

The Sea Is History

Derek Walcott

Where are your monuments, your battles, martyrs?

Where is your tribal memory? Sirs,
in that grey vault. The sea. The sea
has locked them up. The sea is History.

First, there was the heaving oil,
heavy as chaos;
then, like a light at the end of a tunnel,

the lantern of a caravel,
and that was Genesis.

Then there were the packed cries,
the shit, the moaning:

Exodus.

Bone soldered by coral to bone,
mosaics

mantled by the benediction of the shark's shadow,

that was the Ark of the Covenant.

Then came from the plucked wires
of sunlight on the sea floor

the plangent harps of the Babylonian bondage,
as the white cowries clustered like manacles
on the drowned women,
and those were the ivory bracelets
of the Song of Solomon,
but the ocean kept turning blank pages
looking for History.
Then came the men with eyes heavy as anchors
who sank without tombs,
brigands who barbecued cattle,
leaving their charred ribs like palm leaves on the shore,
then the foaming, rabid maw
of the tidal wave swallowing Port Royal,
and that was Jonah,
but where is your Renaissance?
Sir, it is locked in them sea-sands
out there past the reef's moiling shelf,
where the men-o'-war floated down;
strop on these goggles, I'll guide you there myself.
It's all subtle and submarine,
through colonnades of coral,

past the gothic windows of sea-fans
to where the crusty grouper, onyx-eyed,
blinks, weighted by its jewels, like a bald queen;

and these groined caves with barnacles
pitted like stone
are our cathedrals,

and the furnace before the hurricanes:
Gomorrah. Bones ground by windmills
into marl and cornmeal,

and that was Lamentations—
that was just Lamentations,
it was not History;

then came, like scum on the river's drying lip,
the brown reeds of villages
mantling and congealing into towns,

and at evening, the midges' choirs,
and above them, the spires
lancing the side of God

as His son set, and that was the New Testament.

Then came the white sisters clapping
to the waves' progress,
and that was Emancipation—
jubilation, O jubilation—
vanishing swiftly
as the sea's lace dries in the sun,
but that was not History,
that was only faith,
and then each rock broke into its own nation;
then came the synod of flies,
then came the secretarial heron,
then came the bullfrog bellowing for a vote,
fireflies with bright ideas
and bats like jetting ambassadors
and the mantis, like khaki police,
and the furred caterpillars of judges
examining each case closely,
and then in the dark ears of ferns
and in the salt chuckle of rocks
with their sea pools, there was the sound
like a rumour without any echo

of History, really beginning.

Sea Grapes

Derek Walcott

That sail which leans on light,

tired of islands,

a schooner beating up the Caribbean

for home, could be Odysseus,

home-bound on the Aegean;

that father and husband's

longing, under gnarled sour grapes, is

like the adulterer hearing Nausicaa's name

in every gull's outcry.

This brings nobody peace. The ancient war

between obsession and responsibility

will never finish and has been the same

for the sea-wanderer or the one on shore

now wriggling on his sandals to walk home,

since Troy sighed its last flame,

and the blind giant's boulder heaved the trough

from whose groundswell the great hexameters come

to the conclusions of exhausted surf.

The classics can console. But not enough.

Love After Love

Derek Walcott

The time will come

when, with elation

you will greet yourself arriving

at your own door, in your own mirror

and each will smile at the other's welcome,

and say, sit here. Eat.

You will love again the stranger who was your self.

Give wine. Give bread. Give back your heart

to itself, to the stranger who has loved you

all your life, whom you ignored

for another, who knows you by heart.

Take down the love letters from the bookshelf,

the photographs, the desperate notes,

peel your own image from the mirror.

Sit. Feast on your life.

A Far Cry from Africa

Derek Walcott

A wind is ruffling the tawny pelt

Of Africa. Kikuyu, quick as flies,

Batten upon the bloodstreams of the veldt.

Corpses are scattered through a paradise.

Only the worm, colonel of carrion, cries:

"Waste no compassion on these separate dead!"

Statistics justify and scholars seize

The salients of colonial policy.

What is that to the white child hacked in bed?

To savages, expendable as Jews?

Threshed out by beaters, the long rushes break

In a white dust of ibises whose cries

Have wheeled since civilization's dawn

From the parched river or beast-teeming plain.

The violence of beast on beast is read

As natural law, but upright man
Seeks his divinity by inflicting pain.
Delirious as these worried beasts, his wars
Dance to the tightened carcass of a drum,
While he calls courage still that native dread
Of the white peace contracted by the dead.

Again brutish necessity wipes its hands
Upon the napkin of a dirty cause, again
A waste of our compassion, as with Spain,
The gorilla wrestles with the superman.
I who am poisoned with the blood of both,
Where shall I turn, divided to the vein?

I who have cursed
The drunken officer of British rule, how choose
Between this Africa and the English tongue I love?
Betray them both, or give back what they give?
How can I face such slaughter and be cool?

How can I turn from Africa and live?

Love in the Valley

Derek Walcott

The sun goes slowly blind.

It is this mountain, shrouding
the valley of the shadow,

widening like amnesia

evening dims the mind.

I shake my head in darkness,

it is a tree branched with cries,

a trash can full of print.

Now, through the reddening squint

of leaves leaden as eyes,

a skein of drifting hair

like a twig fallen on snow

branches the blank pages.

I bring it close, and stare

In slow vertiginous darkness,

and now I drift elsewhere,

through hostile images

of white and black, and look,

like a thaw-sniffing stallion, the head

of Pasternak emerges with its forelock,
his sinewy wrist a fetlock

pawing the frozen spring,
till his own hand has frozen
on the white page, heavy.

I ride through a white childhood
Whose pines glittered with bracelets,
When I heard wolves, feared the black wood,

every wrist-aching brook
and the ice maiden
in Hawthorne's fairy book.

The hair melts into dark,
a question mark that led
where the untethered mind

strayed from its first track;
now Hardy's somber head
upon which hailstorms broke

looms, like a weeping rock,
like wind, the tresses drift
and their familiar trace

tingles across the face
with light lashes.
I knew the depth of whiteness,

I feared the numbing kiss
Of those women of winter,
Bathsheba, Lara, Tess,

Whose tragedy made less
of life, whose love was more
than love of literature.