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SHIPWRECK

I

IT began with a portent.

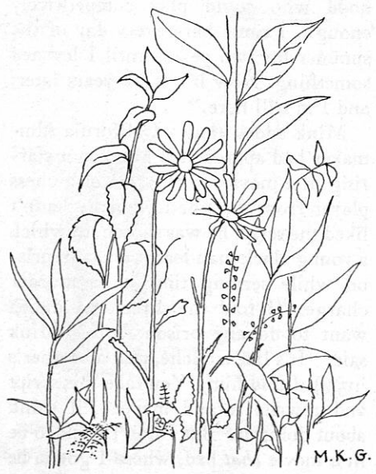
They had doubled Cape Finisterre and were sailing south before a fresh wind when a school of porpoises surrounded the frigate. Those on board crowded the poop and the breastwork, marvelling at the animals' ability to circle a vessel already gaily proceeding at nine or ten knots. As they were admiring the sports of the porpoises, a cry was raised. A cabin boy had fallen through one of the fore portholes on the larboard side. A signal gun was fired, a life raft thrown out, and the vessel hove to. But these maneuvers were cumbrously done, and by the time the six-oared barge was let down it was in vain. They could not find the raft, let alone the boy. He was only fifteen years old, and those who knew him maintained that he was a strong swimmer; they conjectured that he would most probably have reached the raft. If so, he doubtless perished upon it, after having experienced the most cruel sufferings.

The expedition for Senegal consisted of four vessels: a frigate, a corvette, a flute, and a brig. It had set sail from the Island of Aix on 17th June, 1816, with three hundred and sixty-five people on board. Now it continued south with its complement reduced by one. They provisioned at Teneriffe, taking on precious wines, oranges, lemons, banian figs, and vegetables of all kinds. Here they noted the depravity of the local inhabitants: the women of St. Croix stood at their doors and urged the Frenchmen to enter, confident that their husbands' jealousies would be cured by the monks of the Inquisition, who would speak disapprovingly of conjugal mania as the blinding gift of Satan. Reflective passengers ascribed such behavior to the southern sun, whose power, it is known, weakens both natural and moral bonds.

From Teneriffe they sailed south-southwest. Fresh winds and navigational ineptitude scattered the flotilla. Alone, the frigate passed the tropic and rounded Cape Barbas. It was running close to the shore, at times no more than half a cannon shot away. The sea was strewn with rocks; brigantines could not frequent these seas at low water. They had doubled Cape Blanco, or so they believed, when they found themselves in shallows; the lead was cast every half hour. At daybreak Mr. Maudet, ensign of the watch, made out the reckoning upon a chicken coop, and judged that they were on the edge of the Arguin reef. His advice was discounted. But even those unschooled in the sea could observe that the water had changed color; weed was apparent at the ship's side, and a great many fish were being taken. In calm seas and clear weather, they were running aground. The lead announced eighteen fathoms, then shortly afterwards six fathoms. The frigate luffing almost immediately gave a heel, a second and third, then stopped. The sounding line showed a depth of five metres and sixty centimetres.

By misfortune, they had struck the reef at high tide, and, the seas becoming violent, attempts to free the ship failed. The frigate was assuredly lost. Since the boats it carried were not capacious enough to contain the whole personnel, it was decided to build a raft and embark upon it those who could not be put into the boats. The raft would then be towed to the shore and all would be saved. This plan was perfectly well laid; but, as two of the company were later to affirm, it was traced upon loose sand, which was dispersed by the breath of egotism.

The raft was made, and well made, places in the boats allotted, provisions made ready. At daybreak, with two metres and seventy centimetres of water in the hold and the pumps failing, the order was given to abandon ship.



But disorder quickly embraced the well-laid plan. The allotment of places was ignored, and the provisions were carelessly handled, forgotten, or lost in the waters. One hundred and fifty was to be the complement of the raft: one hundred and twenty soldiers including officers, twenty-nine male sailors and passengers, one woman. But scarcely had fifty men got on board this machine—whose extent was twenty metres in length and seven in breadth—than it sank to at least seventy centimetres underwater. They cast off the barrels of flour which had been embarked, whereupon the level of the raft rose; the remaining people descended upon it, and it sank again. When the machine was fully laden, it was a metre beneath the surface, and those on board so crowded that they could not take a single step; at the back and front, they were in water up to the waist. Loose flour barrels were cast against them by the waves; a twenty-five-pound bag of biscuit was thrown down to them, which the water converted at once into a paste.

It had been intended that one of the naval officers should take command of the raft; but this officer declined to come on board. At seven o'clock in the morning, the signal for departure was given, and the little flotilla pulled away from the abandoned frigate. Seventeen persons had refused to leave the vessel, or had concealed themselves away, and thus remained on board to discover their fate.

The raft was towed by four boats in line, preceded by a pinnace, which made soundings. As the boats took up their positions, cries of "*Vive le roi!*" arose from the men on the raft, and a small white flag was raised upon the end of a musket. But it was at this instant of greatest hope and expectation for those upon the raft that the breath of egotism was added to the normal winds of the seas. One by one, whether for reason of self-interest, incompetence, misfortune, or seeming necessity, the tow ropes were cast aside.

The raft was barely two leagues from the frigate when it was abandoned. Those on board had wine, a little brandy, some water, and a small portion of sodden biscuit. They had been given no compass or chart. With neither oars nor rudder, there was no means of controlling the raft, and little

means, either, of controlling those upon it, who were constantly flung against one another as the waters rolled over them. In the first night, a storm got up and threw the machine with great violence; the cries of those on board mingled with the roaring of the billows. Some attached ropes to the timbers of the craft and held fast to these; all were buffeted without mercy. By daybreak the air was filled with lamentable cries, vows which could never be fulfilled were offered up to Heaven, and all prepared themselves for imminent death. It was impossible to form an idea of that first night which was not below the truth.

THE next day the seas were calm, and for some hope was rekindled. Nevertheless, two young lads and a baker, convinced that there was no escape from death, bade farewell to their companions and willingly embraced the sea. It was during this day that those on the raft began to experience their first delusions. Some fancied that they saw land, others espied vessels come to save them, and the dashing of these deceptive hopes upon the rocks provoked greater despondency.

