

Cranberry Juice in a Glass

*Based on a few events from Charles Olson's
life in Gloucester, Massachusetts*

by Danuta Borchardt

Was it "*They that go down to the sea in ships. That do business in great waters,*" or was it the blueberries in the center of the Cape, in Dogtown Common where long ago dogs and old people were the only survivors of a war, or was it rocks and sand dunes as varied as the people who lay on them in the sun that made Mr. Maximus come and cling to this fishtown on the coast of the Atlantic, it is not for me to tell. It could be this and other reasons. There were reasons too for wanting to sip cranberry juice with Mr. Maximus in a café by the waterfront, or anywhere for that matter. And watch ice cubes in his glass, stirred by an occasional glint of sunrays coming through the window, change into a potion reddish-pink and crystalline. Mr. Maximus was the chief poet of the town, and beyond. He liked the town and strolled around listening to gossipers, talking to fishermen and local intellectuals. No thought passing through the streets escaped his scrutiny, and conversation with him would have been most entertaining. But as it happened it was not through conversation but through his coming and goings, as he tried to carry this town on his humongous shoulders, that I was gradually drawn into the vortex of Mr. Maximus' deeply personal event.

Winter is the time of year, more than any other, when I think of the slow passing of Mr. Maximus. For it was on one of those cold days that many stood at this gravesite: poets, friends, gravediggers, while scant snow flakes were falling and they lowered his coffin into the ground. With eyes big and flat, bigger than most peepholes and heavy like an old toad on its way to the mortician, this is the time to look through the window and watch a fishing boat cut through the frigid waters of the harbor. While the sun is setting the water is a deepening blue, the sky is taking on emerald and the crystals of snow under my window become pink, one of the shades of cranberry juice in a glass filled with ice cubes. (Heck, why not just say "the colors of Fitz Hugh Lane"—he painted this harbor, not I). As the day darkens it is time to watch the boat move along the distant horizon where it becomes no more than a brightly shining light on its way to the fishing grounds and, like Our Lady of Good Voyage bid it back, safely. Living on the Fort that juts into the harbor, Mr. Maximus would have watched it too. He must have watched many boats come and go and

disappear into the fog. He must have known that their fate was guided by the sound of fog horns, bells and buoys and yet...

Not far from the Fort was a buoy by whose song this side of town rose and went to sleep. But Mr. Maximus tired of listening to it moaning and moaning into his bedroom ear. Sailors lost their bearings a few yards off shore, half the town slept well past the hour of noon, fish started jumping to see why it was so quiet one day when he prevailed on the city fathers and mothers to have the buoy shushed. I too missed the sound, but Mr. Maximus' ear was big, bigger than mine, and probably heard too much, much more than the buoy's simple rhythmic chanting. "Well," I thought, "he must have had his reasons," but I started to watch more carefully what Mr. Maximus was up to. Especially when his battles with city hall moved closer to my home. Preservation of old houses was no matter to some, but Mr. Maximus led his life caring, as I soon realized. He fussed and worried about an old abandoned house that stood almost, but not quite, on a curve in my street. It had style. Gray, weathered clapboards (the more they weathered the more stylish they became), gingerbread on the pillars that propped up the overhand. Rats were popping their heads through the cracks but mostly wiggling their behinds and long tails after. City fathers wanted to straighten the street. "It's not quite on the curve," Mr. Maximus argued for the house and for the rats. But he lost. The house was razed and the rats moved on. The street was never straightened because there were other houses there, on the curve exactly.

And so he went on gabbing and gibbering by the waterfront or, as I occasionally noticed, in the most dingy of diners while eating the best buy in town—scraps of roast beef and mashed potatoes, with gravy, sometimes a spoonful of green peas thrown in. The diner was not like one of those roadside establishments where truckers eat, where they serve hefty meals, homemade meat loaf, banana cream and coconut custard pies. No saucy comments from the waitress here either, only a smudge of brown stuff from the previous day stuck to Mr. Maximus' plate. Not that this was the fault of the high school kid washing the dishes. He insisted he was hired to shove them in the dishwasher, not to scrub them first. "What's the point?" the kid went on. The cook argued with him for everyone to hear what the point was, but Mr. Maximus told the cook not to squelch the teenager's independent thinking.

There was once a movie house in town built originally as a live theater (a small stage, orchestra, balconies, velvet curtains), this known only to historians and to a few very old people, the same people who, as children, saw the elephants of the Ringling Bros. Circus stomp down the narrow Main Street

winding to the contour of the waterfront. Mr. Maximus had a habit of sitting in the back of the cinema, watching whatever films came into town. In the back, so that he would not obstruct anybody's view. He was so huge that were I to bump into him in the street my forehead would barely reach the middle of his torso and I would see nothing on either side of Mr. Maximus, no street, no sidewalk, only his torso spread wide. As I walked into the cinema that night I saw Mr. Maximus sitting in one of the back rows, his threadbare coat over his shoulders. I sat in one of the front seats. They were playing *Blowup*. I never cared for the shapes that leaves and branches take on when no one is looking, or shadows that they cast on the unwary, at night especially. I watched the final denouement of the film, when a man's face and below that the point of a gun come into focus on the photo of shrubs in a park, and I sensed my terror mounting. The gun was pointing at me, I was sure. Were I to turn around would Mr. Maximus pass me a slow, reassuring wink? I did not turn around, but that same night I unwittingly put my foot in his heart. Feeling almost certain that Mr. Maximus did not have a car, I went up to him after the movie and offered him a ride home. Maybe a glass of cranberry juice in my home first? Gracious acceptance magnifies those around as they walk beside him pure and elated. "thou leadeth me" they sing in their soul. But 'tis all for naught if the giant cannot fit into a VW Bug. We walked up to the car. The small curved form of my Bug looked at me with questioning headlights. Mr. Maximus stood tall, like a Martello tower over the Irish coast on watch for submarines, waiting for me to unlock the door. Too late now to decline the ride as graciously as he had accepted it. I pushed and shoved and squished him till he was in. Sweat on my brow, flushed with embarrassment, it felt hot in the car. But unsuspecting, without grief in my heart, I took him to my home where for several hours his words filled my living room. He did not tell me though, but others did later, that his beloved wife had died in an accident, in a VW Bug. Never again did I have a chance to sip with M. Maximus the juice from cranberries—skimmed off from flooded salt bogs—as they are bobbing up and down, little red balls on the water, and pressed into "Ocean Spray" or "Sweet Life," as sweet and sour as life. But as I look in the night at the copse of bushes where the old house once stood and out of the intertwining branches I see his face take shape, I know why he does not bless me with a wink. Yet there is the comfort that the sun will light up the snow again, and with the hues and warmth of early morning offer me a thin film of potion, reddish-pink and crystalline. Were I to stick out my tongue and lick it.

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