

# **Chanties: An American Dream**



**Eric Weiskott**

Chanties: *An American Dream*  
by Eric Weiskott

Copyright © 2023 Eric Weiskott

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, or other electronic or mechanical methods, without the prior written permission of the publisher or author, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical reviews and certain other noncommercial uses permitted by copyright law.

A Bottlecap Feature, Printed by Bottlecap Press in the United States of America.



<https://bottlecap.press>





## Haul

All the boys and girls we left ashore have remarried. A bigamy plot keeps failing to get underway. The voyage keeps doubling: the deeper we go, the darker the sky. Captain says, captain says. We narrowly missed the walmart glacier. Now to live in the present requires tensile strength. The fish swim through centuries of garbage. The word is entanglement, as in, a six-pack with the fraternity. Make sure to cut through six loops, one for each sea turtle. We have reached the midlife of our rope, the middle of the forest in the Italian poets we never read. Today's configuration of the chairs amidships. In each bunk below, one photograph.

## **Variant Refrains of Songs Sung along the Way**

1. You rolling river
2. Entanglement register
3. Heave away
4. The hour when our ship comes in
5. Haul, haul, haul
6. Below
7. This violent air
8. The meteor of the war
9. Sing, prophet
10. Electricity upon the deep

## **Nowheres and Elsewheres (Land-Lubber's Chanty)**

This is the ballad of a country performing feats of permanent war. These are the vocal cords of our neighborhood. Above the cedars, ghostly galleons encircle the midday sun. This is no place. My child's future prison is located in a suburb. Enclosure expresses the importance of abolishing communal farming. Meanwhile, in the deep reach of the ikea forest, sacral ceremonies of the hart. Watch the hunter tear the throat from a live oak. Watch the corporation dancing in a variety of forms around its own self. Watch this music video. Watch it. For chanty, read shanty. For personal, read American. For prophet, sing profit. This is the chorus.

## **I'm Not a Robot**

so stop expecting me to row like one. I have calculated disdain for the house of the rising sun. Crunch this: (1) a candy bar, (2) a barbell, (3) a nation with bronze bell (cracked). It's another day, the one we live to fight on. Way, way overboard, pronoun usage reflects the difficulty of difficult authors. Reflects my ass. Contemporary lyric turns away from John Stuart Mill's "overheard" speech, but where does lyric turn for shelter from the thunderstorm of genre desperation? The ocean just selves and selves. To no one in particular you say reprogram, your hands dripping with saltwater. I'm not okay with this. I'm not okay with anything. I'm not okay.

## **The River**

In the dream the whale keeps dealing in spades while starbucks refuse to negotiate a union. What was unearthed once can never be covered over with eddies. You row, row, row your bones. Consider land at ocean's edge, our map turned sideways. Land named for the nearest body. Gaze sidelong at the crimson sun and longingly at crimson set into the ripples and, above the horizon, the lower tax brackets. Here, at last, the dimly starred porthole into the twentieth century. In terms of impressionism, I dig it. Solidarity forever! A hermeticism responsive to the zeitgeist. Are you always alone, in the end? Inside the whale, you realize, there will be no picket lines.

## The Masque

Tonight the ocean is a novel lumbering through it. Where do I have these insane thoughts once I ship out? Every day, the same white forehead in a mirror in a saloon deep in Kentuckyland. We're knocking our heels together as hard as we can, I promise. Why explore the bottom of the ocean when you can live a poem instead? Text is superficial. The depths turn electric in their permanent night, a skeletal flash that frightens the fishies. The opposite of the invention of the camera obscura. We're rowing as fast as our contracts stipulate, Herman. So. So you think you're a big fry. You haven't seen a big fry. NB I ain't crazy.

## Shenandoah

Hanging from the beam

oh Shenandoah I long to hear you  
slowly swaying (such the law)  
way—hay—you rolling river.

Gaunt the shadow on your green

oh Shenandoah I long to hear you  
*Shenandoah!*

Ha—ha—we're bound away  
the cut is on the crown  
across the wide Missouri  
(lo John Brown).