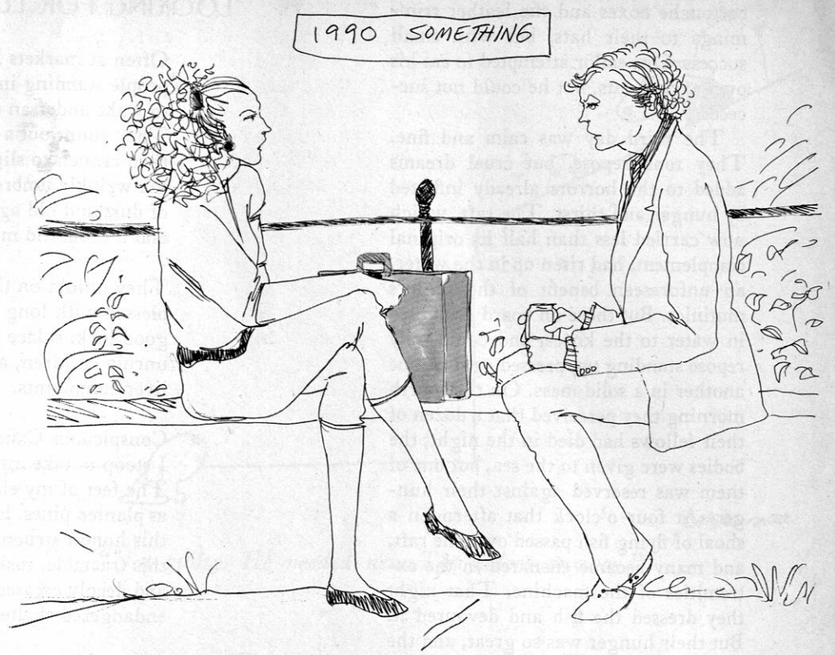
The second night was more terrible than the first. The seas were mountainous and the raft constantly near to being overthrown; the officers, clustered by the short mast, ordered the soldiery from one side of the machine to the other to counterbalance the energy of the waves. A group of men, certain that they were lost, broke open a cask of wine and resolved to soothe their last moments by abandoning the power of reason—in which they succeeded, until the seawater coming in through the hole they had made in the cask spoiled the wine. Thus doubly maddened, these disordered men determined to send all to a common destruction, and to this end attacked the ropes that bound the raft together. The mutineers being resisted, a pitched battle took place amid the waves and the darkness of the night. Order was restored, and there was an hour of tranquillity upon that fatal machine. But at midnight the soldiery rose again and attacked their superiors with knives and sabres; those without weapons were so deranged that they attempted to tear at the officers with their teeth, and many bites were endured. Men were thrown into the sea, bludgeoned, stabbed; two barrels of wine were thrown overboard, and the last of the water. By the time the villains were subdued, the raft was laden with corpses.

During the first uprising, a workman by the name of Dominique, who had joined the mutineers, was cast into the sea. On hearing the piteous cries of this treacherous underling, the engineer in charge of the workmen threw himself into the water and, taking the villain by the hair, succeeded in dragging him back on board. Dominique's head had been split open by a sabre. In the darkness the wound was bound up and the wretch restored to life. But no sooner was he so revived than, ungrateful as he was, he rejoined the mutineers and rose with them again. This time he found less fortune and less mercy; he perished that night.

Delirium now menaced the unhappy survivors. Some threw themselves into the sea; some fell into torpor; some unfortunate wretches rushed at their comrades with sabres drawn, demanding to be given *the wing of a chicken.* The engineer whose bravery had saved the workman Dominique pictured himself travelling the fine plains of Italy, and one of the officers saying to him, "I remember that we have been deserted by the boats, but fear nothing; I have just written to the governor, and in a few hours we shall be saved." The engineer, calm in his delirium, responded thus: "Have you a pigeon to carry your orders with as much celerity?"

Only one cask of wine remained, and more than sixty were still on board the raft. They collected tags from the soldiers and fashioned them into fishhooks; they took a bayonet and bent it into such shape as to catch a shark. Whereupon a shark arrived, and seized the bayonet, and with a savage twist of its jaw straightened it fully out again, and swam away.

An extreme resource proved necessary to prolong their miserable existence. Some of those who had survived the night of the mutiny fell upon the corpses and hacked pieces from them, devouring the flesh on the instant. Most of the officers refused this meat; though one proposed that it should first be dried to make it more palatable. Some tried chewing sword belts and



"I love what you've done with your hair."

"Great briefcase."

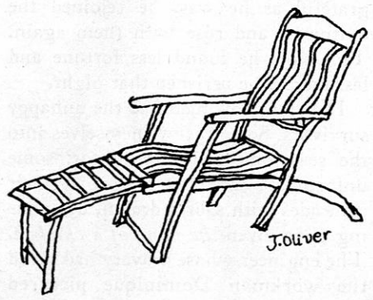
cartouche boxes and the leather trimmings to their hats, but with small success. One sailor attempted to eat his own excrements, but he could not succeed.

The third day was calm and fine. They took repose, but cruel dreams added to the horrors already inflicted by hunger and thirst. The raft, which now carried less than half its original complement, had risen up in the water, an unforeseen benefit of the night's mutinies. But those on board remained in water to the knees, and could only repose standing up, pressed against one another in a solid mass. On the fourth morning they perceived that a dozen of their fellows had died in the night; the bodies were given to the sea, but one of them was reserved against their hunger. At four o'clock that afternoon a shoal of flying fish passed over the raft, and many became ensnared in the extremities of the machine. That night they dressed the fish and devoured it. But their hunger was so great, and the portion of fish so exiguous, that many of them added human flesh to the fish, and, being dressed, it was found less repugnant. Even the officers began to eat it when presented in this form.

It was from this day onwards that all learned to consume human flesh. The next night was to bring a fresh supply. Some Spaniards, Italians, and Negroes, who had remained neutral during the first mutinies, conspired together with the plan of throwing their superiors overboard and escaping to the shore, which they believed to be at hand, with those valuables and possessions which had been placed into a bag and hung upon the mast. Once more, a terrible combat ensued, and blood washed over the fatal raft. When this third mutiny was finally suppressed, there remained no more than thirty on board, and the raft had risen yet again in the water. Barely a man lay without wounds, into which salt water constantly flowed, and piercing cries were heard.

On the seventh day two soldiers concealed themselves behind the last barrel of wine. They struck a hole in it and began to drink the wine through a straw. On being discovered, the two trespassers were instantly cast into the water, in accordance with the necessary law that had been promulgated.

