

All Lookouts Clamped on Paradise

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Robert Louis Stevenson wrote this fine bit of gangster rap in 1883:

Fifteen men of the whole ship's list
Yo ho ho and a bottle of rum!
Dead and bedamned and the rest gone whist!
Yo ho ho and a bottle of rum!
The skipper lay with his nob in gore
Where the scullion's axe his cheek had shore
And the scullion he was stabbed four times four
And there they lay, and the soggy skies
Dripped down in up-staring eyes
In murk sunset and foul sunrise
Yo ho ho and a bottle of rum.

My son used to chant this around the apartment when he was six years old, Treasure Island being his favorite novel. He wore an eyepatch made with a shoelace and a black piece of cloth, cowboy boots, and clothesline rope around his waist to which he had tied a pointy stick with one end wrapped in electrical tape.

And, he sang joyously, day in and day out, about robbing, about killing. Often he would hand friends a piece of loose leaf paper on which he had drawn in magic marker a black circle: "The black spot" signifying the imminent death of the recipient.

He was in no way the only lover of pirates I knew. A quick search on Google produces over sixty one million results for pirates. Their fascination holding well beyond the demographic of nerdy six year olds.

Many people think the fifteen men in Stevenson's poem were dancing, or rejoicing somehow on this dead man's chest, because of some Disney fantasy, a cartoon Treasure Island or the saccharine animated adaptation of Peter Pan, but in the real song, it's pretty clear:

Fifteen men on a dead man's chest

Yo ho ho and a bottle of rum
Drink and the devil had done for the rest
Yo ho ho and a bottle of rum.
The mate was fixed by the bosun's pike
The bosun brained with a marlinspike
And cookey's throat was marked belike
It had been gripped by fingers ten;
And there they lay, all good dead men
Like break o' day in a boozing ken

I never worried that my child would grow up to brain anyone with a marlinspike, despite how deadly serious he was about the romance of the pirate's life, and my incredible distaste for all things romantic. This may be the real difficulty with the pirate's life—the smiling roguish face of murder and self direction.

It has become an increasingly familiar business model.

When my brother went for his first job interviews at consulting firms after college, I drove him to the airport in my \$500 Nissan. I hugged him goodbye and when he closed the door, I took the change that had fallen from his pocket on to the passenger seat.

He was, of course, suited for a pirate's life. A life, it turns out, not averse to narrative overlay and romantic vision. A life concerned with mobility and liquidity.

Sometime last year, I asked him if I could borrow one hundred thousand dollars. He said, yes, "But what are you going to use it for?"

I had absolutely no idea.

"I'm not going to do it then." He said. "I'm afraid you might buy a house."

I know four people who own houses. One is the guy who books my son's punk shows. He has a black and silver pirate flag hanging from his sloping porch on Route 96, just outside the gray, bucolic, town preposterously called "Ithaca" in upstate New York, an area I have been trying to leave, (not return to) for 12 years. A period of time during which my son's love of the pirate aesthetic has remained untouched.

My brother's fear that I might buy a house is a fear that I would be permanently tied to land. It's an encroaching anxiety we hold for one another—the disaster just up ahead—caused by the decision made through attrition or not made fast enough, in the face of what anyone can surely recognize as the utter scam against collective consciousness in which we live.

Maybe a marriage or a house; maybe a degree or a contract. Hasty ideas based on the romance of it all; the money, and certainly, at some point, after all this hard work, the freedom. Guarding against the fool's freedom requires all of our attention. The view from inside and the view from a distance. Often though, it means watching the slow motion capture and commandeering of a life by perfectly predictable forces.

'Twas a cutlass swipe or an ounce of lead
Or a yawing hole in a battered head
And the scuppers' glut with a rotting red
And there they lay, aye, damn my eyes
All lookouts clapped on paradise

All souls bound just contrarywise

Yo ho ho and a bottle of rum.

Pirates, we are to believe, are some branch of anarchist, some autonomist stateless traveling band of looters, who would give everyone an opportunity to join them: outsiders certainly, aware that there is no wealth that is not stolen. This is what we've been reading about since the days Hakim Bey coined the term Temporary Autonomous Zone, extolling the virtues of the dinner party, the pirate, and the act of poetic terrorism.

Hard to exclude the businessman then from our ranks. He's made such a similar choice; to pursue stateless, unbound looting for the individual and for romance and autonomy and freedom. To cordially deliver the black spot,

To know he is not afraid of, or concerned with, any law. That he is cowed only by death.

For things to remain this romantic, they must remain another big favorite for us and our situationist cohort: play. For things to remain this romantic, we must not look at the end results of the pirate's life.

There was chest on chest of Spanish gold

With a ton of plate in the middle hold

And the cabins riot of stuff untold.

I've watched my son's band play at the Pirate House and am happy to see a second generation of punk rockers because it reveals things all over again; fills me with a conviction about the deeper actions of our bodies and voices, and the crowd slamming seems to have some saner sense of what autonomy means.

There is coercion and violence, and there is play, and it is not a fine line that divides them. Once crossed you freeze, like the animal you are, taking in every detail to help you reason while you play dead.

And they lay there that took the plum

With sightless glare and their lips struck dumb

Yo ho ho and a bottle of Rum

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