



DRIFTWOOD ODYSSEY

A poem by Clarence Martin, SJ

Another wind, another tide, and I, half hidden in the sand will sink into dark neverness, meaninglessness covered. Spent and weary, cold, wet and tired, I await it.

But before the last tide can move in, before the last wind stirs, there are footsteps in the sand. They pause above me. A warm hand touches an all but dead projection of me, gentle fingers brush aside the sand and draw me forth.

Cupped in strong warm hands I hear his voice, softly, reverently, whispering "O Father in heaven, how beautiful!"
Not the gleaming blue sky, not the sparkling water, but me —
his eyes are on me. What strange and marvelous being can this be?

At me he looks and again he says in awesome tones "How beautiful!" He does mean me.

Years ago in a far off land I used to stand on the cliff that was my home and unfold my leaves to the warm sun. I felt the caress of gentle winds and knew not anger nor stress. On warm afternoons the spray from the sea cooled and soothed me. All was so good, so radiantly joyful, until that night so long ago, so very long ago.

Out of the sea raged a violence such as I had never felt,
a wild driving viciousness, filling me with terror.
In dread I clung to my mother's breast, her arms around me.
The wind raged wilder and wilder. My clinging arms grew weary.
I felt myself torn from arms that held me tight
and smashed against the rocks below — and then blackness.

When I awoke I was alone. Gone the rocky cliff that was my home.
Gone my mother, my friends, security, love and peace. Alone I
swayed in the waters of the sea and saw myself reflected in its quiet
after storm — and cringed at what I saw.

Stripped I was of leaves and barkless naked. Splintered, broken, riven,
raw, drops of limpid, life-giving sap drying in the sun upon me.

Long years, many long years, I drifted from sea to sea
at the whim of tide and wind and current, of storm and quiet.
Harder I grew as the bitter salt soaked through me,
layer after layer into my inmost self and I grew darker and darker
in the heat and cold of changing seas.

For longer years than I care to count I drifted aimlessly, tossed about at times by winds
and storm until, growing weary of it all, I longed to sink from my own accumulated
weight into the dark silence beneath me.

Then on that blessed winter day in the early light of dawn
I felt the sea beneath me grow small.
I felt the sand and stones scraping me as I was eased from the waters
that had become my restless home, I was tossed back and forth
in their grip until the fingers of the moon uncurled

and they slowly slipped away, leaving me alone on that alien shore.

Harsh they had been, capricious and fitful but this strange bed on which I had been cast made me look with longing at their fleeing.

Weary from my long aimlessness I welcomed the sands as they closed around me. Another wind, another tide would end it all - and then the soothing darkness.

Then came that loving hand that drew me forth into the light. Beautiful he called me, eyes glistening. Hope flickered and fled.

I trembled and feared, knowing that when the moisture left his eyes and when he saw me as I was, so ugly, so sinfully ugly, he would cast me back into the sea and the ugliness of me would drift away once more.

But no, his fingers softly rubbed me, every gnarled, broken, splintered, jagged part of me. Again he said "How beautiful! You are so very beautiful and I shall take you home with me."

Gently and lovingly he carried me to his home upon the cliff. Patiently he brushed the gritty sand from my every pore until I no longer felt its sting. He took me into his own inner room where I saw others like myself—or worse—and placed me with care among them.

He comes to us often and whispers his love to us. He picks us up and speaks to us, each one of us, and we are bathed and cleansed by his warm breath. We are quietly happy because, we know not why, he finds in us a beauty.

We find ourselves growing ever more content with our own sinful unsightliness because the light of delight our presence to him brings into his eyes. He speaks to us. Many things he says we cannot understand—"I, too, have been a drifter" — but, no matter, we know his love for us and that is enough.

Night after night when he has taken a last loving look at us and said goodnight and quenched the light, I lay awake and listen to his soft breathing. I think of the happiness that is mine. In time with his breathing I think gratefully of the storm that tore me from my mother's arms against which I trembled with fear and rage at the time.

I am thankful, deeply thankful, for every tide and wind and current that drew me, painfully and resentfully struggling, to where his loving eyes found the little of me uncovered and took me to himself. I am grateful for the warmth of the sun that brought him to the beach that February day when winter should have kept him warmly home.

Now I know that the seeming harshness of love is the cost of finding love and I know "aimless wandering" a love-plotted course to love.

No more struggles, come what may.

I know now I shall never die, never be unloved.

Fr. Martin, a Baltimore native and a Jesuit for 74 years, died in January



at age 91. He ministered for many years in the Philippines, where during World War II he spent a year as a prisoner of war.