

Vernon Watkins (1906-67)

2 *Ballad of Culver's Hole*

What feet are heard about these rocks
This highest tide of the year?
White spray of the equinox,
You chill the heart with fear.

Two boats close in from East and West 5
On a little boat that feels
The lucky weight of Culver
Gripping the stolen creels.

Is it the rope of Culver
Where the shag has the wit to dive, 10
Dragged through the shivering breakers,
That makes these rocks alive?

A great, round barrel
He has rolled up that grey beach.
Voices like claws are closing in, 15
Almost within reach.

In a moment he has vanished.
The gully's packed with dread.
Where is he hiding in the rocks,
The man they took for dead? 20

'Between this headland and that point
He surely ran aground.
Who saw the cunning hare stop dead
To cheat the flying hound?

You up there, on the cliff's dark brows, 25

You who stand there stiff,
Where does Culver keep his house,
Perched upon what cliff?

'We know nothing, we know nothing,
Never found his nest. 30
Ours is the crooked haystack,
The white-washed farm at rest.

We hear nothing, we hear nothing,
Only seabirds' cries.
Call his name to the rock, and then 35
Hear what the rock replies.

A white-washed cottage, a house of stone
Might not hold your man.
Out of a nest of bleaching bone
The brightest fisher sprang. 40

We have seen the kestrel hang in the air
And where the ravens glide
Have combed the rocks for laver-bread
And the cockles in the tide.

But danger haunts the upper ledge 45
Here where the seagull flies.
Why do you ask us gently
With murder in your eyes?

Watch, watch your footing.
The stones in the ledge are loose. 50
Under this hollow cliff the sea
Is hissing like a goose.'

'Let two upon the green turf go
And two upon the rocks.
A great tide is running, 55

On the door of death it knocks.

It roars to have him hammered down
With nails to the sea bed.
Where is he hiding in the rocks,
The man we took for dead?' 60

'The equinox is rising;
The sky to the West is black.
The sea has drowned a hundred pools:
Should we not go back?'

'To think, that fish was in my net 65
And now has got away.
He beckons for the sun to set
And the waters fill the bay.'

'Go back, go back, and leave him 70
Before it is too late.
The sea has drowned a thousand pools.
We cannot fight with Fate.

The great rock and the little rock,
They slip beneath the wave.
These breakers have drawn blood before, 75
Their lilies strewn a grave.

The mole beneath the giant sea
Is heaping mound on mound.
Make for the ship, come quickly,
Or we shall all be drowned.' 80

'The dark is helping the digging mole
To cut our exit off.
Who could smoke out a smuggler's hole
In a sea so blind and rough?

God rot the guts of Culver 85
By whom the good man dies.
He laughs behind a wall of rock
Where every rock has eyes.'

Now each rock wears disguises,
Each darkened stone deceives, 90
And louder the wave rises
With a noise of rustling leaves.

But before the long wave hit the ground
The shag had the wit to dive.
Those greyhounds covered at a bound 95
The hare they left alive .

Their noose is for that goose of the sea,
But they have not caught him yet.
A barrel rises slowly
Just where the sun had set. 100

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