

At the River House Bar and Grill

Kevin Cantwell

*The Wedding-Guest sat on a stone:
He cannot choose but hear . . .*

I

Rain like pea gravel sleets against the window as the storm bells up, rattling the glass in cracked putty – that while her freckled hand, cold with heavy rings, grips my wrist.

The groom, the best man, and the tide-going-out river pouring into the sea: that was her story, fraught as she told it, her hands through her hair, at the dusk-end of a wet afternoon.

At the shadow reaches of the communal table, her friend relishing that same catastrophe, but more slowly:

the beautiful groom, oh, no sailor he, and the best man, then in a new boat, an extravagant gift the day of the wedding, slipping on the tide-shift out to sea; no gasoline to make it back in; no ship-to-shore radio; no water to drink but the endless pewter of the Gulf . . .

Why, she kept asking, *why* not take it upriver from the marina for a test run? *Why* out to sea?

II

I had seen the news but had not then known her people.

For a week there had been a paragraph in the paper, then nothing, until the next year a small boat was winched from the ocean by a container ship. The best man had strapped himself into three life vests and let the ocean take him up-coast past the phosphorescent wash of sandbars and the lights of nighttime cities whereby two days later the full-moon spill carried him in;

but the raving groom himself going out into the late-day's last darkening sun, as this huge, glittering fish, sequined like a cocktail dress, here set down before us, also fades and loses to our appetites parts of itself, the life-flint of its eyes, and flake by flake its flesh pulled clean.

III

Ours was not the feast of the bride's reception, for she had had her weeping, and though she would keep and water the lush philodendra from the funeral, she moved on.

But now, at this gathering, these who cannot let him go count back the weeks and make us see only what that day's occluded bleb of sun has refracted for us;

here, the evening of a reading by a celebrated traveler:

two lovers, who tell this same story, at either end of the planked table: their separation, too – how we know and now guess they have ended it, candles lighted down the table, the magnificent fish, split, spilling its rice-with-capers stuffing;

and her murmuring epithalamium:

IV

the groom, a boy still lean from golf, going out under the roar of outboards, all the hours of the morning before him, but none slanted to his favor; and she, his aunt or one-time ex or cousin, one more part of this I have lost from a story whose strangeness, despite her carrying on, she had loved to tell;

though finally we have all settled for the quiet of our thoughts;

and, now:

the white stays exposed, ribs of this fish, or umbrella tines of fronds he might have worked through the Victorian-black cloth of his shirt and cocked for shade, the couture of shipwreck:

V

not to have chosen otherwise and motored upriver to an inland marina instead and bought a single navel orange and fed her slices before the summer wind-chimes of forks against

the wine glasses of a hundred guests.