

# Two Poems

Kevin Clark

## NIGHTWATCH UNDER QUARANTINE

—1945, 2020

One nightwatch—and you were no kid rookie.  
You never slept the sleep of the dead. Keen-  
eyed, you spied from Ardennes to Zell Am See.  
When at last the guns ceased, a taboo dream

of routine found you in its faraway lens:  
Wife and kids. Lush and lucky. Still, you hear  
Sawoskos, Burr, Pakala, O'Brien—  
they just keep blowing apart. Twice this year

you dreamt you croaked too, but no—sleep's fatal.  
That's why Sarge keeps sending you out on watch:  
When a TV mortar bursts your two pals  
into snowy dust, your grown grandkids bitch

from their couch while they almost watch, then curse  
their ragged masks. —Every morning's your first.

THE BOY IN THE SAILBOAT:  
A Triptych

*Elk River, Maryland*

—1934

Skimming the eastern shore as if winged, and there,  
always breasting alongside, a seabird, sleek  
brother of the headlong. To be fourteen, to be

the accelerate essence of boy, having arrived  
just now at the intuitions of muscle and water,  
Brandywine swimmer, sole sailor scanning

the wind's script, ciphered hints formed before  
the hills of Delaware broke the surface, sizzling,  
then cooling. Before all birds and leaping dogs . . .

Before the sea-trick of time skidded the bald  
blood-washed crown of his own father headfirst  
into the water-free light . . . Before all this,

the dark surface held the indecipherable words  
of story, refusing to reveal history or future.  
A boy in search of whatever secret presence

he could become, such skirring over sea as path  
to the still promise of breath-as-wind. Once,  
as he dove off a cabin cruiser, a sunken pylon rose

from the Elk's bottom to slash the boy's flesh  
from nose to chin, blood flooding the surface,  
how in shock he ran to his father, one look

and the poised race to the ER, his father's face  
gracing him into calm, the flapped skin salved along  
the smile-line, the prescribed months of oiled rubbing—

then the exhaled father and the boy riding home  
in the safe aching pulse of quiet. The gut-check thrill  
of dark water filling him again as trance and song,

to be known first by the body, something hidden,  
as if healed against panic, buoying the boy  
into age, once more alone amid the call

of the surface, soft and dark and susurrant, like  
night-long sea breeze in midsummer, ancient bird  
in winged synch, the ushering forth and forth—

*Philippine Sea*

—1944

As Halsey orders the fleet into open sea, ballast-  
free, your ship's waterline too high, the hands  
of every gauge shiver behind glass. To be twenty-  
two, map-sure the admiral is misreading the four

winds. To show your captain how stolen charts  
assure you'd best head east. To know how  
he'd never challenge The Bull, the choice fatal  
as a keel split to stern. (Later, some claimed

the typhoon howled out of envy, its gale fixed  
on human squall.) Soon, the sea air flexes  
into molten sinew. To navigate waves rising  
fifty feet above deck, to churn fear into challenge,

to point the prow down each sea-arched wall  
for hours, the light ship listing fifty degrees,  
the stack showing its hot mouth to the flood  
before righting. Even the carrier *Lex* too jumpy

to drop line for fuel, for weight. To steer along-  
side in hundred-knot gusts as a foaming arm  
sweeps your friend overboard, only to find him  
coughed back, his leg split on the stanchion

of the forecastle. In the storming wash, Halsey  
finally relents. —You're free to plot escape,  
the all-ships-for-themselves charge to survive.  
How lightning snaps off the port bow and you see

your father's face in the lit glass of the pilot house,  
his signal nod, old vigilance mapping your instant  
know-how in the flash. Quick then, your deft calls  
to the helmsman. In the viscid blear, the *Spence*,

*Hull* and *Madigan* roll past seventy into cap-  
sized silence. —Then: Morning. Not a bird in sight.  
The sea lowering its chop into sleepy breeze.  
On your cot belowdecks, you dream of wings.

*Santa Rosa Creek, California*  
—2021

(—spoken to a granddaughter)

My hundredth year for Chrissakes. I still read  
tomes on the war. In one novel, some guy spins  
the cliché, how old age sinks you into dreamlight  
for good. I don't buy it (—*yet*). Sure, you couldn't  
know of course. I love the sound of the creek

when our winter gets tired of drought, then rains  
crazed over stone and bank. But it's not some  
blurred-out dream. Fact is, I've savored the sound  
of the Elk River near since birth. In '33,  
my father packed us into his "air-cooled" sedan

to see the six-foot floodwaters of the hurricane.  
The creek's song reminds me: After the typhoon,  
after the Franklin afire, after Leyte—yes, sure,  
I'd been scared...hell, for twenty plus months.  
But you gotta know, there was too much to *do*

for frozen dread. Just stayed open-eyed on coffee  
and habitual prep between battle and boredom. True,  
we all felt the hot wires of our nerves singe a bit,  
little reminders, like squawking terns bearing us on.  
On leave at Ulithi, I'd feel residual fright rise

to the surface. Tried not to think of the close calls,  
or the guys buried at sea. Off ship, we'd all drink  
plenty to press our minds to the future. One night  
we're boozed up on a canopied gig heading back  
in the dark from Mog Mog, me all the way

forward, when the engine cuts and, like that!,  
water floods above my belt. I dive, then swim  
down the aisle beneath the panicked thrashing,  
out into the bay as the gig turns over. A treading EO  
orders me to head for help: a battleship lit-up

maybe a mile off. I can hear waves slamming  
the reef when soon the fortress swings its stern  
my way as if loose at anchor. I reverse course,  
adrenaline muting the drunk daze, worry  
I'll be flung into the slicing coral. I still hear

the sudden quiet out there in the wavelets, no men  
shouting, no birds, just the long star-strewn lull  
between the ship and the collapsing surf. I must  
have swum two miles that night, the leave's rest  
spent into wet nerves. Back on board, I wrote

to my father about reviving in tropical breeze—  
a son's lie after I'd been in the water three frayed  
hours, one seaman lost. What explains the tender  
elation I found years after when telling his family  
he'd been felled unconscious by the coxswain's

railing, their need for closure? Even now, each day  
is a search, but you're never sure what's to find.  
When the supply tankers pulled up, I'd get a foot  
of my father's letters, take three days to read  
his stories from home. I think he wrote so much

to guarantee I'd have to live to read them. Never-  
ending letters meant I'd be home to sail the Elk.  
Time has spent us well so far, don't you think?  
Where there's water, a few birds, I always try  
to unriddle current.

Lovely, what the creek hides—

*for Lt. William L. Hewes, Jr., USN, (Ret)*

*Navigator, USS Miller (DD535)*

Kevin Clark's third volume of poems *The Consecrations* is published by Stephen F. Austin University Press. His second book *Self-Portrait with Expletives* won the Pleiades Press prize. Clark's poetry appears in the *Southern*, *Georgia*, *Antioch*, and *The Iowa Review*, plus *Ploughshares*, *Prairie Schooner*, and *Poetry Northwest*. <http://kevinclarkpoetry.com>