

ROGER NASH

SEA-CHANGES

A CLOCK

Just after the war—a clock on the sea-facing wall of a cabin by the shore. It had a clown-face dial, with wide eyes moving from side to side, as the pendulum swung. Those eyes neither blinked nor closed, though the boy watched patiently. What else to do, when it rained? His father, just de-mobbed, often slept in a rocking-chair that wouldn't rock, since a runner was loose. But his dad's eyes lurched ceaselessly, behind closed lids, presumably on runners of their very own. What he dreamed of refused to dismantle into some done-for and stationary past.

Twice a day, when the tide turned, candles on the table flickered uncertainly, in those dark winter months. Twice a day, the tongue in his father's mouth also wavered, in a drafty bluster of words, uncertain whether to curse or bless the universe.

Twice a day, the clock on the sea-surged wall stopped, in synchronized sympathy. Its large eyes now motionless, the clown no longer seemed to smile, but stared in a crazed suspended judgement.

SOMETHING ON THE BEACH

Something ahead on the beach, with a crowd of people around it. Too late to make a detour, as they'd just turned the corner of a cove. Out for a walk with his parents, he held on like a limpet to his mother's hand. A sailor's cap and naval kit-bag had been cast up on the turn of the tide. That must be a drowned seaman beside them, draped in tightly coiled bladder-wrack and immaculate black ribbons of tar. A coast-guard lifted up one of the sailor's hoofs gently. Another raised the head until a snout pointed straight at the sky, with shining curved tusks just below. The tide was going out very quickly

because of the smell, vomiting thick spray over rock-pools.

“Pigs are hopelessly bad swimmers,” his father said.

“But what a sod the sea is, to dress it up like a man.”

Flies braided themselves into thick mooring ropes on their faces.

The boy crushed a handful. They turned into drops of tar

and dripped back onto the pig-sailor. The tide went out

more and more quickly, unconcerned, as is natural, about anything but itself.

THE FATHER'S PARABLE OF THE PIG-SAILOR

I remember walking back to that cove in the evening, on my own, when our son was asleep. The pig-sailor was still there, though cap and kitbag had been removed, I assume by the military police. The creature swayed back and forth, crouching. Then it humped up and down, energetic with a heaving black undulation of flies. It was just bristling and matted with them. It twitched with an electric vitality, humming as loudly as an exposed high-voltage cable. It was clearly in some kind of majestic, rippling prime, intent on its own hungry purposes: mating, perhaps, or hunting, or finding a whole pack of its species.—Whatever its needs were, and I didn't want to know.

Though I stood very carefully upwind, I could smell something peculiarly like sulphur. It eyed me through eerily eyeless but attentively flickering sockets, whose gaze crawled right through you. It seemed one creature entire in its unfathomable prancing intent. Without warning, it lurched toward me. Or did something slip and gave way? At the time, I wasn't sure which. At any rate, I suddenly felt sharply noticed: part of a plan, or, more likely, a swarming chaos. It felt too much like meeting Lucifer himself, just cast to earth from heaven, or from the depths to dry land, on a tide one way or the other, and bitterly resenting his punishment.

I watched as the sea came in to reclaim its own. The tide gives, then the tide takes away. Then the tide gives back, somewhere else, some of its take-away. Reluctant flies left solo, then in groups, as the approaching spray harassed them. Lucifer's single prancing intent gradually broke up, streaming off in all directions, going wherever it is random gusts take blow-flies. Is Lucifer ever more than that, d'you think, some mindless and innumerable multitude: our small acts taken cumulatively, so difficult to contend with and change because there are just so many of them?

IN THE KITCHEN

For supper, if the catch was good, they ate shrimp and potato. His father strode into the kitchen, galoshes slurping thirstily with what sounded like all eight of the seven seas. A full net squirmed beneath his hand. He tipped the still-twitching shrimps into a pan of water already teased to a boil of fast-rolling anticipation on the stove. The shrimps leapt straight out again, like squibs exploding in every direction. Most fell back in, antennae as bent and smashed as barley-stalks after a storm. But a few always managed to fly on in an arc: changed, suddenly, into a flock of pink and be-whiskered, flipper-tailed birds.

If his father had been particularly lucky in searching the rock-pools, he would pry mussel shells open. Then short tongues lolled out of each, floppily, still trying to recite the name, rank and number of both incoming and outgoing tides.

WHAT YOU CAN LEARN FROM A WELL

One day, I showed our small son where the old well is. It's all overgrown with brambles, beside the cabin. My father got me and my two brothers to dig it, years ago. We were part boys imagining ourselves men, and, when it suited us, part men imagining ourselves boys again. We played double-agents a lot with time, then. Can't do that anymore. Now, if you take the cover off, the well's only drunk at by the brown hedge that leans over it. The hedge more or less grows out of its own reflection, as the soil is so poor here. Sea-wind mutters though that hedge without ever stopping to catch its breath. The well tries to stay pretty unnoticed: I'm just here to serve you. But, like all wells, it's seen and knows a lot.

At the top, we made a ledge to store butter in the summer. Though it got beaded with sweat from the water below. In the water at the bottom, we found old bones, but smoothed and softened into such anonymous slivers, you couldn't tell what species they belonged to: a hawk, a lamb, a fish, perhaps a man, even a hawk-man or a lamb-fish. Gave me the odd feeling that, in the biggest picture of all, it doesn't matter which particular species you get born into. The real difference is between being here as a *something* or other, and not being born at all. Underneath, we're all just very ambivalent slivers of life. At the Front, I reckon we were hawks or wolves as much as we were men. Life's an awfully flexible operator.

