

Capt. Love's Last Command (poem)

by Mathew Paust

**I stifle a curse when I hear the beep beep beep.
Another traffic jamming electric cart.
I'll soon be upon the damned thing
in my usual hurry
to get the shopping done
and get the hell
out.**

**Someone less able than me,
self-destructive I suppose
in my least charitable way.
Someone stuffing greasy chips
into his or her face,
stuffing his or her beeping conveyance
with ever more bags of cheap deadly calories,
or shooting the shit
with another witless old fart,
both oblivious to me
as they block the aisle
in their GOD DAMNED ENTITLEMENT!**

**I round the corner and there he is.
Yes, a he,
a gaunt, tall ancient he.
Enormous bearded head,
white hair on top
and under chin,
milky eyes rolled inward,
parchment lips agape.**

**The head is erect,
but dead.**

**The old man is dead,
body propped in its cart
like the dead El Cid
strapped on his horse by Jimena
to save Valencia,
and yet...**

**Somehow the cart moves,
small, herky jerky moves,
forward and back,
and around,
this way and that,
beep beep beep,
as if its dead commander
still tries to drive.**

**I walk carefully around
this curious grotesque
to find the spices
and then the beans.
A couple more aisles
I must traverse
before I can leave
this crowded, cursed place.**

**Several more times
I meet the dead shopper.
Is he following me
or what the hell?
Each time we pass
I study him harder,
with quick glances**

to catch a vital sign.

I wonder why he's alone.

**If he's dead, how are the purchases
filling his cart?**

A respect for him sprouts in my head.

**There's no fear in his face,
nor defeat in his frame.**

**He's not dead but he's close
and it frightens him not.**

**He's an old sea captain I think,
a mariner once,
adventurous man,
who thrived on the challenge,
the danger of imminent
untimely death.**

**He's Eric the Red
returned from the dead.
He's Ahab and Blackbeard,
Morgan and Kidd,
the spirits of skippers
who handled the helm,
whose lives became legend
inspiring us still.**

**And that's when I see her,
as I piece it together,
this towering figure
nearing death in his cart,
refusing surrender
despite all the odds
overwhelming his body,
every breath that he takes.**

She stands there behind him,
far enough back so I cannot be sure
she is with him at all.
She looks lost,
nearly helpless,
bent and frail thin.
I study her face,
but like his it is closed
to strangers it seems.
She is looking at something
only she seems to see.

I walk on past her,
wondering anew,
and that's when I hear it:
a murmuring sound.
It is her or him or both in tune.
I turn to look and sure enough,
she's moved closer to him leaning in,
and I wonder if I can tell by the voice
or the voices if two,
what clue I can take from the tones I might hear.
Does she know this old warrior,
does he know her, too?
Would I hear impatience or grumble or scorn?
Would they speak at all, would their faces reveal?

I see the cart move.
It turns toward the woman
and the old captain's spirit
I can see has joined hers.
There's movement, animation
in that bearded large face.
Her body is bobbing a little with life,

and I hear it then, the sound unexpected.

**It is thin, it is fragile, but it holds its own.
It shoos away dread, frustration and worse.
Their doom imminent, the bodies for sure,
but their spirits are stronger than ever, I know
when I hear it,
her giggle.**