It was now that the most terrible decision came to be taken. On counting their numbers, it was found that they were twenty-seven. Fifteen of these were likely to live for some days; the rest, suffering from large wounds and many of them delirious, had but the smallest chance of survival. In the time that might elapse before their deaths, however, they would surely diminish further the limited supply of provisions. It was calculated that they could well drink between them as many as thirty or forty bottles of wine. To put the sick on half allowance was but to kill them by degrees. And thus, after a debate in which the most dreadful despair presided, it was agreed among the fifteen healthy persons that their sick comrades must, for the common good of those who might yet survive, be cast into the sea. Three sailors and a soldier, their hearts now hardened by the constant sight of death, performed these repugnant but necessary executions. The healthy were separated from the unhealthy like the clean from the unclean.



After this cruel sacrifice, the last fifteen survivors threw all their arms into the water, reserving only a sabre lest some rope or wood need cutting. There was sustenance left for six days while they awaited death.

There came a small event which each interpreted according to his nature. A white butterfly, of a species common in France, appeared over their heads fluttering, and settled upon the sail. To some, crazed with hunger, it seemed that even this could make a morsel. To others, the ease with which their visitor moved appeared a very mockery when they lay exhausted and almost motionless beneath it. To yet others, this simple butterfly was a sign, a messenger from Heaven as white as Noah's dove. Even those skeptical ones who declined to recognize a divine instrument knew with cautious hope that butterflies travel little distance from the dry land.

But no dry land appeared. Under the burning sun a raging thirst consumed them, until they began to moisten their lips with their own urine. They drank it from little tin cups, which first they placed in water to cool their inner liquid the quicker. It happened that a man's cup might be stolen and restored to him later, but without the urine it had previously held. There was one who could not bring himself to swallow it, however thirsty he might be. A surgeon amongst them remarked that the urine of some men was more agreeable to swallow than that of others. He further remarked that the one immediate effect of drinking urine was an inclination to produce urine anew.

An officer of the army discovered a lemon, which he intended to reserve entirely for himself; but violent entreaties persuaded him of the perils of selfishness. Thirty cloves of garlic were also found, from which arose further disputation; had all weapons but a sabre not been discarded, blood might have been shed once more. There were two phials filled with spirituous liquor for cleaning the teeth; one or two drops of this liquor, dispensed with reluctance by its possessor, produced on the tongue a delightful sensation which for a few seconds cast out thirst. Some pieces of pewter on being placed in the mouth effected a kind of coolness. An empty phial which had once contained essence of roses was passed among the survivors; they inhaled, and the remnants of perfume made a soothing impression.

On the tenth day several of the men, upon receiving their allotment of wine, conceived the plan of becoming intoxicated and then destroying themselves; they were with difficulty persuaded from this notion. Sharks surrounded the raft, and some soldiers, in their derangement, openly bathed within sight of the great fish. Eight of the men, reckoning that land could not be far distant, constructed a second raft upon which to escape. They built a narrow machine with a low mast and a hammock cloth for a sail; but as they made a trial of it the frailty of the craft proved to them the temerity of their enterprise, and they abandoned it.

ON the thirteenth day of their ordeal, the sun rose entirely free from clouds. The fifteen wretches had put up their prayers to the Almighty, and divided amongst them their portion of wine, when a captain of infantry, looking towards the horizon, descried a ship and announced it with an exclamation. All offered thanks to the Lord and gave way to transports of joy. They straightened barrel hoops and attached handkerchiefs to the ends; one of their number mounted to the top of the mast and waved these little flags. All watched the vessel on the horizon and guessed at its progress. Some estimated that it was coming closer by the minute; others asserted that its course lay in a contrary direction. For half an hour they lay suspended between hope and fear. Then the ship disappeared from the sea.

From joy they fell into despondency and grief; they envied the fate of those who had died before them. Then, to find in sleep some consolation from their despair, they rigged a piece of cloth as shelter from the sun and lay down beneath it. They proposed to write an account of their adventures, which they would all sign, and nail it to the top of the mast, hoping that it might by some means reach their families and the government.

They had passed two hours among the most cruel reflections when the master gunner, wishing to go to the front of the raft, went out of the tent and saw the Argus half a league distant, carrying a full press of sail and bearing down upon them. He could scarcely breathe. His hands stretched towards the sea. "Saved!" he said. "See the brig close upon us!" All rejoiced; even the wounded made to crawl towards the back part of the machine, the better to see their saviors approaching. They embraced one another, and their delight redoubled when they saw that they owed their deliverance to Frenchmen. They waved handkerchiefs and thanked Providence.

The Argus clewed up her sails and lay onto their starboard, half a pistol shot away. The fifteen survivors, the strongest of whom could not have lived beyond the next forty-eight hours, were taken up on board; the commander and officers of the brig, by their reiterated care, rekindled in the survivors the flame of life. Two who later wrote their account of the ordeal concluded that the manner in which they were saved was truly miraculous, and

LOOKING FOR LUCK IN BANGKOK

Often at markets I see
people standing in line
to walk under an elephant.
They count out a few coins,
then crouch to slip beneath
the wrinkly umbrella that smells
of dust and old age
and a thousand miracles.

They unfold on the other side
blessed with long life,
good luck, solace from grief,
unruly children, and certain
liver complaints.

Conspicuous Caucasian,
I stoop to take my turn.
The feet of my elephant are stout
as planted pines. His trunk completes
this honest structure,
this tractable, tusked,
and deeply creased
endangered shelter.

I squat in his aromatic shade
reminded of stale bedclothes,
my mother's pantry shelves
of cloves and vinegar,
as if there were no world of drought,
no parasites, no ivory poachers.
My good luck running in
as his runs out.

—MAXINE KUMIN

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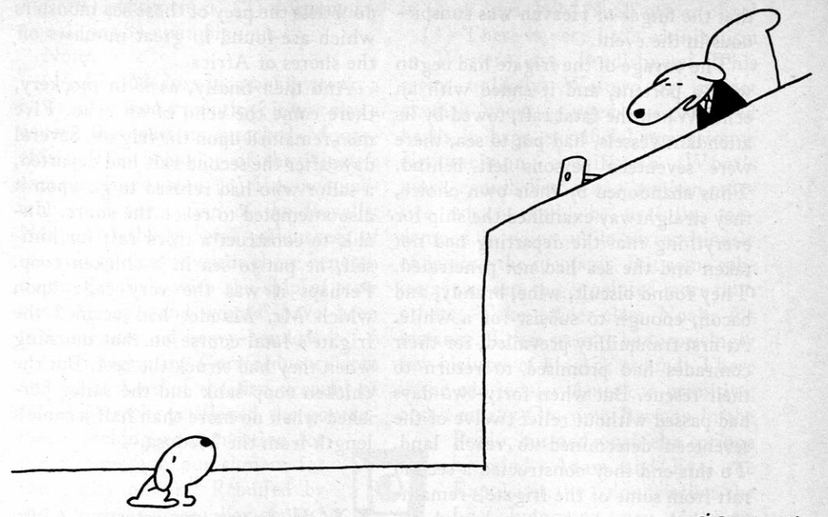


"Not guilty. He needed new Top-Siders anyway."

