

## Letter From Key West

30 December 1934  
Key West

[...] Look at where I am. I say it is for Mrs. Frost's health and she says it is for mine. This is Cayo Huaso as the Spaniards named it. It might have been translated into Bone Key. Instead it was corrupted into Key West...

Neither of us likes it very much yet. But after all it is a part of the earth. (a small part, two or three miles long by a mile or so wide, about a dozen times the size of my farm in South Shaftsbury but all cut up into speculators' house lots about the size of family lots in a graveyard.) And whatever thinkers may say against the earth, I notice no one is anxious to leave it for either Heaven or Hell...

It is a very very dead place because it has died several times. It died as a resort of pirates, then as a house of smugglers and wreckers, then as a cigar manufactory (The Cubans moved over here to get inside the tariff wall) then as a winter resort boomtown. Franklin D himself has taken it personally in hand to give it one more life to lose. FERA is all over the place. This town has been nationalized to rescue it from its own speculative excesses. The personal interest of Roosevelt in his second coming has been invoked and both mayor and governor have abdicated till we can see what absolute authority can do to restore the prices of the speculators' graveyard plots and make Key West equal to Miami...

It is tropical all right but it is rather unsanitary and shabby. It has a million dollars worth of concrete sidewalks with no houses by them. It has three races not very well kept apart by race-prejudice, Cubans, Negroes and Whites. The population once 25,000 has shrunk to 12,000. We live not twenty feet from the water of very quiet seas. What with coral shoals and other little keys, the wind has to be a West Indian hurricane to get up much waves. We are fifty miles at sea and the lowest temperature ever recorded was forty degrees above zero. I sleep under one sheet and

wear one thickness of linen. People that know say it is a Honolulu five thousand miles nearer home. A third of the people at least speak Spanish but there is not a Spanish book in the poor public library. Neither is there a book with a star map. I went to make sure if the new big star we had raised was Canopus, Sirius' rival...

Ever Yours,

Robert Frost

## FOREWORD

The publication of any collection as closely tied to a place as *The Key West Reader* raises the question of "regionalism" in American Literature. Ours is a vast country which comprises a number of distinct areas where social, economic, and environmental factors conflate in a fashion that distinguishes the artifacts created there. Critics influenced by the concept have identified "Southern" writers, the "New York School" of poetry, and "Western" writing, to name just a few. There are anthologies of "Texas" writers, "California" writers, writers of the Piedmont, and many, many others.

In most cases, the work so designated is physically set in the region at hand. Just as important are the subtleties of thought and values, character qualities and behavioral tics, the "world view" suggested by the work. In the American Southwest are endless vistas, few fences, and crystalline air that shrouds nothing. Whether or not such a specific, physical landscape figures in a "Western" story, attitudes developed by an author who lives in such space may find their way into a piece of writing in a thousand subtle ways. There, solitude is often taken for granted—roads are relatively few and rarely curve. It is difficult for writers not to be awed by all the land which lays itself out before them; created characters may well reflect a humility, clarity and straightforwardness born of this environment. Contrast such work with that born of a South where the line of sight is generally a mile or less and usually ends with a neighbor's land, where the air is hazy, freighted with moist, mysterious scent, where roads twist and turn through the hills, forests, and swamps that are the apotheosis of a Jungian dream. There's mystery in both worlds, of course, but "darkness," for example, is not a concept readily associated with a "Arizonan" story.

No one would argue for the worth of a piece simply because it paints an accurate picture of a landscape, but who can imagine the power of Hawthorne divorced from New England or

John James Audubon

## Death of a Pirate

In the calm of a fine moonlight night, as I was admiring the beauty of the clear heavens, and the broad glare of light that glanced from the trembling surface of the waters around, the officer on watch came up and entered into conversation with me. He had been a turtler in other years, and a great hunter to boot, and although of humble birth and pretensions, energy and talent, aided by education, had raised him to a higher station. Such a man could not fail to be an agreeable companion, and we talked on various subjects, principally, you may be sure, birds and other natural productions. He told me he once had a disagreeable adventure, when looking out for game, in a certain cove on the shores of the Gulf of Mexico; and, on my expressing a desire to hear it, he willingly related to me the following particulars, which I give you, not perhaps precisely in his own words, but as nearly so as I can remember.

"Towards evening, one quiet summer day, I chanced to be paddling along a sandy shore, which I thought well fitted for my repose, being covered with tall grass, and as the sun was not many degrees above the horizon, I felt anxious to pitch my mosquito bar or net, and spend the night in this wilderness. The bellowing notes of thousands of bull-frogs in a neighbouring swamp might lull me to rest, and I looked upon the flocks of blackbirds that were assembling as sure companions in this secluded retreat.

I proceeded up a little stream, to insure the safety of my canoe from any sudden storm, when, as I gladly advanced, a

beautiful yawl came unexpectedly in view. Surprised at such a sight in a part of the country then scarcely known, I felt a sudden check in the circulation of my blood. My paddle dropped from my hands, and fearfully indeed, as I picked it up, did I look towards the unknown boat. On reaching it, I saw its sides marked with stains of blood, and looking with anxiety over the gunwale, I perceived to my horror, two human bodies covered with gore. Pirates or hostile Indians I was persuaded had perpetrated the foul deed, and my alarm naturally increased; my heart fluttered, stopped, and heaved with unusual tremors, and I looked towards the setting sun in consternation and despair. How long my reveries lasted I cannot tell; I can only recollect that I was roused from them by the distant groans of one apparently in mortal agony. I felt as if refreshed by the cold perspiration that oozed from every pore, and I reflected that though alone, I was well armed, and might hope for the protection of the Almighty.

Humanity whispered to me that, if not surprised and disabled, I might render assistance to some sufferer, or even be the means of saving a useful life. Buoyed up by this thought, I urged my canoe on shore, and seizing it by the bow, pulled it at one spring high among the grass.

The groans of the unfortunate person fell heavy on my ear, as I cocked and reprimed my gun, and I felt determined to shoot the first that should rise from the grass. As I cautiously proceeded, a hand was raised over the weeds, and waved in the air in the most supplicating manner. I levelled my gun about a foot below it, when the next moment, the head and breast of a man covered with blood were convulsively raised, and a faint hoarse voice asked me for mercy and help! A death-like silence followed his fall to the ground. I surveyed every object around with eyes intent, and ears impressible by the slightest sound, for my situation that moment I thought as critical as any I had ever been in. The croaking of the frogs, and the last blackbirds alighting on their roosts, were the only sounds or sights; and I now proceeded towards the object of my mingled alarm and commiseration.

