

I Am a Slave to Anemones

by Joseph Conrad Payne

WHY WE LIKE IT:

Cormac McCarthy meets the 'Creature from the Black Lagoon' in this strangely beautiful obsessive outsider tale of a modern-day Robinson Crusoe. There's a creepy retro pulp fiction quality at work here that draws the reader in and the author's quaint, unselfconscious and curiously lyrical prose keeps us interested until the end. We think it's magic. Click. Click. Click.

The crabs, look at them go—scuttle, scuttle—their little legs dancing over the sand. One of them is slower than the others. He's tinted green and red, black little beads at the end of stalks, but his big claw is too big. It's weighing him down, and he struggles, digging his sharp little legs into the sand in an effort to keep up.

A rock comes down on him, big and round and thick—like a coconut. He's gone, dead, split open like a squashed melon. His friends scurry away, little red and green pinpricks on the island beach.

Bort, shirtless and tanned, picks up the crab by its overbig claw, looks at it proudly: breakfast.

It's a good way to start his morning, killing crabs. Crabs are fast, so he has to be faster. Miss and you go hungry. Or—worse—they get angry, because crabs don't like being eaten, and they move towards you—scuttle, scuttle—and climb up your legs and arms and naked torso, crawl up your back and the nape of your neck and: snip, snip, snip.

Bort knows this. Bort also knows that there are other sources of food on the island, like passion fruit and figs and pears and coconuts, but he chooses crabs for breakfast. Because they are so fast; he has to be faster. It keeps him alert, keeps him active, keeps him on his little brown toes. He's always attentive: sharp, like a pointed stick.

He has to be sharp for the anemones.

Bort takes his meal-to-be back to his home. It's a little hut, sitting in a circle of palm trees, only a short walk away from the water. The sun drips through the leafy fronds as he goes to work on the crab: ripping, cracking, tearing. Take off the shell, pull out the legs. Use the sharp rock to cut away the stalk eyes. The stalk eyes stare at him just the same, even in death.

It's a good meal. Bort cooks the crab meat over a fire of fronds, a burning of friends. Bort loves the palm trees: they're beautiful, they provide him with coconuts and shade from the sun, and they provide him the means to make a humble shelter.

Good things, palm trees, although there's markedly fewer of them now.

He's been forced to cut them down, because of the anemones. Bort washes down the crab with the milk of a coconut. He places the empty coconut cup on a table he fashioned: another gift from his friends whose lives he must now so regretfully take. He strolls back to the beach. In the distance, he can see a mass of red and green, crabs discussing the death of one of their own. They see him, but they do not move. They stare at him menacingly from the other end of the beach.

They will do nothing, and Bort knows this. He is not worried about the crabs, for death always scares them to their crustacean core, shakes them so much that they don't know what to do—they can't understand. Bort instead stares at the waters of the ocean, crystalline and aggressively blue, gently lapping at the shore like the tongue of a lazy lover. Therein lies a much more pressing threat than the crabs: the anemones.

Bort can see them clearly. They are there, just below the ocean waves, clinging to the jagged reefs which crudely—and cruelly—jut into the quickly evaporating island. The anemones wave at him menacingly, thousands upon thousands of wriggling arms swaying to the beat of an underwater wind. They know he is there, safe on the dry sand, and they hate him for it. They know, though, that he will not be safe forever, not in his

current state. For every day, they eat up the island, and although it is large and pear-shaped, the anemones grow closer and closer: inch by inch, sucking the island in until it is a sandy speck in the sea.

The anemones are passing something along, up from the depths of their colossal, bottomless reef. A vibrant blue and green anemone hands the object to a prominent red and white anemone—an arrogant and boisterous fellow, flamboyant, a true patriot—who holds it up with his rippling ghost arms for Bort to see, pushing it against the weight of the water, bubbles detaching from it, breaking apart in a dramatic flourish:

It's a stick. A pointed stick.

Bort grimaces. They are taunting him. The stick they are holding is the same stick that Bort drove into the sand the night before as a means of measuring the progress of the anemones, after gauging their bites from the pear. It was his favorite stick, and he had often used it to spear the soft underbellies of crabs—and now the anemones have it. They hold it up to say to him: look, we have your stick, and you are not so sharp, are you? And look how much land we have taken from you, look how much we dragged down into the deep blue. Soon it will be you.

