

The bird-hunters

1997

(A cycle of poems)

Clear the day was
the birds making northwards.
There were three of us
we went across the ice
shot long-tailed duck, eider and goldeneye.

Black-tarred our boat was
we took it out with us
we rowed between the gleaming plains of ice.
The morning water was sun
the day was the day of hunting.

Bird-hunters were we
three were our names.

Then we owned names.

When the expanses of ice break in spring
and long cracks open up in them
then they sing –
no not them, but the crack sings
and silent days over the sea
then sound like wings.

Wings no one sees
but wings that are heard

the short while before the crack widens
and a grave becomes visible.

The crack came suddenly
we saw it too late
too late did we see our destiny.

The one of us who stood farthest away from the boat:
Bloody hell, he screamed
it's cracking, it's cracking!
The boat – run to the boat, quick!

The boat we had just left
separated from us by the widened crack.
We had spent far too much time
turned towards the stretch of eider
the shot and the lure of the hunt.

Flame-green the water was at the edge of the ice
quickly blackening towards the depths.

The black tarred boat, two oars
provisions, boots and birds we had already shot.
The boat – so easy to pull over the ice.

Crouched, were just about to make the leap
over the heady blackness.

Held back, held back in the leap
believed perhaps that further on
the crack was less in dimension –
looked that way, hurried over
but the width was already too great.
If we jumped, if we waved our arms
no one dared jump,
no one dared swim through the icy coldness.

Too long our hesitation was
the crack did not hesitate.

Paralysed we stood there
grasped nothing. Did not grasp, grasp
as yet death was not visible
it waited still in that second.

Blows of iron we heard within the ice
and through the air
it sounded like planes against planks –
before we had thought it the song of the ice.

The flowers of fear unfolded
the shivers took us, tears were near
the evening was near
we should soon have turned homewards.

No one saw us, no one heard from the shore
the cries that were swept away by the wind.
The sky saw us but did not move
we saw how death wrote our names there.

The ice saw us
the waiting water saw us

attached to our hands the mark of the doomed.

Eagles were seen earlier that winter
they sat far out on the ice
they looked like deposed princes waiting for their own death
they fed on hunger
they pecked pieces of carrion out of the ice
and crowned themselves with the longest night.

And our eyes were glazed with fear
and our tongues were stiff like the fish's
and far off the black-backed gull rested
its eyes colder than the hawk's
used to living off fish
and what else had died in the sea.

The wild leap
The wild hope
the wild cry beyond the cry.

But a hope of rescue for us
would only challenge the absurdity
but there is no absurdity here either.
Far out at sea there is never any absurdity.

And then it was dark
and then there was nothing more
and then there was the water
and the water was the last thing
and beyond the water there was nothing more.

Of those that sink
or those that build themselves a nest
towards the sea-bed
of the improbable in the mountain ravines down there
of the journey there

without memory and prior to their birth
they build there their new boats.

We were taken down into the lower sun-orbit
already
deep under the roof of the ice

our cries were washed away
in distant echoes they could still be heard
before the relighting of the moon
and more translucent than the bodies of jellyfish
we received the sound from the bells of water.

As when a newly born
leaves its habitat and is led out into the visible
where its name is given and gender determined
we were led here towards what is farther off
where no names and no gender
and no other signs of recognition
apply any more.

So did the first evening sink
the evening when the ice broke.
The land was grey, grey-dashed were the houses
grey was the blood, grey was sorrow.

Over the ice in gleaming black feathers
the released water spread
ice gnawed ice, a slurping was heard
when the fields of white were cracked by the wind.

So did the night sink where no joy was possible
the lights that shone in the windows
where sleep was not possible either
strips of red spread out over the white of the eyes
the hours became the bodies of phantoms
wrapped in grey
drowned in the dark
no one tasted the bread, no one ate of the meat.

The cloak of sorrow was spread out over the night
Damn, someone cried in hate with clenched fists
God, my God, someone prayed
the whimpering was heard right up to the hour of dawning.
The wind did not answer
the ice did not answer.

Grey was the blood, grey was sorrow
grey were the roses of death.

Far out there a boat drifts without a crew
the ice is already devouring it.

The bird's outstretched necks

the long necks
the narrow ones and those covered with green velvet.
Bright-red was the morning sun
and the ice breaks.

The long-tailed duck's pointed wings
burn in the sun
the clatter, the downy whirl of the feathers
not yet reached by shot
stroked them with its hand
down against the trembling of the fingertips
above the breaking ice.

The goldeneye's vigilant eyes
dark crystals
mirrored in the water – the water that is mirrored.

Whirling bodies, whirling winds
and when a cry breaks out
ice against blood heated by the sun
is heard over the water – is heard under the water
plays at evening and at morning.
The cry of the birds
the birds' pointed wings.

If only it had been morning
and our death been drawn in the sun
if only we had heard the farm dogs bark
though there are no dogs out here.

If March crows that we are used to hearing
at this time had come
not as a deliverance but just as company.

If a late aurora borealis had been visible.

