

N.K., EX-CATHOLIC, USA (PART 3 OF 5)

Rating: 4.3

Description: A Catholic who rejects his faith and takes to Philosophy, and then later accepts Islam due to many unanswered questions. Part 3: Reflections on fishing in Alaska.

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As Chicago was a more expensive school, and I had to raise tuition money, I found summer work on the West Coast with a seining boat fishing in Alaska. The sea proved a school in its own right, one I was to return to for a space of eight seasons, for the money. I met many people on boats, and saw something of the power and greatness of the wind, water, storms, and rain, and the smallness of man. These things lay before us like an immense book, but my fellow fishermen and I could only discern the letters of it that were within our context: to catch as many fish as possible within the specified time to sell to the tenders. Few knew how to read the book as a whole. Sometimes, in a blow, the waves rose like great hills, and the captain would hold the wheel with white knuckles, our bow one minute plunging gigantically down into a valley of green water, the next moment reaching the bottom of the trough and soaring upwards towards the sky before topping the next crest and starting down again.

Early in my career as a deck hand, I had read the Hazel Barnes translation of Jean Paul Sartre's "Being and Nothingness", in which he argued that phenomena only arose for consciousness in the existential context of human projects, a theme that recalled Marx's 1844 manuscripts, where nature was produced by man, meaning, for example, that when the mystic sees a stand of trees, his consciousness hypostatizes an entirely different phenomenal object than a poet does, for example, or a capitalist. To the mystic, it is a manifestation; to the poet, a forest; to the capitalist, lumber. According to such a perspective, a mountain only appears as tall in the context of the project of climbing it, and so on, according to the instrumental relations involved in various human interests. But the great natural events of the sea surrounding us seemed to defy, with their stubborn, irreducible facticity, our uncomprehending attempts to come to terms with them. Suddenly, we were just there, shaken by the forces around us without making sense of them, wondering if we would make it through. Some, it was true, would ask Gods help at such moments, but when we returned safely to shore, we behaved like men who knew little of Him, as if those moments had been a lapse into insanity, embarrassing to think of at happier times. It was one of the lessons of the sea that in fact, such events not only existed but perhaps even preponderated in our life. Man was small and weak, the forces around him were large, and he did not control them.

Sometimes a boat would sink and men would die. I remember a fisherman from another boat who was working near us one opening, doing the same job as I did, piling web. He smiled across the water as he pulled the net from the hydraulic block overhead, stacking it neatly on the stern to ready it for the next set. Some weeks later, his boat overturned while fishing in a storm, and he got caught in the web and drowned. I saw him only once again, in a dream, beckoning to me from the stern of his boat.

The tremendousness of the scenes we lived in, the storms, the towering sheer cliffs rising vertically out of the water for hundreds of feet, the cold and rain and fatigue, the occasional injuries and deaths of workers - these made little impression on most of us. Fishermen were, after all, supposed to be tough. On one boat, the family that worked it was said to lose an occasional crew member while running at sea at the end of the season, invariably the sole non-family member who worked with them, his loss saving them the wages they would have otherwise had to pay him.

The captain of another was a twenty-seven-year-old who delivered millions of dollars worth of crab each year in the Bering Sea. When I first heard of him, we were in Kodiak, his boat at the city dock they had tied up to after a lengthy run some days before. The captain was presently indisposed in his bunk in the stateroom, where he had been vomiting up blood from having eaten a glass uptown the previous night to prove how tough he was.

He was in somewhat better condition when I later saw him in the Bering Sea at the end of a long winter king crab season. He worked in his wheelhouse up top, surrounded by radios that could pull in a signal from just about anywhere, computers, Loran, sonar, depth-finders, radar. His panels of lights and switches were set below the 180-degree sweep of shatterproof windows that overlooked the sea and the men on deck below, to whom he communicated by loudspeaker. They often worked round the clock, pulling their gear up from the icy water under watchful batteries of enormous electric lights attached to the masts that turned the perpetual night of the winter months into day. The captain had a reputation as a screamer, and had once locked his crew out on deck in the rain for eleven hours because one of them had gone inside to have a cup of coffee without permission. Few crewmen lasted longer than a season with him, though they made nearly twice the yearly income of, say, a lawyer or an advertising executive, and in only six months. Fortunes were made in the Bering Sea in those years, before over-fishing wiped out the crab.

At present, he was at anchor, and was amiable enough when we tied up to him, and he came aboard to sit and talk with our own captain. They spoke at length, at times gazing thoughtfully out at the sea through the door or windows, at times looking at each other sharply when something animated them, as the topic of what his competitors thought of him. "They wonder why I have a few bucks", he said. "Well I slept in my own home one night last year."

He later had his crew throw off the lines and pick the anchor, his eyes flickering warily over the water from the windows of the house as he pulled away with a blast of smoke from the stack. His watchfulness, his walrus-like physique, his endless voyages after

game and markets, reminded me of other predatory hunter-animals of the sea. Such people, good at making money but heedless of any ultimate end or purpose, made an impression on me, and I increasingly began to wonder if men didn't need principles to guide them and tell them why they were there. Without such principles, nothing seemed to distinguish us above our prey except being more thorough, and technologically capable of preying longer, on a vaster scale, and with greater devastation than the animals we hunted.

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