

PROJECT PAPERS

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DOUGLAS OLIVER

THE ORACLE OF THE DROWNED

Memory in sea-green with sea-weed grain
of glass as the rearing wave rains briefly
before a lot of bother
on the beach of childhood,
and men with a burden file across sand.
Those far-out surfaces are lipped
with transparent phrases coming to mind:
that the real dying happened in middle heights
between the lips and the sea floor.
Remember the swim trunks lost in waters
and the first man in our lives who drowned,
this, now, his cortege from the tide-edge,
the sacred hanging-down of head and arms
seeing that person's white groin
cooked chicken bared near the hook of the ribs
and a shore-line of horrified children
arrested in their digging to gaze
at seas of such corruption as to change him
His shirt left behind too long on the promenade rail,
always there in our lives, its caked cotton
fluffy-white in its inner wrappings.
The cloth wandered open at nights as we wondered
what a drowning body could say
when its chest became translucent green.
We courted in our minds such corrupt purity,
never escaping but sinking into not
the unthinkable gift of the self to death,
or the sea flash flood in the throat,
but into the oracle of the drowned;
because the oracle of the dying comes to a halt
while the oracle of the dead continues and has humour in it.
We ask the dying, "How do you go about drowning?"
and the answer comes first "I cannot—"

then swims in ambivalent vowels
and voiceless consonants in the washing tide
voiced consonants in the last buzz of the eardrum:
“Aah, I am funtoosh, zoid, walway,
wallowing, rows and rows of waves,
a goooood one, my soooul a sea-mew” —
and we learn nothing but the knowledge of pain,
and the hope of a future from it.
But the gone-dead are beamish and talk to us
from out of memory’s hollows and gulphs:
“You, boy, in your Bournemouth bed, be with me now
and I will come to you many years later
still drowned in a medium of green liquid
the water whispering through its lips
as the dark whispers to you in caves or before sleep.
And I was a man and had babies
as you, a baby, will have a man and call him ‘Father’
and as the drowned will have the drowned.”

CHRISTOPHER MIDDLETON

THE CHINA VIRGINS

They tinkle in their glass
Voices more thin than shrill
Coils of mist they penetrate remote hill temples
They are fire tongues capping spires of thought
They inhabit oblongs of ice in orange juice

Often they appear when creation begins
In memory
They rub their fingers and glow when you lose your mule
Hungering footsore in a Tibet of aimlessness
Like an onset of birdsong in heartbreak they capture you

Cool outrush of force
In the construction of a seashell
Meandering prolonged across symmetry breaks
They delineate an evolution
They round the roof of a wren’s nest

Pop of champagne cork
Snap of elastic against firm muscle
If not so then slow motioning the convolvulus display
Tremor of a voice when it has caught the drift
Of white bone powder blown across the Gobi

Breath of wind bending the crest of a catalpa
Also the clatter when catalpa bean pods fall
The sputter when wet has called for the surge
Of a body incandescent but then backs off
The china virgins recoil to advance
On the back of matter they pound their bright fists
Flash their eyes in the twice five parabolas of a Leticia's legs

A parchment swept by fingers
Sidereal coin
A nymph spinning struck into the hot silver centre
A song that drinks the scent of a space unborn
Nothing nothing but a phrase no sooner uttered
Than questioned as to its calligraphy
Nothing sooner questioned than the china virgins