

4 short stories for

# SEASICK SAILORS

*Thomas Guiducci*



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*preface by Marta Ciccolari Micaldi*



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# Preface

by *Marta Ciccolari Micaldi*

On the strip of the sea, looking at the horizon, a sailor sees two things: the ship's course, that imaginary line that cuts through the blue of the waves to arrive at a destination, and, intermittent between the sparkling of the sand and the ups-and-downs of the swells, the motives that led him to follow that course: the will of the captain, if the sailor is part of a crew; the search for a catch, if the sailor is a fisherman; the flow of his own life, if the sailor is a thinker.

For all three of these sailors the imaginary line of the course is straight; for all three the motives behind that course are known; but for only one of them the destination is not the important thing. For the last of the three, the vision matters more than the direction: a vision made of images, memories, small details of a long-used object, or a step desired and not taken, of feelings anchored in a landscape, of tastes, smells and touches that – if the vision is deep, and his certainly is – in the long run ends up blurring his vision, filling this thoughts and splitting the horizon.

The sailor doesn't fear the waves, nor does he veer from the course, and yet one of them always ends up with seasickness. Luckily, we might say, because every once in a while he is forced to stop, takes his eyes off the horizon, collect the thoughts that horizon suggested to him, and look to the firmness of his own hand for a good cure that will get him back on his feet.

The four stories written by sailor Thomas to cure him of his seasickness are precisely this: four moments of life, navigating a course of images that are brief and vivid, of corporeal and sensorial details that bring back memories and feelings that are almost always terrestrial, an in-depth exploration of an ocean that is vaster and more blue than the

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one on the horizon, an interior ocean in which to seek, if not a course, at least a wake that can be followed back.

But this is not all. The seasick sailor who nevertheless fixes his gaze on the ocean in order to think and meditate has at least two other gifts: the courage to do it, and the sensitivity to see his own imperfection as the most interesting wave to plough through. To these, in Thomas's case, is added a third, not to be at all taken for granted: the grace to know how to recount what he sees. In knowing how to transform his own seasickness into a new waters where the breeze of reading blows gently, sweetly and intimately.

To all sailors, perfect and imperfect, happy sailing.



# 1

## Salt of the soul

I've always had a special relationship with the sea.

Anyone who was born by the ocean knows how it is.

The sea doesn't just get you wet.

It goes right into your heart, under your skin, in your nostrils, into your throat. Into your soul.

When you go in for the first time you get a strange feeling.

Shivers.

The goosebumps last for an instant. The intense cold that shocks you at first quickly becomes your friend, turning into a warm, soft massage. You go all the way in, let yourself be rocked and while you push yourself under water, slowly and gently, you open your eyes. The salt stings for a moment, then you get used to it and see the green and blue water in front of you. An immense empty space to explore, where you know you can never find anything different.

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But what you're looking for when you swim isn't in front of you.

It's inside.

And inside the landscape is constantly changing. The sea become a green meadow, it blossoms, it changes into a sky and you find yourself flying.

Every now and then you have to come up for air, and that's when the waves make you seasick, so you go back under and start to fly again.

The sea makes you free but at the same time it traps you.

In no time at all your fingers get wrinkly and it's time to get out; because in the end it's not our natural element and this is its way of reminding us of that.

When you get out you feel cold again.

But not in a good way like the first time. You let the sun warm you up, the drops of salty water on your body slowly dry, leaving your skin dry, tight, skin that wants water again.

The sea pretends to slake your thirst, but it leaves your throat burning.

My first steps were taken in the sand. I learned balance with wet feet, at the edge of the shore, collecting seashells, falling, my hands sinking into the wet sand. Watching my image mirror itself in what remained of a wave and disappear in the backwash. Watching the seagulls glide to the sunset in that orange that no palette can reproduce.

Yeah, the seagulls.

Those same seagulls that I sometimes see gliding, lost and sad, over the foul-smelling dumps at the outskirts of the city. A little ways on there's a river, but it's not the same thing and even they know it. Nothing is sadder than a city seagull, a modern transposition of Baudelaire's albatross.

Who knows why they have chosen to live here. Maybe because it's easy to find food. Maybe out of laziness. Or maybe because they've never seen the sea.

Because once you've seen it, you have to go back.

It's been too long since I've smelled the smell of salt, too long since I've hurt my feet on seashells.

Too long.

I often feel like a sailor.

