

Songs the Ocean Sang to Me

by Katherine Rigney '20

Sometimes at night, when I was hungry, or exhausted, or shivering and covered with a fine salty spray, or some invigorating mixture of them all, I would sing myself songs. Alone at the bow of the ship, the wind stole the air almost as soon as it left my salty lips with a puff of warm breath, whisked the sound away into the great unknown before it could bother my crewmates or wake anyone up. It was how I kept myself occupied while standing watch in the middle of the night, alone with my thoughts and the stars. I realized right away that I could only sing light songs, sweet songs, songs that could skim along the top of the water like a flying fish, gentle and graceful and leaving only a flutter of a wake behind them. Songs of power are too scary to sing to the sea--the ocean at night seems to breathe, seems to have a song of its own. It felt disrespectful to try to compete, and respect for the ocean is the very first thing you learn when you go to sea.

The ocean is huge--larger than comprehension. The ocean is ancient and eternal and so powerful that human words fail. The ocean is uncaring. The ocean is deep, and dark, and poorly understood. To sail along across it, knowing how many meters down lies the bottom, knowing how little you know about what, exactly, is beneath you at any time, knowing how many human bones the ocean has welcomed home--knowing all of this makes you understand superstition. I learned to blanch at the sound of whistling onboard, learned to toast Neptune at every all-hands meeting. Respect is everything on the ocean because the ocean kills, unflinchingly. And in the face of this, the people around you become more than classmates, or even best friends. They become essential. You come to trust them, implicitly. With your life. You learn to depend on

them, and their strong arms and legs, and their smiles, and the way they take care of you when you need it. The way they make you better.

A lot of my classmates from Carleton have gone abroad. Many of them had wonderful experiences that changed them a lot, and that broadened their understanding of the world and deepened their understanding of themselves. But very few have gone to sea, or had the kind of surreal, terrifying, often uncomfortable, sometimes magical experience that I did. My shipmates and I talked about this a lot--how to communicate what exactly happens when you put thirty strangers on a ship and ask them to cross the ocean. And I could come close to telling you! I could tell you about salty, tangled hair, bruised shins, callouses from hauling lines. I could tell you about the sky, and how big, how unimaginably humbling it is at sea. I could tell you about the most beautiful sunsets you'll ever see--huge and pink and open and birds flying shadowed across the pillow clouds. I could talk about the million million shades of blue in this world, and the inexplicable hypnosis of the spray that comes off of confused waves. I could describe the way steam curls off of a bowl of ramen in the dark dining room down below, when everyone else is asleep but you and some friends just got off watch and can't wait three hours for breakfast. I could talk about chipping away at a fresh coconut with a spoon on the quarter deck, or the unique challenge of pouring orange juice in thirteen-foot seas, when the "gimbaled" tables are swaying back and forth in a way that never got less disorienting. I could paint a picture of the rigging against a clear blue sky, stately and elegant and reaching tall, or the sneaky, calm creeping mangroves, orange-brown in turquoise water. I could try my best to describe how challenging it is to sweep up wilted pieces of lettuce off of the galley floor in the middle of the night, when the floor is diagonal and you're so seasick you're having trouble focusing your eyes. I could tell about the exhilaration, the thrill of adrenaline that shoots through your body when you're on the

headrig in a squall (there's no question of whether or not you'll brave the driving rain and the cruel, howling winds to tie down that sail while standing on netting that never did feel very robust. Your ship needs you. It's in your bones--you do what must be done). I could tell stories of jumping off the bow of the ship into the middle of the ocean, no land in sight, and then I could talk about taking a salt water shower on deck, and the warm teak wood under your feet. I could fill a book, ten books, a hundred books with snapshots like this. But it would never be quite enough (and, in another sense, it would all be far too complicated).

Because it isn't that complicated, is it? People go to sea, it's what we do. People try to write about the sea, and fail, and that too is necessary. The ocean can't be quite caught; our languages aren't big enough, and that's okay with me. The conclusion that my shipmates and I came to was that maybe this whole experience simply couldn't be adequately described to others, and I've made my peace with that. What I got from this term abroad was enough--loving and being loved (deeply, truthfully, wholly) and sometimes, in the quiet moments between bustle, being close enough to hear a whisper of the ocean's own song underneath mine, deep and true, the magnetic one that calls me home.