

Vernon Watkins (1906-67)

3 *Ballad of Hunt's Bay*

It was a grey and ghoulish day;
The rocks were hidden or taken to pray,
But the 'Maid of Ireland' kept her way.

The Sabbath! A tree-log lying at rest;
A flying priest under each white crest; 5
A searcher under the raven's nest.

The waters ran white in their shivering bands
Baring their teeth, tore streams to strands.
Oystercatchers screamed on the sands.

The wrack was crowded with bundles of straw, 10
Jettisoned palliasse, planks, and raw
Ropes entangled with wing and claw.

Galloping grains; motionless flint;
A black stick holds my eyes intent,
In a moment spanning the ocean footprint. 15

'Who are you, Sir? What finds you here?'
— 'I am Sir Vulture, to bring you cheer.
I sing this song to the hermit's ear.'

A flash in the shell and he was gone:
Sea-horse and rider of horse were one, 20
But the 'Maid of Ireland' still kept on.

Sucked by bells, the shingle ground
Out of the ebb a deathlike sound
Of nail-torn sea-wood, bones of the drowned.

Seagulls rose, and their shadows cried: 25
'He that spoke and was at your side
Lied not. Wait for another tide.'

Day is shrunk to a bubbling seed.
Double your back to the smell of the weed.
Black in the pools the wet planks bleed. 30

Time reflowers in an earlier mould.
Stones and pebbles are smoothed and rolled.
Seabirds are scouring the beach for gold.

Scrabbled bark, and a bone picked clean;
Two sharp rocks, and a log between. 35
Under the surface, hands unseen.

Fingers picking the holes of the coast,
Riddling water, their needle is lost;
They quiver about us, ah haunting host!

Many timbers, many and one. 40
A host of fears in the rising sun.
Near me the circling waters run.

Under the stupefying wave
A limpet grips their slippery grave.
Flat ghosts in sackcloth crawl through the cave. 45

Hands closed on the task they did.
Skill is asleep in the light of the lid,
And the fast green waves have something hid.

Floating there, where rings of the pool
Unwind forever their wonder's spool, 50
Are wooden parts of the sunken tool.

Under the drifting wood they walk.
A stanchion rusting, thrusting a stalk.
Screws scraping sand grind dead men's talk.

Bewildered spray and a broken vow. 55
Silk of the pool, is it then or now?
The moon is milking the old sea-cow.

What foundered ironwork? Smart and cold
Is the tar on the stinging wood I hold,
Stained with a word no stars foretold. 60

A hiss, a flash, and a weed blown back.
How can a voice come out of a sack,
Or breath from pieces of wood gone black?

Voices, inch-shallow, I mark and miss.
The cormorant flies from them. Cold shells hiss. 65
Land shudders back from the dead's white kiss.

He crosses the water a second late,
Flees with his shadow, low and straight,
And the shadow touches his wings like fate.

'O cross the water, far and wide,' 70
Cries the floating wood and the breath inside,
'Fly to my mother —
my lost —
my bride.'

'O cross the water to cupboard and hod, 75
To loaf and cup,' sings the breath of the god
Through the broken stick, my divining-rod.

And blind with fury the sea runs in,
Nailing their hands to a rustgold tin,
Guilty, and white with the breath of men. 80

'Maid of Ireland,' unseen Maid,
Why is the pulse in my hand afraid
To touch the sea-wood, soaked with dread?

Stunned, the oystercatchers escape
White from the rock, like birds in sleep. 85
There is no secret the rocks can keep.

What shipyard town where the sea-log lies
Sees the morning founder in their eyes?
Is there a book to keep their sighs?

Sighs of sailors, lusty, strong, 90
Tossed to the boomerang beat of a gong,
Lost in the fall of the curlew's song.

True is the teak and the pitchpine, true
The wood of the hatch, and every screw.
The sea spits white the curse of the crew. 95

And long, long after, caught in a cleft,
A slumbering mammoth of wood is left,
Eyeless, limbless, dumb and deaf.

Spirit laid in the long dumb wood,
Floundering, sleeping, left by the flood, 100
Freed by the wave, by the ninth wave's hood,

Ride till you come where men are cast
To a music binding Future and Past
Heard by Ulysses, lashed to the mast.

'Who are you, Sir? What brings you here, 105
Looming out of the path they steer?'
— 'Cover your eyes. Their hour is near.'

I hold in my hands the broken stick,
And the voice in the fork cries out, 'Be quick!'
— 'Be slow. I, too, have a bone to pick.' 110

Who in the mist at my elbow stands?
O blenched waters, crystal sands.
— 'I launch them out of your waking hands.

I am the bone the salt winds bleach.
Me the widows of hope beseech. 115
I am the rope that did not reach.'

Who is it flies
Blinding my eyes,
In a moment spanning the ocean footprint?

Stick, stick, 120
Broken stick,
Why do you breathe? Why do you glint?

'I see a chain of white hands thrown,
But the voice in your fingers is your own.
Leave me. Let me lie on a stone.' 125

And I fling the broken stick away
With the world and the ocean under its sway;
And silence pulls the thunders away.

1954

(From *The Death Bell: poems and ballads*. London: Faber
and Faber, 1954)