Alas! the poor being who lay prostrate at my feet, was so weakened by loss of blood, that I had nothing to fear from him. My first impulse was to run back to the water, and having done so, I returned with my cap filled to the brim. I felt at his heart, washed his face and breast, and rubbed his temples with the contents of a phial, which I kept about me as an antidote for the bites of snakes. His features, seamed by the ravages of time, looked frightful and disgusting; but he had been a powerful man, as the breadth of his chest plainly shewed. He groaned in the

most appalling manner, as his breath struggled through the mass of blood that seemed to fill his throat. His dress plainly disclosed his occupation:—a large pistol he had thrust into his bosom, a naked cutlass lay near him on the ground, a red silk handkerchief was bound over his projecting brows, and over a pair of loose trousers he wore fisherman's boots. He was, in short, a pirate.

My exertions were not in vain, for as I continued to bathe his temples, he revived, his pulse resumed some strength, and I began to hope that he might perhaps survive the deep wounds he had received. Darkness, deep darkness, now enveloped us. I spoke of making a fire. "Oh! for mercy's sake," he exclaimed, "don't." Knowing, however, that under existing circumstances, it was expedient for me to do so, I left him, went to his boat, and brought the rudder, the benches, and the oars, which with my hatchet I soon splintered. I then struck a light, and presently stood in the glare of a blazing fire. The pirate seemed struggling between terror and gratitude for my assistance; he desired me several times in half English and Spanish to put out the flames, but after I had given him a draught of strong spirits, he at length became more composed. I tried to staunch the blood that flowed from the deep gashes in his shoulders and side. I expressed my regret that I had no food about me, but when I spoke of eating he sullenly waved his head.

My situation was one of the most extraordinary that I have ever been placed in. I naturally turned my talk towards religious subjects, but, alas, the dying man hardly believed in the existence of God. "Friend," said he, "for friend you seem to be, I have never studied the ways of Him of whom you talk. I am an outlaw, perhaps you will say a wretch—I have been for many years a Pirate. The instructions of my parents were of no avail to me, for I have always believed that I was born to be a most cruel man. I now lie here, about to die in the weeds, because I long ago refused to listen to their many admonitions. Do not shudder when I tell you—these now useless hands murdered the mother whom they had embraced. I feel that I have deserved the pangs of the wretched death that hovers over me; and I am thankful that one of my kind will alone witness my last gaspings."

A fond but feeble hope that I might save his life, and perhaps assist in procuring his pardon, induced me to speak to him on the subject. "It is all in vain, friend—I have no objection to die—I am glad that the villains who wounded me were not my conquerors—I want no pardon from *any one*—Give me some water, and let me die alone.

With the hope that I might learn from his conversation

something that might lead to the capture of his guilty associates, I returned from the creek with another capful of water, nearly the whole of which I managed to introduce into his parched mouth, and begged him, for the sake of his future peace, to disclose his history to me. "It is impossible," said he, "there will not be time; the beatings of my heart tell me so. Long before day, these sinewy limbs will be motionless. Nay, there will hardly be a drop of blood in my body; and that blood will only serve to make the grass grow. My wounds are mortal, and I must and will die without what you call confession."

The moon rose in the east. The majesty of her placid beauty impressed me with reverence. I pointed towards her, and asked the Pirate if he could not recognise God's features there. "Friend, I see what you are driving at," was his answer,—"you, like the rest of our enemies, feel the desire of murdering us all.—Well—be it so—to die is after all nothing more than a jest; and were it not for the pain, no one, in my opinion, need care a jot about it. But, as you really have befriended me, I will tell you all that is proper."

Hoping his mind might take a useful turn, I again bathed his temples and washed his lips with spirits. His sunk eyes seemed to dart fire at mine—a heavy and deep sigh swelled his chest and struggled through his blood-choked throat, and he asked me to raise him for a little. I did so, when he addressed me somewhat as follows, for, as I have told you, his speech was a mixture of Spanish, French and English, forming a jargon, the like of which I had never heard before, and which I am utterly unable to imitate. However I shall give you the substance of his declaration.

"First tell me, how many bodies you found in the boat, and what sort of dresses they had on." I mentioned their number, and described their apparel. "That's right," said he, "they are the bodies of the scoundrels who followed me in that infernal Yankee barge. Both rascals they were, for when they found the water too shallow for their craft, they took to it and waded after me. All my companions had been shot, and to lighten my own boat I flung them overboard, but as I lost time in this, the two ruffians caught hold of my gun wale, and struck on my head and body in such a manner, that after I had disabled and killed them both in the boat, I was scarce able to move. The other villains carried off our schooner and one of our boats, and perhaps ere now have hung all my companions whom they did not kill at the time. I have commanded my beautiful vessel many years, captured many ships, and sent many rascals to the devil. I always hated the Yankees, and only regret that I have not killed more of them.—I

sailed from Matanzas.—I have often been in concert with others. I have money without counting, but it is buried where it will never be found, and it would be useless to tell you of it." His throat filled with blood, his voice failed, the cold hand of death was laid on his brow, feebly and hurriedly he muttered, "I am a dying man, farewell."

Alas! It is painful to see death in any shape; in this it was horrible, for there was no hope. The rattling of his throat announced the moment of dissolution, and already did the body fall on my arms with a weight that was insupportable. I laid him on the ground. A mass of dark blood poured from his mouth; then came a frightful groan, the last breathing of that foul spirit; and what now lay at my feet in the wild desert?—a mangled mass of clay!

The remainder of that night was passed in no enviable mood; but my feelings cannot be described. At dawn I dug a hole with the paddle of my canoe, rolled the body into it, and covered it. On reaching the boat I found several buzzards feeding on the bodies, which I in vain attempted to drag to the shore. I therefore covered them with mud and weeds, and launching my canoe, paddled from the cove with a secret joy for my escape, overshadowed with the gloom of mingled dread and abhorrence.

correspondent's hand. The correspondent, schooled in the minor formulæ, said, "Thanks, old man." But suddenly the man cried, "What's that?" He pointed a swift finger. The correspondent said, "Go."

In the shallows, face downward, lay the oiler. His forehead touched sand that was periodically, between each wave, clear of the sea.

The correspondent did not know all that transpired afterward. When he achieved safe ground he fell, striking the sand with each particular part of his body. It was as if he had dropped from a roof, but the thud was grateful to him.

It seems that instantly the beach was populated with men with blankets, clothes, and flasks, and women with coffee-pots and all the remedies sacred to their minds. The welcome of the land to the men from the sea was warm and generous; but a still and dripping shape was carried slowly up the beach, and the land's welcome for it could only be the different and sinister hospitality of the grave.

When it came night, the white waves paced to and fro in the moonlight, and the wind brought the sound of the great sea's voice to the men on shore, and they felt that they could then be interpreters.

John Dos Passos

## Under the Tropic

Some of the best times in those years were with Hem and Pauline in Key West. The time that stands out was in late April and early May of 1929. . .

