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The Wrecking Light

Written by Robin Robertson

Published by Picador

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ROBIN ROBERTSON

The Wrecking Light

PICADOR



First published 2010 by Picador
an imprint of Pan Macmillan, a division of Macmillan Publishers Limited
Pan Macmillan, 20 New Wharf Road, London N1 9RR
Basingstoke and Oxford
Associated companies throughout the world
www.panmacmillan.com

ISBN 978-0-330-51550-4

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1 3 5 7 9 8 6 4 2

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from
the British Library.

Printed in Great Britain by CPI Mackays, Chatham ME5 8TD

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I dropped it, I dropped it,
and on my way I dropped it

ABOUT TIME

In the time it took to hold my breath
and slip under the bathwater
– to hear the blood-thud in the veins,
for me to rise to the surface –
my parents had died,
the house had been sold and now
was being demolished around me,
wall by wall, with a ball and chain.

I swim one length underwater,
pulling myself up on the other side, gasping,
to find my marriage over,
my daughters grown and settled down,
the skin loosening
from my legs and arms
and this heart going
like there's no tomorrow.

ABANDON

That moment, when the sun ignites the valley and picks out
every bud that's greened that afternoon; when birds
spill from the trees like shaken sheets; that sudden loosening
into beauty; the want in her eyes, her eyes' fleet blue;
the medals of light on water; the way the water intrigued
about her feet, the ocean walking her out into its depth,
sea lighting the length of her from the narrow waist
to the weight of the breasts; the way she lifted her eyes to me
and handed me back, simplified; that moment
at the end, knowing the one I had abandoned was myself,
edging with the sun around the bay's scoop of rocks,
rolling the last gold round the glass; that shelving love
as the sun was lost to us and the sky bruised, and the
stones grew cold as the shells on the beach at Naxos.

AT ROANE HEAD

for John Burnside

You'd know her house by the drawn blinds –
by the cormorants pitched on the boundary wall,
the black crosses of their wings hung out to dry.
You'd tell it by the quicken and the pine that hid it
from the sea and from the brief light of the sun,
and by Aonghas the collie, lying at the door
where he died: a rack of bones like a sprung trap.

A fork of barnacle geese came over, with that slow
squeak of rusty saws. The bitter sea's complaining pull
and roll; a whicker of pigeons, lifting in the wood.

She'd had four sons, I knew that well enough,
and each one wrong. All born blind, they say,
slack-jawed and simple, web-footed,
rickety as sticks. Beautiful faces, I'm told,
though blank as air.
Someone saw them once, outside, hirpling
down to the shore, chittering like rats,
and said they were fine swimmers,
but I would have guessed at that.

Her husband left her: said
they couldn't be his, they were more
fish than human,
said they were beglamoured,
and searched their skin for the showing marks.

For years she tended each difficult flame:
their tight, flickering bodies.
Each night she closed
the scales of their eyes to smoor the fire.

Until he came again,
that last time,
thick with drink, saying
he'd had enough of this,
all this witchery,
and made them stand
in a row by their beds,
twitching. Their hands
flapped; herring-eyes
rolled in their heads.
He went along the line
relaxing them
one after another
with a small knife.

It's said she goes out every night to lay
blankets on the graves to keep them warm.
It would put the heart across you, all that grief.

There was an otter worrying in the leaves, a heron
loping slow over the water when I came
at scraich of day, back to her door.

She'd hung four stones in a necklace, wore
four rings on the hand that led me past the room
with four small candles burning

which she called ‘the room of rain’.
Milky smoke poured up from the grate
like a waterfall in reverse
and she said my name
and it was the only thing
and the last thing that she said.

She gave me a skylark’s egg in a bed of frost;
gave me twists of my four sons’ hair; gave me
her husband’s head in a wooden box.
Then she gave me the sealskin, and I put it on.