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I love to sail, but the pitching of the stern on the waves makes me seasick. I have never been a sea wolf. But the wake of white foam that the boat leaves behind it gave me a feeling of security. Maybe it was the certainty of knowing exactly where you'd been a moment before, mixed with the hysterical euphoria caused by the lack of a sure destination. If you know where you're going, the journey isn't as wonderful.

There, maybe that's always been my problem.

The destination.

Every time that I've hit the road I've always had a destination in mind. The way lost importance since I had a place to get to. No matter what I did, or what road I took, it was in function of a place to go.

It took me too long to understand that what counts you find between one step and the next. At the very moment you begin walking and know that you're leaving something behind.

Like in the sea.

When you pull out of port and point the stern towards the open sea, there aren't any destinations. There is only the horizon.

The water buoys you up gently and shows you exactly where you've been.

It's still dark.

The smell of stale liquor.

Outside, in the night, only the smoke of chimneys can be seen, lightened by the moon.

My mouth is still pasty.

The fault of that cheap whiskey and too much tobacco.

I stumble over to the bathroom, rinse my face.

My jacket's less wrinkled than my face.

On the floor a sea of confetti, left there after the party.

Wet. Torn and stuck to each other so that it's impossible to tell what colours they are.

It seems like a metaphor to me.

Pieces of life strewn on the pavement.

I could write a song about that.

I need to clean up, but not now.

I go up the stairs that lead to the attic.

Somewhere I must still have that bucket of sand. Here it is.

It weighs a lot more than I remembered. I take it downstairs.

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I throw the sand on the floor trying to spread it evenly. It mixes with the confetti and covers it a little. I fill the bucket with water and throw a fistful of coarse salt into it.

I stir it slowly.

I put my bare feet on the sand and pour the salty water over them. Closing my eyes, for an instant I am a kid again.

Then I open them again.

Now there's a lot more to clean up than before.

Your gaze appears to me like a flash in the night.

I seem to hear your voice.

I quickly put my shoes on and go down to the bar.

'A double whiskey. And a glass of water.'

The sand in my shoes really bothers me.

My throat still burns.

I walk out into the night.

I don't want to come look for you.

I don't want to find you.

The sky is changing from black to deep blue.

The moon is the colour of oranges.

I get to the station with my heart in my throat.

The first train to the seashore leaves in about 20 minutes.

I take off my shoes, and beat them hard on the ground, passing a hand over my feet to sweep away the sand that remained. I am sweaty and tired.

On the other side of the tracks is a kid looking lost and holding a red rose.

The train whistles far away while the dawn lights peep out from behind the factories.

For an instant I think of you again.

But I don't want to come look for you.

The sign in front of me says not to go beyond the yellow line.

I won't. Not now.



2

The  
collector of  
mistakes

Rebecca was drunk.

Drunk as a skunk.

And when she was drunk she was irresistible.

She was an overflowing river, she was bursting with energy, in her cobalt-coloured pupils you could see the sparks of a glowing, crackling fire. It came from her soul.

That same soul that was cobalt-coloured like her eyes.

A pair of young lovers were talking and laughing loudly. They made way for us in the tepid night of a summer in the city.

Right, the city.

I had gone away a year earlier, in the midst of an existential crisis.

I needed air.

I needed wind and clouds, sun and rain. The smell of freshly-cut grass.

To go run, early in the morning, in the middle of the fields, with the corn growing taller by the minute, ever greener and more luxurious. To hear the boisterous

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call of a magpie and see it fly out of the tree as I passed. To meet a family of ducks in a rivulet, with the ducklings walking in a row behind the big ones. To wet my feet in the dew-covered grass while a hawk makes large, perfect circles in the sky in search of prey. To interrupt the pecking of a rainbow-coloured woodpecker, or come upon a fox jumping like a kangaroo in the middle of a golden field of wheat. To say hello to the farmer who's been working on his piece of land since sunup, cringe for an instant at the passing of a snake, all while taking care not to step in a hole or on one of the many round stones that constellate the trail.

There are things – in the country – that make me think that the world isn't such a bad place.

But tonight the city wants to conquer me again.

This evening the buildings, which one seemed grey and claustrophobic to me in their reaching high to hide the sky, bewitch me like the illuminated towers of an imaginary New York that takes shape in my mind.

Rebecca.

I wasn't even listening to her, I laughed and sank into her gaze. That fire bewitched me.

She was weaving along, with that restless smile peeping out. Her lips were red as fire, her hair black as a crow, shiny and vivid. Her lipstick was smudged and her makeup ruined, but she was beautiful just the same. I was going to tease her, but she glanced at me and knocked the cheap vodka I was holding all over me. We both laughed with gusto and did a high-five.

