## 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

The casket of the strong.

95

SHE: 'However long the waters roll

Longer my love shall be,

Nor shall you leave my burning soul

Torn by the moving sea,

Though all the bells of Zennor toll

And say you died for me.'

1962

(From Affinities. London: Faber and Faber, 1962)