

The Days of Man

by Robert Kloss

They drifted for months, locked between the vast merciless blue and the withering sun. Their faces blistered and their minds bleached and weary. They conspired in the shadows, drew plans in the sawdust, they grew confident and foolhardy. Then the Admiral ordered them shackled and thrashed. When another man later raised the cry of mutiny the Admiral consulted his god, before decreeing a ball shot through the offender's temple, his body weighted with lead and dropped to the depths, with neither forgiveness nor prayer. When finally the first gull appeared as obsidian against the sun, a hurrah went up amongst the ranks and hats flung into the air. The Admiral measured the shrill distant cries and tasted the briny-waters, before saying, "We have neared the Orient."

And the sun swelled red, and the sky shimmered, and ever more gulls swirled, screaming. Soon the black mountain juttred the horizon. And some considered it a mirage, and some called it "the finger of the Evil One," and some named it a tower of soot, dreamed it an ancient citadel misshapen by flame, the horror of all trapped within. The Admiral alone crossed himself and raised His book to the winds, saying, "Father, I see you now."

For the sun's unrelenting sheen, the men remained below deck, lading their chests with green and briny water. The games they played with dice, with lice, these men in the shadows, nude but for their leggings, their laughter as they supped upon salt pork, the maggots writhing. And when they wearied of consciousness how the men took to their grog, eyes blurred in the waft of fume, while ever above, the steady boot steps of the Admiral, pacing the deck as he scanned the horizon, the nearing shore, calling out the name of the

Almighty, calling out the names he gave the black mountain ever upon the horizon.

Each day ever as the days before, until the exhilarated call of the lookout announced the vast wilderness before them. And the Admiral with all the maps and books of his knowledge, their descriptions of the Orient, their towers, their treasures, their merchants, turned to his crew and said, "By morning we will be dressed in silks. We will smell of spices and our bodies will glisten with oil." Now fires lit the evening shores. And the night was born into heathen drums, screams and whoops, and smoke fogged the land. And within this cacophony the Admiral said, "Sleep with your muskets readied."

Soon the natives ventured forth, bodies painted blue or black or red, bones impaling their noses, their brows, their cheeks. How the lines of their canoes drifted the waters. How the dawn swelled with their heathen shouts, their arrows aflame. The Admiral and his crew waited in armor, in horse hair plumes, their swords and muskets readied, and when he commanded, the explosion of musket fire, the acrid punch of gun smoke. And natives leapt from their canoes and natives sloshed in blood. Gulls screamed and gulls investigated the bodies as they cooled, consumed the eyes, the cheeks, and soon, the bloated and rotting rest.

The crew went ashore firing muskets, the red sun tinting their armor until they seemed born in the fires of another world. And the natives fled into the forests while others fell to their knees, gnashing and wailing. The crew took these stragglers by the clumps of their hair, held them down, bound their wrists and ankles with rope. The bodies rubbed black with soot, the white of their eyes and teeth, the nonsense of their jabbering-language. And before these hostages

they waited, until at last those who had fled slowly returned. They fell to their knees, pressed their brows to the sand. They offered the smoked meat of green and red and blue birds. They offered fruits, orange and hideously spiked, their yellow flesh dripping with sweetness. They offered breads made of the paste of mashed roots. They called the Admiral and his crew a word the Admiral translated for the others as "gods." He said, "They call us 'lords from the sky.'" He said, "I have gestured across the waters, and they believe we have come from the heavens." And when the Admiral indicated the black mountain, asked of its genesis, its distance from where they stood, the natives gazed at him as if he were mad, as if he were pointing at nothing at all.

To follow were days of bounty. While the Admiral trekked the lands, his crew lounged in beds of rope strung between palms, and now the ladies of the island cooled them with the waving of palm fronds. "What lovelies are these," wrote one sailor, "voluptuous and wild and totally submissive to the whims of man." And in the nights they supped on smoked birds and barbequed lizards and when the broken open skull of a monkey was offered none of the crew resisted scooping the brain. And in the nights they drank their fill of a fermented root brew, and each man sang and danced in the manner of his civilization, calling out the songs and melodies of his home. In the firelight all men were as brothers before each other and all men were as husbands unto the women. And many coupled without struggle and with great pleasure on the sands of the beach, the surf licking their feet. How they lay together, breathless and silent, having already spoken the only language they held mutual.

And by the flicker of his candle, he alone on his vessel rocking with the surf, the Admiral wrote in his journal, "Perhaps we have not arrived at the Orient. So much of the innocence of the people, their lack of clothing, their inability to comprehend guile and greed and

vanity and possession, so much of this world, the beauty and splendor and plenty, hints at some far deeper significance” and later he wrote, “I have sometimes wondered if we are not at the threshold of Paradise.”

At midday next the chief returned from the forest, with feathers ragged, his blackened face streaked with tears. His people watched as he crouched before the Admiral, mumbling in his heathen language, weeping and beating the ground. He reached to his captors and said a word the Admiral translated as “Brother.” The chief's gold bracelets jangled until the Admiral took these in his hand. “This metal,” he said, “there is more?”

And in his journal the Admiral wrote, “I have wondered of you, Father, what is your purpose in leading me here? Perhaps I now understand.”

Soon the natives were sent for gold, their shadows silent in the forests, their muddy figures sifting near the rivers. Those who brought nuggets were rewarded with pretty glass and tin bells. Those who returned with nothing were thrashed before all. A man's face as he lies in the dirt, coughing blood. A man's eyes as his wife watches him from the door of their hut, as his son observes from behind his mother, as he is spat upon. In the days to follow these men were found slouched against trees, their jugulars sliced with spear tips, their wrists gouged and brutalized, the life drained to the soil.

