

George Mackay Brown – The Year of the Whale

Horseman and Seals, Birsay

On the green holm they built their church.
There were three arches.
They walked to the village across the ebb.
From this house they got milk.
A farmer cut and carted their peats.
Against their rock
Fishermen left a basket of mouthing silver.
They brought the gifts of heaven
To the new children and the suffering shapes.
They returned to the island
And mixed their bell with the seven sounds of the sea.
Eight times a day
They murmured their psalms in that steep pasture.

A horseman stood at the shore, his feet in seaweed.
He could not cross over.
The sea lay round the isle, a bright girdle.
His voice scattered in the vastness
Though from shore to shore pierced cries of gull and petrel.
What did the horseman want?
Perhaps an old man in the parish was sick,
Or he wanted a blessing on his ship,
Or he wished to argue a point in theology.
From shore to shore they blessed him.
They trooped under the arch for nones.
After the psalms the horseman was still there,
Patient in the seaweed.

The sea shone higher round the skerry.
And the abbot said, 'Cormac, you are the carpenter
A blessed occupation.

And tomorrow you will beg some boards and nails
And you will build a little boat,
So that we do not need to keep horsemen waiting on the other shore
Who are in need of God' . . .
And while the boat was building under the crag
Paul gathered whelks.
From the cold triangular pools he gathered handfuls
And put them in his basket.
He sang *Dominus Pascit Me*, gathering whelks in the ebb.
Twenty seals lay on the skerry.
They turned their faces towards the psalm.
The brother sang for them also,
For the seals with their beautiful gentle old men's faces.
Then the ebb subtracted one sound
From the seven-fold harmony of ocean.
The tide lay slack, between ebb and flowing, a slipped girdle.
Paul gathered whelks and sang
Till the flood set in from the west, with a sound like harps,
And one by one the seals entered the new water.

The Abbot

Here at Innertun we have seven brothers.
Havard was a shepherd
In Hoy, that huddle of blue shoulders.
In the tavern there
He broke the back of a loud fisherman.
He has given his fifty sheep to the widow,
To the three orphans his green hill.
At Innertun now, he weaves our coats.

At Rinansay, Einar was a butterfly
Over a tangled harp.
The girls miss him in that low island.
Now when candles are lit
For matins, in the warp of winter,
He drifts, our gray moth
Among the woven monotonies of God.

Sigurd sailed to Iceland, a boy,
And lost an arm there.
He was with Leif on the Greenland voyage.
He bought a Galway horse, sire of thirty
And sailed home from Norway
With tusks of walrus, proper embellishment
For hilt and helmet and ale-cup.
'Too old now', said Sigurd
'For any port but the blue of heaven,
I teach the brothers shipwit'.

We have a field at Innertun
That was full of stones last April.
Plenty of lobsters, goat milk
At our fasting tables.
Then Erling rode from Birsay, love-torn.
He laid a plough on our acre.
He gives us bannocks and new ale.

You would not wish to have seen
The *Gothenberg* at the crag
Like a hare in the cold jaw of a wolf.
You would not wish to have seen
Gulls over blind shapes on the sand.
From the timbers we made a new door
And the Swedish boy
Has Latin enough to answer the priest now.

Rolf whistled down the wild hawk.
He brought twelve rampant foals
From the hill Greenay,
Gale shapes, to the horse fair at Hamnavoe.
He put a ring in the bull's nose,
And said in a circle of drunk whalers
'There is a time to finish with beasts
And to strive with angels'.
His knee was at our line of knees next morning.

This day is a day of sheaves at Innertun
And five crisp circles.
A yellow wind walks on the hill.
The small boats in the Sound
Pluck this brightness and that from the nets.
Our cow watched a black field in March,
And deepening greens, all summer.
Today she cries over a sudden radiance,
The clean death of corn.
Christ, crofter, lay kindly on this white beard
Thy sickle, flail, millstone, fires . . .
They shout across the broken gold.
The boy has found a lark's nest in the oats.

Old Fisherman with Guitar

A formal exercise for withered fingers.
The head is bent,
The eyes half closed, the tune
Lingers
And beats, a gentle wing the west had thrown
Against his breakwater wall with salt savage lament.

So fierce and sweet the song on the plucked string,
Know now for truth
Those hands have cut from the net
The strong
Crab-eaten corpse of Jock washed from a boat
One old winter, and gathered the mouth of Thora to his mouth.

Trout Fisher

Semphill, his hat struck full of hooks
Sits drinking ale
Among the English fishing visitors,
Probes in detail
Their faults in casting, reeling, selection of flies.
'Never', he urges, 'do what it says in the books'.
Then they, obscurely wise,
Abandon by the loch their dripping oars
And hang their throttled tarnish on the scale.

'Forgive me, every speckled trout',
Says Semphill then,
'And every swan and eider on these waters.
Certain strange men
Taking advantage of my poverty
Have wheedled all my subtle loch-craft out
So that their butchery
Seem fine technique in the ear of wives and daughters.
And I betray the loch for a white coin'.

Hamnavoe Market

They drove to the Market with ringing pockets.

Folster found a girl
Who put wounds on his face and throat,
Small and diagonal, like red doves.
Johnston stood beside the barrel.
All day he stood there.
He woke in a ditch, his mouth full of ashes.

Grieve bought a balloon and a goldfish.
He swung through the air.
He fired shotguns, rolled pennies, ate sweet fog from a stick.

Heddle was at the Market also.
I know nothing of his activities.
He is and always was a quiet man.

Garson fought three rounds with a negro boxer,
And received thirty shillings,
Much applause, and an eye loaded with thunder.

Where did they find Flett?
They found him in a brazen circle,
All flame and blood, a new Salvationist.

A gypsy saw in the hand of Halcro
Great strolling hers, harvests, a proud woman.
He wintered in the poorhouse.

They drove home from the Market under the stars
Except for Johnston
Who lay in a ditch, his mouth full of dying fires.

Weather Bestiary

RAIN

The unicorn melts through his prism. Sodden hooves
Have deluged the corn with light.

WIND

A fisherman wets his finger. The eyelash
Of the gray stallion flicks his blood with cold.

SUN

A hard summer. The month I sat at the rock
One fish rose, belly up, a dead gleam.

THUNDER

Corn, lobster, fleece hotly harvested – now
That whale stranded on the blue rock!

FROST

Stiff windless flower, hearse-blossom,
Show us the brightness of blood, stars, apples.

FOG

The sun-dipped isle was suddenly a sheep
Lost and stupid, a dense wet tremulous fleece.

SNOW

Autumn, a moulted parrot, eyes with terror
This weird white cat. It drifts the rose-bush under.

Fisherman and Boy (extract)

A NEW FISHING BOAT

Thorfinn, this new boat 'Whitemaa'
Can die as many deaths as a man.
Say two boards were badly fitted.
There are rocks like wolves all up the west,
Braga and Hellyan, Yesnaby, Marwick, The Brough.
A man and his boat like a sung word, a spell,
Compell the waters.
They dance well above the salt and the savagery,
The sudden swell that bursts from the sea's heart,
The wind that sweeps like an agel's wing.
These stresses break a bad song.
The 'Serpent' was cloven by a trawler.
The 'Swift' disappeared in shining seas, westward.
But that was a better doom than 'Thetis'.
She lay in seapinks, turtled, a proud fisher
Decaying among hens.
Twelve years the nettles besieged her bursting sides.

Be the lonely cold questing eye of the gull.