It is hot in April in Key West when the trade wind drops. We trolled back and forth between the wharves and an old white steamboat that had gone on a reef in a hurricane. She had lost her stack and the engines had been taken out. Waldo painted a picture of her that still hangs in the upstairs hall at Spence's Point. When Charles took his boat up into a bight away from the town, an unbelievable sweetness of blossoming limes came out along with the mosquitoes from among the mangroves.

Hem had brought along a couple of bottles of champagne which perched on the ice that kept the mullet fresh in the bait bucket. The rule was that you couldn't have a drink until somebody caught a fish. The sun set in a wash of gaudy pinks and ochres. We kept fishing on into the moonlight. I'm not sure whether we caught any tarpon that night, but we certainly had one hooked because I remember the arc of dark silver against the moon's sheen on the water when the fish jumped.

The tarpon seemed only to bite when the tide was low and the water warm in the channels. When they stopped striking and we had finished the champagne Charles said with a yawn that he had to go to work at the store at seven o'clock next morning and headed us in to the dock.

If we hadn't pulled in a tarpon I was probably just as glad because catching tarpon always seemed a waste to me. I hated to



see the great silver monsters lying in the dust on the wharf. They aren't fit to eat. About the only use is for mounting. Some people make knickknacks out of the dried scales. Sheer vanity catching tarpon.

We went to the Asturian's for a bite before going to bed. Frenchfried yellowtail and bonito with tomato sauce were his specialities. It was a delight to be able to chatter amiably on all sorts of topics without tripping over that damn Party line. No taboos. Everybody said the first thing that came into his head. After the ideological bickerings of the New York theater Key West seemed like the Garden of Eden.

Hem was the greatest fellow in the world to go around with when everything went right. That spring was a marvelous season for tarpon. Every evening Charles would take us out tarpon fishing and we would fish and drink and talk and talk and talk far into the moonlit night. Days, after Hem and I had knocked off our stint—we were both very early risers—we would go out to the reef with Bra.

Bra was a Conch. That's what they called white people from Spanish Wells in the Bahamas. His real name was Sanders. Hem, who had gotten to be a Conch right along with him, talked Captain Sanders into taking us out. Nobody had heard of a party boat. Fifteen dollars was considered a fair price for the day.

Fishingboats were still smacks whether they had sails or not. They carried a livebox built into the boat amidships to keep the fish alive. Key West had a iceplant, but at the fishmarket down at the wharf they would scoop up your yellowtails with a net out of a big vat when you bought them. Another great tank was full of green turtles. Shipping sea turtles was an important industry.

There was endless fascination in the variety of creatures you pulled up off the reef. Never much of a sports fisherman, I liked going along, just to be out on the varicolored water. I always announced that I fished for the pot. Although as competitive as a race horse, Hem wasn't yet so much the professional sportsman as to spoil the fun. Such was my enthusiasm for the great pale moonstruck snappers known locally as mutton fish that Katy got to calling me Muttonfish. It stuck for a while as a nickname.

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For several winters after that Katy and I made a point of spending as much time as we could at Key West. It wasn't quite under the tropic but it was mighty close to it. No doctor's prescription was ever pleasanter to take.

The railroad had folded and now you arrived by car-ferry from a point below Homestead on the mainland. There were three separate ferryrides and sandy roads through the scrubby keys between. It took half a day and was a most delightful trip, with long cues of pelicans scrambling up off the water and manofwar birds in the sky and boobygulls on the buoys, and mullet jumping in the milky shallows.

Hem and I kept planning a trip to Bimini, but it always had to be put off for some reason or other. The first time we started out we had hardly reached the purple water of the Gulf Stream when old Hem shot himself in the leg—in the fleshy part, fortunately—with his own rifle trying to shoot a shark that was making for a sailfish somebody had alongside and was trying to gaff. We had to turn back to take him to the sawbones at the hospital. Katy was so mad she would hardly speak to him.

Hem's leg had hardly healed when a package arrived for him from Oak Park. It was from his mother. It contained a chocolate cake, a roll of Mrs. Hemingway's paintings of the Garden of the Gods which she suggested he might get hung at the Salon when he next went to Paris, and the gun with which his father shot himself. Katy, who had known her of old, had explained to me that Mrs. Hemingway was a very odd lady indeed. Hem was the only man I ever knew who really hated his mother.

It was on the first of Hem's *Pilars* that we finally made it to the Bahamas. The big money fishing camp at Cat Cay had gone broke in the collapse of the first Florida boom and was still closed down. There were a few yachtsmen and sports fishermen about but the tiny island of Bimini proper was very much out of the world. There was a wharf and some native shacks under the coconut palms and a store that had some kind of a barroom attached, where we drank rum in the evenings, and a magnificent broad beach on the Gulf Stream side. There was an official residency and a couple of sunbeaten bungalows screened against the sandflies up on the dunes. Katy and I occupied one of them for a week to give Hem more room on the *Pilar*.

We had gotten to calling Hem the Old Master because nobody could stop him from laying down the law, or sometimes the Mahatma on account of his having appeared in a rowboat with a towel wrapped around his head to keep off the sun. He had more crotchety moments than in the old days, but he was a barrel of monkeys when he wanted to be. Life still seemed enormously comical to all of us. Nobody ever got so mad that some fresh crack didn't bring him around. We drank a good deal but only cheerfully. We carried things off with great fits of laughing.

If I'm not mistaken this trip to Bimini was the first time the Old Master really went out after tuna. He'd been reading Zane Grey's book about catching great tuna on the seven seas (and a surprisingly wellwritten book it is) and wanted to go Zane Grey one better.

We had caught a few smallish yellowfins along with some rainbowcolored dolphins on the way over across the Gulf Stream from the upper end of Hawk Channel. It was in the spring of the year and the wiseacres all claimed that the tuna were running.

Katy and I were delighted with the island. We never tired of walking on the beach and watching the highslung landcrabs shuttle like harness racers among the fallen coconuts. We did a lot of bathing in the comfortable surf on the great beach. Hem was scornful of our shell collection.

We got hold of an agreeable storytelling Negro with a small sailboat who took us sailing over the marly waters of the Great Bahama Bank and fishing for bonefish in the shallows between the coral heads. The Mahatma used to kid us about our taste for going out in rowboats together, said people did that before they were married, not after.

The Bimini Negroes were great fun. They made up songs about every incident of the day. Every little job like hauling a boat ashore was a choral event. It was the first time any of us had heard

*My Mama don't want no peas no rice no coconut oil  
All she wants is handy brandy and champagne.*

They immediately made up songs about old Hem. I wish I remembered the words. All my recollections of that week are laced with the lilt of those Bimini songs.

Anyway while Katy and I were unashamedly sightseeing and sailing and rowing and dabbling in folklore—all occupations frowned on by serious fishermen—the Old Master was cruising the deep. He'd brought tuna rigs along and was trolling with that implacable impatient persistence of his.

