

**ROBERT MINHINNICK**

*The Castaway*

Sleepless

I keep sleep in my pocket,  
insomnia a sea-urchin language  
and the nights strung together dried like chilies,  
the red, the black, the ceaseless, the unbearable,  
the darkness of chile wombs rattling with stars.

But every night  
a whale in the bay  
spits at the moon.  
Though it does not exist  
how quickly I put my serenade together  
for our low-tide rendezvous.

Look at me, I say to the no one there.  
One day these bones will be silver in the sea-holly.  
But today I darken, I darken,  
my skin a caste-marked congregation in a chancel of salt.

The town astronomers  
are camped upon the dune  
measuring Mars as it rides over Somerset.  
Maybe I should throw my spear at them  
or serve rainwater in an oystershell.

Such a current.  
I call it El Generalissimo -  
for only the current can say  
where the disappeared people have gone.

I fear lightning, jellyfish, the uncomprehending mind, call centres, ticks, the data protection act, search parties, autopsy, sandfleas, journalism, tourists, tiger sharks, whirlpools, translation, the storm ten miles offshore whose ziggurat is built from one billion tons of rain, rain bricks, imperial staterooms of rain with rain's imperial family waving from their balcony overhead.

Was it for this I bartered  
my breath? But at dawn a footprint,  
and in twilight a crab army  
circumnavigates the camp.

Meanwhile, I'm refining  
my religion.

To hell  
with the sutras of sand:  
every day that gospel changes.  
My latest god is the driftwood god and I am driftwood's dizziest disciple.

See his altars with their pilot-lights ablaze upon the tide.

My mermaid I made of marram  
the storm stole, she lifted, green  
grass angel over the point,  
not an outline left of her  
or a trace of the garden I trod her in the chalk,  
and after weeks waiting not a word to her  
guardian of the one who ascended  
without sin or sign, my  
wife from the midden,  
my wife in mid  
air.

One thing I know.  
The cormorant is always  
black. But not blacker  
than the blacknesses the ocean will become:  
and even the cormorant's eye will be black that an hour ago  
was the Peruvian gold of Mars as it scorched the sky.

Destiny, they say,  
is all: our pre-natal  
navigation. So the poet sets out  
over the shelves of Spezia  
and there's my mother madcap on the shore  
sewing his shipwreck into a shroud.

Every day  
the sea smells stronger on my skin.  
At last I am utterly clean,  
anointed with crow feathers, battery  
acid, the fair's cinnamon doughnuts,  
sulphur in the dune-rift and fire  
from the fumeroles on the seabed.  
How my blood rings against salt's armour.

So,  
which sea tonight?  
The waif?  
The wolf?  
Yes.

Traeth yr Afon low tide:  
the beach a looted exchequer;  
barbarians streaming away.  
I start again.

Now the current is dark and all its candles  
pinched, its voices vanished like so many

voices that failed at midnight, and the sea's library  
in darkness, in its greatest darkness, every book of it  
and every page fused to blackness, every word and signature  
translated into the language of the dark.

Patience he played  
and patience he showed.  
I'll show him patience, that no one there.  
Here's the wayfarer tree upon the shore -  
as if my father had left his diamonds and spades  
all over the beach.

August  
I'm spending under a hunter's moon.  
Tides come in like brickdust,  
and all the sprockled moths mad in the wall rocket.  
Sometimes I lie on the seabed  
to look at the sun.  
And sometimes I think drowning's  
a white door  
behind a white  
door where a fire  
burns on a dark  
isthmus.

First  
there is an island  
then  
there is no island  
then  
there is.  
Or:  
a sleeper in the ocean  
who rises and  
shakes himself  
out of his limestone trance  
every eleven hours.

In my own dream  
I was a glass  
statue on the sand with the sea  
suspicious behind the mist.  
And in my glass belly  
beat the last  
Adonis of the dunes,  
the last thought I would ever have,  
the last creature I could dare to be.  
I stood,  
a statue on a shell-dust plinth,  
the invisible ocean's foam

to my femurs, and the butterfly  
tormented in the glass web  
of my veins.

They told me not to swim  
at night, but the cormorant is a great cartographer  
and I follow the compass in his heart.

Yet who knows these roads like me?  
I put out my hand and the darkness pulls me in  
and I join the army of the invisibles  
whose breath is black, whose blood is black  
and whose wine is the colour of the waters under the waters.

They are waiting for me  
in the amnesiac room:  
they are waiting for me to open my black mouth  
and tell them all I have learned of the collision of midnights,  
of the sea's unseen catastrophes.

My sentry  
is the mullein in its greatcoat.  
And strange - the sea going out and going  
out and going beyond me somehow,  
so in place of the garden where I floated  
- nose and ears stoppered by the waves' pollen -  
lie the bureaucracies of mud  
and a conger family  
fledged like school railings.

Television people come to ask  
what I eat. Only oysters  
oiled with samphire, I say:  
or fennel's green shuttlecocks;  
maybe kedgeree of seabass seared on a basket of kale.  
(More truthfully scroungings from the wheelie at the Seagull Room).  
Now I'm planning my own series after the soaps.

But the current insists.  
Over the shoulder of the world it comes.  
And I who was sealed  
am a honeycomb.

A long way out.

Oh never so far.  
Over my head the butterfly is moving  
away from the citadel and its arcades.  
Not that way, I want to shout,  
that way is twenty miles without an orchid mouth.  
But there it goes, as if it knew what I do not -  
black through my squint  
and trembling

like a sunspot.

Yes, I bartered my breath  
for this. Here the sea's anaerobic  
clerks tend their screens, every  
molecule awarded its place,  
never ending their trials at the terminals.

And the sea drinks with me bringing cup after cup.  
What a night we have together rolling in one another's arms.  
But drowning's the second  
impermissible dream. Each wave is a flume  
and a fugue, high pressure August swell lifting me light  
as the whipweed till each wave is a fog of dirty gold  
where the swimmers are smiling with their cuttle teeth  
and then each wave is a child at my ankle and then a mother to my mouth.  
For her salt milk will make me strong as starfish,  
as dead men's ropes, and I'm a belly bursting like a hot Dominican plum.  
Here's the wine I wanted most and never was allowed.