I can't forget it.

That high-five wasn't just the clap of two hands against each other. It was the collision of two lives.

Her hand hit mine strongly, but she didn't pull it away at once. It remained for an instant suspended in the damp air, resting on my palm, before sliding slowly down, grazing my soul and making me feel her pulse.

Yeah, I felt it.

And for a moment it threw me.

I saw right away that she wasn't like all the others.

Behind her playful, saucy way there was something dark, something that she hid well but I could feel in my gut.

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It doesn't happen often that you meet someone you don't need to talk to in order to be understood. Usually you don't talk, not because you don't want to, or because it's not nice to, but because you can't say the important things. You're afraid nobody can understand.

And when you meet someone you don't need to say anything to, it's luck; luck and magic.

This changes the balance.

In the precise instant that her hand drew away from mine I understood that for her I could have made every mistake in the world.

I could have. But I didn't.

I've spent my life collecting mistakes of all kinds, and I've often used my time to fix things again.

But now time is passing a lot quicker and my collection is getting larger and more variegated.

I manage to screw up even when it seems impossible, I manage to miss things that other see and — worst of all — I manage to repeat the same mistakes more than once.

It often happens that I make a mistake even knowing that I am doing it, so that sometimes I ask myself if it's really such a mistake to make mistakes.

Maybe it's my mistakes that keep me alive; maybe if I didn't make mistakes I'd be like those people who spend their lives always dressing the same way, always doing the same things, waking up at the same time, always rushing, holding a briefcase full of useless stuff.

I don't want to put on a tie, it squeezes my neck, I can't get enough air.

And without air I can't think.

That was why I escaped to the country: to have more air, to think better, to collect new mistakes. New and well thought out.

Besides, collectors, the real ones, are methodical; they collect for the pleasure of possessing; they collect because each new piece is a new joy.

And right or wrong, it's that joy that I need to make life run through my veins.

When I grow up I want to be a collector of mistakes.



# B

## The Boots

The little red shoes, with their squared toe, hammered the wooden platform covered with linoleum without missing a beat. Young dancers came on and went off the stage continually, each following and being followed by another. Like the characters on horseback that I shot at while I sat – uncomfortable – on the mechanical rides that my parent took me to when I was a kid. The cool evening breeze of a still early summer evening brought the smell of the sea, sometimes of fish, and the lights of the arcade didn't distract me from my job as a sharpshooter. I shot at both cowboys and Indians without distinction, while the iron horse that I sat on rocked in a way that was hypnotic and annoying. I squeezed my legs to keep myself from sliding. The short pants I wore let my skin stick to the metal. My tongue was often pressed between my lips, and my cheap tennis shoes were always untied. The horizon behind the silhouettes showed the typical American canyon, a

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boundless sky with white and pink clouds, and wings of orange rocks. In my mind I shot and rode, rode and shot. Even today I can still feel that same feeling of slight nausea and uneasiness when I look at the horizon, or idealise a journey, or imagine myself catapulted into different realities.

But I keep rocking and shooting.

I'm a little breathless!

A bolero booms through the theatre. I loosen my scarf as the feeling of heat on my face forms a counterpoint to my frozen feet. In spite of the boots. How many times I've put new soles on my boots.

In the stories I heard first from my grandfather and then from my father there was always a poor world, a world where you worked solid, where there wasn't much room for fun. Things were few, and if you owned things it was because they were useful.

If a shirt was torn, you sewed it up.

If a sock had a hole, you darned it (often using that wonderful wooden egg that I saw in my grandmother's sewing drawer, one of the those objects that I found unexplainably fascinating, and whose use I understood only a long time later).

If a bike got a flat, you fixed it. My grandfather taught me that when I was a kid. First you had to take off the tire, that thick tire with the wide white wall, and to do that you had to use two tools shaped sort of like a can opener. With the first you lifted the tire, and then you ran the second around the rim of the wheel so that the tire popped off. Then you took out the inner tube, pumped it up with the bike pump, and immersed it in a bucket full of water with a little soap. Sliding the inner tube through your hands in the water (I can smell that rubber smell like it was today), sooner or later you came to the part where the hole was. Lots of tiny bubbles rising through the water left no doubt as to where the patch had to be put. Then you had to take the inner tube out of the water and roughen the surface around the hole by rubbing it with sandpaper. At that point you smeared the glue onto the black and orange patch, let it dry for a minute, and then applied it to the point you were fixing. I used to swamp the patch with glue to make sure it didn't leak, I went over and over the patch with the glue, smearing my fingers with it in the process and then had a good time peeling the dried glue off them. Once the patch had dried

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you made sure that the inner tube didn't leak anymore, and then put it all back together doing the same operations in reverse. You don't forget the way it felt when you got back on the bike and pedalled away after fixing your own tire. It was wonderful. An object that has been fixed is wonderful.

