

## George Mackay Brown *Loaves and Fishes*

### *Part I: The Drowning Wave*

#### **The Old Women**

Go sad or sweet or riotous with beer  
Past the old women gossiping by the hour,  
They'll fix on you from every close and pier  
An acid look to make your veins run sour.

'No help', they say, 'his grandfather that's dead  
Was troubled with the same dry-throated curse,  
And many a night he made the ditch his bed.  
This blood comes welling from the same cracked source.'

On every kind of merriment they frown.  
But I have known a gray-eyed sober boy  
Sail to the lobsters in a storm and drown.  
Over his body dripping on the stones  
Those same old hags would weave into their moans  
An undersong of terrible holy joy.

### *Part II: Crofts Along the Shore*

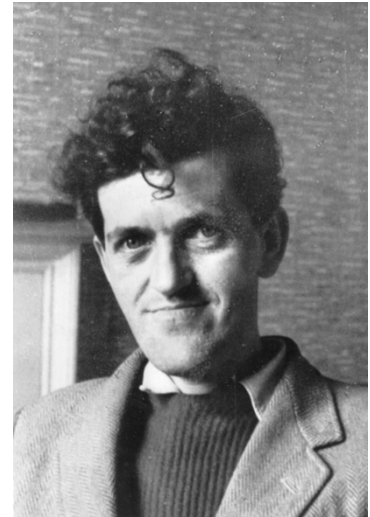
#### **Hamnavoe**

My father passed with his penny letters  
Through closes opening and shutting like legends  
    When barbarous with gulls  
    Hamnavoe's morning broke

On the salt and tar steps. Herring boats,  
Puffing red sails, the tillers  
    Of cold horizons, leaned  
    Down the gull-gaunt tide

And threw dark nets on sudden silver harvests.  
A stallion at the sweet fountain  
    Dredged water, and touched  
    Fire from steel-kissed cobbles.

Hard on noon four bearded merchants  
Past the pipe-spitting pier-head strolled,  
    Holy with greed, chanting  
    Their slow grave jargon.



A tinker keen like a tartan gull  
At cuithe-hung doors. A crofter lass  
    Trudged through the lavish dung  
    In a dream of corn-stalks and milk.

In the Arctic Whaler three blue elbows fell,  
Regular as waves, from beards spummy with porter,  
    Till the amber day ebbed out  
    To its black dregs.

The boats drove furrows homeward, like ploughmen  
In blizzards of gulls. Gaelic fisher-girls  
    Flashed knife and dirge  
    Over drifts of herring.

And boys with penny wands lured gleams  
From tangled veins of the flood. Houses went blind  
Up one steep close, for a  
Grief by the shrouded nets.

The kirk, in a gale of psalms, went heaving through  
A tumult of roofs, freighted for heaven. And lovers  
    Unblessed by steeples lay under  
    The buttered bannock of the moon.

He quenched his lantern, leaving the last door.  
Because of his gay poverty that kept  
    My seapink innocence  
    From the worm and black wind;

And because, under equality's sun,  
All things wear now to a common soiling,  
    In the fire of images  
    Gladly I put my hand  
    To save that day for him.

### *Part III: The Redeeming Wave*

#### **Elegy**

The Magnustide long swords of rain  
    Quicken the dust. The ploughman turns  
    Furrow by holy furrow  
    The liturgy of April.  
    What rock of sorrow  
    Checks the seed's throb and flow  
Now the lark's skein is thrown  
    About the burning sacrificial hill?

Cold exiles from that ravished tree  
    (Fables and animals guard it now)  
    Whose reconciling leaves  
    Fold stone, cornstalk and lark,  
    Our first blood grieves  
    That never again her lips  
Flowering with song we'll see,  
    Who, winged and bright, speeds down into the dark.

Now let those risers from the dead,  
    Cornstalks, golden conspirators,  
    Cry on the careless wind  
    Ripeness and resurrection;  
    How the calm wound  
    Of the girl entering earth's side  
Gives back immortal bread  
    For this year's dust and rain that shall be man.