

The Casks of Wine · Robert Bly

“In those days ship captains sometimes cured a few casks of sherry by taking them on board.”

—*History of Portuguese Wine*

When a man steps out at dawn, it seems to him he has lived his whole life to create something dark. What he has created is the wine in the hold of the ship. The casks roll about when the ship rolls, and no one knows what is in them but the captain. The captain stands looking out over the back rail in the dark, drawn by what follows in shoals behind him. Behind him, shoals of fins sail with intense forward strokes. The ship is going where the captain has agreed to go, and the casks are there. That is all we know.

The ship lay so long tied to the dock, rubbing, as the captain lay ill on his pallet in the seamen's home, imagining the covers were a Medusa with his mother's face. And one day as he woke he was already on board. It must be that he hired the seamen, and bought the supplies, while still asleep. Now the ship is moving. And what does he know about those he has hired? What are the islands like, where they were born; whom do they kneel to at night, fanning a fire of pencil shavings. . . . Or was it a farmhouse in Montana? Did the seaman then pass into a prison, and through it, as the earthworm passes through thoughtless soil?

The ship is going, and the casks roll in the hold. But how long has gone by already! How much labor by men older than the captain! First the grapes had to be brought from a settled country, and a climate found, calm and protective; then ground scouted out where the grapes could be at home, difficult to find with the unexpected acids and mineral traces. . . . And it takes so long for the vines to mature. And when at last the vines are grown, tough, twisted, resembling intense dwarf houses, then the grapes have to be protected from frost, the owner waking at three in the morning to light smudge fires. And the stalk of the vine slowly widens. But the assurances others give us, “You're a good father”; “you're a good captain”. . . . What do they amount to? They do nothing, however gladly we hear them, because we are not the captain. The captain is still alone on the ship, alone among the ocean-flying terns, the great hooded mergansers flopping at early dusklight over the sparse waves they have never been introduced to . . . and the mist that suddenly appears at mid-ocean. . . . No assurances in the ocean. So when a man steps out at dawn and breathes in, it seems he has lived his whole life to create something dark!