

THE DRUNKEN BOAT

Arthur Rimbaud

Trans. Donald Revell

Unmanned, adrift down impassable Rivers,
I saw my crewmen on shore, shot full of arrows,
Naked, bound to painted stakes,
And I heard red Indians shrieking with pleasure.

It made no difference to me. Cargo
Of Flemish wheat or English cotton, it made
No difference. The cries of my crewmen faded.
The Rivers let me go where I wished to go.

Winters ago, dumb as a newborn,
I ran a deafening gauntlet of angry waters,
Wild tides. Peninsulas by hurricanes cut free
Of their continents never endured such noise.

The storm blessed my sea-bord wakening.
Lighter than a wine cork, I danced on whitecaps
Otherwise known as human sacrifice
Ten whole nights. The lighthouses slobbered in blindness.

Sweeter than the flesh of sour apples to children,
Green waters washed me clean of blue wine
And vomit, doused the Christmas of my hull,
Shattered my rudder, scattered my ironwork.

Ever since, I have bathed in the Poem
Of the Sea, infused with stars, simmered in milk,
Swallowing green azures; and there, the white
Delighted wraith of the drowned man sinks;

And there, drenched in blueness, deliriums
And rhythmical, slow comets of daylight,
Stronger than alcohol, vaster than our lyres,
The acrid roses of love ferment!

I know the skies gutted with lightning,
And the waterspouts, undertow, currents: I've seen
Dusk and daybreak exalted with doves,
And, more than once, the mirage of humanity!

I have seen the low sun, stained with mystical horrors,
Like Oedipus and Agamemnon on stage,
Visionary, the violet blood of their wounds
Clotting the ocean surface into a flower.

I dreamed a green night of dazzling snows,
A fuck sluggishly mounting the ocean's eyes,
The traffic in extraordinary jism,
The yellowish blue arousal of singing phosphorous!

In months of glut, I've followed, like a mad cow,
The heavy seas that batter on reefs,
Never a thought of the Blessed Virgin's shining feet
Or of their miracles that calm the wheezing ocean!

Believe it, I've struck incredible Floridas,
Wallowed in flowers with panthers' eyes and human
Skin! Beneath the starboard horizon,
Rainbows harnessed glaucous herds.

I've seen enormous swamps fermenting,
Stinking eel-pots beside the beached Leviathan!
Ruinous turbulence out of a dead calm,
All distances whirlpooled into the abyss!

Silver suns, nacreous waves, glaciers, heaven's brazier!
Hideous wreckage at the bottom of brown gulfs
Where mythological serpents, maddened by maggots,
Fall out of twisted trees, stinking black perfumes!

I'd like to have shown some child the dorados
Cutting the blue water: those golden fish, those singing fish.
I drifted upon a foam of flowers, and sometimes,
For a moment, ineffable winds gave me wings.

Too, I was sometimes the weary martyr of poles
And zones, and then the sobbing ocean would rock me
Gently, offer me shadow-flowers with yellow suckers,
And I rested, like a woman in her prayers.

I weltered, almost an island, in the shit
And quarrels of noisy, yellow-eyed gulls.
And I sailed on, my spidery rigging
Sifting drowned men backward into sleep.

And now, a lost boat in the dank hair of inlets,
Typhooned into the birdless heaven, I
Whose sodden carcass the ironclads
And Hanseatic clippers could not save;

Free, afire, festooned with violet fog,
I who breached the walls of sunset bearing
Exquisite jam of better poets made
From celestial moss and azure snots,

Who sped like a mad spar painted
With small electric moons, harried
By hippocampi when cruel July cudged
Ultramarine into a steaming rubble;

I who trembled hearing, even at a distance
Of fifty leagues, the rutting behemoths
And fat thunderheads, eternal spinner of blue
Stillnesses, I ache for Europe, for parapets!

I've seen sidereal archipelagos! And islands
Where delirious Edens open to mariners:
Is it in such abysmal nights you sleep out your exile
O million golden birds, O future Vigor?

I've wept enough! The dawns are pathetic.
The moon's an atrocity and the sun's poisonous:
A bad love has bloated my drunken keel.
O let it burst! O let me sink beneath the sea!

If any European water could please me
It would be an oily, cold puddle where,
In the fragrant half-light, squats a small boy
Launching a toy boat flimsy as a butterfly.

I give up. Bathed in your indolence, O ocean,
I cannot follow the cotton boats anymore
Nor criss-cross the arrogance of flags and engines
Nor swim the horrid gaze of prison ships.