

## THE STRANGE VOYAGE OF YOU AND ME

*for K.R. and G.B. who went whaling*

...then we were towed out in our two-pronged yachts  
till we had passed the harbour bar.  
Sounding from quays packed tight with dark-toned cars,  
the starting shot.  
They thought we disappeared, but we did not.  
We were striving to be the best that we could be.  
That is a retrospective lie, probably.

Waves swell as bladders. Water, like cold skin,  
pimples. A night and day pass fast.  
Their craft beyond, the gulls perch on, my mast.  
Taut hawsers sing.  
The bulkheads creak, the wood's tense and stretching.  
The warning hiss of the foam on the hard-tacked hull:  
gravity; momentum; friction; push and pull.

Another night. Look South. Horizon's bare  
except for unfed clouds in rows;  
hovering seagulls in a hand-made pose;  
the white-edged tear  
that moves and sheds its shreds in upper air.  
Alone. Yet still the wireless clears its thickened throat.  
The salt bleeds from the sea and scales my wax-dry coat.

A day. A night. A day. Another night.  
Bottles, cans, seaweed with the dawn,  
planks, a two-winged towel, bare husks of corn,  
signs in scuffed white,  
process the hazy lanes of waking sight.  
I pick my glasses up to scan for hills and trees;  
put them down. Sight imprisons who believes he's free.

I sleep. I roll in dreams. Am I awake ?  
I sit up, wipe my eyes and drink.  
Impossible to forge habitual links.  
The moves you make  
are gone. Transparent things become opaque.  
Lightning forks, then sheets fired linen. Sounds arrive late.  
The sky bucks madly. For a while the heart's ship-shape.

It must accept all lies that brought it here,  
piggybacking the younger mind:  
a naive brother, stumbling in, defined  
by wrath and fear.  
The heart has organised its house. It's clear  
that it must exorcise the ghosts of things it's done.  
The mind is still a child. It breaks loose, laughs and runs.

Some nights a woman stands up on the foam.  
She slips and slinks, so smooths on board.  
Her eyes are licked by flame. Her ribs are swords.  
She mews and moans.  
She bunks. Her pleasure's taken loud, alone.  
Her limbs slick and streamlined. She dolphins through the sea.  
Her feet are webbed. Her fingers flat. She touches me.

Others. A crowd appears dressed to the nines  
with manicured nails and whet-stoned drinks.  
They love what I have done and what I think.  
Some prize is mine.  
I'm lauded now, remembered for all time.  
They drift across the ocean waving grey goodbyes  
and visit other solitaries with the same bald lies.

And God appears, of course. He says not much,  
just sits there, silent, throwing glares  
not displacing water, my sight or air.  
Not to be touched.  
A disappointing cliché as all such  
attempts to step outside what is, resolve into.  
I know I am dreaming. I know what's real, what's true.

Yet one more night. I sit. I rule the chart  
with lines that always tend to straight  
but angles kink, they trip, their curves oblate.  
They have no parts.  
Each is one thing: one simple hard-pressed mark.  
I sail along the sharp-ruled edge. The tidal lands  
are far away in life. As marks they're by my hand.

Another dawn. Sea fogs banked like ice-waves.  
The sun behind: blood-vessel red.  
The gulls flop on the air. It is their bed.  
The course a nave  
of a great church. The mind, of course, is brave.  
My heart returns again to what it can't forgive:  
the lies that it had told to carry on with life.

Another day. A night. Completely still  
the sea bush-whacked and proned by oil,  
beneath a sun that seems about to boil:  
no wave nor rill.  
And in my heart and head, zero of will.  
The air's too thin to prise apart the sea and sky.  
They collapse in ruin, shudder, whisper their lies.



I find when I venture. I climb the stairs  
and see the sea's a polished floor.  
The horizon up ahead builds a barred door.  
All things are grey. The blues and greens aren't there.  
The palette's bare.  
The light seems like a habit that the air can't break.  
The air hangs like a breath my lungs will never take.

And in the sluggish current, new affairs -  
a splintered mast, a slip of sail,  
unopened good luck cards, a plastic pail,  
compasses, earphones, tee shirts with Dan Dare,  
a teddy bear -  
stretching off along the stream like a New Year queue.  
I consider their passing. Are they or aren't they true ?

And for ten days ( or maybe it's six weeks -  
why count time since it disappears ? )  
I cut round signs which open, narrow, clear,  
wiping the trace for who would, after, seek  
my rant and reek,  
so that my time ( what's that ? ), my place, my every act  
could never be written as historical fact.