Oh Shenandoah I love your daughter  
and the stabs shall heal no more.

Oh Shenandoah I love your daughter  
hidden in the cap

Missouri she's a mighty river  
is the anguish none can draw.

When she rolls down, her topsails shiver  
so your future veils its face.

Seven years I courted Sally  
*Shenandoah!*

Seven more I longed to have her  
but the streaming beard is shown.

Farewell my dear I'm bound to leave you  
(weird John Brown)  
oh Shenandoah I'll not deceive you.

Oh Shenandoah I long to hear you  
hanging from the beam  
way—hay—you rolling river  
slowly swaying (such the law).

Oh Shenandoah I long to hear you  
gaunt the shadow on your green  
ha—ha—we're bound away  
*Shenandoah!*

Across the wide Missouri  
the cut is on the crown.

Oh Shenandoah I love your daughter  
(lo John Brown)  
oh Shenandoah I love your daughter.

The meteor of the war.

## **Landfall**

In the dream you type and type until the other coast materializes.  
Out the porthole, fog and foghorn have reached a truce. What was  
once deleted can never be deleted again. Stroke, stroke, stroke.  
Gaze at the horizon if the nineteenth century makes you dizzy.  
Turn to crimson for the end of the day. Grab a pail and get to  
work on abstract expressionism. Are you always this insufferable?  
In dreams you don't have to answer that.

## Seascape

A norton anthology of the mind. Editors take their objects on faith, a luxury shared with each imaginary freshman. Shared with you. On this page, wind froths the cool water. “Loomings” is the only chapter anyone can stomach. I would now like to introduce a drop or two of whiskey. I would like to—but captain says there isn’t room. We are always bailing out the wrong baggage, Jonah-like. Each porthole represents three lives lived end-to-end. The anthology of missed connections rolls on. I was like, are all of your selections this imbricated within an unexamined experience of whiteness, man?

## Occasion

I am reading two Old English poems aloud for an online collection. One is about the finitude of human existence. No one knows what the other one is about. Listening to the recordings later, I remember that I was on our couch that evening while our daughter snoozed in the next room. You and I had quarrelled. My whisper carries the weight of the sleeping child and the pressure of the fight. I take that tone. It is a voice without ignition. My pronunciation is accomplished; my enunciation is muted. Both recordings are like this. Am I the only one who will notice? To notice requires the listener to compare the voice on the recordings to a mental sound-image of my indoor voice. Online is not a place where anyone has a sound-image of me. Online is not a place where anyone has a mental. Online is no place. Poetry is a place for a deferred realization. The poetry lies in the recording, not the original reading in John Cage's original room. A voice has its finitude, like a line of poetry broken against our furniture. I will appear in this collection as a muted timbre.

## **Prow**

1. Each morning, the wooden mermaid guides us into the mist.
2. Fitted out of lumber of ashes.
3. One afternoon, Queequeg and I were playing backgammon up there and the dolphins splashed ahead of our goodly vessel like premonitions. Did I want a plug of tobacco? I did not, thank you. Did I like chowder? I did. Did I believe in gods? Once, very much. Then Captain—
4. Glow of the silent moon.
5. If the voyage never ends, did it happen?

## 4:34

You wake up in the dead of night with the knowledge that the state you are in is shaped like a foot. It is Florida. The machine whirrs next to you, shedding green light around the room. The machine advertises uses for mosquito netting, infant cribs, and travel. The baby is snoozing soundly. You remember that your mother used one of these in the early '80s, before you were born. That was on Long Island. They still use them in Florida. It's a cross between an air conditioner and a truck-mount pesticide sprayer. Florida points south toward Cuba, the nearest place we can kick. You roll over and that's the last thing you remember.

## **Viewed from Above, Soul and Body Are Concentric**

Tonight the fog forms unknowing. Leeward of us some porpoise swim astray. Theology is our name for whatever we'll discover when we make landfall. The unknown shape of evening descends amidships, the island disappears in our mind's eye, the porpoise chirp after our goodly vessel, and we glide up into the mystery. A rejected negation differs from assent just as the sail's lenticular billow differs from our angle of yaw.