• •

that the finger of Heaven was conspicuous in the event.

The voyage of the frigate had begun with a portent, and it ended with an echo. When the fatal raft, towed by its attendant vessels, had put to sea, there were seventeen persons left behind. Thus abandoned by their own choice, they straightway examined the ship for everything that the departing had not taken and the sea had not penetrated. They found biscuit, wine, brandy, and bacon, enough to subsist for a while. At first tranquillity prevailed, for their comrades had promised to return to their rescue. But when forty-two days had passed without relief twelve of the seventeen determined to reach land. To this end they constructed a second raft from some of the frigate's remaining timbers, which they bound together with strong ropes, and they embarked upon it. Like their predecessors, they lacked oars and navigational equipment, and possessed no more than a rudimentary sail. They took with them a small supply of provisions and what hope there was remaining. But many days later some Moors who live beside the Saharan coast and are subjects of King Zaide discovered the vestiges of their craft and came to Andar with this information. It was believed that the men on this second raft were doubtless the prey of those sea monsters which are found in great numbers off the shores of Africa.

And then finally, as if in mockery, there came the echo of an echo. Five men remained upon the frigate. Several days after the second raft had departed, a sailor who had refused to go upon it also attempted to reach the shore. Unable to construct a third raft for himself, he put to sea in a chicken coop. Perhaps it was the very cage upon which Mr. Maudet had verified the frigate's fatal course on that morning when they had struck the reef. But the chicken coop sank and the sailor perished when no more than half a cable's length from the Medusa.

II

HOW do you turn catastrophe into art?

Nowadays the process is automatic. A nuclear plant explodes? We'll have a play on the London stage within a year. A President is assassinated? You can have the book or the film or the filmed book or the booked film. War? Send in the novelists. A series of gruesome murders? Listen for the tramp of the poets. We have to understand it, of course, this catastrophe; to understand it, we have to imagine it, so we need the imaginative arts. But we also need to justify it and forgive it, this catastrophe, however minimally. Why did it happen, this mad act of Nature, this crazed human moment? Well, at least it produced art. Perhaps, in the end, that's what catastrophe is *for*.

He shaved his head before he started the picture, we all know that. Shaved his head so he wouldn't be able to see anyone, locked himself in his studio, and came out when he'd finished his masterpiece.

Is that what happened?

The expedition set off on 17th June, 1816.

The Medusa struck the reef in the afternoon of 2nd July, 1816.

The survivors were rescued from the raft on 17th July, 1816.

Savigny and Corréard published their account of the voyage in November, 1817.

The canvas was bought on 24th February, 1818.

©Réunion des Musées Nationaux

The canvas was transferred to a larger studio and restretched on 28th June, 1818.

The painting was finished in July, 1819.

On 28th August, 1819, three days before the opening of the Salon, Louis XVIII examined the painting and addressed to the artist what the *Moniteur Universel* called "one of those felicitous remarks which at the same time judge the work and encourage the artist." The King said, "M. Géricault, your shipwreck is certainly no disaster."

It begins with truth to life. The artist read Savigny and Corréard's account; he met them, interrogated them. He compiled a dossier of the case. He sought out the carpenter from the Medusa, who had survived, and got him to build a scale model of his original machine, on which he placed wax models to represent the survivors. Around him in his studio he placed his own paintings of severed heads and dissected limbs, to infiltrate the air with mortality. Recognizable portraits of Savigny, Corréard, and the carpenter are included in the final picture. (How did they feel about posing for this reprise of their sufferings?)

He was perfectly calm when painting, reported Antoine Alphonse Montfort, the pupil of Horace Vernet; there was little perceptible motion of the body or the arms, and only a slight flushing of the face to indicate his concentration. He worked directly onto the white canvas with only a rough outline to guide him. He painted for as long as there was light, with a remorselessness which was also rooted in technical necessity: the heavy, fast-drying oils he used meant that each section, once begun, had to be completed that day. He had, as we know, had his head shaved of its reddish-blond curls, as a Do Not Disturb sign. But he was not solitary: models, pupils, and friends continued coming to the house, which he shared with his young assistant, Louis-Alexis Jamar. Among the models he used was the young Delacroix, who posed for the dead figure lying face down with his left arm extended.

Let us start with what he did not paint. He did not paint

(1) the Medusa striking the reef

(2) the moment when the tow ropes were cast off and the raft abandoned

(3) the mutinies in the night

(4) the necessary cannibalism

(5) the self-protective mass murder

(6) the arrival of the butterfly

(7) the survivors up to their waists, or calves, or ankles in water

(8) the actual moment of rescue.

In other words, his first concern was not to be (1) political, (2) symbolic, (3) theatrical, (4) shocking, (5) thrilling, (6) sentimental, (7) documentational, or (8) unambiguous.

Notes:

(1) The Medusa was a shipwreck, a news story, and a painting; it was also a cause. Bonapartists attacked Monarchists. The behavior of the frigate's captain illuminated (a) the incompetence and corruption of the Royalist Navy, (b) the general callousness of the ruling class towards those beneath them. Parallels with the ship of state running aground would have been both obvious and heavy-handed.

(2) Savigny and Corréard, survivors and co-authors of the first account of the shipwreck, petitioned the government, seeking compensation for the victims and punishment for the guilty officers. Rebuffed by institutional justice, they applied to the wider courts of public opinion with their book. Corréard subsequently set up as a publisher and pamphleteer with a shop called At the Wreck of the Medusa; it became a meeting place for political malcontents. We can imagine a painting of the moment when the tow ropes are loosed: an axe, glittering in the sun, is being swung; an officer, turning his back on the raft, is casually slipping a knot . . . It would make an excellent painted pamphlet.