The anemone sucks up the stick, drawing it into its waving arms like a clownfish. It curls into itself, becoming a ribbed

ball, and then splays itself, arms wide and flat, and the stick shoots soars out in a magnificent, slow-motion surge of bubbles, floating away into the abyss of the ocean. The ocean quivers with a violent swell as the anemones cheer, a mass of writhing arms.

Bort looks away in disgust. He looks back at the crabs across the beach who are still staring at him, angrily, stupidly.

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Bort is the owner of a large, wooden platform that he constructed from palm tree. It sits in the center of the ever-shrinking island atop five big, flat boulders that just happened to be there, seemingly for the purposes of supporting Bort's platform. The platform is constructed from palm trees.

Its construction is crude: Bort is hardly an architect. It is unstable, although Bort seeks to remedy this by placing the trunks of the friendly palms below the platform, with the boulders, wedging them in there like they were fish trying to wriggle through cracks.

Bort hates walking on the platform, something he was forced to build because of incipient rise of the anemones. His hardened feet pad on the dry palm floor. They keep coming, the anemones—undaunted, no respect for anything, not a care for a single speck of sand. His hope is that the platform will keep him safe

as the anemones, day after day, eat up the island; that it will keep him safe from their dragging him down into the great below.

They took his wife and son in this way. Bort did not see it happen. His wife and son had been lying on the beach that night, counting the stars, wondering if the sky was bigger than the ocean. They had fallen into a beautiful and innocent sleep there. None of them knew about the anemones then. This was before they had come; when their only preoccupation was the mood of the ocean.

His wife and son were gone now, somewhere down in the ocean, dancing to the song of the anemones. Bort did not know if they alive or dead. The anemones didn't tell him, because the anemones told no secrets. But they could laugh. The ocean sounded different the day after they dragged his family down, the vibrations of jubilant rubbery arms thrumming a monotonous paean that bounced off the waves and reverberated through the trees with echoing taunts.

Bort did not want to know if his family were alive or dead. Not after that. Instead, he went into a frenzy, cutting down palms, his old friends, with a makeshift axe, while the memory of his family urged him on: go Bort, go; work for us, sweat for us, bleed for us, just as you did in the beginning, just as you did when you brought us to the island, wide and promising paradise; just as you did when you saved us from the submersion

of the world, saved us from floating away endlessly on the salt ocean.

He had to build the platform to keep himself aloft. It was either that, or take it off the rocks, float it into the ocean and search for land again. But most of the land was gone, now, swallowed up first by the ocean and now the anemones. Besides, the island was now his home and what a grand victory it would be if he conquered the anemones, built his own island that they couldn't siege but were forced to prop up with their thousands and thousands of arms.

They weren't making it easy for him, though. They ate large chunks of the island at a time—unpredictably—taking away large copses of balmy palmed areas, taking away heavy portions of crabbed havens.

It's why the crabs hated him. They were here first. It was their home and they blamed him for the anemones biting into their island, into the little paradise-that-once-was. They had conspired to kill him one night, when he was weak and distraught from the loss of his family. He had worked through the night and collapsed from exhaustion, banging his head against a palm and slumping into a deadened sleep. The crabs came and swarmed around him and: snip, snip, snip—they climbed, they jabbed, they cut and they stabbed. Bort had awoken in a fright—screaming and in great pain—as he ripped the crabs off him, beat them against

trees, smashed them with his axe. He killed three of them before they scuttled away.

The crabs feared death more than anything else.

Bort had been hunting them ever since that incident, and it was then he discovered the merits of the hunt and eating their meat. It electrified him, gave him the energy to defy the will of the anemones—or to try to. It was a difficult task. The loss of his stick today was a serious blow: they had taken more land than he anticipated. The north end of the island—the tip of the pear—must be nearly gone now. They were growing, and time was running out.

Bort paces back and forth on his platform. The more he ponders it, the more he realizes the platform won't suffice. He has spent hours upon hours, days upon days, looking for a better way to support it, to try to make it stable and even, determinedly shoving dismembered palms into crevices, nooks, and crannies. It is a waste of time. Wouldn't the anemones eventually take over the platform for a raft? Bort trembles at the thought. He dreads being pulled back to float endlessly upon the ocean blue, not a strip of land, not a speck of hope, not a memory in sight.