We were ashore when the Old Master first tangled with his great tuna. It had been hooked early in the morning by a man named Cook who was caretaker at Cat Cay. It must have been an enormous fish because as soon as it sounded it ran out all the line. Cook's hands were cut to shreds when he turned it over to Ernest, who came alongside with the *Pilar* in the early afternoon. Hem went on playing it from Cook's boat and sent the *Pilar* in to fetch us so that we should see the sport. I've forgotten who was at the wheel but we cruised alongside while the battle continued.

Among the assembled yachtsmen there was a gentleman who had a large white yacht named the *Moana*. William B. Leeds, of a family famous in the international set, had invited the Old Master aboard for drinks a couple of days before. The Old Master had come away charmed by Bill Leeds' hospitality but even more charmed by the fact that Leeds owned a Thompson submachine gun. Just at that moment a submachine gun was what the Old Master wanted more than anything in the world.

From a boy he had been fond of firearms but now he was particularly interested in a submachine gun as a way of fighting the sharks. Bimini was infested with sharks that season. They even bothered us bathing on the beach, but particularly they had an exasperating way of cutting off a hooked fish just as you were about to get him into the boat. The Old Master tried potting them with his rifle but unless you shoot him right through his tiny brain a rifle bullet doesn't make much impression on a shark. The night before he fought the tuna he'd been trying all sorts of expedients over the rum collinses to get Leeds to part with his submachine gun. He kept suggesting that they match for it or that they cut a hand of poker for it or shoot at a target for it. I believe he even offered to buy it. But Leeds was holding on to his submachine gun which he told me later had been given to him by the inventor's son who was a good friend of his.

It was late afternoon by the time Katy and I got out to the scene of the battle. By dusk the tuna began to weaken. The Old Master was reeling in on him. Everybody was on the ropes but the tuna was still hooked. We were very much excited to be in for the kill. There was a ring of spectator boats around, including Leeds with his machine gun on the launch from the *Moana*.

It was getting dark. The wind had dropped but a nasty looking squall was making up on the horizon. In the last gloaming the Old Master inched the fish alongside. Nobody had seen him yet. One man was ready with the gaff. The rest of us, hunched on top of the cabin of the *Pilar*, peered into the water with our flashlights.

We all saw him at once, dark, silvery and immense. Eight hundred pounds, nine hundred pounds, a thousand pounds, people guessed in hornswoggled whispers. All I knew was that he was a very big fish. He was moving sluggishly. He seemed licked. The man with the gaff made a lunge and missed. The silver flash was gone. The reel whined as the fish sounded.

The Old Master's expletives were sibilant and low.

The fish took half the reel; then the Old Master began hauling in on him again. He didn't feel right. Somebody suggested he might be dead. Bill Leeds had been keeping the sharks at bay



with his machine gun, but now he laid off for fear a ricochet might hit someone. The Old Master reeled and reeled.

The stormcloud ate up a third of the starry sky. Lightning flickered on its fringes. Most of the small boats had put back to shore.

Leeds from his launch was inviting us to take cover on his yacht but the Old Master was doggedly reeling in.

At last in a great wash of silver and spume the tuna came to the surface ten or fifteen yards astern of the boat. The sharks hadn't touched him. We could see his whole great smooth length. The Old Master was reeling in fast. Then suddenly they came. In the light of our flashlights we could see the sharks streaking in across the dark water. Like torpedoes. Like speedboats. One struck. Another. Another. The water was murky with blood. By the time we hauled the tuna in over the stern there was nothing left but his head and his backbone and his tail.

Getting Katy and me aboard the *Moana* was a real victory for Old Hem. He'd been trying to cotton up to Leeds on account of that machine gun, and maybe too because he thought Leeds was so stinking rich. Katy had taken a scunner to poor Leeds and declared she'd rather die than go aboard his yacht. There was an oily and rather pimpish old Spaniard in the party whom we called Don Propina. We'd both taken a scunner to him. Anyway Ernest won. The squall blew up so hard there was nothing for it but to take refuge on the yacht. We climbed up the gangplank in the first horizontal sheets of rain and sat wet and shivering under the ventilation ducts in the saloon. To serve us right for being so snooty we both caught colds in the head.

Leeds hospitably put us up for the night. We turned in early, so we never knew exactly how it happened; but when we shoved off from the yacht in the lovely early morning sunlight the Old Master had the submachine gun affectionately cradled in the crotch of his arm.

It must have been a loan because Bill Leeds wrote me later that he didn't make Hem a present of the machine gun until a couple of years after when the Old Master was leaving for the civil war in Spain. Leeds agreed that what we saw was a preview of *The Old Man and the Sea*, though the tales the Canary Islander told Hem in Havana certainly played their part. Nobody ever had much luck trying to trace a fish story to its source.

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It was probably the following spring that Hem and Waldo and I rented Bra's boat to go out to the Dry Tortugas. These are the westernmost islets of the string of coral islands that make up the Florida Keys. We'd made the long choppy trip across the banks hoping to catch up with one of the schools of big king mackerel that move east and north out of the Gulf of Mexico in the spring. We hadn't caught many big fish.

Waldo set up his easel at one of the embrasures of the vast stone fort and painted. I had my cot and notebook in another shady nook. The sun was hot and the tradewind cool. The place was enormous and entirely empty. We kept expecting to meet poor old Dr. Mudd coming out of one of the tunnels. No sound but the querulous shrieking of the terns. The water was incredibly clear, delicious for swimming. We saw no shark or barracuda, only a variety of reef fish: yellowtails, angelfish, searobbins, all sorts of tiny jewellike creatures we didn't know the names of swarming under the coralheads. A couple of days went by; it was one of the times I understood the meaning of the word halcyon.

Ernest had brought along Arnold Gingrich, who was just starting *Esquire*. The man was in a trance. It was a world he'd never dreamed of. He was mosquitobitten, half seasick, scorched with sunburn, astonished, half scared, half pleased. It was as much fun to see Ernest play an editor as to see him play a marlin.

Gingrich never took his fascinated eyes off Old Hem. Hem would reel in gently letting his prey have plenty of line. The editor was hooked. Sure he would print anything Hemingway cared to let him have at a thousand dollars a whack. (In those days it never occurred to us anyone got paid more than that. We lived outside of the world of agents and big time New York lunches.) Ernest was practicing up on skills he'd later apply to high literary finance. He got Gingrich so tame he even sold him a few pieces of mine for good measure.

Bra meanwhile was spending his time dredging up conches. Tourists had appeared in Key West. Bra had discovered to his amazement that tourists would buy the great rosy scalloped shells. He had the whole bow of the boat piled up with them. The night before we started back to Key West he made us one of the best conch chowders I ever ate. That with fried yellowtail seasoned with a brine and lime concoction he called Old Sour, made a royal feast. We washed it down with a little too much Bacardi rum.

