

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.'

1954

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