

- 14 *The Uncollected Poetry and Prose of Walt Whitman*, II: 21.
- 15 W. Whitman, *Complete Poetry and Collected Prose*, p. 1329.
- 16 W. Whitman, *Notes and Fragments*, p. 146.
- 17 *Walt Whitman's Workshop*, p. 233.
- 18 W. Whitman, *Complete Poetry and Collected Prose*, p. 939.
- 19 W. Whitman, *Complete Poetry and Collected Prose*, p. 50.
- 20 John Neal, *Randolph, A Novel* (New York, 1823), II: 190.
- 21 W. Whitman, *Complete Poetry and Collected Prose*, p. 341.
- 22 W. Whitman, *Complete Poetry and Collected Prose*, p. 26.



## Peter Fortunato

### VASILI

At the waterfront, boats tied up, nets  
dripping across decks, the fishermen  
have cached it all — market in the alley  
smells of fresh money — and at the cafe,  
without a shave, in shoes weeping saltwater  
Vasili gives his lecture: Eye cocked on the grey sky  
gyrating at the mast tops: nine moments before dawn.

In his face, flying fish are leaping,  
the sun screams silently, the nights are deprived  
of sleep, his patron saint treks mountains  
and drinks sweetwater from a chapel cistern,  
eyes bluer than you'd think a Greek's would be.  
Coffee cup empty, refilled, a small table of men  
in stained jackets, one speaking no Greek  
you understand, insomniac with roosters —  
“That was the woman could save us!”

Low chuckles all around, eyes down on the shiny metal tabletop, then scanning the quay where tourists don't yet belong —

“If the sea were a woman, we'd take care of *her*, yes?”

And the table clatters approval, a waiter changes the set, more light, water lapping louder across the street. Past the portside murk studded with fishing caiques, beyond the painted prows nodding bright faces attentive to Vasili, the sea tosses its ropes decisively, white wave tips make for shore, out in the Gulf a sky is hoisted blue and bluer — I looked — I know the Saronic from that glance at least, and the purple six moments before dawn which settles on the Peloponnese.

Now the street livened up:

Three wheelers and tiny lorries of produce come to market out of the island steeps, or unloading the steamers who slid up to the dock last night in the Twentieth unstoppable Century baited with tomatoes from Crete and multinational toothpaste lighting the darkness where we all hunger for more, our teeth are cutting away our own hearts —

Vasili slapped the table and caught me watching, wanting; He read me the gospel with his shirt open at his brown neck, with his breast pierced in three places like a martyr; He watched me curious at what sort of creature I am, neither of the sea nor land, and hardly alone with a wife sleeping at the hotel just down the quay — but my face was full, I could feel it, of longing when only these words could have satisfied me.