Below the mud at the bottom—as we know from digging there—there’s only hard rock, saying all that rock has ever learned to say: that it’s damned hard rock. Formed by tireless volcanic fires that view us people as late, minor and rather short-lived obstacles to their own splendid, long-term progress. Rock that might’ve been, but for the accidents of gravity, rock on a distant planet, coursing where my father and two brothers were never born; where wells were never dug or imagined; where our father never rewarded us each with a pint and a shilling.

Anyway, after a few years, we had to stop using the well. Its water got saltier and saltier. The same unalterable tides move down there as are in the bay, and—so it seems—down the whole course of history. Wherever we are, we’re all being washed around in the same big sea.

THE CHURCH OF UNREDEEMABLE SPRAY

The first winter after the war was one of very bad storms.
 Huge swells trained their siege-guns on the sea-wall.
 Could we ever make peace with the waters too? It seemed doubtful.
 As swell hit the wall, it ricocheted as a vast, reversed,
 rampant waterfall, right over the Church of St. Mark:
 henceforth to be known, in the chronicles, as the Church of Unredeemable Spray.
 Organ-pipes breathed salt glitters of glissandos.
 Stained-glass windows became sides of a pea-green aquarium,
 with small fish shoaling incuriously through each station of the Cross.
 Memorial tiles tried hard to save the remembrance
 of women and children first. Even the spire began to tilt
 its lumbering mast, making heavy weather of any certainty.
 Wherever the horizon was now, it heaved-ho in complete indifference
 to our Sunday need to know what’s above, what’s far below.

HOW TO SWIM-CLIMB A TREE

The boy was hopeless at tree-climbing, though he kept on trying,
 on the old holm-oak by the cabin, that we had thought was dying
 even when I helped dig the well. Then, one day,
 when a rough sea was, as usual, swaggering around and smashing things
 on the beach, I looked out the window, and saw something happen to him.
 As a particularly big wave crashed onto the beach, he suddenly
 changed his stance, and skimmed along a branch in fluid movements,

as though swimming up out of that wave; his head tilted back, eyes fixed as if on some surface-light above, pupils so enlarged they could easily buoy him after them, catching every bit of phosphorescence in the strange evening light. He cast off up that tree, rather than climbed it, as nimble as a bubble.

A WALLED GARDEN

One Friday, his mother wanted a few groceries from the village. She peddled a large wicker basket attached to an inconspicuous bicycle, and took her son with her, in the basket, both for company and for ballast. The road into the village was a-swirl, flooded with sea-spray, and she couldn't get through. Luckily, a gardener on the land-side of the road spotted her, and let them into the shelter of a walled garden. Here, the heavy artillery of the sea, its quick-firing cannonades of colliding waves, the ack-ack of scared dogs' yaps, the screaming buck-shot of blown gulls' cries, were muffled. Layer after layer of moss grew on each other, until they forgot that they were meant to be attached to anything beyond themselves. After a breather, the gardener let them out of another gate, further back up the road, and they returned to the cabin. He waved as they cycled away. He stroked a fish-shaped moustache with one hand. A grey cascade from his shoulders was desperately trying to turn back into a rain-coat.

GOING SHOPPING BY KAYAK

When his mother wheeled her basket back into the cabin, his father decided to go shopping by kayak, and paddle along the shore to the village. Seas weren't running that high. The trouble on land seemed mostly with wind-blown spray. Beside, his weekly order of baccy desperately needed him. The boy went with him, as he often did in the big, thick-hulled sea-kayak.

They made a quick, safe trip to the store. On the way back, the tide turned strangely, just off the cabin. The paddle slipped and careened through what felt like sudden vacuums and big bubbles of air below. Then, the next moment, it dragged to a standstill, as if stuck in molasses or a pot of cooling tar. Foam seemed to curdle on the lifted blades, and their grip in the sea quickly decayed and went rancid. The harder his father paddled towards the cabin, the further they were carried out to sea.

It was then that they spotted a seal swimming nearby, head raised high. Its grey coat streamed with stormy light, as though it might, at any mo-

ment, turn, without remainder, into the broodiest of weather. It seemed to be watching them. Every so often, a flipper was raised to place a moustache-shaped fish in its mouth, just below its bristling whiskers. At first, the boy, tired by now, half-wondered whether it might, half-possibly, be the gardener. The seal kept swimming out into a choppy maelstrom of water, then coming back beside them, as if urging them to follow.

At last, the boy's father followed. He'd looked at his son, now swaying trustfully asleep between his knees in the kayak's foam-and-sweat-flecked cockpit. If a wave can teach a boy how to climb trees, where's it written that a seal can't guide you home? Anyway, he'd tried everything else, and the cabin was drifting further and further off. Once into that choppy circle of water, the outward current eased off. His blades took good, even bites out of the waves. They were soon back at the cabin, escorted close to shore by the seal.

LATER THAT EVENING

Later that evening, Mum noticed, with surprise, that, at this particular turn of the tide, the clown-faced clock hadn't stopped at all. With its eyes darting from side to side, it smiled as companionably as any clock can. She'd fixed both her petticoat and the runner of the rocking-chair while they'd been out in the kayak, with all of the precision of a recent munitions-worker. Dad dozed in the chair, rocking gently. The boy was curious that there were moments when his father's eyes, unexpectedly, didn't lurch at all behind their closed lids.