The chart is now a gloss around a chart:  
footnotes by original text,  
which tell you where it's from and what comes next  
and how the world is made from sums of parts.  
Mind riding heart.  
Where I am, who I pretend to be. In-between  
ghosts of intention, conventional sky and sea.

I can see no one there, crouched beneath the mast.  
I talk. He listens, pauses, speaks.  
His words phase into sizzles, gusts and creaks.  
His voice is low and spiked and rich and fast.  
He speaks his last  
word, then turns and faces the sea before he flies  
up and up. He joins the half-round sun as it dies

leaving behind two eyes I can't forget  
which glare at me accusingly  
reminding me of bad faith and soft lies,  
parts I went up for and didn't get,  
things I regret.  
His eyes look blank. His face is bronzed. He is not me.  
He is me. He looks down. He is paste. He can't see.

Then I'm not there. The yacht's unmanned. It tacks  
and turns and trembles in the wind,  
the currents of the sea. The scent of land.  
It makes the sign of grief, describes a lack.  
It doubles back  
as though the missing helmsman has shocked it alive,  
free from bad faith, regrets or the need to forgive.

Then I am there. The hull moves with echoes.  
Salt water sluices in the floats.  
The wood seams cannot float. I cut and shoot  
mastic in the gaps. The hull fattens, slows.  
I start to row.  
Weed ties reef knots on the blades and hog-ties the prow.  
A seagull on the cross-beam, beams and squawks ' Land Ho ! '

I do not shoot in. That would be too clear.  
Men like me live among such scraps.  
We nibble at them. At night they come back.  
They savour of a badger's marking spoor.  
Our minds are bare  
of all but what's been forced in there by better men  
with plans and strategies, with more craftsmanlike brains.

Between land and me are acres of weed  
where I might walk two miles, then stand.  
Ecologies of colour – brown and green,  
yellow, orange. Gas bloats like a fruit.  
Each frond a leaf  
and trapped inside the interstices, old lost stuff:  
ovens, armchairs, cars and homes. Tools laced with red rust.

Such tatters, tawdry tatters of a time  
city-bonded, carpeted in soukhs;  
the libraries of gesture, how-to books;  
of music giving voice, behaviour, tone;  
of gold-leaf frames.  
I nose through viscous fluid but I feel no force  
vibrating in the hull, itemising our course.

I step on land. Stumble. Head empties out.  
One foot. The same foot. Habit gone.  
I move backwards over ground I have gained.  
I still the profiles of hill, fence and gate,  
of window frames.  
The farmhouse shimmers skittish in the woozy yard.  
The drunken hens peck sand, more circus clowns than birds.

He speaks. I see his face is upside down;  
his mouth above his deep set eyes.  
His limbs are legion and jerk fast, in ways  
suggesting he is of some other time,  
some other place.  
His words are jagged shapes that fall down to the ground.  
I look. I study. There is no meaning, only sound.

I flee across the bucking land and weed.  
I turn. He stands. Both straight and small.  
He is steady. Behind him the high hills  
are dancing. The yacht is unclasped from speed.  
I have to wade  
to push it from the sharp notch in which it is cleft  
and set off to the sun. Feeling free, made, bereft.

I move around the maze. I do my sums,  
repeat the spells in my cold mind,  
repeat them when the sea stays ruler-lined  
returning me to places I had come,  
where I had found  
a place to engineer idolatrous, cruel vows  
which come back to haunt me, this nowhere, this no now.

There are no side alleys. Only packed fog  
damned up by the rear cul de sac.  
There is only one option. No way back.  
No rewriting. No edit. No dry dock.  
All sand. No rock.  
You cannot visit your past, wrong indecision,  
or work on second thoughts and new editions

and I do not need them. For I am great.  
I am good. Beyond your purest dreams.  
I was, but am no longer, what I seem.  
I am twinned with experience and fate,  
above all hate  
and love. Beyond direction and repetition.  
This moment is all moments. Beyond creation.

And I am nothing. Not even made of night.  
Quintessence of pre big-bang black.  
What creation, as it is, always lacks.  
The opposite of midsea's arc of light.  
Death's thought of sight.  
And I am less than that, lost on a sign-strewn chart.  
And less than even that. A mind without a heart.

We tried to be the best that we could be  
but all of us are lost or dead.  
It was a lie we worked out in our heads  
and clung to with complete hypocrisy.  
We would not see  
but more, we would not take these sights into our hearts.  
The facts were subtle. We were wrong right from the start.

The yacht's becalmed. The anchor is not sensed  
while I move to everywhere.  
I am uniquely present and not here.  
You cannot catch me on a dial, in tense,  
down a strong lens.  
The weather's stopped. The sea flat. The wind's out of breath.  
I sit here on the cabin roof knowing there is no death.