It is crucial that he keep the island alive, for the sake of what was lost.

But he knows the platform will not suffice. He needs a new solution, and fast. The anemones are now the dictators of time, and they are becoming less generous with it by the day. Bort frowns at the sand. He sits for some time, lost in thought.

Crabs, look—a crowd of them, thick and tiny, moving towards his platform, moving towards the rocks in search of shade. Bort does not mind, because these crabs are not green and red, they are blue.; They are not his enemies, and Bort does not hunt them. And, oh, these blue crabs are quite the little cards. They run along the sand—click, click, click—their tiny pincers wagging, their eyes bulging. They dance over hollow coconuts, a pleasant drum; they skirt over fallen palms, a lovely rustle; and they tap along: click, click, click—always having a grand old time, them, those merry blue crabs.

Blue: more like the sky, not like the ocean.

Click, click, click—

In Bort's brain: he does not need a platform, he needs a tower; he needs to reach the sky, where the ocean can't touch, where the anemones cannot be—and there, he will be able to find out if the sky is bigger than the ocean.

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Bort sets to work immediately.

Bort is not an architect.

His first tower fails miserably, barely taller than a palm tree before it collapses on the rickety platform, trunks rolling into trunks, splints and supports scattering. It had taken Bort five days to construct. He had decided to build it on his platform, so that all that work might not go to waste. He had to punch holes in it with an axe to get the trunks to stand upright. But that was a foolish decision. Now there is no chance that the platform will float.

Bort goes to bed angry. In the morning, the anemones are closer, and their hymn echoes over the waves: they know that he has failed, they know that he is losing time to them. They are pleased, because he bends to them, he fails because of them.

Bort's next tower is shaped like a tepee, but after six days, it too fails. The anemones are dangerously close to his hut now, dangerously close to that little circle of leafy palms and past pleasures. They will not move any closer for some time—because now they want to watch Bort, now they want to make him suffer: he has eluded them too long.

Bort smashes another crab the next morning. He remains zealous. The other crabs, a red and green mass, watch from a distance as he dismembers their slain fellow in front of him. They are mad, they are mean, and they are scared.

Bort spends the next week building a more or less successful structure. He gets a solid foundation going, stacking

trunk on top of trunk to form a square base. Little rivets, carved with a sharp stone, hold the trunks in place. It is slow work, and in the meantime by now the anemones have circled all around the island, have bitten off massive chunks of the pear from the south and west, the east and the north—but Bort has made progress, and he is hopeful. If he can just get the base to stay put, this tower might be successful—it might be the one. But he has to figure out how to nail it to the platform. Meanwhile, the anemones eat up the den of the red and green crabs who watched their fellow be dismembered by Bort on the beach.

Bort does not realize these crabs are dead until the eighth morning of the construction. He stalks the wet, sandy beaches, searching for crabs, until he sees an anemone—a red and white one, a vain fellow—holding up the stick Bort drove into the sand the night before. The anemone shouts: those crabs are gone! Then he swallows the stick up and spits it back out, sending to the depths with raucous applause of his fellows.

Bort could survive by eating fruit, but he is stubborn. He travels to another beach, where the red and the blue crabs live together in harmony. The blue crabs are dancing, flirting, skirting, moving: click, click, click—don't kill them, Bort, show some compassion, show some mercy.

Bort hurls a rock and crushes two crabs at once—a first for him, a new record. The panicking crabs flee as he retrieves his kills and moves back to his hut, except for one blue crab, who watches him go with sad, bulging eyes, and—click, click, click—pities Bort.

Bort is glad when he eats the crabs. He comes up with an idea for holding his tower down: he will drive a trunk through each corner of the square, nailing it to the platform. He spends the rest of the day preparing the trunks, carefully cutting holes in the four corners of his tower. He goes to bed satisfied, confident he will beat the anemones, that they will hold his tower for him after they have eaten the island.

There is a terrible storm that night. Mighty waves swell about the island, threatening Bort in his hut in the circle of palms. But he remains untouched by the torrent. The anemones revel in the storm, emboldened by it, taking more and more of the island in the rave of the waves. Miraculously, Bort's platform weathers the lashing torrent—but his tower succumbs to the storm. It was not nailed down to the platform. It is scattered everywhere, thrown from its precarious perch into the ever-growing reefs of the anemones.