We were tied up to a pier across from the fort. While we were eating and drinking, a couple of Cuban smacks that had been fishing in deep water for red snapper came alongside. They were a ragged sunbaked friendly crew. We handed around tin cups of

Bacardi. Hem's Spanish became remarkably fluent. From out of his beard Waldo produced that mixture of French, Italian, and bastard Castilian that had carried him for years through the Mediterranean countries. Bra, who disdained foreign tongues, made himself friendly with shrugs and grunts. Gingrich sat speechless and goggleeyed while we climbed around each other's boats jabbering like a band of monkeys.

There were feats of strength, tales of huge blue marlin hooked and lost, of crocodiles sighted in the Gulf and rattlesnakes twenty feet long seen swimming out to sea. Night fell absolutely windless. There was no moon. Our friends pushed their boats off, anchored a few hundred feet out and turned in. We moved out from the pier to catch what breeze there was. The stars looked big as Christmastree ornaments, clustered overhead and reflected in the sea. The three small craft seemed suspended in the midst of an enormous starstudded indigo sphere.

It was hot in the cabin. Weighed down with heat and Bacardi we lay sweating in the narrow bunks. Sleep came in a glare of heat.

We were wakened by a knocking on the deck. It was the elderly grizzled man who was skipper of one of the smacks. "Amigos, par despedirnos." Redeyed, with heads like lumps of lead, we scrambled on deck.

He pointed. Against the first violet streak in the east we could see a man on the bow of the smack shaking some liquid in a large glass carboy. They were sailing for Havana with the first breeze. They wanted to honor us with a farewell drink before they left.

Everybody climbed up on the narrow planking of the pier. Of course there was no ice. It was a warm eggnog made with a kind of cheep aguardiente that smelt like wood alcohol. Obediently we brought out our tin cups. We were hung over. We felt squeamish. It made us retch. We couldn't insult our amigos. We expected to die but they were our amigos and we drank it.

It was then that Ernest brought out his rifle and started to shoot. By this time it was silvery gloaming. You could feel the sun burning under the horizon. He shot a baked-bean can floating halfway to the shore. We threw out more cans for him. He shot bits of paper the Cubans spread out on wooden chips from their skiff. He shot several terns. He shot through a pole at the end of the pier. Anything we'd point at he would hit. He shot sitting. He shot standing. He shot lying on his belly. He shot backward, with the rifle held between his legs.

So far as we could see he never missed. Finally he ran out of ammunition. We drank down the last of the fishermen's punch.

The amigos shook hands. The amigos waved. They weighed anchor and hoisted the grimy sails on their smacks and steered closehauled into the east as the first breath of the trade lightened the heavy air.

We headed back to Key West. There was an oily swell over the banks on the way back. What wind there was settled into the stern. Bra's conches had begun to rot and stank abominably. The punch set badly. Our faces were green. Our lips were cold. Nobody actually threw up, but we were a pallid and silent crew until we reached the lee of the first low patches of mangroves that lay in the approaches of Key West.

## Ernest Hemingway

### *From* To Have and Have Not

He did not take the bicycle but walked down the street. The moon was up now and the trees were dark against it, and he passed the frame houses with their narrow yards, light coming from the shuttered windows; the unpaved alleys, with their double rows of houses; Conch town, where all was starched, well-shuttered, virtue, failure, grits and boiled grunts, under-nourishment, prejudice, righteousness, interbreeding and the comforts of religion; the open-doored, lighted Cuban bolito houses, shacks whose only romance was their names; The Red House, Chicha's; the pressed stone church; its steeples sharp, ugly triangles against the moonlight; the big grounds and the long, black-domed bulk of the convent, handsome in the moonlight; a filling station and a sandwich place, bright-lighted beside a vacant lot where a miniature golf course had been taken out; past the brightly lit main street with the three drug stores, the music store, the five Jew stores, three pool-rooms, two barbershops, five beer joints, three ice cream parlors, the five poor and the one good restaurant, two magazine and paper places, four second-hand joints (one of which made keys), a photographer's, an office building with four dentists' offices upstairs, the big dime store, a hotel on the corner with taxis opposite; and across, behind the hotel, to the street that led to jungle town, the big unpainted frame house with lights and the girls in the doorway, the mechanical piano going, and a sailor sitting in the street; and then

on back, past the back of the brick courthouse with its clock luminous at half-past ten, past the whitewashed jail building shining in the moonlight, to the embowered entrance of the Lilac Time where motor cars filled the alley.

The Lilac Time was brightly lighted and full of people, and as Richard Gordon went in he saw the gambling room was crowded, the wheel turning and the little ball clicking brittle against metal partitions set in the bowl, the wheel turning slowly, the ball whirring, then clicking jumpily until it settled and there was only the turning of the wheel and the rattling of chips.

# Who Murdered the Vets?

## A First-Hand Report On The Florida Hurricane

*I have led my ragamuffins where they are peppered; there's not three of my hundred and fifty left alive, and they are for the town's end, to beg during life.*

-Shakespeare

*Yes, and now we drown those three.*

Whom did they annoy and to whom was their possible presence a political danger?

Who sent them down to the Florida Keys and left them there in hurricane months?

Who is responsible for their deaths?

The writer of this article lives a long way from Washington and would not know the answers to those questions. But he does know that wealthy people, yachtsmen, fishermen such as President Hoover and President Roosevelt, do not come to the Florida Keys in hurricane months. Hurricane months are August, September and October, and in those months you see no yachts along the Keys. You do not see them because yacht owners know there would be great danger, unescapable danger, to their property if a storm should come. For the same reason, you cannot interest any very wealthy people in fishing off the coast of Cuba in the summer when the biggest fish are there. There is a known danger to property. But veterans, especially the bonus-marching variety of veterans, are not property. They are only human beings, unsuccessful human beings, and all they have to lose is their lives. They are doing coolie labor for a top wage of \$45 a month and they have been put down on the Florida Keys where they can't make trouble. It is hurricane months, sure, but if anything comes up, you can always evacuate them, can't you?

This is the way a storm comes. On Saturday evening at Key West, having finished working, you go out to the porch to have a drink and read the evening paper. The first thing you see in the paper is a storm warning. You know that work is off until it

is past, and you are angry and upset because you were going well.

The location of the tropical disturbance is given as east of Long Island in the Bahamas, and the direction it is traveling is approximately toward Key West. You get out the September storm chart which gives the tracks and dates of forty storms of hurricane intensity during that month since 1900. And by taking the rate of movement of the storm as given in the Weather Bureau Advisory you calculate that it cannot reach us before Monday noon at the earliest. Sunday you spend making the boat as safe as you can. When they refuse to haul her out on the ways because there are too many boats ahead, you buy \$52 worth of new heavy hawser and shift her to what seems the safest part of the submarine base and tie her up there. Monday you nail up the shutters on the house and get everything movable inside. There are northeast storm warnings flying, and at five o'clock the wind is blowing heavily and steadily from the northeast. They have hoisted the big red flags with a black square in the middle, one over the other that means a hurricane. The wind is rising hourly, and the barometer is falling. All the people of the town are nailing up their houses.

