

An underwater photograph showing sunlight filtering through the water, creating a shimmering, ethereal effect. The light rays are visible, and the water has a greenish-blue tint. The overall mood is serene and mysterious.

# Sea Glass

Billie Chernicoff

Sea Glass is the fifty-first in a series of texts and chapbooks published by  
Metambesen.

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For Charlotte and Robert

# Sea Glass

Billie Chernicoff

**Metambesen  
Annandale-on-Hudson  
2018**

1.

No east, only mist.

The sea rose up,

a revelation,

my ear was its temple,

my skin was at home.

I had not slept

so I caught the news there.

I hurried to music.

There was a single gull

and there were many.

My friend listened with me.

Is that possible?

Like the arm of a cove.

The cotton sheet over us

swanned away, knots

untangled themselves,

just shadows,

and we too

were merely ourselves.

2.

In a strange bed with no table  
I an island say what I listen.  
The sea all around me  
rushes with secrets,  
not only mine,  
those of sadhus and widows  
on the steps of the Ganges,  
and those of the English,  
their tyrannies,  
civilities,  
majestic certainties  
and quiet prayer for bread,  
their island no man is,  
their drowned book.

3.

Ink spread out  
over the damp paper,  
a lapis egg,  
and I thought  
something had ended  
there, but with the next breath  
I had taken the egg deep in  
and couldn't be sure  
of anything,  
though it felt safe in me  
and could wait.

4.

I'll tell you a book  
in another language  
that has deeds and travelers  
and silver for free.  
There's laughter at all hours  
as if our gods lived  
just across the street  
and still loved us  
and kept an eye on us  
and never tired of our fumbling  
and fondling and the moon  
was a beaten gold cup,  
gone by the time we get up to look.  
How handsome he is, that gull.  
I want us to touch each other.  
Soon our almost immortal children  
go to war and invent art.  
Now I've lost track of the plot,  
but it's you, love, it's you.



5.

Every hour has its say.  
If it's not roses,  
it's Solomon's Seal,  
creamy cups dangling in the sky  
or a stone I found on the beach  
a granite almost heart  
that holds paper on the table,  
a pact with gravity,  
lest we forget as we thump  
crudely around that we,  
too, agreed to be here,  
tethered,  
hoping to be educated.  
Solomon's Seal,  
so called because the thick,  
fleshy, medicinal root  
bears leaf scars resembling  
a king's seal, a ring  
inscribed by God herself.  
This was in the time  
of magician kings,  
and the wisdom of love,  
stars of David,

heraldry, splendor.  
Or so called for the dangling  
liliaceous chalices  
like Arabic drinking cups  
marked on the bottom  
with Solomon's hex,  
for anyone to see,  
like that man,  
pretending to be drunk,  
inscribing the sigil in his mind.  
He could be Solomon himself,  
his ring stolen and thrown in the sea,  
swallowed by a fish.

6.

The islanders don't lock their doors  
so you can try their perfumes and violet ink,  
remedies from cuttlefish and pure salt.  
A fish is in charge of the church  
and there are no sins and no headaches,  
only baseball on the radio,  
and composers beginning with B.  
After awhile you begin to wonder  
if all this could be true,  
and Jesus doesn't praise doubters,  
though the other teacher does.  
If only the ocean, if only the ocean were true.  
You plunge in, uncertain apostle, to find  
you're inseparable, there is no wound  
no wound at all. You are free to go.

7.

J'oublie, I forget to dream

in my own language.

Oublions,

let's forget together,

till we are here.

Till the lovely rough glass,

that fell from ships,

falls from our lips,

a turquoise like Botticelli's,

the amber of Flemish varnish.

Gull, silica, salt on the sill,

ridge, coil, hidden whorl,

fig, ear, slipper, wing,

jingle, cockle, whelk, speckle,

shallow, swallow, ethereal null.

Now forget, now remember

living words and living water,

strange tongues, gone gods

come again, then we're home.

8.