Because it has a little of the soul of the one who made it, a lot of the soul of the one who used it for a long time, and a little of the soul of the one who fixed it with care.

For children everything is alive, has a value, a name, its own existence. Maybe assigning a soul to things means giving them a little bit of the voice of the child that struggles to stay alive in some (but not all) of us.

Anyhow, this is why I still fix my boots today. Because I love things that are fixed. Because they have walked with me for a lot of years, have gotten wet in hundreds of puddles, have beaten the time on old wooden boards, have gotten muddy and dried out in the sun many a time. They've kept my feet warm when it was cold, and cool when it was hot. They are my boots. Today though my feet are cold anyway. It must be this damned anxiety that hits me when I go out of myself, when I move away from where I'm comfortable and find myself in places that I don't know what they are.

My mind begins to wander in ways that are whirling and claustrophobic, to elaborate strange, useless, detrimental fears. Like what is happening around me has become a silent film, lost its colour. The characters move quickly, in an almost unnatural rhythm, when subtitles appear to explain what is happening and tell you the story.

You don't read them though. And you find yourself thinking about some stupid mantra to distract yourself: 'fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck'. It doesn't work. Your heart thunders in your chest and in your ears. Your throat tightens up, and you have a hard time swallowing what little saliva there is.

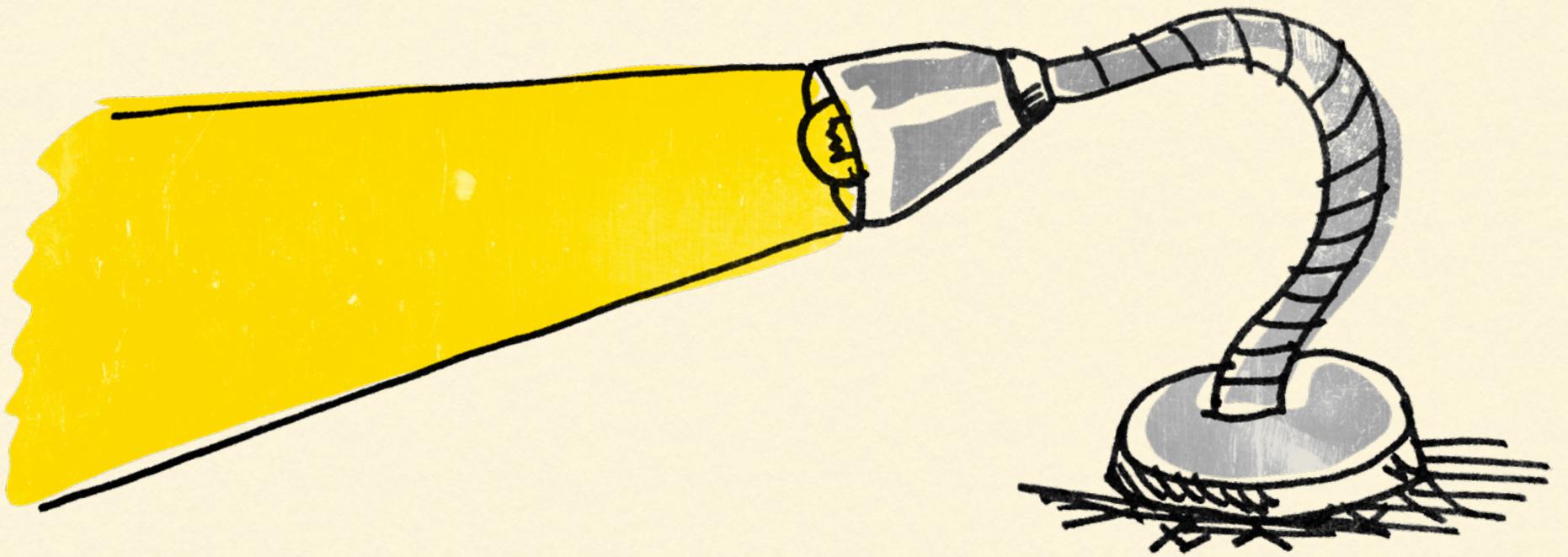
Sooner or later though you get used to it.

