

Sitting there monster he waves the remote like calling a
dog inside but he doesn't know she'll never not be that sudden
bigger lady again. God damn size elevens in a seven shoebox.
She's done shrinking.

LINDSEY GODFREY ECCLES

The Last Voyage of Captain Black

His ship was the pride of the Liverpool yards; her sails, taut in
the favorable trades; her belly, stuffed with African rosewood
fit to win the favor of the queen. The Captain stood full two-
and-a-half feet in her prow, the chiseled planes of his nose and
cheeks upthrust to the flare of the southern sun. Voices sang out:

*All hail our Captain Black!
His pants swing low and his lines run slack
Drunk on rum he's missed his tack
All hail our Captain Black!*

And laughter from rough layabouts pressed into service. But
the raucous shouts deceived. Cheeky rhymes or no, the high
seas had whipped his sailors into a crew that would stand
against any admiral's. He trusted them with his cargo and his
life, and his cinder-smudged countenance betrayed no frown.

And so all the more ugly the shock when, the ship safely in
port, he did not find himself carriage-bound to an audience
with Her Majesty. Instead he was left stationed at the quay
among cords of dense, dark heartwood. Soon the pride of the
Congo was hauled away, but he remained on the docks in the
rain, day after day, ignored but for the occasional drunken
salute until finally he tumbled into a heap of refuse and lay
waiting for something, someone, anything, *anyone*, though
nothing and no one ever came. A night that never ended.

At least, not for a very long time.

When at last darkness lifted he found himself standing
lonely watch inside a cage made of the thinnest, clearest
glass. At his feet, affixed to the floor, a puzzling plaque:

Folk Art of the High Seas, Lot 87
African juniper with traces of burnt cork
Early to Middle Nineteenth century
Untitled
Artist unknown
Est: \$8,500

Beyond the glass an array of seats, sporadically occupied by men and women in peculiar dress, each of them clutching a broad paddle as if on watch for a naughty cabin boy in need of correction. Most paid him no mind, but one man strode to and fro in front of the Captain's enclosure, occasionally pausing to point quite disrespectfully in his direction. Captain Black bore it with as much straight-spined dignity as he could, until someone threw a heavy curtain over his cage as if he were a parrot.

Daylight, and a horrendous mechanical screech. He wanted to cover his ears, but he could not move. A mysterious machine approached, lifted his glass cage in its outstretched arms, and moved him to a platform beside other cages, one of which held a life-sized but inanimate brown bear standing on its hind legs as if it were a man. The curtain descended once more, and all was dark. The platform began to rattle and shake, and he experienced a sense of movement through space. Sometime after that, the smell of the sea and cries of seagulls. God, it was glorious. The tip and sway of the deck, the muffled crash of waves against the hull.

He dozed, dreaming of jungle treasures.

But now, disaster. A violent shudder, an ear-piercing metallic scream, and a slow sense of tipping. His cage fell onto its side, taking him with it. Upended. The glass shattered with cracks, but it did not break. He struck it headfirst, but its shimmering surface held. There must be some magic in it. A flashing red light appeared: a prelude to hellfire, he assumed. The ship was foundering. How deep would it sink before it came to rest? Was this the open ocean? Was there any bottom to it, or would the vessel sink forever?

He was curious to find out. But duty lay elsewhere. If anyone could right this ship, it was Captain Black.

He gathered his strength and set his will to break free of this glass prison. But he could not kick or punch or butt; he only swayed with the leaning of the ship. Intermittent red light revealed water filling the hold. No matter; he could hold his breath with the best of his sailors. At last with a mighty pitch and roll he smashed through the walls of his cage and lay on the metal floor. The tropical sea rose and wrapped him in her embrace, warm and luscious as any dockside lover's. She didn't belong in this cold, unnatural place, and neither did he. The Captain no longer wished to pilot this ungraceful, unwieldy, incomprehensible vessel. He no longer wished to pit his manly strength against this ocean or any other. It was delightful to float, luxurious. Drifting to freedom through a massive crack in the hull, he felt the ship settle and heard the massive crash of many more cages breaking, many more prisoners set free.

A rush of water, and then nothing.

At first, only blackness. But slowly he floated up, and up, and up, drawn by his swollen heart to a heavenly indigo blue. This would be his greatest voyage yet. Who knew what lands he might find, what wonders he might collect for the pleasure of the queen? Let the sea take him; he trusted her now as perhaps he always should have. He would sail to the edges of the Earth, amass unimaginable riches. The queen would quiver with delight at the sight of him. He bobbed to the sun-speckled surface and took on a slow but stately westward drift.

The world was his to discover.