You go down to the boat and wrap the lines with canvas where they will chafe when the surge starts, and believe that she has a good chance to ride it out if it comes from any direction but the northwest where the opening of the sub-basin is; provided no other boat smashes into you and sinks you. There is a booze boat seized by the Coast Guard tied next to you and you notice her stern lines are only tied to ringbolts in the stern, and you start belly-aching about that.

"For Christ sake, you know those lousy ringbolts will pull right out of her stern and then she'll come down on us."

"If she does, you can cut her loose or sink her."

"Sure, and maybe we can't get to her too. What's the use of letting a piece of junk like that sink a good boat?"

From the last advisory you figure we will not get it until midnight, and at ten o'clock you leave the Weather Bureau and go home to see if you can get two hours' sleep before it starts, leaving the car in front of the house because you do not trust the rickety garage, putting the barometer and a flashlight by the bed for when the electric lights go. At midnight the wind is howling, the glass is 29.55 and dropping while you watch it, and rain is coming in sheets. You dress, find the car drowned out, make your way to the boat with a flashlight with branches falling and wires going down. The flashlight shorts in the rain, and the wind is now coming in heavy gusts from the northwest. The captured boat has pulled her ringbolts out, and by quick handling by Jose Rodriguez, a Spanish sailor, was swung clear before she hit us. She is now



pounding against the dock.

The wind is bad and you have to crouch over to make headway against it. You figure if we get the hurricane from there you will lose the boat and you never will have enough money to get another. You feel like hell. But a little after two o'clock it backs into the west and by the law of circular storms you know the storm has passed over the Keys above us. Now the boat is well-sheltered by the sea wall and the breakwater and at five o'clock, the glass having been steady for an hour, you get back to the house. As you make your way in without a light you find a tree is down across the walk and a strange empty look in the front yard shows the big old sappodillo tree is down too. You turn in.

That's what happens when one misses you. And that is about the minimum of time you have to prepare for a hurricane; two full days. Sometimes you have longer.

But what happened on the Keys?

On Tuesday, as the storm made its way up the Gulf of Mexico, it was so wild not a boat could leave Key West and there was no communication with the Keys beyond the ferry, nor with the mainland. No one knew what the storm had done, where it had passed. No train came in and there was no news by plane. Nobody knew the horror that was on the Keys. It was not until the next day that a boat got through to Matecumbe Key from Key West.

Now, as this is written five days after the storm, nobody knows how many are dead. The Red Cross, which has steadily played down the number, announcing first 46 then 150, finally saying the dead would not pass 300, today lists the dead and missing as 446, but the total of veterans dead and missing alone numbers 442 and there have been 70 bodies of civilians recovered. The total of dead may well pass a thousand as many bodies were swept out to sea and never will be found.

It is not necessary to go into the deaths of the civilians and their families since they were on the Keys of their own free will; they made their living there, had property and knew the hazards involved. But the veterans had been sent there; they had no opportunity to leave, nor any protection against hurricanes; and they never had a chance for their lives.

During the war, troops and sometimes individual soldiers who incurred the displeasure of their superior officers, were sometimes sent into positions of extreme danger and kept there repeatedly until they were no longer problems. I do not believe anyone, knowingly, would send U.S. war veterans into any such positions in time of peace. But the Florida Keys, in hurricane months, in the matter of casualties recorded during the building of

the Florida East Coast Railway to Key West, when nearly a thousand men were killed by hurricanes, can be classed as such a position. And ignorance has never been accepted as an excuse for murder or for manslaughter.

Who sent nearly a thousand war veterans, many of them husky, hard-working and simply out of luck, but many of them close to the border of pathological cases, to live in frame shacks on the Florida Keys in hurricane months?

Why were the men not evacuated on Sunday, or, at latest, Monday morning, when it was known there was a possibility of a hurricane striking the Keys and *evacuation was their only possible protection?*

Who advised against sending the train from Miami to evacuate the veterans until four-thirty o'clock on Monday so that it was blown off the tracks before it ever reached the lower camps?

These are questions that someone will have to answer, and answer satisfactorily, unless the clearing of Anacostia Flats is going to seem an act of kindness compared to the clearing of Upper and Lower Matecumbe.

When we reached Lower Matecumbe there were bodies floating in the ferry slip. The brush was all brown as though autumn had come to these islands where there is no autumn but only a more dangerous summer, but that was because the leaves had all been blown away. There was two feet of sand over the highest part of the island where the sea had carried it and all the heavy bridge-building machines were on their sides. The island looked like the abandoned bed of a river where the sea had swept it. The railroad embankment was gone and the men who had cowered behind it and finally, when the water came, clung to the rails, were all gone with it. You could find them face down and face up in the mangroves. The biggest bunch of the dead were in the tangled, always green but now brown, mangroves behind the tank cars and the water towers. They hung on there, in shelter, until the wind and the rising water carried them away. They didn't all let go at once but only when they could hold on no longer. Then further on you found them high in the trees where the water had swept them. You found them everywhere and in the sun all of them were beginning to be too big for their blue jeans and jackets that they could never fill when they were on the bum and hungry.

I'd known a lot of them at Josie Grunt's place and around the town when they would come in for pay day, and some of them were punch drunk and some of them were smart; some had been on the bum since the Argonne almost and some had lost their jobs the year before last Christmas; some had wives and some couldn't



remember; some were good guys, and others put their pay checks in the Postal Savings and then came over to cadge in on the drinks when better men were drunk; some liked to fight and others liked to walk around the town; and they were all what you get after a war. But who sent them there to die?

They're better off, I can hear whoever sent them say, explaining to himself. What good were they? You can't account for accidents or acts of God. They were well-fed, well-housed, well-treated and, let us suppose, now they are well dead.

But I would like to make whoever sent them there carry just one out through the mangroves, or turn one over that lay in the sun along the fill, or tie five together so they won't float out, or smell that smell you thought you'd never smell again, with luck when rich bastards make a war. The lack of luck goes on until all who take part in it are gone.

So now you hold your nose, and you, you that put in the literary columns that you were staying in Miami to see a hurricane because you needed it in your next novel and now you were afraid you would not see one, you can go on reading the paper, and you'll get all you need for your next novel; but I would like to lead you by the seat of your well-worn-by-writing-to-the-literary-columns pants up to that bunch of mangroves where there is a woman, bloated big as a balloon and upside down and there's another face down in the brush next to her and explain to you they are two damned nice girls who ran a sandwich place and filling station and that where they are is their hard luck. And you could make a note of it for your next novel and how is your next novel coming, brother writer, comrade shit?

