

Twelve River RIPPLES

Favourite Poem



The Fisherman's Farewell

by Robin Robertson

Their long stares mark them apart; eyes gone
to sea-colours: grey, foam-flecked

and black in the undertow, blue
as the blue banners of the mackerel, whipping west.

On land, they are smoke-walkers, where each stone
is a standing stone, every circle a stone circle.

They would be rumour if they could, in this frozen
landscape like a stopped sea, from the great stone keels
of Callanish to the walls of Dunnottar and Drum.

They would be less even than rumour:

to be ocean-stealers, to never throw a shadow -
to dream the blank horizon and dread the sight of land.

The drink storms through these men, uncompasses
them, till they're all at sea again.

Their houses, heeled over in the sand:
each ruin now a cairn for kites.

And down by the quay
Past empty pots, unmended nets and boats:

this tiny bar, where men sleep upright
in their own element, as seals.

From *Hill of Doors* by Robin Robertson, Picador Poetry, 2013

Favourite Poem cont.

I was lucky enough to hear Robin Robertson read this at a Snape poetry festival in his taut Scottish accent. The poem is even more powerful now, with the difficulties the fishermen are experiencing. You can easily envisage them in this marvellous descriptive poem eyes gone to sea colours so long on the sea it has changed them. Changed to the extent that they are different from land dwellers. They become smoke-walkers so removed from normal life that they could almost be rumour. After generations of fishing, their way of life is in serious decline and the poem addresses the long-deceased fishermen as dreaming of being ocean stealers, to never throw a shadow.

We switch between the dead and the living fishermen, because they are of the same experience. When in port, an excess of alcohol uncompasses them – until they return to the sea. The houses of the dead have decayed, there is no on-going need for them, they have become the perch of carrion eaters, the Red Kites.

Finally, we visit the almost derelict quay, to a tiny bar, where redundant fishermen sleep in alcoholic haze, more like seals than men.

Ivor Murrell



Robin Robertson