Bort is horrified when he sees realizes this in the morning. He frantically searches for his lost trunks—because every friendly palm he fells in the name of love is vital—and

then he finds them, in the reefs of the anemones. He watches them push the heavy palms down into the recesses of the ocean. They are angry because the trunks have hurt some of them, killed others. There's one—red and white, flamboyant, an imperious fellow—who has been crushed flat, a few of his arms detached, lazily drifting halo-like around his corpse. With one final heave, the anemones shove the last of the palms into the engulfing blue, and resolve to redouble their efforts.

This setback has cost three red and green crabs their lives. They try to fight back, having been afraid that Bort would return with his crude and murderous tools. They fail, as always, driven as they are by fear. They are thrown with fury by Bort, who smashes and stabs them out of his own growing fear. They hurry away—scuttle, scuttle—and watch, horrified, as Bort tears their slain friends to pieces. The blue crabs start to advance, move closer to him—click, click, click—but Bort waves a pointed stick at them, and they reluctantly retreat, scrabbling over the sand, spiked eyes bulging. They leave Bort to his silent, lonely misery.

Bort begins to work like a madman, his mind only on the tower he must rebuild. The anemones attack the island with a renewed, frightening intent. There is a new reason behind their purpose: the death of the patriotic red and white anemone—the hero, who died a martyr. They are determined to destroy Bort; to

take away his palms trees, those with whom he was once friendly;
to take away the crabs he feeds on; to take away the crabs he
tolerates; to take away the fruit and the grass and the sand.

Bort chops, hacks, saws. Creates and destroys. He smashes
crabs, rips them open, spears them through their soft
underbellies, throws their little stalk eyes into the ocean.
Every day, he thrusts a pointed stick into the sand, stained
with the blood of crabs—let the anemones take it. The anemones
do, and they break the stick into pieces, split it amongst their
many, multi-colored arms, and then swallow the little bits and
spit them out, a constant taunt, a rallying cry saying:
remember, remember the one who used to do this. They are
energetic. There are so many of them now. Their hymn becomes
perpetual, never-ending, an underwater echo reverberating across
the island, bouncing back off the waves. It reminds Bort of his
family, of his wife and son, of those who he has lost, of all he
has lost, and they drive him through each failed endeavor. They
are calling to him from the depths of the ocean, the song of the
anemones: go, Bort, do it for us, you diligent fellow, you
dutiful man—over and over and over again: for us, for us, for
us.

Time is measured only by successes and failures, in what is
taken and what is created, but never in what is given. The
island is shrinking, shrinking, shrinking, becoming the dot that

the anemones promised it would become, and soon it will be no more.

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The crabs, look at them go, there are so few of them now—click, click, click—their tiny pincers wagging, their eyes bulging. And oh, in the midst of them, a few of them scurry, red and green—scuttle, scuttle—with the crowd of blue.

But now Bort is too exhausted to care. He sits on the platform he hates, his last refuge. The sun is sinking. His latest tower is near completion, tall and rickety—but not tall enough: not tall enough to save him, not stable enough to prop up his misguided ambition. The island is disintegrating into nothingness, the end is nearing. There is so little of the island left. His hut in the circle of palm trees had long since sunk into the ocean. Every day, the anemones take more land away from him. They had faith, and they had numbers, and the faithful ate away at his island. The faithful had consumed everything: they ate away at his home, they ate away at the not-so-friendly-anymore palm trees, they ate away at his enemies the crabs, they ate away his soul. He could do nothing, he could never accomplish what he set out to do. He had done nothing since the anemones were here. It was over. He was defeated—Bort: the slave of anemones.

Click, click, click.

The crabs are at his platform. Bort ignores them.

Click, click, click.

Scuttle, scuttle.

Bulging eyes, stalk eyes; red and green mixed with innocuous sky blue; big claws, little claws; sharp legs and skinny legs; flat shells and round shells.

One by one, the red and green crabs begin to scurry away.

One by one, the blue crabs begin to scabble away.

The last in the line remains—a blue crab, eyes bulging, pincers beckoning—and he clicks his claws—click, click, click: he wants Bort to follow him.

Bort would rather be left to die alone.

But the crab will not hear of this. Click, click, click: follow me, Bort, come, there is something you must see.