But just then one of eight survivors from that camp of 187 not counting 12 who went to Miami to play ball (how's that for casualties, you guys who remember percentages?) comes along and he says, "That's my old lady. Fat, ain't she?" But that guy is nuts, now, so we can dispense with him, and we have to go back and get in a boat before we can check up on Camp Five.

Camp Five was where eight survived out of 187, but we only find 67 of those plus two more along the fill makes 69. But all the rest are in the mangroves. It doesn't take a bird dog to locate them. On the other hand, there are no buzzards. Absolutely no buzzards. How's that? Would you believe it? The wind killed all the buzzards and all the big winged birds like pelicans too. You can find them in the grass that's washed along the fill. Hey, there's another one. He's got low shoes, put him down, man, looks about sixty, low shoes, copper-riveted overalls, blue percale shirt without collar, storm jacket, by Jesus that's the thing to wear, nothing in his pockets. Turn him over. Face tumefied beyond

recognition. Hell, he don't look like a veteran. He's too old. He's got grey hair. You'll have grey hair yourself this time next week. And across his back there was a great big blister as wide as his back and all ready to burst where his storm jacket had slipped down. Turn him over again. Sure he's a veteran. I know him. What's he got low shoes on for then? Maybe he made some money shooting craps and bought them. You don't know that guy. You can't tell him now. I know him, he hasn't got any thumb. That's how I know him. The land crabs ate his thumb. You think you know everybody. Well you waited a long time to get sick brother. Sixty-seven of them and you get sick at the sixty-eighth.

And so you walk the fill, where there is any fill and it's calm and clear and blue and almost the way it is when the millionaires come down in the winter except for the sand-flies, the mosquitoes and the smell of the dead that always smell the same in all countries that you go to—and now they smell like that in your own country. Or is it just that dead soldiers smell the same no matter what their nationality or who sends them to die?

Who sent them down there?

I hope he reads this—and how does he feel?

He will die too, himself, perhaps even without a hurricane warning, but maybe it will be an easy death, that's the best you get, so that you do not have to hang onto something until you can't hang on, until your fingers won't hold on, and it is dark. And the wind makes a noise like a locomotive passing, with a shriek on top of that, because the wind has a scream exactly as it has in books, and then the fill goes and the high wall of water rolls you over and over and then, whatever it is, you get it and we find you now of no importance, stinking in the mangroves.

You're dead now, brother, but who left you there in the hurricane months on the Keys where a thousand men died before you when they were building the road that's now washed out?

Who left you there? And what's the punishment for manslaughter now?

## Letter to Maxwell Perkins

7 September, 1935

Dear Max:

I was glad to have your letter and would have answered sooner except for the hurricane which came the same night I received it. We got only the outside edge. It was due for midnight and I went to bed at ten to get a couple of hours sleep if possible having made everything as safe as possible with the boat. Went with the barometer on a chair by the bed and a flashlight to use when the lights should go. At midnight the barometer had fallen to 29.50 and the wind was coming very high and in gusts of great strength tearing down trees, branches etc. Car drowned out and got down to boat afoot and stood by until 5 a.m. when the wind shifting into the west we knew the storm had crossed to the north and was going away. All the next day the winds were too high to get out and there was no communication with the keys. Telephone, cable and telegraph all down, too rough for boats to leave. The next day we got across [to Lower Matecumbe Key] and found things in a terrible shape. Imagine you have read it in the papers but nothing could give an idea of the destruction. Between 700 and 1000 dead. Many, today, still unburied. The foliage absolutely stripped as though by fire for forty miles and the land looking like the abandoned bed of a river. Not a building of any sort standing. Over thirty miles of railway washed and blown away. We were the first in to Camp Five of the veterans who were working on the highway construction. Out of 187 only 8 survived. Saw more dead than I'd seen in one place since the lower Piave in June of 1918.

The veterans in those camps were practically murdered. The Florida East Coast had a train ready for nearly twenty four hours to take them off the Keys. The people in charge are said to have wired Washington for orders. Washington wired Miami Weather Bureau which is said to have replied there was no danger and it would be a useless expense. The train did not start until the storm started. It never got within thirty miles of the two

lower camps. The people in charge of the veterans and the weather bureau can split the responsibility between them.

What I know and can swear to is this; that while the storm was at its height on Matecumbe and most of the people already dead the Miami bureau sent a warning of winds of gale strength on the keys from Key Largo to Key West and of hurricane intensity in the Florida straights [straits] below Key West. They lost the storm completely and did not use the most rudimentary good sense in figuring its progress.

Long Key fishing camp is completely destroyed and so are all the settlements on Matecumbe both upper and lower. There is over thirty miles of the R.R. completely gone and there will probably never be another train in to Key West. Highway is not as badly damaged as the R.R. but would take six months to repair. The R.R. may make a bluff that they will rebuild in order to sell the govt their right of way for the highway. Anyway Key West will be isolated for at least six months except for boat service and plane from Miami.

The Marine Corps plane that is flying some of the 1st class mail just brought two sets of page proof going up to page 130. Do you want me to send this back before the other comes?

To get back to your letter.

But first I wish I could have had with me the bloody poop that has been having his publishers put out publicity matter that he has been staying in Miami because he needs a hurricane in the book he is writing and that it looked as though he wasn't going to have one and him so disappointed.

Max, you can't imagine it, two women, naked, tossed up into trees by the water, swollen and stinking, their breasts as big as balloons, flies between their legs. Then, by figuring, you locate where it is and recognize them as the two very nice girls who ran a sandwich place and filling-station three miles from the ferry. We located sixty-nine bodies where no one had been able to get in. Indian Key absolutely swept clean, not a blade of grass, and over the high center of it were scattered live conchs that came in with the sea, craw fish, and dead morays. The whole bottom of the sea blew over it. I would like to have had that little literary bastard that wanted his hurricane along to rub his nose in some of it. Harry Hopkins and Roosevelt who sent those poor bonus march guys down there to get rid of them got rid of them all right. Now they say they should all be buried in arlington and no bodies to be burned or buried on the spot which meant trying to carry stuff that came apart blown so tight that they burst when you lifted them, rotten, running, putrid, decomposed, absolutely impossible to embalm, carry them out six, eight miles to a boat, on the boat for

ten to twenty more to put them into boxes and the whole thing stinking to make you vomit—enroute to Arlington. Most of the protests against burning or burying came from the Miami undertakers that get 100 dollars apiece per veteran. Plain pine boxes called coffins at \$50 apiece. They could have been quicklimed right in where they are found, identification made from their pay disks and papers and crosses put up. Later dig up the bones and ship them.

Joe Lowe the original of the Rummy in that story of mine "One Trip Across" was drowned at the Ferry Slip.

Had just finished a damned good long story and was on another when this started with the warning on Saturday night. They had all day Sunday and all day Monday to get those vets out and never did it. If they had taken half the precautions with them that we took with our boat not a one would have been lost.