(3) The Mutiny was the scene that Géricault most nearly painted. Several preliminary drawings survive. Night, tempest, heavy seas, riven sail, raised sabres, drowning, hand-to-hand combat, naked bodies. What's wrong with all this? Mainly that it looks like one of those saloon fights in B Westerns where every single person is involved —throwing a punch, smashing a chair, breaking a bottle over an enemy's head, swinging heavy-booted from the chandelier. Too much is going on. You can tell more by showing less.

The sketches of the Mutiny that survive are held to resemble traditional versions of the Last Judgment, with its separation of the innocent from the guilty and with the fall of the mutinous into damnation. If so, this was an idea well abandoned. Would such a resonance have been useful? On the raft, it was not virtue that triumphed but strength; and there was little mercy to be had. The subtext of this version would say that God was on the side of the officer class. Perhaps he used to be in those days. Was Noah officer class?

(4) There is very little cannibalism in Western art. Prudishness? This seems unlikely: Western art is not prudish about gouged eyes, severed heads in bags, sacrificial mastectomy, circumcision, crucifixion. What's more, cannibalism was a heathen practice which could be usefully condemned in paint while surreptitiously enflaming the spectator. But some subjects just seem to get painted more than others. Take officer-class Noah, for instance. There seem to be surprisingly few pictures of his Ark around. There is the odd jocular American primitive, and a murky Giacomo Bassano in the Prado, but not much else springs to mind. Adam and Eve, the Expulsion, the Annunciation, the Last Judgment—you can have all these by major artists. But Noah and his Ark? A key moment in human history, a storm at sea, picturesque animals, divine intervention in human affairs: surely the necessary elements are there. What could account for this iconographical deficiency? Perhaps the lack of a single Ark painting great enough to give the subject impetus and popularity. Or is it something in the story itself: maybe artists agreed that the Flood doesn't show God in the best possible light?

Géricault made one sketch of cannibalism on the raft. The spotlit moment of anthropophagy shows a well-muscled survivor gnawing the elbow of a well-muscled cadaver. It is almost comic. Tone was always going to be the problem here.

(5) A painting is a moment. What would we think was happening in a scene where three sailors and a soldier were throwing people off a raft into the sea? That the victims were already dead? Or, if not, that they were being murdered for their jewelry? Cartoonists with a problem explaining the background to their jokes often give us news venders standing by billboards on which some convenient headline is inscribed. With painting, the equivalent information would have to be given in the title: "A GRIEVOUS SCENE ABOARD THE RAFT OF THE MEDUSA IN WHICH DESPERATE SURVIVORS, WRACKED BY CONSCIENCE, REALIZE THAT PROVISIONS ARE INSUFFICIENT AND TAKE THE TRAGIC BUT NECESSARY DECISION TO SACRIFICE THE WOUNDED IN ORDER THAT THEY THEMSELVES

MIGHT HAVE A GREATER CHANCE OF SURVIVAL." That should just about do it.

The title of "The Raft of the Medusa," incidentally, is not "The Raft of the Medusa." The painting was listed in the Salon catalogue as "Scène de Naufrage" ("Scene of Shipwreck"). A cautious political move? Perhaps. But it's equally a useful instruction to the spectator: this is a painting, not an opinion.

(6) It's not hard to imagine the arrival of the butterfly as depicted by other painters. But it sounds fairly coarse in its emotional appeal, doesn't it? And even if the problem of tone could be overcome, there are two major difficulties. First, it wouldn't look like a true event, even though it was; what is true is not necessarily convincing. Second, a white butterfly six or eight centimetres across, alighting on a raft twenty metres long by seven metres broad, does give serious problems of scale.

(7) If the raft is underwater, you can't paint the raft. The figures would all be sprouting from the sea like a lineup of Venus Anadyomenes. Further, the lack of a raft presents formal problems: with everyone standing up because if he lay down he would drown, your painting is stiff with verticals; you have to be extra ingenious. Better to wait until more on board have died, the raft has risen out of the water, and the horizontal plane becomes fully available.

(8) The boat from the Argus pulling alongside, the survivors holding out their arms and clambering in, the pathetic contrast between the condition of the rescued and that of the rescuers, a scene of exhaustion and joy—all very affecting, no doubt about it. Géricault made several sketches of this moment of rescue. It could make a strong image; but it's a bit . . . straightforward.

That's what he didn't paint.

WHAT did he paint, then? Well, what does it look like he painted? Let us reimagine our eye into ignorance. We scrutinize "Scene of Shipwreck" with no knowledge of French naval history. We see survivors on a raft hailing a tiny ship on the horizon. (The distant vessel, we can't help noticing, is no bigger than that butterfly would have been.) Our initial presumption is that this is the moment of sighting which leads to a rescue. This feeling comes partly from a tireless preference for happy endings but also from posing ourselves, at some level of consciousness, the following question: How would we know about these people on the raft if they had *not* been rescued?

What backs up this presumption? The ship is on the horizon; the sun is also on the horizon (though unseen), lightening it with yellow. Sunrise, we deduce, and the ship arriving with the sun, bringing a new day, hope and rescue; the black clouds overhead (very black) will soon disappear. But what if it were sunset? Dawn and dusk are easily confused. What if it were sunset, with the ship about to vanish like the sun, and the castaways facing hopeless night as black as that cloud overhead? Puzzled, we might look at the raft's sail to see if the machine was being blown towards or away from its rescuer, and to judge if that baleful cloud is about to be dispelled; but we get little help—the wind is blowing not up and down the picture but from right to left, and the frame cuts us off from further knowledge of the weather to our right. Then, while we're still undecided, a third possibility occurs: it could be sunrise, but even so the rescuing vessel is not coming towards the shipwrecked. This would be the plainest rebuff of all from fate: the sun is rising, *but not for you*.

The ignorant eye yields, with a certain testy reluctance, to the informed eye. Let's check "Scene of Shipwreck" against Savigny and Corréard's narrative. It's clear at once that Géricault hasn't painted the hailing that led to the final rescue: that happened differently, with the brig suddenly close upon the raft and everyone rejoicing. No, this is the first sighting, when the Argus appeared on the horizon for a tantalizing half hour. Comparing paint with print, we notice at once that Géricault has not represented the survivor up the mast holding straightened-out barrel hoops with handkerchiefs attached to them. He has opted instead for a man being held up on top of a barrel and waving a large cloth. We pause over this change, then acknowledge its advantage: reality offered him a monkey-up-a-stick image; art suggested a solider focus and an extra vertical.

But let us not inform ourselves too quickly. Return the question to the tetchy, ignorant eye. Forget the weather; what can

"With the pretzels I recommend a hearty burgundy, with the goldfish a blanc de blancs."

