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The who Belonged to the Sea

Written by Denis Thériault

Translated by Liedewy Hawke

Published by Hesperus Nova

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The Boy who Belonged to the Sea

*To Hélène and Camille.
If it weren't for them, I'd be a wanderer.*

1

During a deep dive, a euphoric state resembling alcohol intoxication may occur. Known as 'rapture of the deep', this phenomenon is due to the narcotic effect of inert gases on the nervous system, brought about by the increase in pressure.

The gulls emerge from the east and gather in crowded clusters on the crests of all the rooftops to wail in unison. They call and answer one another, provoke each other, they scream like witches at a midnight revel, and since my bedroom is upstairs, in the attic, I can hear them tramping about. It sounds as though a battalion of gnomes were manoeuvring above my head. At the window, I see them lined up on the shed like living bowling pins. Sometimes there are so many you'd think you were in an old movie about crazed birds, but, unlike what goes on in Hollywood, our gulls remain harmless. There's no risk of their bills suddenly digging into our caps. Even the garbage bin doesn't interest them. It's like that every morning. To what, I wonder, do we owe this faithful attendance at first light?

I have nothing against gulls, but their raucous dawn serenades annoy Grandfather. It wakes him up, while he's made a tradition out of sleeping late. He'll come out of the house in his pyjamas and try to disperse the web-footed little devils by pelting them with stones, but his aim isn't very good, so all he manages to do is amplify the chorus of outraged protests – when he doesn't break a window, that is. If it were up to him, he would slaughter the disagreeable feathered creatures with his Winchester, but Grandmother hides the bullets. She refuses

to be part of such a massacre of innocent birds, so we put up with the shrieking until the gulls themselves get sick of it, at about seven, and suddenly all fly away at the same time.

To tell the truth, this commotion, this early rising, suits me just fine. It drives away the night and its icy mists of fear. It lets me enjoy my May mornings, feast on the special light that fringes the sky at daybreak in the springtime. When the gulls arrive, I go down onto the shore, right up to the cathodic hiss of the languid water. I love to see the sky glow red when a flaming, brand new sun blasts across the horizon, proudly surfacing once again at the end of its sombre journey. This is the time to investigate the previous night's underwater events and discover the evidence – simple surprises, sometimes dead ones – the tide has surrendered. The other day, in front of Madame Papet's place, they found a washed-up basking shark the length of a house, with jaws so huge it could have swallowed me whole without even noticing, like plankton. The men scratched their heads at the sight of the enormous carcass. They argued back and forth, wondered what to do with it; they couldn't leave it there because it was obviously causing an obstruction, and also because of the smell which had already begun to rise. While they started to cut it up with a chain saw, some guys from Fisheries and Oceans turned up to record this wreck on land. They stopped the work and took photographs just like police inspectors. All that was missing was the tape, that yellow stuff they put up to decorate a crime. I thought they were going to take our fingerprints while they were at it, but they didn't after all; we weren't suspicious enough. After the photographs, the government people sent for a crane and a truck to haul the shark away. I don't know where to. The morgue? A museum? The dump? More likely to the Department of Oceanic Affairs, I suppose, where they'd put it away in a cartilaginous folder. Or in a very large – previously deodorised – file thirteen.

I wonder what that shark died of. It had no injuries, wasn't

tangled up in any net. Some shark disease? A maritime problem? A tsunami? An overpowering wave of melancholy? What is the lifespan of a shark, anyway?

* * *

In spite of the gulls, I'm never the first one to arrive on the beach. There's always that other kid who's ahead of me – Luc Bezeau, with that mug of his that reminds me of a radiation victim from the other side of the world, with his Newfie boots, his gawky clown-like walk, and that cap emblazoned with the crest of a heavy-machinery company, incongruously topping his worrisome scrawniness. He comes from the west, dragging along his garbage bag like a janitor as he combs the shore. He collects the empty bottles from around fires lit the previous night by careless fishermen looking for caplins or by other passing gypsies. In a satchel, he gathers empty shells of shellfish, crab backs, feathers, and bits of whalebone. In the beginning, I took him for some sort of environmentalist, but I changed my mind when I saw him leave all kinds of other waste in his wake. Rain or shine, he turns up every morning, as if that were his mission, except on Sundays, for he has religious obligations on that day. He serves mass at the village church, and since I go there with Grandmother, I can see him orbiting Father Loiselle, that gaseous giant, like some dusky dwarf. Luc makes a peculiar altar boy. With his heavy boots sticking out beneath the skimpy white vestment, with that air he has of a gag that has fallen flat, his Hawaiian mop of jet-black hair, and especially that faraway look in his almond eyes – those strange X-ray eyes he aims at you as if to see right through you – you'd think he'd just disembarked from a UFO or stepped out of a dryer, but that doesn't stop him from performing his functions expertly. He officiates with a pope-like solemnity. Priestly, scratching himself occasionally – but always unobtrusively – he stands close to the altar like a kind of liturgical watchdog and

anticipates Father Loiselle's every gesture. It's as if he were directing the service by remote control. During the sermon, he stands at attention, his arms protruding from his too-short sleeves, yet he remains vigilant, prepared to jump in, ready to spring into action and, all along, only his fingers will move, wriggle, bend, and unbend. If he were to be dropped down on the main street of Dodge City with a Stetson on his head, he might easily be taken for a crack shot at the crucial moment of a confrontation. The desperado of the beaches. The guy who draws his altar cruet before his shadow has a chance to catch up with him. The fastest jingler in the West. I must admit he impresses me with his shy-sponge-like austerity. That face he has of an explorer of the beyond matches my gloomy mood and arouses my curiosity. If he let me, I would definitely try to befriend him, or at the very least say hello to him on the beach when he comes ambling along at the crack of dawn, but that's impossible because he's opposed to such familiarities. As soon as he sees me slouching about near the flagpole or on the verandah gobbling up a chocogrunt, he hurries away without even looking at me. Could he be terribly shy? Or is he perhaps too sensitive to the aura of tragedy that emanates from me? In any case, he gives me a wide berth, the way Ulysses steered clear of certain notorious corners of the Aegean. He still walks by our house because he has no choice, but furtively, without stopping, and always scuttles away, shadowed by a fear I simply cannot understand.