Feel too lousy now to write. Out rained on, sleeping on the deck of the run boat, nothing to drink through all that business so ought to remember it, but damned if I want it for my novel. We made five trips with provisions for survivors to different places and nothing but dead men to eat the grub...

John Hersey

## The Captain

We were on deck making up gear that morning, tied up to Dutcher's Duck opposite Poole's, when the new hand came aboard. Caskie, the skipper, seated on an upended bucket, was stitching some new bait bags, his huge, meaty fingers somehow managing to swoop the sail needle with delicate feminine undulations in and out of the bits of folded net. You could buy bait bags, but would Caskie? He had a closed face, signifying nothing. We knew he must have been hurt by Manuel Cautinho, who had served him as mate 19 long years and had suddenly walked off on him, but there was no reading Caskie's face, any more than you could read the meditations of a rock awash at high tide off Gay Head. His was a tight-sealed set of features, immobile and enigmatic in their weather-cracked hide. His eyes were downcast, the hoods of the lids the color of cobwebs, unblinking as he steadily worked. We never knew what he thought; sometimes we wondered if he ever needed to think.

I had been bowled over with the luck of being given a site as shacker on Caskie Gurr's *Gannet*. I was an apprentice, I got all the dirty work, I was salting stinking remains of pogies and yellowtail for bait with a foul tub between my feet that morning, but it didn't matter. (You could buy frozen bait, but...) Caskie had the best reputation of any of the offshore lobstering skippers out of either Menemsha or New Bedford. Everyone said that he cared, more than most, whether his men got decent shares, and that he knew, better than most, the track of the seasonal marches of the lobbies on the seabed of the shelf out there. *Gannet* was known as a

room of the *grocería*. Bang! The metal tip of the cane struck again, all the men coming to attention as Abuelo elevated the cane haughtily as a teacher with a pointer in a classroom of thick-headed boys destined to grow to men forever ignorant of the ways of women, unless they heeded the words of great Góngora. Abuelo raised the cane higher, until the metal tip nudged the white dancer tights banded around the forceful thrust of Pavlova's thighs, her body trapped forever in an eternal leap from the poster nailed to the wall. Never taking his eyes from the curved spirit of Pavlova's leap Abuelo's voice swelled with wisdom of great Góngora, filling every square inch of the small room as if it were the vast hall of a ghostly cigar factory:

*That fixed armada in the eastern sea  
Of islands firm I cannot well describe,  
Whose number though for no lasciviousness  
But for their sweetness and variety,  
The beautiful confusion emulate  
When in the white pools of Eurotas Rose  
The virginal and naked hunting tribe...*

Great Góngora's words echoed in Justo's ears as if spoken only moments before by Abuelo in the backroom of the *grocería*. Justo last heard Góngora's poetry twenty years ago, in a time of "beautiful confusion." All gone now, gone the way of handmade cigars and natural sponges. The turtles were endangered, and sport fishermen let their less than prize catches from the sea off the hook. What would Abuelo think of it all now? This time of rich rock and roll crooners of drug tunes and hot dogs in alligator loafers blowing away slow greyhounds. A time of conspicuous corruption which had less to do with simple survival and more to do with spiritual greed. Stella Maris had lost more than her virginity and glitter. The Góngorian time of "sweetness and variety," which Abuelo once hailed in the now deserted great halls of the cigar factories, gone forever, along with sponges in the sea and arias soaring to the chandeliered ceiling of the San Carlos.

## Wallace Stevens

### The Idea of Order at Key West

She sang beyond the genius of the sea.  
The water never formed to mind or voice,  
Like a body wholly body, fluttering  
Its empty sleeves; and yet its mimic motion  
Made constant cry, caused constantly a cry,  
That was not ours although we understood,  
Inhuman, of the veritable ocean.

The sea was not a mask. No more was she.  
The song and water were not medleyed sound  
Even if what she sang was what she heard,  
Since what she sang was uttered word by word.  
It may be that in all her phrases stirred  
The grinding water and the gasping wind;  
But it was she and not the sea we heard.

For she was the maker of the song she sang.  
The ever-hooded, tragic gestured sea  
Was merely a place by which she walked to sing.  
Whose spirit is this? we said, because we knew  
It was the spirit that we sought and knew  
That we should ask this often as she sang.

If it was only the dark voice of the sea  
That rose, or even colored by many waves;

If it was only the outer voice of sky  
 And cloud, of the sunken coral water-walled,  
 However clear, it would have been deep air,  
 The heaving speech of air, a summer sound  
 Repeated in a summer without end  
 And sound alone. But it was more than that,  
 More even than her voice, and ours, among  
 The meaningless plungings of water and the wind,  
 Theatrical distances, bronze shadows heaped  
 On high horizons, mountainous atmospheres  
 Of sky and sea.

It was her voice that made  
 The sky acutest at its vanishing.  
 She measured to the hour its solitude.  
 She was the single artificer of the world  
 In which she sang. And when she sang, the sea  
 Whatever self it had, became the self  
 That was her song, for she was the maker. Then we,  
 As we beheld her striding there alone,  
 Knew that there never was a world for her  
 Except the one she sang and, singing, made.

Ramon Fernandez, tell me, if you know,  
 Why, when the singing ended and we turned  
 Toward the town, tell why the glassy lights,  
 The lights in the fishing boats at anchor there,  
 As the night descended, tilting in the air,  
 Mastered the night and portioned out the sea,  
 Fixing emblazoned zones and fiery poles,  
 Arranging, deepening, enchanting night.

Oh! Blessed rage for order, pale Ramon,  
 The maker's rage to order words of the sea,  
 Words of the fragrant portals, dimly-starred,  
 And of ourselves and of our origins,  
 In ghostlier demarcations, keener sounds.

## O Florida, Venereal Soil

A few things for themselves,  
 Convolvulus and coral,  
 Buzzards and live-moss,  
 Tiestas from the keys,  
 A few things for themselves,  
 Florida, venereal soil,  
 (Disclose to the lover.)

The dreadful sundry of this world,  
 The Cuban, Polodowsky,  
 The Mexican women,  
 The negro undertaker  
 Killing the time between corpses  
 Fishing for crayfish . . .  
 Virgin of boorish births,

Swiftly in the nights,  
 In the porches of Key West,  
 Behind the bougainvilleas,  
 After the guitar is asleep,  
 Lasciviously as the wind,  
 You come tormenting,  
 Insatiable,

When you might sit,  
 A scholar of darkness,  
 Sequestered over the sea,  
 Wearing a clear tiara  
 Of red and blue and red,  
 Sparkling, solitary, still,  
 In the high sea-shadow.

Donna, donna, dark,  
 (Stooping in indigo gown)  
 And cloudy constellations,  
 Conceal yourself or disclose  
 Fewest things to the lover—  
 A hand that bears a thick-leaved fruit,  
 A pungent bloom against your shade.