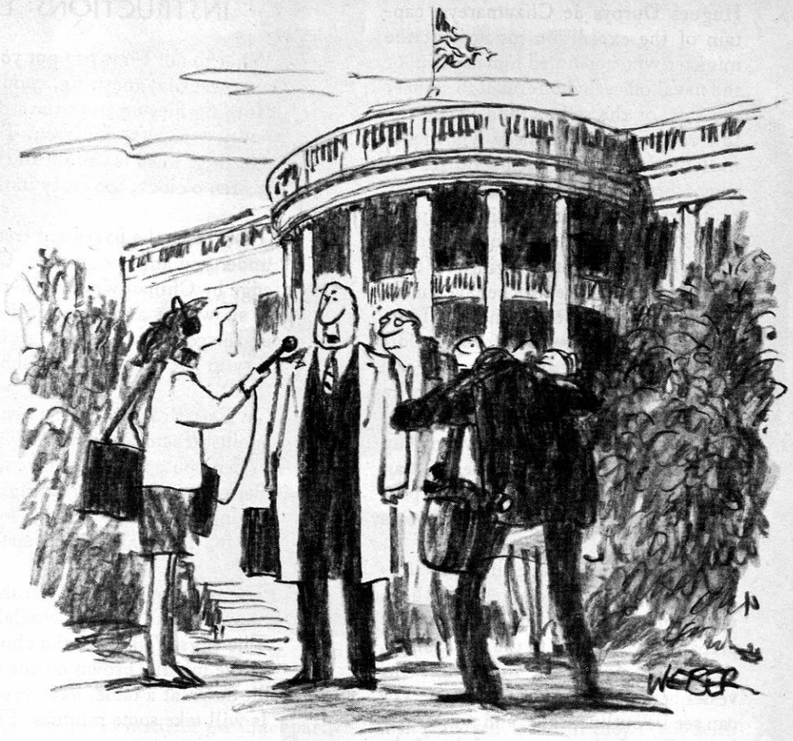
be deduced from the personnel on the raft itself? Why not start with a head count? There are twenty figures on board. Two are actively waving, one actively pointing, two vigorously supplicating, plus one offering muscular support to the hailing figure on the barrel: six in favor of hope and rescue. Then there are five figures (two prone, three supine) who look either dead or dying, plus an old graybeard with his back to the sighted Argus in a posture of mourning: six against. In between (we measure space as well as mood) there are eight more figures: one half supplicating, half supporting; three watching the hailer with noncommittal expressions; one watching the hailer agonizingly; two in profile examining, respectively, waves past and waves to come; plus one obscure figure in the darkest, most damaged part of the canvas, with head in hands (and clawing at his scalp?). Six, six, and eight: no over-all majority.

(Twenty, queries the informed eye. But Savigny and Corréard said there were only fifteen survivors. So those five figures who might only be unconscious are definitely dead? Yes. But then what about the culling which took place, when the fifteen healthy survivors pitched their thirteen wounded comrades into the sea? Géricault has dragged some of them back from the deep to help out with his composition. And should the dead lose their vote in the referendum over hope versus despair? Technically, yes; but not in assessing the mood of the picture.)

So the structure is balanced—six for, six against, eight don't knows. And as we look, both our eyes, the ignorant and the informed, are increasingly drawn back from the obvious focus of attention, the hailer on the barrel, towards the mourning figure front left, the only person looking out at us. He is supporting on his lap a younger fellow, who is—we have done our sums—certainly dead. The old man's back is turned against every living person on the raft: his pose is one of resignation, sorrow, despair; he is further marked out by his gray hair and the red cloth worn as a neck protector. He might have strayed in from a different genre—some Poussin elder who had got lost, perhaps. (Nonsense, snaps the informed eye. Poussin? Guérin and Gros, if you must know. And the dead "son"? A medley of Guérin, Girodet, and Prud'hon.) What is this "father" doing: (a) lamenting the dead man (his son? his chum?) on his lap, (b) realizing they will never be rescued, (c) reflecting that even if they are rescued it doesn't matter a damn, because of the death he holds in his arms? (By the way, says the informed eye, there really are handicaps to being ignorant. You'd never, for instance, guess that the father and son are an attenuated cannibalistic motif, would you? As a group they first appear in Géricault's only surviving sketch of the cannibalism scene; and any educated contemporary spectator would assuredly be reminded of Dante's description of Count Ugolino sorrowing in his Pisan tower among his dying children, whom he ate. Is that clear, now?)

But, whatever we decide that the old man is thinking, his presence becomes as powerful a force in the painting as that of the hailer. This counterbalance suggests the following deduction: that the picture represents the midpoint of that first sighting of the Argus. The vessel has been in view for a quarter of an hour and has another fifteen minutes to offer. Some believe it is still coming towards them; some are uncertain and waiting to see what happens; some—including the wisest head on board—know that it is heading away from them, and that they will not be saved. This figure incites us to read "Scene of Shipwreck" as an image of hope being mocked.

Those who saw Géricault's painting on the walls of the 1819 Salon knew, almost without exception, that they were looking at the survivors of the Medusa's raft, knew that the ship on the horizon did pick them up (maybe not at the first attempt, but still), and knew that what had happened on the expedition to Senegal was a major political scandal. But the painting which survives is the one that outlives its own story. Religion decays, the icon remains; a narrative is forgotten, but its representation still magnetizes (the ignorant eye triumphs—how galling for the informed eye). Nowadays, as we examine "Scene of Shipwreck," it is hard to feel much indignation against



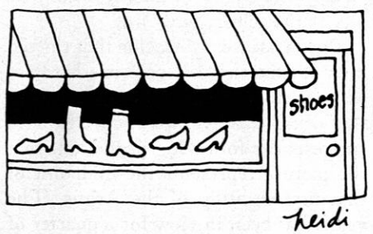
"I'll go out on a limb and say time will tell."

Hugues Duroys de Chaumareys, captain of the expedition, or against the minister who appointed him captain, or the naval officer who refused to skipper the raft, or the sailors who loosed the tow ropes, or the soldiery who mutinied. (Indeed, history democratizes our sympathies. Had not the soldiers been brutalized by their wartime experiences? Was not the captain a victim of his own pampered upbringing? Would we bet on ourselves to behave heroically in similar circumstances?) Time dissolves the story into form, color, emotion. Modern and ignorant, we reimagine the story: Do we vote for the optimistic yellowing sky or for the grieving graybeard? Or do we end up believing both versions? The eye can flick from one mood, and one interpretation, to the other: is this what was intended?