On this island no one's married.

A gold ring is the outward

visible sign

of endless proposals

like green, or the wind,

warm skin and rose hip tea,

a good, damp book,

the pale curtain you lift

to see the moon,

even a dog barking,

and a husband or lover

who comes to bed

and dreams he's lost

in a perilous city,

while you dream of water,

never the same.

Or are we all married?

Here to husband

and wife each other,

to say good morning

bravely again,

and the vessel

of this promising

ordeal of becoming  
is vast, immeasurable,  
so the word vessel  
is meaningless,  
like a tall sailing ship  
on the horizon we can't explain.

9.

Who even knows what now is?  
Something shy, swollen,  
worshipful, scared,  
hopeful, inventive,  
tensing and loosening  
its limbs. Streams  
and unfurls the sea's  
own being. A feeling,  
breathing luminescence  
that hovers, sways,  
slips off its clothes.  
All desire, needs nothing,  
all mind with a secret bone,  
insinuates, occults, divulges itself  
with a spurt of ink like a cuttlefish.

10.

Rebellious swimmer,  
the sepia subject,  
much copper in the blood,  
Aphroditic, oceanic,  
motherless,  
with archetypal eyes,  
a ruse? Is moved  
by feeling. Itself.  
Whoever.  
Unable to hide  
her tears, projects  
as a mask  
a powerful anima  
with bedroom eyes.  
An incomparable enemy,  
sly, as a lover, a virtuoso,  
with excitable, camera eyes.



11.

Close your ears.

To hear again

is to be in love

with that strange girl

under the wave,

who lulls you

till you want to be her.

Come inside,

before she's all you know

and you live forever

in a house with no floor.

## 12. Catalogue of the Stones

Smooth, rugosa, broken hearted,  
volcanic, lunatic, translucent.

Chaste, adulterous,  
romantic italics,  
arias, heresies,  
obvious forgeries.

Passwords,  
guesswork,  
rumors,  
silences,  
the null that breathes  
and closes your eyes,  
good anglo saxon words  
that fit in the hollow of your hand.

13.

Naiein, to swim  
or suckle  
a sort of rapport  
with oneself  
herself,  
a borne up  
affinity.

Yes, absolute.

Once swim  
meant water,  
lucid anima  
of the whole world.

But how to understand  
its olden root,  
to hunt?

Is it that we listen for her?

14.

The fisher king  
can only fish,  
which is nothing  
but waiting.  
He waits in the mist  
where no one  
ever comes along  
except a fish, lured  
by the man's confessions,  
the provocative glisten  
of his doubts.

"The infidel, I hear,  
has many words for love,  
whereas I have but one,"  
the man says to the fish,  
or "I have learned  
all this timeless time  
only to be here,"  
or "Everything happens  
in the body."

"Teach me to pray,"  
a prentice to the sea.

"Not only whom

does the grail serve,  
but who is the grail,"  
he says at last,  
and thus each consents  
in his own way to be healed.

15.

If nothing else, mist.

Damp paper,

sticky table, the wet

from the chair seeping up.

You can hear it

in the leaves.

These are the close,

obvious things

I count on,

the things at hand,

weather,

fat drops of water

sliding over the rose hips,

and birds, the articulate

sparrows and cardinals,

friends of friends,

rude gulls and grackles,

those lovers I love

as a sort of practice,

and then really do.

They bring the small,

important news,

all I can know of here

or anywhere,  
through this sea fog  
of real substance  
so you can see the air,  
its tides of bright shards,  
veils that unveil.

The blessed visible,  
the given I take  
for something to know,  
something to say.

Sea glass. Fragments  
of what may once have been  
one great rose window  
in some mythic, beloved Europe  
whose roughed up words  
we pick up on the beach  
and use again.

16.

Mist, and green tea,  
its smoky  
slightly bitter  
familiarity,  
the givens,  
what is at hand.

What alights  
and goes,  
the null  
that is grace.