## Shore Leave from the USS *Lineage*

Captain says three weeks, there's a monastery overlooking Argostoli harbor, you scabble up a stone staircase between houses to attain the vista, it's quiet there (no longer a working monastery, but not ruined either), you just sit so long as you can beat the sunset up the rocks, sometimes a goat clacks by reminding you of yesterday's cliffside climb in the rental car at Fiskardo ("automatic" in Greek is *off-tomato*), captain says no, fortnight, OK you'll have to see Sami next time, the tavernas all serve the same branzino dinner and it's good everywhere every time, captain says no, one week, beer is cheap and they don't let you leave without having some dessert, it's always donuts, it becomes free if you try to refuse, there's nowhere to get to after dinner, captain says no, three days at the outside, make sure to buy presents for the kids, it's hard to tell the difference between a road and a driveway back there outside the town, captain says no, report to the vessel and stand by, was it nice.

## Transcontinental Lullaby

California weather reaches the Jersey Shore in three days.  
The transcontinental flight takes six hours, so you deplane into  
yesterday's weather, and the day before, and the day before  
that.

It is pleasant to live in the past.

Each morning, yesterdays unfurl across the sky, and I go shopping,  
and the poem's next line catches up with us, a form of lag.

It is obscene to expect good weather.

Life is mostly lag, picking over yesterday's oranges at a  
supermarket in California with Walt Whitman and Allen  
Ginsberg.

It is delicious to imagine it:

New Jersey and Long Island consume yesterday's Californias and  
toss them one by one into the ocean, where all our garbage  
tomorrows accumulate in a field of garbage twice the size of  
Texas.

Even a continent has to use the toilet sometime, said I think  
Whitman in his most all-containing, all-accepting mood.  
Above the oceanic garbagefields of literary history

starlight reaches the eyelids of Earth in just under three thousand  
years,

a form of lag.

It is long to extinguish.

A twinkle communicates a distortion in the medium, the pit at  
either end formed from the absence of orange, the nation  
formed at either end from the absence of.

It is a relief to confess these things to you,  
America, long after the weather has turned.

It is rude to speak behind the back of the learned astronomers.  
So here I am back on the eastern seaboard, singing, eating  
tomorrow's garbage and strung out on Ginsberg's endless  
lines and I think toxins that have permeated the prose-poetry  
barrier,  
a form of lag. I'm writing this to you,

California, a love letter from the past addressed to the pleasant, to  
the planet, to the picnic.

Your garbage stinks to the heavens, but it is too granular to be  
detected in the tiny bellies of each tiny dying sea creature in  
the field in time to reprogram today's arrival from San  
Francisco. So I imagine an Earth with no need for otherwise  
useless poems, just earth,  
it is delicious to imagine it, but

it is long to extinguish.

## Proof

[     ] an immense noise, like the sound of the sea. Measureless means without metrical norm. In older paintings, oceanic rhythm is divided by breath.

A wave,  
a wave.

In recent photographs, freedom upon the deep disturbs repetition. A wave, a volta. Rising oceans drown our most celebrated poets, who are the novelists. An editorial intervention. Our hottest days, these days, arrive as proof of climate change. Our coldest days prove nothing against the gray ocean. They do not even arrive. An immense silence, like the sound of gray [     ]

## **Violaceous Euphonia**

is not found at this latitude. Instead, here is the screech favored by our graduate community. In the dream, you are the program's golden boy, exempt from criticism. Female members of the species are sick of this shit. From now on, bus your own solo cup and plastic plate from the seminar room. It is an elementary mistake to pin gender and genre in the same display case. Just because it really happened to you doesn't make it poetry. Just because it didn't doesn't make it novel. Violaceous, suggests the thesaurus, seeking a middle ground between force and delight. Between hue and taste. It looks like you are trying to purchase a rhyme. Can I help with that? All the poets fell back on birdsong, the original mimicry. Nabokov once remarked, with pleasure, that the dorsal coloration of butterflies exceeded the requirements of camouflage. He said so in each of his novels, with pleasure, it was all he ever said. But that was then, before we blasted the beech trees with our soot. An elemental mistake. Etymology and entomology have evolved separate quarterlies, alas, a famous process that has come to be known as the divergence of inner and outer problems. The result is planetary dysphoria. It looks like you are trying to stabilize the climate. It looks like you are reaching across the aisle. No, the bird keeps hopping away from your outstretched arms, so it looks like you are praying.