(8a) He very nearly painted the following. Two oil studies of 1818, which in composition are closest of any preparatory sketches to the final image, show this significant difference: the vessel being hailed is much closer. We can see its outline, sails, and masts. It is in profile, on the extreme right of the canvas, and has just begun a painful voyage across the painted horizon. It has clearly not yet seen the raft. The impact of these preliminary sketches is more active, kinetic: we feel as if the frantic waving by those on the raft might have some effect over the next few minutes, and that the picture, instead of being an instant of time, propels itself into its own future, asking the question: Will the ship sail off the edge of the canvas without seeing the raft? In contrast, the final version of "Shipwreck" is less active, offers a less articulated question. The signalling seems more futile, and the hazard on which the survivors' fate depends more terrifying. What is their chance of rescue? A drop in the ocean.

HE was eight months in his studio. Around this time he drew a self-portrait, from which he stares out at us with the sullen, rather suspicious gaze that painters often assume when faced by a mirror; guiltily, we assume that the disapproval is aimed at us, whereas in fact it is mostly directed back at the sitter. His beard is short, and a tasselled Greek cap covers his shorn hair. (We only hear of its being cropped when he began the picture, but hair grows a long way in eight months—how many extra trims did he need?) He strikes us as a piratical figure, determined and ferocious enough to take on, to board his enormous "Shipwreck." The width of his brushes, by the way, was surprising. Given the breadth of his manner, Montfort supposed that Géricault used very thick brushes; but they were small compared to those of other artists. Small brushes, and heavy, fast-drying oils.

We must remember him at work. It



is a normal temptation to schematize, reducing eight months to a finished picture and a series of preliminary sketches; but we must resist this. He is tallish, strong and slender, with admirable legs, which were compared to those of the ephebe restraining the horse in the center of his Barberi Race. Standing before the "Shipwreck," he works with an intensity of concentration and a need for absolute silence: the scratch of a chair was enough to break the invisible thread between eye and brush tip. He is painting his large figures directly onto the canvas with only an outline drawing for assistance. When the work is half done it looks like a row of sculptures hanging on a white wall.

We must remember him in the confinement of his studio—at work, in motion, making mistakes. When we know the final result of his eight months, his progress towards it seems irresistible. We start with the masterpiece and work backwards through the discarded ideas and near-misses; but for him the discarded ideas began as excitements, and he saw only at the very end what we take for granted at the beginning. For us the conclusion was inevitable; not for him. We must try to allow for hazard, for lucky discovery, even for bluff. We can only explain it in words, but we must also try to forget words. A painting may be represented as a series of decisions labelled (1) to (8a), but we should understand that these are just the annotations of feeling. We must remember nerves and emo-

INSTRUCTIONS: EARLY EPIPHANIES

What to do: First you put your hand on her arm
on a weekday morning, coming out of the subway.
Nothing flies up from the street that shouldn't—
not newspapers, not trash. The island's becalmed,
dazzling: mica is caught in the sidewalk,
it's ten o'clock, too early in the year for shade.

Test: Does the pavement tremble? Trains pull away
under you and the ground. Cross calmer streets to
edge by Chinatown, bright-red boxes
of snow peas and white-leaf cabbage. Stay
on the corner a moment, tighten your grip.
Try to get over it—your shaken street scene.

On East Broadway, face east, close your eyes
against tractor-trailer soot, against bleach-light.
When you open them, first see shambles, pickup, delivery,
black-crate foreign lettering, wood chips, coin-sized
buying and selling. You'll soon find a cafeteria. Take
her in. The clatter may startle her. Take her anyway.

The point of all this is breakfast on a brown tray.
Show her the slices of challah. *Do you want this?*
The eggs. *This?* All the choices are gold and white
in the middle, brown on the edges, zigzag, serrated.
Sit down at a table, have your vision.
It will take some minutes. Finish eating. Pay.

You may have left her bewildered; she may look at you
warily, shake her head. On the twelve-o'clock horn-blazing
sidewalk say loudly "Now!" or "It's nothing!" Take her
hand. Charm her completely. Put her at ease again. Now.
Remember what brought on the vision. Work very hard.
It could happen again some morning.

—ELIZABETH MACKLIN

tions. The painter isn't carried fluently downstream towards the sunlit pool of that finished image but is trying to hold a course in an open sea of contrary tides.

Truth to life at the start, to be sure; but, once the process gets under way, truth to art is the greater allegiance. The incident never took place as depicted; the numbers are inaccurate; the cannibalism is reduced to a literary reference; the father-and-son group has the thinnest documentary justification, the barrel group none at all. The raft has been cleaned up as if for the state visit of some queasy-stomached monarch: the strips of human flesh have been housewifed away, and everyone's hair is as sleek as a painter's new-bought brush.

As Géricault approaches his final image, questions of form predominate. He pulls the focus, crops, adjusts. The horizon is raised and lowered (if the hailing figure is below the horizon, the whole raft is gloomily engulfed by the sea; if he breaks the horizon, it is like the raising of hope). Géricault cuts down the surrounding areas of sea and sky, hurling us onto the raft whether we like it or not. He stretches the distance from the shipwrecked to the rescuing vessel. He readjusts the positions of his figures. How often in a picture do so many of the chief participants have their backs to the spectator?

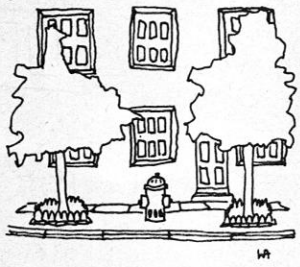
And what splendidly muscular backs they are. We feel embarrassed at this point, but we shouldn't. The naïve question often proves to be the central one. So go ahead, ask. *Why do the survivors look so healthy?* We admire the way Géricault sought out the Medusa's carpenter and had him build a scale model of the raft, but— But if he bothered to get the raft right, why couldn't he do the same with its inhabitants? We can understand why he fiddled the hailing figure into a separate vertical, why he added some supernumerary corpses to assist the formal structure. But why does everyone—even the corpses—look so muscled, so . . . healthy? Where are the wounds, the scars, the haggardness, the disease? These are men who have drunk their own urine, gnawed the leather from their hats, consumed their own comrades. Five of the fifteen did not survive their rescue very long. So why do they look as if they have just come from a bodybuilding class?