That's no small thing.

The dancers start to dance again.

Outside it's raining hard.

Luckily I've got my boots.



4

*Light in my  
eyes*

The sun comes through the peeling iron window, through the cracks of the old wooden shutters, straight into my eyes. I turn over fast in the wrinkled sheets and put my head under the pillow. The cold late winter morning is waiting for me outside. I should get up, make coffee, take a hot bath and throw myself headlong into the new day.

I should.

But where did that dream go that until a second ago filled my heart and head? I always try. Try to close my eyes, think about what was happening, look for the smells, the emotions, the feelings that were so real just a few moments ago.

I can't ever do it.

Everything is different here.

I make myself think about what I was doing, try to imagine the places, the people who were with me, the gestures. But imagining isn't dreaming. Dreams, like life, aren't chosen by you. The dream leaves you incomplete, as if all of your

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efforts were rendered vain by a rude awakening, as if the life that you were living in the dream was suddenly over. You see that everything that made you vibrate, the efforts made, the adventures lived, don't exist. All of a sudden.

And you're forced to start again, this time in real life, with this weight, with the risk that it will all be useless.

The pillow is making it hard to breathe. By now I'm not sleepy anymore.

I move it, sigh and stare at the ceiling for a minute.

I have to get my eyes used to the light again.

I set my bare feet down on the cold floor. A quick shiver. I light the fire under the coffeepot.

Lara is still sleeping, her breath slow and regular. She's always stayed by my side, from the very first. She's tolerated every one of my paranoias, supporting me, and supporting me even when I deserved less. She cleans rooms in a hotel 12 hours a day, so I can have my space, live my life my way, allowing me to follow my muse. Today is her day off, I'll let her sleep. I think she still loves me. Her red, full lips, even though framed by new wrinkles, are there to remind me that maybe I was in love once too, before this ice filled my heart. I can't explain when or how it happened; sure, the passing of time hardens you, but sometimes I don't recognise myself in the mirror. I'm not talking about wrinkles or grey hair, I couldn't care less about those. It's my gaze, the light in my eyes.

Where did it go?

And yet I remember it well. I'm sure it was there; in fact, I'm sure that it's still in there somewhere, but I don't know how to turn it on again.

It's only fear.

Since I was a kid I've thought that truth is the best option, that lying was profoundly wrong, and that if you told the truth everything would be alright.

It's not like that.

Not everyone is ready to stand the truth. Me first of all. I boast that I'm sincere and that I always tell everyone just how I feel, but then I find myself lying to myself out of fear of losing my balance.

But I need that light.

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I've never been good at understanding my feelings. I fall in love every day, with a pair of black eyes, a particular nose, a shock of messy hair, with a lipgloss, a flower in bloom, a perfume, a photograph, a song. But then I find love, the real kind, on me without even realising it and maybe not even recognising it; I let it go out, like a cigar in an ashtray, without having given it the breath it deserves.

Outside a titmouse sings in the peach tree. Spring is slowly coming, and a pale sun is trying to make the sleeping buds open.

The coffeepot is by now howling on the fire, spewing drops of coffee on the floor. I turn off the gas, fill my cup and look at my reflection in it. The smoky aroma of burnt coffee fills my nostrils. I drink patiently, the titmouse flies away.

Laura turns over slowly, her long ash blonde hair covering her face.

I've got to go.

I dress quickly, put on my leather raincoat and hat.

My cigars, I can't forget those!

I close the door softly and walk away. I pull the old gas lighter from my pocket, the wind doesn't touch its flame. I light my cigar, and look back for a second.

She's awake and at the window, behind the curtain, looking at me. My chest tightens and my eyes fill with tears. I see only now that maybe I loved her, but I'm not good with feelings.

I turn around, turn up my collar, pull down my hat and keep walking. The wind blows the strong odour of my Kentucky tobacco away, I follow it without knowing where we're going.

This morning I just want to walk, to let my thoughts carry me far away from here, farther than my feet can carry me; I came here in another life, without anything, with only hopes, dreams and designs. Maybe it's right that I should go away without anything, now.

The sun is higher, and its orb, now reflected in the old canal of stagnant water, throws annoying light in my eyes.

It's not the light I'm looking for, but maybe it's a start.

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*Big thanks go to everyone who helped me to find my way  
while my boat was running adrift.*

