



Winfield Townley Scott

(1910-1968)

The U.S. Sailor with the Japanese Skull (1945)

Bald-bare, bone-bare, and ivory yellow: skull  
Carried by a thus two-headed U.S. sailor  
Who got it from a Japanese soldier killed  
At Guadalcanal in the ever-present war: our

Bluejacket, I mean, aged 20, in August strolled  
Among the little bodies on the sand and hunted  
Souvenirs: teeth, tags, diaries, boots; but bolder still  
Hacked off this head and under a leopard tree skinned it:

Peeled with a lifting knife the jaw and cheeks, bared  
The nose, ripped off the black-haired scalp and gutted  
The dead eyes to these thoughtful hollows: a scarred  
But bloodless job, unless it be said brains bleed.

Then, his ship underway, dragged this aft in a net  
Many days and nights--the cold bone tumbling  
Beneath the foaming wake, weed-worn and salt-cut  
Rolling safe among fish and washed with Pacific;

Till on a warm and level-keeled day hauled in  
Held to the sun and the sailor, back to a gun-rest,  
Scrubbed the cured skull with lye, perfecting this:  
Not foreign as he saw it first: death's familiar cast.

Bodiless, fleshless, nameless, it and the sun  
Offend each other in strange fascination  
As though one of the two were mocked; but nothing is in  
This head, or it fills with what another imagines

As: here were love and hate and the will to deal  
Death or to kneel before it, death emperor,  
Recorded orders without reasons, bomb-blast, still

A child's morning, remembered moonlight on Fujiyama:

All scoured out now by the keeper of this skull  
Made elemental, historic, parentless by our  
Sailor boy who thinks of home, voyages laden, will  
Not say, "Alas! I did not know him at all."

#### ANALYSIS

This tortured poem contrasts two kinds of reaction to war. First, there is a brutal, even disgusting, account of a U.S. sailor souvenir-hunting after the action at Guadalcanal in World War II and of his insensitivity to all the horrors of war. In contrast is the speaker in the poem, a poet-observer, probably a fellow sailor. The skull is purely a souvenir for the sailor, a trophy of war. But it is far more to the poet-observer.

There are three movements in the poem. In the first movement (stanzas one through three) the observer tells how the sailor secured the skull, with no gory details spared, showing the brutality of war. In the second movement (stanzas four and five) he describes how the sailor scrubs and cures the skull, washing from it the hideous marks of war until it becomes "death's familiar cast." In the third movement (stanzas six through eight) the observer does what the sailor is incapable of: he thinks of the skull not as the hated enemy but as representing another human being. He reflects on what the skull represented before death came: love, hate, patriotism, and--the only touch of gentleness in the entire poem--a childhood and the beauty of moonlight on Fujiyama. It is the poet-observer who has human perspective, who sees the horror of the whole incident (not only the physical horror of death and war, of a U.S. sailor who can treat the dead body of a fellow human being as a mere souvenir and trophy and is incapable of thinking "Alas! I did not know him at all").

The technical aspects of the poem are interesting. The rhythms are as tortured and harsh as the ideas. Line 1, for example, starts out with relentless hammering, where practically every syllable is heavily accented:

Bald-bare, bone-bare, and ivory yellow: skull

The phrases and sentences run ruthlessly over ends of lines, and even carry over from one stanza to another, as though the very structure of the poem is being torn apart. The repetitions stress brutality as, for example, in the last line of stanza three, where the explosive sound of *b* occurs six times:

But bloodless job, unless it be said brains bleed

The diction, too, shows the torture in this poem, with such expressions as skull, dead eyes, lye, bone-bare, two-headed, scarred, hacked, skinned, peeled--to list only a few of many. Even the rhymes are torn and imperfect. For example:

sailor--war: our (stanza one)  
bared--scarred (stanza three)  
is in--imagines (stanza six)

The poem follows an *a-b-a-b* rhyme scheme in each stanza, though often the rhymes are so far from perfect that it is hard to recognize them as such. Thus the poet has marshaled all his strategies to infect the reader with one dread symbol of the general horror of war.

James M. Reid  
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