In a little while  
mist will be gone,  
tea will be gone,  
the mourning dove  
with his rose throat,  
and pretty wings,  
his cry or coo,  
which is not mourning,  
but wooing, will be gone.

In such nothings  
we begin,  
in the silences.



17.

Likewise the heart  
is not a pump.  
It is moved to answer.  
Persuaded,  
breathed,  
sucked into form,  
the heart acquiesces  
to blood's sovereign motive,  
the vortices of galaxies,  
tornadoes,  
the spiraling whelk,  
whorl of the ram's horn,  
the involute rose,  
the desire of desire  
to rise and go round,  
its devotion,  
obsession,  
swoon to be known,  
the gothic arch,  
the embrace,  
helix of the I/thou  
that pulses and twists  
through the child in the womb,

creating a heartbeat,  
then a heart.

18.

That explains the intelligence  
of the heaven of the moon  
that heralds the herald  
of those who call out.

It explains the mutual  
lunar tug, how ardor acts,  
its comings and goings,  
the tidal swirl  
(beauty, love, loss)  
that makes that odd, tilted  
heptahedron, that grail in our chest,  
and all the heart shaped stones on the beach.

19.

My errors are many,  
lies numberless.  
What I know of astronomy  
is only anatomy.  
I confess that ship  
is just a tree  
rooted in the mind,  
or another zodiac  
octaves above,  
flames you can read  
through a rising wave  
if you're any sailor,  
though you may founder  
on a single letter.  
The tongue fishes  
for lost words, mother,  
a naiad,  
father, the light,  
whose light eyed daughter  
you might even marry,  
to find yourself lost  
in her atlas or odyssey,  
labors and miracles,

oars and wings,  
a book of longing.  
Touched everywhere,  
are you touched?  
The utterly known  
can only be unknown.  
Weaving unweaving  
her misterie,  
deceiving the long night,  
a gull, a ruse,  
the eye of the island,  
a cunning shuttle,  
a sea of hearsay,  
and all the voices her one.

## Notes

Penelope, daughter of a Naiad and wife of Odysseus, is a hidden figure in Sea Glass. Naiad comes to us from the word for swim, or flow, its Indoeuropean root (s)nāu is also the root of words for suckle, like nurse and nurture. Naiads are water nymphs, and while lighthearted by temperament, they can also be jealous and a bit overexcited, sometimes drowning the men they love.

The name Penelope may have originated from the word for 'woof' or 'shuttle' or, alternatively, from the name of a water bird. A gull is a water bird, and a ruse.

Rumors are many. Duris of Samos and the Vergilian commentator Servius report that Penelope slept with all 108 suitors in Odysseus' absence, and consequently gave birth to Pan (all).

"The shroud Penelope weaves is a coded language representing the Odyssey's major themes: "la mémoire et l' oubli, le mariage et la mort, la ruse."\* One might imagine that Penelope is conning both suitors and readers, and that the shroud she weaves and unweaves alone in her room, *deceiving the long night*, is the Odyssey itself, and Penelope its author -- text as textile, yarn for yarn, craft as craft.

Shroud, a thing that envelops or obscures, "a shroud of mist," "a shroud of secrecy." cf. Old Norse skruð "shrouds of a ship, tackle, gear; (mid-15c.) strong rope supporting the mast of a ship. One without rigging was said to be naked.

Mystery, from Old French mistere, secret, hidden meaning, from Latin mysterium, secret rite, secret worship; a secret thing, from Greek mysterion, secret rite or doctrine, from mystes, one who has been initiated, from myein, to close, to shut, perhaps the lips, in secrecy.

Mystery, handicraft, trade, art (archaic), late 14c., from Medieval Latin misterium, alteration of Latin ministerium, service, occupation, office, ministry, influenced in form by Medieval Latin mysterium and in sense by maistrie, mastery.

\*Christos Tsagalis, *The Oral Palimpsest* "Exploring Intertextuality in the Homeric Epics," Center for Hellenic Studies, Harvard University.