That night the groundswells were
high mountains of a great evil
that pass through the world
they ground themselves into heavy knives
before the age of iron.

But they were not driven on by evil
they were from before the age of evil
it was only us who perceived them as such.
They were knives out of the night that devours all
and cuts to pieces any semblance

of a human face.

The stars watched over them
the fish listened to them deep down
the stones heard them in their forgotten places
when they cut through the world.

To write with letters of water
the alphabet that only the water reads

to descend to the sea-bed
and write there the names of those
that once owned the palms of hands

and the water that will stream
before anything has even been written completely:
the water that constantly effaces
the water that constantly once more allows the names
to gleam in the eyes of the waves.

On walls of sorrow
the water builds its transparent roof.

The water that talks in its sleep
follows the path of the drowned
talks itself through night after night
hides what the day can find:
timber, rudder and oar.
The eel swims past but does not stop on its journey
the cod's eye keeps watch
everything is sucking mouths.

The water conceals its eye
fills its mouth with mud
stares as if blind at the path of those sinking.

If tonight a cry were
once more to be heard in the gale
it would be the mouths of the water
would be the cry of the water

would be the cry of the nightmare
would be the cry of breaking feathers
sunk to soot in the water.

The water that talks in its sleep, writes in lead
comfort that no one can fathom.

And we who speak here
do not speak with our usual tongue
nor is it that of the fish –
the water gave us to another voice.

It grows dark around us
more than the darkness lets one suspect.

We were pulled down ever deeper
borne ever heavier towards sealed rooms
and a sleep that was to last for ages.
Beds of a different kind than those we had previously slept in
were ready to receive us
with a different softness in a different sleep.

And the sea cow bellows
her udders have sufficient for all of us
and the beehives on the sea-bed
are full of the honey of sea bees
and butterflies fluttering cause
the various seasons to change colour
devoted as they are to both summer and winter.

We have enough space to walk in
we have enough nights to sleep through
we have sweetness for our tongue.
Even so the memory burns us:
clear the day was, the birds making northwards.

And when the water
had forced itself into our mouths
and when we had opened ourselves
to the sea
and the sea was within us.

When we were as fish
and as far removed from the beauty of fish
as can be imagined.

But beauty does not count
on such a journey –
not that kind of beauty
and time does not count –
not that kind of time.

The sea-grass
the sea-hair
the water of sea-cries

and the goldeneyes that rise from the sea-bed
with their green crests.

After we had taken in the water
we glided down towards the sea-bed
the sea-bed whispered to us.

The air was no longer willing to give us its life
but the water received us
carried us
like descending wreaths of smoke.

With head spread out we sank
and with outstretched arms.
Our heaviness was another than that above the water
our heaviness became our lightness
we were among those gliding diagonally
like eggs
we were sinking downwards
towards a nest.

We turned round in the water
with the whites of our eyes towards the surface
from which sun had been able to come
had not the evening already done so –
although the sun would not have enticed us more.

We recalled the potatoes in the opened furrows
and the blue earthworms that disappeared
we recalled the gulls above

the wren
and the caraway that was gathered

the salt on the table we recalled
the light birch leaves that unfolded

the dream of a woman's breast, summer nights
and the heat of the skin against the sheet.

Transformed into animals
into fish-animals, into cow-animals
we grazed on the sea's meadows
and were taken further and further away.

Transformed into crow-animals
and the crows we had earlier seen on the ice,
transformed into the mice that nibble
even under the lowest sea-bed
we were taken ever further in
towards a large
and heavy heart.

We thought ourselves free
we were where we were not.
We were there.

Call for a new name
a name that no one knows
the waves whispered to us
those that passed high above our faces.
And phosphorescence that had died during the winter
and was waiting to be lit the following autumn
whispered too.

We then called and became the cry
that goes through the backs of the waves
in winter as in summer.
We became the gull's wing.

We continue spiralling downwards
the algae that previously did not gleam at all
now gleam like phosphorus
in the dreams that come before the seen
and after.

The greenly shimmering feather that follows.

Then we drank oblivion
and went to the threshold of oblivion.

We spread out our nets as we did before
and these are the nets of oblivion.

We love as before
and our women are the oblivion's women

they look at us with shining eyes
as if from desire or from tears
and they say:
you are oblivion's men.

On land the houses lie
like dead birds they hatch dead eggs.

For those that have sunk there are tall, green halls
water touches water
among fishes' mouths.

On land is sorrow, its swirls round itself
its grey shawl.

A notion is that the dead
suckle the breasts of the unborn.

The hours came, leached out of the salt
not the salt from the sea but the salt of sorrow
and the bread that was given us
we were unable to eat.

The dreams came at night and took us close
to the land of madness
and even more as a mockery were dreams held out to us
about the life that had been.

Fleeting snatches of torpor
when nothing we recalled was shown us.

We crossed the field, the lapwing had returned
the field we did not know, the lapwing we did not know.

Pale, crumpled feathers
were given us when asleep and when awake
plucked from birds whose flesh had already been eaten
the waves hacked at our ankles like teeth.
The sun burned
the day was entirely without shadow
the rain that came
was water from the hair of the drowned.