Bort feels he cannot refuse. What does it matter anyway? He climbs down from his platform and follows the crab. They move along a small, narrow stream—a fissure in the island, crammed with anemones. The anemones made the fissure only today, having carved their way inland, the shelves of the reef like the jagged teeth of an old friend's smile.

The crabs lead Bort to the stream's end. Here the anemones will completely absorb the island. There are still palm trees here, ripe with coconuts that fall and clunk joyfully, bouncing and rolling and dancing with the crabs.

And, oh, how the crabs dance. They dance over hollow coconuts, a pleasant drum; and they dance over full coconuts; a mellow beat. They roll them into the water: splash. They scurry over the trunks, a lovely rustling sound; and they dance on—click, clack, click, clack—beating out the rhythm on the remnants of Bort's failed structures. They click against each other's shells, dance with each other. It's quite a beautiful sight, really: red and green amidst the blue, all moving as one, the sun melting through the fronds of the last palms, painting the sky yellow and orange like the inside of a passion fruit, or red and gold and purple like a pleasant fig.

Bort had forgotten how lovely the sunset could be, shimmering over the blue, and suddenly he dances, too. The coconuts continue to fall; the fronds blow in a gentle ocean breeze: the island, content. They dance until the sky turns dark and blue—not like the ocean, but rather a sky that imposes itself upon the ocean—they dance to the song of the island.

They danced together. The anemones danced alone, with no one: dejected, but still determined, still taking over the island. By the time the stars were out, the stream had grown into a pond. By midnight it had grown into a lake and by sunrise, a pale and battered sunrise, became one with the ocean. The stream grew into a pond by the time the stars were out, grew into a lake by midnight, and became one with the ocean by the

time the sun had risen again—pale and battered, but happy. Bort, the trees, the crabs: they all danced until the very end, until the anemones took them all, reached up with their innumerable arms and, one by one, dragged them down into the depths of the ocean. And the anemones found Bort's tower, and their hymn was forever renewed. And the anemones took hold of his tower with thousands of gently waving arms. Calmly, triumphantly, they placed it on their shelved reefs to stand there until the end of time and, in their vanity, held it aloft as a trophy—a proud symbol—of their accomplishment. One day they would try to climb it so that they might touch the sky.

And Bort sank to the very bottom of the ocean—to the bottom of the deep blue—and was crushed into nothingness under the weight of that eternal expanse. He did not find his wife and son down there. But when he sank, he did not sink dancing to the song of the anemones, but sank dancing to the song of the island: to the song of the sand and the crabs; to the song of the sun and the sky; to the song of the trees of the wind. He sank to all that was left and all that he had, to all that was and all that is, dancing to the song of Bort.

AUTHOR'S NOTE:

This piece was written at a very serene point in my life: an in between period where I was briefly out of one school and waiting to attend another, this time in Germany. There was simultaneously a lot going on for me and not a lot going on; as such, this piece draws from different sources for inspiration. The title,

*for instance, was borne from an oddball, one-off joke I made to my younger brother that I then promised to write a story about (despite feverishly scribbling down passages on napkins at my job, I did not dream it would come this far.) Moreover, I think the overall facts of my existence during this time, inspired, in part, the setting: the peaceful, ever-shrinking island. This is not to say that this piece is in anyway anecdotal—this is simply to say that I think of this piece concerning itself chiefly with time as it relates to the self, and that the scope of the piece can further be broadened or narrowed through that locus. I had also been reading a lot of Kurt Vonnegut at the time and had just come off the high of reading his excellent *The Sirens of Titan*, which deals with similar themes of time, presence, punctuality and life. That novel, I think, serves as my primary influence stylistically—I wanted to draw on the ‘wit-in-the-face-of-darkness’ style of Vonnegut and blend it with the eerie and unsettling; I wanted to take overarching themes of inevitability and death—no small fixations of mine—and turn them on their heads.*

BIO:

I am an emerging writer who has yet to be published. (*Until now. The Editors*). I have been studying English Language and Literature at Central Michigan University for the past three years and have graduated with a Bachelor of Science in that area. I have currently returned to CMU to teach Freshman Composition and to pursue a Master of Arts in Creative Writing. Before university, I lived most of my life in a small farmhouse which has fostered a quiet and contemplative atmosphere.