it made.
Big Rain

Ambition that would soar
would plunge on days like this.
Not me. Like moss I feed
on the gray overcast.
Where my shadow could fall
is no concern of mine.
The world without shadow
is a private room
small enough to own.
Tamalpais

The road past the highway
is a foot trail. We follow
the steep rise, gritting hard
against loose shale we spill
into a green expanse. The shadow
of this mountain leans past the valley
against brown hills spotted by stucco homes
in rows. It moves, as if this old volcano
could bulge once more with primal thunder.
High up, a lofty jet chalks the sky.
Take my hand. Before us lies
the corner we must turn to face
the low sun and western gale
cool above the coming fog banks.
Our shadows fall behind.
On the west face scrub trees
are scored and bent against
the red sky spilling with wind.
Mist is spreading quickly
over hidden beaches.
Our shouts of conquest
blow past our ears. We near
the top, alone and winded,
nowhere else to turn.
The path falls away
to crumbling shale and stunted shrub.
Across the west rim of the world
the sun is pooling its final orange.
Past dissolving blue,
stars pick up strength.
We call for wings, raise our arms
to wind, flap once and drop.
Orange vapor trails are breaking up
in the high jet stream gale.
Birds are diving for their nests.
Take my hand. It's time to go,
there's nowhere else to turn.
But wait, the searchlights
of a distant grand opening
are teasing dolphins from clouds!
Narcissus In Hipboots

At noon you see yourself fish the sky.  
You stuff the mouths of trout with words.  
Light angles off the water to needle  
your vision but all you do is shade  
your eyes to nag a two-foot bull.

I thought I had you once, broke  
your prize head with a perfect stone  
but you were squaw, bloat  
scavenger, bait, unfit for pan.

I tossed you back.  
You curved for murk  
against the final roll.  
Deep in green  
you became a branch,  
then nothing,  
in the spinners of noon.
Beach Man

Where dreams get tide-ditched and withered
counthood's lost boats get beached, and you
in your salt get weathered. With skin
like a whaler's leather, you guard
your sucker heart from surface bother.
Though they drown your lovely bather,
or let him die of weather, sing--
sing tuneless in your aching salt
above the beached and wailing father.
Cliffs Near Oceanside

Past faces turn west to jump the future.
Epic waves laugh the way high Greeks
cheer a wedding or clap the birth of a son.
And I am conscious only of my skin
burnished white like the futile shield
of an ancient shell.

Plunge the phased roll, strike for Japan,
let the green roar drown your name,
the fragment moon smile you west.
This game ends here. Skin seems rare.
Bone, priceless. Pretend to flesh
once again the sovereignty of bone.
Turn, climb these dunes, those cliffs,
let a stone drop from heights where waves
are wrinkles, wind supreme. Traffic back
to reasoned walls where you console
a way of life without an epic jump.
January blows alive
with the Tijuana sirocco
and exploding skirts flag two-dollar bulls.
Neon thighs flare red with flamenco heat
to chords of night wild with tequila.

In Catholic countries whores are proud as priests.
Give it meaning. Say pagans can breathe
where protestants haven't polished the air.
No matter. See those full-tit toreros
making every dive their arena,
strutting the challenge that brings
each northern ducktail to communion.

They teach of pass and turn
and how the matador's killing thrust
is given by the bull.

The world above the Tijuana river
spins with a purpose no one sings.
Date palms test the wind for stray guitars.
Nothing. Traffic. The rigid flight of women
from men who clown above a cardiac chill
and claim the certain logic
of several graveyard shifts.

Below the bordering river
Mexico has no purpose.
Black priests balance
the rainbow whores,
and shiftless Mexicans
claim a policy of peppers,
the logic of guitars.
Hardboiled Easter

That day you went invisible croaking Eli
until bored deadbeats sent out for vinegar in fun,
and friends you left behind began to look ahead,
anywhere but in,
your first priests, the ants,
carried the hard pellets of your blood
to their queen. Your wounds were bright,
you kept us on pins and needles
thinking about those Roman spikes
until we healed you, posthumously.
Ballad for a Crafty Buddhist

Tanzan you old puzzler,
you spend the emperor's money
filling young heads with theories
and chuckle up your Japanese sleeves.
That girl, did she see
your glinting eye turn ambiguous
in rain? Did she wait, fake distress?
You caught her up, barged
her over mud, but your hands,
did they exult on secret flesh?

You knew all secrets are apples
shaped for an original hand,
that careful heads can't get this far
while theories itch the brain.
Your monkish friend, Ekido,
called you dangerous in that rain.

On her own she could have bridged
the intersection flood.
But you, smelling danger's fun,
saw possibilities in the scene, like
fractured lights from the buried sun.

Ekido, pure by brute force,
fought the itch
you ended at the source.
Kodak Blue

You ran for a rock perch where the sea paused but perched there too long. Sunlight burned green when afternoon came with dark design and nameless sea nymphs spied your hair.

I did not criticize you then. Your name became the shroud lines of my silk. You were in the air, above the chilled sand, true against the secret thrill of crowds. Heroic in slacks, I charged the slamming tide.

The danger was in the scene. You only laughed. Wet to the knees I crossed beds of tangled kelp, shouldered the stone stares of beach boys. The burn on my neck was the sun, rich with late brilliance for the salt. Later, slides would show harmless Kodak blue.
The Day After Words

Here where the tide leaks past the beach bar
to fill or drain this swamp dense with reeds
and the thick smell of rot, everything ends.
Long dead shacks end in a warped slump. Trees
end that fed long on salt and now stump beside
the path whose reasons end and ends itself
at the edge of a deep-running ooze.
Sunday, and that iron dredge brown with rust
stands with herons sentinel of the still
day and the gray solitude of morning.
No near town has bells to ring this mired place.
Surf, dull below grass dunes, paves silence
thick. Our soft sighs reach our lips and stop.
This is the day after words. Who will say
that rusting dredge shapes history once and fades?
Bad Spell on West Beckwith

You walked six miles
to the Buckhouse bridge
with thoughts of why
it isn't working out.

In our dark kitchen
I wait, boiling coffee,
reminding all my ghosts
everything beautiful dies

and myself that miles
have always been your cure.
But what fast sedans brake for you
because your walk is loose with sadness?

Across Beckwith, young oaks claim
the last lights of day. Street lamps
turn on in pairs. Those retired lovers
next door, rocking in separated chairs,

stare into separate nights.
Sea Wall

Porcelain clams scale the walls
of failing days. We lie silent
as kelp under the assault of flies,
in faked equilibrium between sun and sea.
If only your thighs did not end in acetate
polka dots I would explore them.
I would cattle-tongue your salt,
put words in your flesh,
watch old dead language cry.

Once we swam naked as fish
in a lake you called pristine
and scaled in mud we rolled pristine.
We laughed a lunar tongue in every dialect
forgotten by day --you remember?
But these are failing days.
Our words are caught
in a porcelain relief
where water nymphs hold tridents
or pass the time of day
with somber dolphins in pink.