

Vernon Watkins (1906-67)

10    *The Ballad of the Mermaid of Zennor*

Where grey Land's End repels the sky  
The granite boulders stand  
Reared in a column.    There they lie  
Laid by a giant's hand,  
And there the ascending seabirds fly                    5  
Beyond the last of land.

The shallow hills reflect that grey,  
The walled-in fields are bleak.  
The road from Zennor winds its way  
West, in a barren streak,                                    10  
Shunning the softer forms of day,  
Forgetting what men speak.

Who stands upon that farthest ledge  
And sees the Atlantic break,  
Back through the fields with stones for hedge            15  
His Eastward way will take  
To Zennor's valley and its pledge,  
A legend cut in teak.

The tale in teak has worn away  
These last five hundred years                                20  
But still the church of granite grey  
Its haunting music hears  
While fields are singing or obey  
The silence winter wears.

The black teak near the chancel stands                    25  
And shines there like a shell.  
The boy above her dripping hands

Had sung too well, too well.  
The mermaid dragged him to her sands  
And bound him with her spell. 30

HE: 'Why break, why break, unending waves?  
O take me, lead me home!  
The stones I long for are your naves  
Where Cornish folk would come,  
But here black wood, in secret caves 35  
The darkness of the foam!'

SHE: 'Come down, come down from that high chair,  
That hook with hassock hung;  
Climb from the sailors' swinging stair,  
Leap from the bottom rung. 40  
Now throw your life into my care  
And be forever young.

For you and I as one must be,  
A mermaid and a boy,  
Joined in the always moving sea 45  
Where dolphins leap for joy.  
Forget the stones, the starry tree;  
The thought of graves put by.

This music hovered round your soul  
Before you first drew breath, 50  
And those its caul has covered whole  
Shall never come to death,  
Long though the murderous seawaves roll  
With many and many a wreath.'

A thousand tides, a thousand tides, 55  
And bridals on the hill.  
The sunken ships with broken sides  
Lean over and are still.  
A granite church the seaweed hides;

Its aisles the fishes fill. 60

HE: 'Why break, why break, unending waves?  
O take me, take me home!  
Down to your stones, along your naves  
The worshippers have come.  
But mine the night, the secret caves, 65  
The darkness of the foam!'

SHE: 'Bend down, bend down, and hear my wood:  
None was more sweetly strung.  
The tenor boy who fell was good.  
I heard his golden tongue. 70  
He raised my spirit from the flood  
And on his voice I hung.

His music pierced my heart, and then  
I called him from the sea.  
He left the church, he left the men, 75  
He stood upon the quay.  
The long rope ladder held him then,  
And then the rope went free.'

But was it he who heard her sing  
Or did she first hear him? 80  
Black as bright teak the cormorants fling  
Up from the waves they skim  
The silver fish, and mussels cling  
And close above the hymn.

The mermaid knows what no man knows, 85  
The secrets of a shell,  
The pearl on fire, the breaking rose,  
The murmuring, foundered bell  
Whose sound through singing chambers goes  
Crossed by the tingling swell. 90

And every adolescent knows  
How searching is that song  
And how mysteriously it flows  
Plucked from a death so young  
When unborn years with passion close 95  
The casket of the strong.

SHE: 'However long the waters roll  
Longer my love shall be,  
Nor shall you leave my burning soul  
Torn by the moving sea, 100  
Though all the bells of Zennor toll  
And say you died for me.'

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