

Vernon Watkins (1906-67)

6 *Ballad of the Rough Sea*

I like the smell of the wind, the sniff,
Said a man on the top of Dover cliff.
I like the voice of the sea, the sound,
Said the fossil-man asleep in the ground.
And I want to look over the sea, 5
Said the man on the cliff-top free.
I want to look over the sea,
I will look over the sea.

The sun fell slant on the cliff's white face
And the waters ran under the sails in a race 10
But the fossil-man in his bed of chalk
Turned in his grave and began to talk:
O what's the good of a man in a rock
Who will not wake when the seawaves knock?
I want to stand up in the rock, 15
I will stand up in the rock.

O the seagulls are crying, the seagulls scream
That the sea is cruel and blue and green
But to-day the waters are white with spray
And hark in the boats what the fishermen say: 20
'It's a rough grey day with the tide coming in
And a haul of herring's a slippery skin
For the waters are deep and the nets are thin.
It's a rough grey day with the tide coming in.'

The fishers were fishing in little boats 25
From Cap Grisnez to John o' Groats
When the man in the rock and the man on the cliff
Met, like a shadow sheer and stiff.

They were shooting their hooks from the side
And the wind coming in with the tide. 30
They were leaning and looking over the side.
They were shooting their hooks from the side.

There's a phantom above the seawaves' roar
Screams, and a man has come through the door
Of the chalkwhite cliff, and star and sea 35
Are locked in the fear of a fisherman's knee,
But louder and louder the white waves hiss —
They will never come out of this.
Till the stars fall and the stone mouths kiss
They will never come out of this. 40

Come up from the sea, you sandy shoals
That lurk where Leviathan swims and rolls!
Like the pointed limpets stung by foam
Bared by the black wave leaping home
Come up from the sea, you crags, 45
Where the soaked straw-pillow sags,
Come up for the wreck's black-timbered rags,
Come up from the sea, you crags.

'O wandering water white and free
As the runaway stag that hides in the tree, 50
As the runaway stag that flies from the horn,
Fly to the low roof where we were born
And pull the door from the hinge and throw
The seven wild windows all in a row
And the tables and chairs in the room below 55
Through the white sea-jaws throw!

There are loaves of bread in the wooden chest
And safe on the hooks the white cups rest
And high on the shelf are sugar and tea
But cold is the darkness under the sea. 60
There's a floor unsafe beneath

And the sea has a wolf's white teeth.
O sweet would it be to beg and breathe.
There's a floor unsafe beneath.

O gallows-man on the cliff-top free, 65
Why do you fix your eyes on the sea?
O man in the rock erect and stiff,
Why are you pale as the dead white cliff?
O is it your thought and is it your wish
To help us to catch a creel of fish? 70
The waters to-night are devilish.
O tell us your thought and your wish.'

I have left in a room my rope and pin.
I will open your eyes when the sea rolls in.
I have left in a cave my bony skull. 75
I am waiting to hear the cry of a gull
For a seagull is crying aloud
That the sea is white as a shroud,
That, whiter than whitest moon or cloud,
The sea is white as a shroud. 80

'Go back to your rock, go back to your room.
We are men of heart, not men of the tomb.
Not the sea's twist nor the wind's alarms
Shall pull us down from the New Moon's arms,
And our ships are good black teak. 85
Go back, for we must not speak.
Go back to the crevice, back to the creek.
Go back, for we must not speak.'

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