

Out on the Chesapeake

by Janie Meneely

Out on the Chesapeake, early morning time
Blue crab swings from the old trot line

Out on the Chesapeake, early morning light

Waiting in the shadows till the rockfish bite

Soft wind stirs up the surface of the water

Playful as a kiss from a waterman's daughter

It fills my sails and it fills my soul,

And there's nothing gonna catch me

When that wind starts to blow

I was born on the heels of a Chesapeake storm

First I heard was the low foghorn

First I knew was the morning air,

My father sitting wondrous in a straight-back chair.

He looked at me with a crack-face grin,

Rubbed his hand longside his chin,

Said it's 'bout time for the tide to come in.

That's when I felt that Bay wind blow

When my father opened up the big back door

Sidled outside in his Black Diamond coat,

One of Ma's mufflers wrapped 'round his throat

And headed on down to his old workboat.

I felt that wind brush against my side,

Drank it deep with my first cries.

My mother lay still and I huddled warm,
Close in the breast of that Chesapeake morn.

I was born on the Chesapeake—river reared,
Never got farther than my father's fears.
Never got farther than a Chesapeake wind
Ever cared to carry me, out or in.
Worked on the water soon as I walked,
Culled through the crabs, listen to 'em talk.
Dredged up the oysters, pulled up some clams,
Eyed the horizon to guess God's plans.

The Chesapeake is vast and wide.
Can't always see to the other side,
And days when the sun hots up the air
And the haze rises up to break the glare
You can't hardly see but a mile or two
Across a water that's stale and blue.
Chesapeake wind has fire in its eye.
The day you doubt it is the day you'll die.

Bought me a boat—the *Sally Kate*,
Fifty years dredging more or late,
Fussed her up till she stood sound,
Let the wind sing through her shrouds.
Old wood stove to keep us warm
As she bent her bow to the winter storm.

We dredged that boat in the day's first light,
Back and forth, 'neath the Sharps Isl' Light.
Out from the Choptank and into the Bay
Till the sun rose high to call it a day.
Then bushel after bushel shoveled off and tallied
Count up the boats; see who dallied
First to the dock—you get home quicker,
Swap a joke while the boss men dicker
Hose the deck, make the ride home sure
In the gloaming light with the yawl boat's purr.

Then all us sinners'd huddle down below
To share a bottle in the oil lamp's glow,
And one old fella, he'd start into talk
And you'd swear this time you wouldn't get caught
But as the hours went tickin' by
You'd be hard in the lee of days gone by,
Hard in the lee of some waterman's grin,
As one old timer would wink and begin,
"I once knew a fella named Cap'n Ben. . . ."

I tell you those stories grew with the tide
Tall as a mast and twice as wide,
Front to back and town to town
All the same and upside down
As if they drew breath all their own
To set those stories, skin and bone,
Straight on into the Chesapeake air

That breathed 'em soft back in our ear.
There's something astir in that Chesapeake wind,
Keeps the whiskers hard to my chin,
And keeps me coming back for more
To my little dredge boat on the Chesapeake Shore.

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Playful as a kiss from a waterman's daughter
It fills my heart and it fills my soul,
Fills my world till there's nothing left to know,
And there's nothing gonna catch me
When that wind start to blow