

JEANNE ROSEN SOFEN

Big Sur Coast, 2018

Acrylic and art papers on wood panel, 18 x 24 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST

PAUL DRESMAN

Slatches

Sails and trails on the whale's path,
depths caught in tone-talk.
I can hear incisions
carved in scrimshaw.

In a moment and forever, too,
ghosts and their echoes
feedback into loops—
winds, runes.

* * *

From a perspective below the long workbench—golden curls of wood unfurled, resin scented, falling light as leaves from the sure-passed plane—I pretended to ride inside the half-built vessel, waves of imagination navigating the sea, and, if not the sweep of the plane, the swish of the cutting saw or the hammer of the hammer, then the *chonk-chonk* of the cold chisel where he notched a beam that a beam might grip.

Goggled like Barney Oldfield, my grandfather smoothed a metal fitting against a whirring stone wheel. It wasn't electric, but powered by a driving foot pedal like the New York City sharpener, in Walt Whitman's poem, whose sparks shower the cosmos on an everyday street in an ordinary neighborhood.

Honing an edge to fit exactly, caliper gauged—it made for the difference when a ship had to keep hitting its way through ocean waves, taking the seas as they came, riding to crests, falling to troughs with all the economy of an elegant structure designed to withstand the vast rolling anarchy of a storm at sea.

When I watched him in his workshop, he built seaworthy fifty-foot fishing boats that he finished and sold one by one. I was a tyke, four, five, six years old. I only wish I had been old enough to understand exactly how he did it because building a ship, like building a poem, is painstaking and complicated. First of all, it has to float.

Instead of driving nails, my grandfather preferred pegs. They gave. But, for bigger joints, steel plates with bolts spun by a wrench so big it nearly outweighed me. After I tried to lift it, I dropped it with a *whang* on the concrete.

He looked over, made sure I still had my fingers and both my feet, went back to the A-frame high above him while he guided an engine swung on thick chains

into empty space between rising struts of the ship—as if he could do this day after day in his long working life. Then the noon whistle blew somewhere inside, and, with legs made of meat and potatoes, he walked to the house where my grandmother had laid out lunch on the dining room table.

In the afternoon, when I returned from a nap, the westering sun of summer Los Angeles struck dusty side windows, divided into many squares and panes, and illuminated the shed where Jack built ships. The interior grew golden, and the ship's frame glowed at eventide, ribs and beams lit up in a world of Vermeer—as if light suffused from inside the wood and scattered tools, each object embodied with an aura of purpose and exactitude.

* * *

Too small to constantly watch,
they tied him to a mast below deck—given the rise
and dip,
the sideways pitch
in the North Atlantic—
so he wouldn't roll and crack his head.
Age four, Nils Jurgen Petersen arrived at Ellis Island—
the customs man looked at his name and said,
"From now on, you're Jack."

Jack Sprat, Jack Shit, Jack be nimble,
Jack be quick, Jack get up and get out of bed—you're ten
years old in the New World, and you'll labor
ten hours a day, six days a week for a dollar a day,
the going wage
on the Yellow Brick Road.

* * *

Sometimes you seem to be looking through girders,
other times through branches. You catch the gestalt,
a pattern that flips back and forth through ledgers,
saw-hewn ship masts, bone-pipe vests,
double tracks of wagons gone west.

A church bell rings but who's listening?
The mail arrives at the wrong address.
A knock on the door of the Philosopher's Club.
When Alcott opens it, no one's there.

Someone sighs because someone wept.
It makes no sense: "Moose . . . Indian . . ."

* * *

A faded chart, shoals in the harbor,
framed behind glass, attached
to a wall draped with nautical net.
We sit, our drinks clink, but,
thirty years ago, this watering hole
was out in the middle of the waves
at Dana Point—before they
dropped the boulders, built the
breakwater, and paved the cove.
The pilgrim's log disappeared
into an eastern archive
and there's no navigational chart
to guide your way across this parking lot.
Its phantom fathoms where we sit
adrift on this limited premise.
Richard Henry once fished
here on his bumboat.

Stiff cowhides sailed
from rancho hands
down from the cliffs
to land on a deck,
and the hides became,
in time—
with a kiss of luck
and a rounding of the horn
—American boots, belts,
the binding on a book
Thoreau read,
a cover for a chair
where Dickinson sat
looking out a window
over Amherst.

Conversations are muted
among the living, the dead,

past and present lives
at uncertain depths.

California, here I come!
California, there you went.

* * *

In jacklight, Nils drifts out on the ebb tide
through walls and studs of the boat shed.
He's swinging a sledge to free the stays
and slide the ship along runners
down the driveway and into the river,
Seventy-Fourth Street just off San Pedro
Boulevard, bound directly for the sea.
He's at the helm, a Viking
in denim overalls and a flatcap
sailing past cars, trucks, buses.

I'm down in the hold, awash in the bilge,
half-light, deepest night, twilight.

I think we constellate our sea bearings
by stringing stars on invisible threads,
slosh and roll, currents against the hull,
finding our way home by reckoning.

Seashell to sailor ear, you hear surf echo,
sea chantey, wave dirge, child wail,
the mother in labor, the nurse saying,
"There, there . . ."

* * *

Sails and trails on the whale's path,
depths caught in tone-talk/

I can hear Atlantic incisions
carved in Pacific scrimshaw,
the doomed Pequod, St. Elmo's fire
dancing down the mast—

Ahab!

In a moment and forever, too,
ghosts and their echoes
feedback into loops—
winds, runes.

Paul Dresman was born in Los Angeles, California, in 1943. He is a poet, translator of poetry from Spanish, essayist, and coeditor of the bilingual magazine *hélicóptero*. He taught twentieth-century literature at the University of California, San Diego, Beijing Teachers' University, and the University of Oregon.