

Lessons in Mallemaroking

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Nine
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'No one invents an absence'

John Burnside

FIRST PERSON

A black rod
and white wig blind
to what eye sees tight-lipped
to ai's shout says no to aye
Fish in clear water
open window neon light
I won't lie

I
should write of bones
bowing to the earth's pull
of heaviness and thickening
of ageing the surprise of
how much I like it
I should write of belief
and speak of barbed seeds
found in schools
chapels that scratch
under flesh for a lifetime

as I
slip into corners
try on faces speak through stones
and hollow logs skin breathes
me stretches as I explore
taste the salt of blood
I sit cross-legged
in caves throw my voice
through blowholes let it follow
hares from shortening days
to longer nights

I as I
don't cage my own stories
I have woven them
into wattle walls entwined
with tangled braids of others' myths
threaded with magpie pebbles
I speak in my own voice
through gaps left in the weave

MALLEMAROKING

*:the drunken carousing of sailors
on ice-bound whaling ships
in Greenland (OED)*

Sing to salt
the crack and groan of ice,
to brace the ship's back
as it moans and creaks
in the grip of frozen tide.

Drink for the pitch and roll,
to pretend the deck moves,
the bilge-water doesn't tilt,
that lines still slide in the hold.

Blur the sight of slabs
as they shift and screech,
drown the shriek in your throat,
the fear of being still.

LITTORAL

Become a man, he leaves the dry plain;
finds a spring, a brook, a river.
He follows the current, wading
hip-deep. His skin tingles and shrinks
against his flesh. Bending to wet his head,
he opens his eyes under water;
tastes the greening of his sight
as remembrance.

Near the coast, the salt-scent wakes
old secrets, stirs old yearnings;
he runs over rocks, stumbles,
throws himself into the shock of sea
where his legs kick together,
power him into breakers
that roar in celebration.

He laughs and tumbles in the waves,
plunges down to riffled sand, spins
up to a dome of light. Frond-soft fingers
catch at his limbs, whispers bubble
in his ears, silver shapes dart
at the edge of vision. Sure he is home,
he takes a breath,
chokes,
breaks the surface
to gasp and cough; feels them leave.
From the berm, he watches
empty waves.

SALT

It's not regret, nor losing my friends
who laugh with me as we taste sherbet
and jangle bracelets.

Beaded hems and ringed toes
don't matter very much,
nor smooth-faced boys,

music and dark eyes' glimmer.
I can live without the sweetmeats
and the honeyed dates.

It's this sudden flush of shame stops me;
knowing I've allowed this man's
passion to cover my head.

I've allowed him to lead me, bloody-toed,
on this path. I can see my years
laid out on the grey hillside,

and know that my mouth will forget
the shape of my own name. I taste
the salt from all the tears I shed as I

DRY DOCK

Reynold's warehouse
frowns rows of windows down
on 'The Tall Ships' where crisp
packets and fag-ends cluster
at the base of the menu blackboard.

She stands, folded into herself,
hugs the faux-fur closed; arched feet
fidget in red straps as wind
lashes her scarlet-tipped toes with grit.

Cosy-painted longboats rock
and nudge each other, seagulls wheel
over the oil-shimmered water to yawp
above the roar of an excavator
shuddering a bite of stone.

He shifts his shoulders, lifts his shades,
grumbles about the risk
of dirt on his lens. He adjusts his dials
C'mon darlin', let's get on with it.

Angling her head to let the wind lift her hair,
she spreads open her coat. Her clenched
calf muscles drive her feet down
onto stilettos; a quiver races
over the skin of her improbable breasts.
The camera clicks, whirrs, clicks:
her pink and white smile shivers
like the ripple that chases
across the grease of the dock basin.