And in the early days of these labors the natives were allowed to freely move about their camps, for if one man fled another man would be shot, or the wife and children of the man who fled would

be shot. And the Admiral addressed those who worked the hardest in a nonsense language of his invention, saying, "You will make wondrous workers back home." He clapped them on the back and he gave them bells, while in his journal he wrote, "The King will be pleased to learn these heathens are quick to labor and vigorous in their duties."

And while the native men sought the forests for gold, the Admiral's men gathered the comeliest of the native women, their bare and ample breasts, their round hips, and brought them to the ship. And when the women fought back, when they gouged and drew lines of blood in the sailor's backs, across their throats, their faces, when they bit and tore and gnashed, they were tied down and thrashed with rope until teeth were spat into a bloody muck, eyes made fat and purple, lips mashed and bulging. "These shameless bitches," wrote one sailor by candle light, his native woman pummeled and asleep in his bunk, "go about attired in leaves or in nothing at all, such is their lustiness, and yet they act as uninitiated as nuns when brought to our quarters. However, I can assure you, after a thrashing or two they all take to the act with such vigor and skill you would think even the youngest of them as raised in a brothel."

When these women returned to their husbands they returned hobbled and bruised faced and bite marked. They returned impregnated. Their husbands would not look upon them, and so now the beaten bodies of women lay in the mud, in the rains, beneath the shelter of the furthest palms yet overlooking the camp. And when the children wept for their mothers, called out for them, they were told the women they observed in the distance were not living women, but the spirits of the dead. "Call not to them," said the fathers in their heathen tongue, "for the souls of the dead long to devour the living."

And when the chief refused the ravishing of his wives he was beaten with musket butts and accused of treason. And when the charges were read the chief wept and waved his hands, murmuring in his language while the Admiral informed his crew, "The chief has plotted against us. He means to see us murdered in the night." So the chief was imprisoned within his hut and forbidden any interaction. And the Admiral confiscated his possessions, all his casks of fermented root, his huts and feathers and spears, and so his wives were brought to the ship and there made to lie with the crew. They never returned, save those who washed ashore.

And while many of the crew played, the Admiral strode amidst the natives he made to toil, their knees sunk into the mud. The baskets of woven grass they filled with sludge and glinting nuggets. How he ordered the natives thrashed with branches, with whips, when their vigor seemed to wane. The way the blood blackened the mud, the way their faces slouched into the soil when they toppled, the mosquitoes fattening at their sup. The way they wept for the world newly born about them. And when one native attempted to flee the Admiral ordered him destroyed, the natives collapsing for the musket fire, the smoke. And when the balls sailed harmless overhead the Admiral ordered the native fired upon again, and when this again missed all save for vines and tree trunks and a monkey blown out of its skin, the Admiral ordered the native tracked through the brush. When he was found he was found in the shadows, his ankle broken in the flight. They beat him with musket butts. And when he could no longer walk they carried him through the overgrowth and tossed his body to the Admiral. And the Admiral consulted the Almighty, before ordering the native's ears cut off. And so these were. And these were strung yet dripping and hung around the Admiral's neck. There they dried and shriveled. Ever outward, they listened.

And when the rivers and forests no longer offered their riches, the Admiral sent them to unknown depths. And when their efforts returned mere tufts of cotton or berries or nuts or clumps of mud the Admiral ordered the chief's ears removed. And so they were. His screams at the cut of the blade. How the appendages dripped from their crescent around the Admiral's neck.

And the Admiral ordered the chief hung upside down, his face purpling, the drip of his ear cavern, and soon the circling of flies, the swishing tails of jungle cats, lapping the blood and purring. And the Admiral gestured to this figure, and he said unto the assembled natives, "Let this be a lesson to you all." And with sullen eyes, with slouched posture, they gazed back at him. And none spoke or moved. And only at the show of musket fire did they slowly disperse.

And when the natives no more rose from their tents they were thrashed with rope, with branches, until they gathered their baskets and returned to the jungle. And soon they refused to rise, no matter the beating. They took their beatings limp and no longer weeping. They no longer covered over their faces when the rope lashed. They no longer cried out. Only the dull thump of the rope against the meat of their bodies, the savage grunts of their torturer. And when they refused eat, when their ribs bulged against their paling skins, when the sunken in eye sockets became as caverns, their cracked lips and dry white tongues, slowly now their bodies piled against huts, in the forests, on the beach. Their heart beats imperceptible and stilling and then done. And when all the natives lay bloating and fly covered or made the sup of the horned lizards and squawking birds, now the Admiral, his nose covered with rags, said, "The Almighty has come to me in a dream. He has said this land is not the

Orient." And the Admiral gestured to the black mountain on the horizon, and the Admiral said, "There is the land we seek."

So they pulled on their armor, their plumes. So they readied their muskets. So they gathered what smoked meat and fruit and water they could heft. They stepped over the bodies, black and putrid, as they touched torches to the thatched huts. From roof-to-roof went the blue-orange of flame, consuming and reducing all into the black smoke, coughing and wrapping the skies. The sound such fires make, the booming and crackling of voices far older than the earliest utterances of man. Soon the bodies of natives gone to bone and char save those bodies on the beach. There the crabs inspected and plundered, there the surf washed over them, there the weeds tangled and the gulls attended to their sup.