## Violet Air

Tonight the sky is a square buckled into a velvet-lined vault where I locked my possessions before I shipped out for contemplation. Awaiting orders from the captain aboard USS *Athenaios* I thrum upon this violet air. Why go where no man has gone before? Why not dock in the Illyrian harbor and hallucinate a chord that outlasts its string? It surprised me to find the recommendation letter written in the first-person choral, no, the first-person royal. Why not have mocktails with Sokrates and Sappho, just this evening, on the foredeck?

## Epitaph

Here lies all your scholarship. Here lies your poetry.

In 1869, no monument was erected in honor of William Langland at St. Mary's parish church, Shipton-under-Wychwood, Oxfordshire.

No one strides across the Church Green in Shipton on one misty afternoon.

In 2022, after protracted debate, residents of Padua voted not to memorialize the setting of the *Taming of the Shrew* with a tourist center.

In the same year, the University of Padua celebrated its octocentenary.

Illyria, the untamed country, exists on the stage.

Here lies Geoffrey Chaucer. Because he was the first to be buried in Poets' Corner, one could not say Chaucer was buried in Poets' Corner. They buried him in a corner.

Your letter reaches me at a difficult time. I am celebrating my octocentenary as we speak.

A lineage of male surnames could be said. Here lies a lineage beneath the South Transept of Westminster Abbey. Chaucer, Spenser, Drayton, Dryden, South, Johnson, Campbell, Browning, Tennyson, Hardy, Kipling. Laurence Olivier.

You buried Charles Dickens with the poets. Here lies Mr. Dickens.

Here lies Gilbert Murray and Sullivan. Here lies the nineteenth century.

Here lies the horse you rode in on, Elizabeth Willis. Here lies the water you couldn't make him drink.

Here lies the fin de siècle.

Keats takes the form of an epitaph. Here lies the inscription of a surname in water. Is it the same water?

The unnamed country lies south of here. The epitaph is illyrical.

Here it lies. This epitaph is engraven upon Geoffrey Chaucer, father of poetry.

In 1929, no monument was erected to the future world war. Each year in our history is an interwar year. Each father in our lineage is a name.

Letters in the names had already melted off the face of the ice cliff before we arrived.

Here lies lifelikeness in fiction. Here lie Roland Barthes Simpson.

Here lies the unknown. Following this is our postwar period.

In 1869 at the intersection of First Street and South Street in Greenport, New York, not a damn thing happened. Here lies your maritime history. Here lies the North Fork of Long

Island, tending northward into sound, formerly administered by the New Haven Colony. Here lies your souvenir shop. What follows is a chanty administered by the sons of colonial subjects.

Here lies your historical memory. Your problematic monument to Christopher Columbus. You can bring a statue to water, but you can't make it sink.

Here lies your statute. Residents voted. In 2023, after protracted debate: what follows.



## Acknowledgments

Poems appeared previously in:

*8 Poems*: “4:34”

*Bodies: A Preservation of Land & Self*, a limited-edition chapbook by *Beaver Magazine*: “Nowheres and Elsewheres (Land-Lubber’s Chanty)”

*Dusie*: “Shore Leave from the USS Lineage”

*Exacting Clam*: “Landfall” and “Epitaph”

*Fence*: “Violaceous Euphonia”

*Quarter After Eight*: “Haul”

My gratitude to poetry comrades Thomas H. Crofts, Edgar Garcia, Andrew Gorin, and Davy Knittle.