When television companies make drama-docs about concentration camps, the eye—ignorant or informed—is always drawn to those pajamaed extras. Their heads may be shaven, their shoulders hunched, all nail varnish removed, but still they throb with vigor. As we watch them queue on-screen for a bowl of gruel into which the camp guard contemptuously spits, we imagine them offscreen gorging themselves at the catering van. Does "Scene of Shipwreck" prefigure this anomaly? With some painters we might pause and wonder. But not with Géricault, the portrayer of madness, corpses, and severed heads. He once stopped a friend in the street who was yellow with jaundice and told him how handsome he was looking. Such an artist would hardly shrink from flesh at the limit of its endurance.

So let's imagine something else he didn't paint—"Scene of Shipwreck" with the casting redistributed among the emaciated. Shrivelled flesh, suppurating wounds, Belsen cheeks: such details would move us, without trouble, to pity. Salt water would gush from our eyes to match the salt water on the canvas. But this would be precipitate: the painting would be acting on us too directly. Withered castaways in tattered rags are in the same emotional register as that butterfly, the first impelling us to an easy desolation as the second impels us to an easy consolation. The trick is easily worked.

Whereas the response Géricault seeks is one beyond mere pity and in-

dignation, though these emotions might be picked up en route like hitchhikers. For all its subject matter, "Scene of Shipwreck" is full of muscle and dynamism. The figures on the raft are like the waves: beneath them but also through them surges the energy of the ocean. Were they painted in lifelike exhaustion, they would be mere dribbles of spume rather than formal conduits. For the eye is washed—not teased, not persuaded, but tide-tugged—up to the peak of the hailing figure, down to the trough of the despairing elder, across to the recumbent corpse front right who links and leaks into the real tides. It is because the figures are sturdy enough to transmit such power that the canvas unlooses in us deeper, submarinous emotions, can shift us through currents of hope and despair, elation, panic, and resignation.



What has happened? The painting has slipped history's anchor. This is no longer "Scene of Shipwreck," let alone "The Raft of the Medusa." We don't just imagine the ferocious miseries on that fatal machine; we don't just become the sufferers. They become us. And the picture's secret lies in the pattern of its energy. Look at it one more time: at the violent waterspout building up through those muscular backs as they reach for the speck of the rescuing vessel. All that straining—to what end? There is no formal response to the painting's main surge, just as there is no response to most human feelings. Not merely hope but any burdensome yearning: ambition, hatred, love (especially love)—how rarely do our emotions meet the object they seem to deserve? How hopelessly we signal; how dark the sky; how big the waves. We are all lost at sea, washed between hope and despair, hailing something that may never come to rescue us. Catastrophe has become art; but this is no reducing process. It is freeing, enlarging, explaining. Catastrophe has become art: that is, after all, what it is for.

And what of that earlier catastrophe, the Flood? Well, the iconography of officer-class Noah begins as we might imagine. For the first dozen or more Christian centuries the Ark (usually represented as a mere box or sarcophagus, to indicate that Noah's salvation was a premonstration of Christ's escape from his sepulchre) appears widely in illuminated manuscripts, stained-glass windows, cathedral sculpture. Noah was a very popular fellow: we can find him on the bronze doors of San Zeno in Verona; on the cathedral's west façade at Nimes and the east at Lincoln; he sails into fresco at the Campo Santo in Pisa and Santa Maria Novella in Florence; he anchors in mosaic at Monreale, and at St. Mark's in Venice.

But where are the great paintings, the famous images that these are leading up to? What happens—does the Flood dry up? Not exactly; but the waters are diverted by Michelangelo. In the Sistine Chapel the Ark (now looking more like a floating bandstand than a ship) for the first time loses its compositional preëminence; here it is pushed right to the back of the scene. What fills the foreground is the anguished figures of those doomed antediluvians left to perish when the chosen Noah and his family were saved. The emphasis is on the lost, the abandoned, the discarded sinners—God's detritus. (Should we allow ourselves to postulate Michèlangelo the rationalist, moved by pity to subtle condemnation of God's heartlessness? Or Michelangelo the pious, fulfilling his papal contract and showing us what might happen if we failed to mend our ways? Perhaps the decision was purely aesthetic—the artist preferring the contorted bodies of the damned to yet another dutiful representation of yet another wooden Ark.) Whatever the reason, Michelangelo reoriented—and revitalized—the subject. Baldassarre Peruzzi followed him, Raphael followed him; painters and illustrators increasingly concentrated on the forsaken rather than the saved. And as this innovation became a tradition, the Ark itself sailed farther and farther away, retreating towards the horizon just as the Argus did when Géricault was approaching his final image. The wind continues to blow, and the tides to run: the Ark eventually reaches the horizon, and disappears over it. In Poussin's "The Deluge" the ship is nowhere to be seen; all we are left with is the tormented group of non-swimmers first brought to prominence by Michelangelo and Raphael. Old Noah has sailed out of art history.

THREE reactions to "Scene of Shipwreck":

(a) Salon critics complained that while they might be familiar with the events the painting referred to, there was no internal evidence from which to ascertain the nationality of the victims, the skies under which the tragedy was taking place, or the date at which it was all happening. This was, of course, the point.

(b) Delacroix in 1855 recalled his reactions nearly forty years earlier to his first sight of the emerging Medusa: "The impression it gave me was so strong that as I left the studio I broke into a run, and kept running like a madman all the way back to the Rue de la Planche, where I then lived, at the far end of the faubourg Saint-Germain."

(c) Géricault, on his deathbed, in reply to someone who mentioned the painting: "Bah, a vignette!"

And there we have it—the moment of supreme agony on the raft, taken up, transformed, justified by art, turned into a sprung and weighted image, then varnished, framed, glazed, hung in a famous art gallery to illuminate our human condition, fixed, final, always there. Is that what we have? Well, no. People die; rafts rot; and works of art are not exempt. The emotional structure of Géricault's work, the oscillation between hope and despair, is reinforced by the pigment: the raft contains areas of bright illumination violently contrasted with patches of the deepest darkness. To make the shadow as black as possible, Géricault used quantities of bitumen to give him the shimmeringly gloomy black he sought. Bitumen, however, is chemically unstable, and from the moment Louis XVIII examined the work a slow, irreparable decay of the paint surface was inevitable. "No sooner do we come into this world," said Flaubert, "than bits of us start to fall off." The masterpiece, once completed, does not stop: it continues in motion, downhill. Our leading expert on Géricault confirms that the painting is "now in part a ruin."

—JULIAN BARNES