

body of water

1. figurehead.

the first thing born is the border,
the fierce defence of the cell;
the membrane terror.

the skin cured, you make a frame
and stretch the hide.
you form a shape for yourself
to hold back water
and it floats.

lighthouse dreams, house dreams,
a planting of feet
in light's buoyant soil.
dreams of direction
dreams of rescue
navigate the calm before the storm.

across the sea someone is yelling
horror... horror... horror... horror...
violence is the spectre barque
the white woman rising,
leper-skinned.
safety scuttles out of sight like mice.
on the prow, a child crucified.

this is how you run aground:
a dam bursts. the planks crack.
hull-holes bust in. blank space fills.

you can breathe here.

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faith is thinking
you can breathe here.

blank space fills. seams gap.
the membrane is selectively permeable.
the border guard throws up his hands
and redraws an imaginary line.

2. deadrise.

earth curves a slick gift.
the horizon has split.
in your hands, the sea
is a clumsy herringbone
unstitching composition.

you are imagining things.
death's wife is dancing on the quarterdeck.

in the moment of wreck
all measurements are thrown
all lines are crossed
all strength is frozen
all witnesses are unreliable
and all light fails.

the absence of boundary is magnified
like a great kill: a bloody, glorious universe
in which you might disperse like aspirin.

from the crow's nest, clinging to ropes,
pirates drop their bottled notes into the sea.
having skulled the rum first, they're hitting sailors.

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now everywhere is drunk and broken glass
and letters made as carefully as kid's cards:
'help. captain absconded.'
'help. lost at sea.'
all this has to be swept away.

3. disaster bay.

the sea is valium grey;
light's subdued seduction.
ships like to wreck here.
on a morning like this, it's quicksilver.
someone tells me metal holds your feelings.
this silver grief's an endless sink
for those old whales to sing in.

under light rain like a bandaged child
who reaches at you, asking nothing
the taste left in the mouth by pain
is that of waking
the great comfort of unhappiness
is its fog.

the tow truck driver says
half his callouts are down this road.
there is something in this country, he agrees,
that makes ships like to wreck here.

4. the hard.

heave to for an inventory.
meaning's form is electricity.

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things are metaphors for non-things;
the object represents the word.
there is no substance,
only the imagined

and this:
in the place where i began
to swim for myself
it is raining.

this is crow rain,
circling in place.

the storm warps.
lightning thrums in the water.
i am thrown alive by terror:
a weak cluster of molecules,
mostly water, floating in water
which it barely displaces.
with a moment's charge,
i might exchange myself atom for atom
with another form.

there is calm before
and calm after a storm
and then there is the calm in its eye.

this is crow rain,
circling in place.

in the hold of the painted ship,
the disconnect is cellular:
a slowing of pulses. 27

5. dog watch.

i drown the mouse which all night
dragged its trap and set the crippled dog
to whimper. she watches me swim that tiny pest
to its death in a pool of mineral tears.

surface tension
sucks at my hand.
i sharpen myself
to meet the meniscus.

the comfort of unhappiness is fog.
you lay back in the salty bed
hands behind head and legs crossed
floating on nothing
to regard the clearest sky.
i will tell you something:

trying to write this down is like
catching mice with your bare hands.
if language is the border, then it is language
i will take to with my fists.

the ocean is annihilation.
this trap is absurd.

if there's only metaphor,
water is the one that can take our fear.
it's big and liquid, seeps into all things
has ebb and flow and depth enough
to carry what's beyond us.

but if our fear is wanting unity

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then god is a body of water:
a bucket with a hole.

you can breathe here.

6. craft.

fools float from the hold,
so much jettisoned timber.
salt keeps resounding.
you can breathe this story:

the white boat in red mud. its skin
is blistered, scales white, raised like sails.
the mudskin scattered white to match
but they are maps, or prints of maps, or blueprints
telling how the craft was made.

this dream belongs to the desert, not to you.
hear what has been spread into the sand,
myth-catchers for fish that breathe in salty air.
after, you can cast an empty net
for holy mackerel.

i swing by a branch and push the craft out with my toes.
maps, prints sunk on silk-sheened fax rolls imitate
the waves. the sun goes to work
a miracle of buoyancy at light.
a desert's bare hand takes me in.

over time, this
is like a sunken ship still sailing.
who breathed this story into the red dust? 26

who mixed our spit with country like this?
because it wasn't us.

7. vessel.

the work is not the work.
it underpins the course
like a granite bed where water pools
in a dry river, giving the illusion
of a spring, but it's not the spring.
the source swims between.
there are no words there
and no things.

i write
'the fabric of my dreams is not strong enough'
and red enamel birds tear through a canvas.

magnified and bloody,
the creative act, like reason,
happens afterwards,
between the pulse and the motion.

i heard of a family sailing a cargo ship:
one long home between a sole horizon
which clasped them in a circle
of the blessed, at liberty
to drift.
to give this voice, i need to move.

language is a singing
into being we must do;
if you want, our fabrication. 27

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the work is a push and pull
between bluff and gap
and death's wife dances on the quarterdeck.

but where's the wreck?
leap off the broken bow and the sea carries you.
once you're down there,
you haven't fallen. you're being lifted.

look here: you have made a shape
for yourself in water,
only to find it is continuous with water,
atom for atom.

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