



## Three Birds and Forty Fish

*by Michael Trump*

**F**OAM falls from flashing rocks, swelling back to piles of sea-green water washing wildly in upon the beaten shore. Rising water swells and dumps its load and settles back down, leaving heights of foam to tower above.

Off into the sun the fish boat lurches on a silver sparkling sea, pitching mast first touches frozen mountain peaks then dips to the emerald sea waves and I feel the taut line tug at my skiff, dipping its gunwales to the foam. Some splashes in.

My hand at the wheel whips back and forth; “Keep that tow line tight; keep the fish boat from the tangling net.”

Off there into the sun the silhouetted boat dips from my sight behind a swell and when it reappears I see the men hard pulling nets.

Through the glare from silver water I see with shaded eyes the skipper with his hand upon the power-winch valve. I watch him guide the net up from the depths, through the high winch and down to the deck in a dripping tent of mesh with jellyfish.

He raises his arm for attention and I watch as he points starboard and follow till I’ve reached the place, then pull again.

My prop leaves foam and wash behind as I hurry away from the boat, straining the line, lashing the water behind.

Curious smell, compounded of spindrift brine and partially-burnt fuel, assaults my nostrils in jets which alternate crazily with the redolence of the tree-choked shore.

The tow line lashed to the post before me sings past my ear and off through the water. Now dipping down and tasting salt, now lashing up and leaving a curtain of streaming water back to back to where it lay. Now singing and snapping in the wind, now slacking and dipping back to the sea.

Now off in the dream light the skipper signals again, waving his hands above, for me to throttle back and drift a while.

More peaceful now, the big skiff engine chugs quietly at idle and the tow line lies slack in the swells and seas.

It's a good time and I know the net is lying quiet in the water, spread into a purse on the far side of the fishing boat. I can sit still and listen to the voice of God upon the restless water. The skiff rocks slowly with the tide, slow motion, side to side, and close by, the rocky headland rises from the restless tide.

Wolf Rock, I've named it. Green mantled tower, monument to some lost age of rocky violence, carved down by glaciers when all this land was ice.

Behind Wolf Rock the steep hills rise majestically and seek the misty sky. The hillsides sleep beneath a stand of Sitka spruce.

A whistle startles me, I jerk my head to look, but no one on the boat wants my attention. Again I hear a sharp piercing call, but I can see no one, no thing, that could have made the sound. All is quiet, on the restless sea.

It was nothing, I decide, some queer noise the tow rope made as the skiff rocked side to side sliding the hemp across wet wood.

The waters calm and easy, though the swells and seas still pile above my head. No breaking waves, no liquid splash.

Across Icy Straight, Brady Glacier lies shining in the sun, catching so much of the sky and mountain tops it seems to

appear in reflected glory. It rocks there in the distance as my skiff slides down the swells, trailing the tow rope off behind with rhythmic pull and slack.

Tongues of water lap the strakes and climb the sides of my rocking skiff. Common noises seem to fade and I float alone in silence.

The wind and the rushing water are all I hear, and the blood-pulse pounding in my ears keeps time. And then that solitary sound again.

A solo whistle, not from the skipper, I can see, and yet there are no other boats within my sight. This momentary contact with the unknown sends a chill shiver down my back. Some sort of mystic meaning that I should comprehend might be hidden in that call.

And then I see it, suddenly visible, no miracle, just a common sea-borne bird riding in the swells and seas off toward Wolf Rock tower.

I watch it for a while as it rocks with the rolling water, feeding on the krill and plankton that fill these frigid waters with teeming life.

Then it leaves, skimming low out over the water, back toward the looming Wolf Rock tower. I follow it in till it disappears against the green of the spruce. Its sudden flight leaves me wondering. "What was its mission here?" "An envoy leaving with its tidings still untold?"

This small loss, this unimportant incident, somehow leaves an empty pit within me. The whistling bird, I'm sure, had something to say.

As if this were of importance I watch toward the shore for the bird to return. And the longer I wait expectantly, the more important it seems to be.

I didn't notice it come again, but the whistle turns my head and there, topping a swell is the bird; no, not one, but three. Riding the waves. And it's hard not to feel there is a message for me that I should see, if I'd listen to God's voice carefully.

Like momentary fleeting thoughts, the birds are gone and back again, singly and then in pairs and once all three leave and return.

But finally they disappear, and my thoughts are back

with the job at hand. It was but a moment that the birds had kept me from my tasks.

I see the final signal and the tow line is tossed clear. Arcing to the water, it splashes against my reverie. Quickly I pull the rope in with a curtain of water that puddles the tangle the wet rope makes as it falls at my feet.

Now I jump to the throttle and shove it full forward. — The skiff rears back and the water-wall follows me in toward the boat.

But the fish boat is moving now, and I must catch up, be lashed on and pulled in at full speed forward, or be left behind.

This run is bad, for few fish were caught when they can lift them by hand to the boat. For a larger catch I'd pull alongside and the fish-thrashing filled purse would stretch from boat to skiff and be emptied out with the bailing net.

But now we must race, beat the other boats to the next good tide, and be first in line for a better spot. We've got a head start, but it's short.

The fish boat wash rises high behind and I climb the skiff up at full power. I ease my bow to the big boat's stern and I'm on.

The bear-trap snaps on my painter ring and the power winch takes over, pulling me up, right to the stern of the boat. I climb the wet pile of net. But the sullen faces that greet me mean few fish this set. "How many?" I ask, and the answer is slow: "Forty fish." is all they say.

. . . . and three birds.

