

George Mackay Brown (1921-96)

1 *The Ballad of Betty Mouat*

Old kind Betty Mouat
Setting out to Lerwick, to the shop there
With knitted shawls, stockings, bonnets.

Patient Betty with the crippled foot
In the *Columbine's* cabin, 5
Wind and seamen shouting above.

Wondering Betty,
In the creaking boat, in the up-and down sea
Under a broken mast.

Benighted Betty, in a sea cell, 10
With a biscuit to chew,
With a text or two for comfort.

Betty, a ghost holds the wheel now.
The skipper,
He is one with starfish and spindrift. 15
Women wail from sea-banks far back.

Brave Betty Mouat, she remembers
Other voyages, God-charted,
Noah with the raven and the dove,
Jonah in the whale's belly. 20

Ships search in wide circles, they batter
Ramsheads into the tempest.
Nothing - a gray waste, with cold fringes.

Betty wets her mouth with milk.
She thinks of New Jerusalem, no more sea. 25
'I aye liked tidemark and rockpools.'
Betty dreams. Ocean is a cloth

Sewn with whale, herring, lobster, jellyfish, sailor, whitemaa,
limpet, star
Hung on a wall in New Jerusalem,
Just like the tapestry 30
On Mr Bruce's hall in Sumburgh,
An undulant splendour, mothless immortal fabric.

Beautiful scripted old woman, Betty Mouat,
Not a ghost kept the helm,
An angel herded *Columbine* through those wolf packs of ocean. 35
Norwegian fjord-folk
Find you, fold and fire and feed you, you with the basket
Clover-sweet still.

1999

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