

her seabelly to the sky

re-habbing a boat named Rosie

by Carmen C. Wong

Her oceanic beginnings – plank and rib, stretched, sealed, riveted, watertight. 31 feet. 1931? Silvers?



Squatting inside her hull, I marvel at her un/making as I pick at the ghostly remains of what used to form and fill her, now a pile of moldy rubble. Some of her parts – notably her brass portholes – were already removed and sold off by the owners of the marina. After her owner died, she had been abandoned, taking up space on the hard when the automatic cheques for her rent stopped arriving. She was twisted: her centre-line off-kilter from being on land more than a decade, and therefore had no buyers.

Lapwing she was called, we found out later, after naming her Rosie for the faded pink paint below her waterline. As we take her insides apart, we put together pieces of her story mostly from hearsay, dotted with a few more authoritative accounts. Some parts have been imagined, some inferred, all true as far as boat stories go.



When we first entered, everything inside her was already beyond a Havishamian mass of detritus covered with sawdust, cobwebs, rust, salt. The good parts called to be rescued, others lay quietly idle, resigned to have their status changed from useful thing to garbage. Her engine and motor were expertly, meticulously removed by a young friend born in a lineage of shipbuilders. He arrived surgeon-like with his toolbox and promptly got to work, spanners and screwdrivers akimbo, a greasy rag tucked in his pocket. The crane did the rest, lifting the diesel-covered chambers like toy prizes in the claws of an arcade game. These will eventually get packed on a pallet and cling filmed, resembling Koonsian art, ready to find their next buyer.



We gift the copper and metal wiring to our neighbors, which when stripped can fetch a good price, although not as good as the ballast and the keel, which can cover the rent and utilities for two months. The keel goes wholesale to Alaskan Tim who also lives on the yard, in need of weight for displacement so he can travel on. I save the nesting aluminium pots, which now holds our kitchen scraps for the compost, the smaller one a home for garlic and ginger in the root cellar, the largest a planter for the coriander. A miniature plastic cow has found its new home with a succulent, and a plastic yellow bread stamp promises to make our morning toast greet us cheerfully with GOOD MORNING SUNSHINE!



The post-salvage sorting of what remained after the interiors were removed took a good while because I was lingering on each thing I touched, attending to it with close viewings of how materials naturally deteriorate, or noticing the manner in which matter unravelled as I tear, fold, crack, smash, cut it with my hands. The tangled ropes are joined by the red clumps of fluffed insulation, whose edges crumbled quickly when picked up. Some segments of the thick rubber hose worn down by flowing usage cut easily under the pressure of my box knife, the other parts still sturdy and almost new, resist and I let them keep their length.

I am mesmerized by the ugliness of the carpet, and other decorative finishings, the 80's-mod floor linoleum, still-tacky plastic wallpaper, covered over with faux wood formica. I tug and tug at lengths of damp plastic rope, cut away from sails and other parts inside, wondering if I could somehow find other uses, maybe in art, maybe in an archival art project? The practical part of me, realizes I am standing waist-high in rained-sogged, half-rotted trash, vetoes this wistful thinking.



I scoop uncountable pailfuls of decayed wood chips flecked with paint, some of which were parts of what was once a cozy cabin. These we will place in a shady place to forget, to let rotten wood chips do what rotten wood chips do. The other things among them will sadly tumble forlorn into the black garbage bags: a set of rusted emergency flares; a toilet brush holder; flame-retardant navy blue curtains torn from their plastic rails; a cracked Christmas mug which I imagine a grandchild has picked out; a potato masher and matching ladle -- their metal extensions rusted to the core, their plastic parts still going strong; a spray bottle of window cleaner emptied since the 90's; deteriorating cleaning sponges and rags; a radio and cassette player...all sprinkled with tiny incessant plastic strips that have fluttered from the tarp of a neighboring boat, similarly abandoned, and which in the next month would be quickly dispatched into firewood.



As I clean and sort and peel and scrape, my thoughts ramble to cartography and the almanac. I contemplate how we feel small yet limitless in the vast ocean, how clouds clue us to watery weather, wondering how often Lapwing was reunited with the sea when she was being sailed. Cleaning her revealed a slice of life in a different era in a country I now have a deeply complicated relationship with. As I gather and crush newsprint that splashes tits and football scores on its pages, I think about the owner's daughter, who was spotted at the marina last winter, crying as she picked up mementos of her father.



I think of the permeability of affect, how feelings move through watery commons. I pause to see if I can sense who this skipper was when I find and hold a pair of his shoes in my hands, spotlessly white and seemingly new. They leave a trace of foam dust where my fingers have pinched them, and when flipped over, their peeled soles threaten to slide off. One set of ghostly objects leads to others: here is his medicine cabinet holding a first aid kit, but lo, a toothbrush, pain ointments, and a Norwegian formula hand-creme, trusted by so many of those who have come to live by the sea.

My nose runs from mold and dust and cold damp, and I wonder whether fumes from this diesel soaked wood will give us cancer, to what makes a habitat become a home or place of safety, to the carbon footprint of the project of turning Lapwing into Rosie as we place her upside down atop our shipping container tiny home, to Heraclitus and the Ship of Theseus and how this transformation will grace time. I dutifully bag bits of Lapwing, a poor burial, and wish quietly for her reincarnation.



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