And the swallows that already in autumn
sought the sea-bed beneath the water
so as to drink the winter
open their eyes and meet us.

They whisper:

tonight the ice broke up
did you hear the singing crack?
already the heat of summer is approaching
and we will fly once more.

They move their wings
and smile the way swallows smile.

Like ships we drift over the sea-bed
full of water
we see our ribs and heart that has ceased beating
our eyes we see as warped globes
and the feet we have walked with
and the hands we have grasped with
and the mouths that have sucked desire and love
they float away from us
we owned them for a while
in time the water will dissolve them
and they shall be water.

We become ships
and the swallows smile in their sleep.

When the ice shattered
the final joy of our summers shattered
we shrink
and are borne half asleep ever further away
from what we believed was our life.

We hear a foghorn through the mist
but no voices reach us that we know.

A film has grown
between us and the trees when they flower
now as before
everything is as before
and nothing is as before.

We pick the apples in autumn
we collect them in baskets
but do not know what they taste like.
We painfully recall the light of summer nights
and the cuckoo's cry for consolation
becomes a cry for death.

We write names
but the paper has faded.

It is not really the return
we still are hoping for
that a face worn down by water
that no longer is that of a human
should show itself.

What is then our hope?
that which is beyond hope and even waiting.

The waves speak of a wind from the southwest
then summer comes
the ringed plover lays its eggs
and in the calm we sometimes can see the salmon's
crooked jaws.

We are not waiting for any return.
The ropes of sorrow have stretched us year after year.
Will they then never break?
No, they will never break.

The pennants of the nets show the wind is rising
and what we are waiting for
is beyond hope and waiting.

The northern lights we still recall within us
from that winter
are now the new winter
and the sunsets that sparkled in the cold
as wild now as then.

The fish we catch and haul up on the land
from the ice-holes
scare us
they take away our words when we eat them.

We eat a different bread than that night
even so we eat of the same bread
we bake it from dead days
its taste we do not like.
To stay silent we already learnt after the first summer
but the silence does not satisfy us either
finally not even tears have any taste.

We see the crack when it opens up.

For months we went searching
but nothing drifted ashore:
not a boat did we find, not an oar, let alone

a hand
a heart
an eye.

How shall we hear the voice that the water swallowed?

We who have long lived close to some water
and who have long missed those who have sunk
know that the water does not own any songs
except the water's own complaint.

We who weep
we weep as long as there are tears
finally the drugs of sleep and oblivion also
do their work.

Sun that sinks
preserve us from gentle hands
and consolation that even so consoles nothing.

The butterfly of oblivion its wing velvet-smooth
but with a poisoned barb beneath.
For the water owns no songs.

Sun come – sun disappear
frost come – frost disappear.

Summer and winter will even so come
but to us they will not come back.

Water come – water turn
wind come – wind disappear

to us they will even so not come back.

Goldeneye come – goldeneye turn
boat come – boat disappear.

Goldeneyes and boats will even so come
to us they will not come back.

For a long time after the water was clear blue
with tints of green

boats set out from the land, boats sought the land

fish weighed down the nets.

We sank and with us sank time
our bodies were filled not only with water
oblivion was given to our memory
and carried us below the sea-bed
for a while our names followed us
but when time yielded, so too did they.

In the mouldering where we had been once before
before names had been given –
and around us the mouths of fishes.

But nothing of what we relate
have we ever related
we are in the land of death
and we have nothing from there to relate.

The words are placed in our mouths
how we were carried ever deeper
and reached the realm of Oblivion
where the cows of oblivion grazed
and we drank of the milk of oblivion.

Late at night we reached the shore that sings
snow fell
the song was the song of oblivion
sweet as honey it met our lips
as when the man sinks into the woman
and woman into man.

We sailed on – and the ice breaks –
we rowed on – we saw long-tailed duck, eider and goldeneye
our eyes broke, our lips split
we were borne on
the green of the algae became our sail.
the eagle gave us its eye.

It was the journey down to our death
about that this has related.
About the death-land and our days there
we have nothing to relate.

Birds that were not birds
sought in towards the coast
their breasts were rent by hail
in their eyes were also holes.

They flew against the windows
they wanted to enter where the humans were.

We did not sink
like our dead had sunk
in the water of sorrow we had
long been drawn down.

Sometimes the shore became a jetty for us
there we waited beyond waiting.

From the bed of the winds
which is deeper than that of the water
we heard voices –
to us they whispered.

Whether one year or many had passed –
that spring a wagtail came.

It sat on the edge of the field
we saw it
it bore no greeting from the dead
but it was alive as we are alive.

The clear air became even clearer
we saw our life.
A dread it was.

The sorrow grieves in us –
shall we one day see it
as the wagtail looked at us?

The abode of the oar forgotten
were it to be found its wood would be so splintered
that no shore there could be traced
even less a name.

No memories of eider and goldeneye.

The oar owned by the water
The oar owned by No One.