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## The Thunder of the Captains and the Shouting

Herbert Morris

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HERBERT MORRIS

*THE THUNDER OF THE CAPTAINS AND THE SHOUTING*

What it was like days after seemed too partial,  
seemed fathoms less than crucial, seemed the light  
of natural day and dusk of common night,  
the small gray dreams of countless small gray sleeps

endlessly signifying daily tasks  
and nightly self-assignments, that surrender  
seem less to make the gesture of surrender,  
that breath draw different breath, and that we hope

another hope, we with no sense impaired,  
whose vision only deepened, asked to suffer  
not any longer wild things like belief  
but something broken, mild enough to live with.

What it would be much later and years after  
no one can tell you, least of all myself.  
What it would be to wake at night and wonder  
where the battalion on the Malay coast,

landed against all odds and never heard from  
under a scorching rain and hail of mortar,  
stumbles or weeps now, bathes its wounds, bears anguish;  
what it would be to look up from the page

in the blaze of midsummer, some wars later,  
the roses pruned, the borders green and ordered,  
and taste across dry lips, for the first time  
in twenty years, the names of all hands drowned

in straits whose name was never less than desperate  
and latitudes too south not to mean foundered;  
what it would be to live not reconciled  
no one can guess or hint or hope to render.

Say a word for success, but not the kind  
dutifully praised, pursued, and celebrated.  
The one I mean says what force here prevaieth  
does so despite our will, says some things settle

counter to invitation, past dispersal,  
rational, in dim ways, beyond all reason,  
anarchic with no mark of anarchy,  
logical past the small gray bounds of logic.

However we may try, escape proves futile,  
evasion worse, abstention a delusion.  
Here, by success I mean what vastly prospers,  
but mortal, mortal, infinite, forever.

What would it be to break bread with the past  
day unto day, and not be done with breaking,  
each morning at the table plotting silver  
as ships played in flotilla, salt-and-pepper

shakers great bastions in the linen waters,  
fortifications night alone might breach,  
or something kin to darkness, infiltrating  
beautifully where all else would go detected

over the scent of archipelago  
on the wind and above the lap of blossoms  
doing all night what they must do in yielding  
concepts like palm, hibiscus, bougainvillea.

Say a word for the war, but not the word  
every day said and night to night expected,  
and not the war you think when you say war,  
but something lost and garbled, some campaign

from which mere safe return was not accomplished  
and, even if accomplished, not enough.

To have come back seems much the common lot,  
some act that seemed not quite dependent on us,

the least we could have done, the accidental  
light or luck we like to think of as human,  
seeing us through again, again tomorrow  
dragging us with it, not for the first or last time,

and for which we seem hardly responsible,  
presences in us never sought or willed,  
if we might seek or will, a visitation  
for all but those who blundered and the legions

sweltering under rain and fierce cross fire  
in clearings of the jungle we can conjure  
but, save for midnight wakings, never fix  
quite neatly in the mind or put to rest

with the precision of a lost crew's roster  
nailed as a plaque against the deck or mast  
to beat down hard on young crews coming after  
with all the dazzle of a little sun

in its own right, or haunt them down the night  
with a moon-luster like an apparition  
over the waves, moving across a surface  
seeming more nearly dreaming than like water.

What I must know is how reduction struck them,  
whether it took them slowly or at once,  
whether the light that morning and the salt  
of names that lashed their lips raged meek or total;

whether the borders wavered as they looked  
or the book trembled, if some turning back  
lay secret, deep, and sweet along that route  
and, late, some fate insist time shall not have them.