

Sea Gypsies¹

You are a spirit, I know. When did you die?
—King Lear

1.

Her eyes search you for amulets,
a fish skin sack perhaps—anything
to ward off the salty teeth of sudden

storms. Who can know what missions
a falling branch fulfills? Didn't you feel
the rocks shift to decode your footsteps?

No creaky wagons here, no copper pans,
cunning knives or even damp silk for sale.
This woman knows no ballads of silver

earrings, or spurting semen in haylofts
(while Lady's away) grafting urgent passion
onto her womb, though her eyes still

question your buttons. She has babies
enough to dampen this dust. If she could
she would shake all twilight free of men.

She smashes oyster shells against a stone
with a blackened hammer. Those pearls
you glimpse are *your* dreams, not hers.

¹ No relation to European gypsies, this clan has lived for generations on the island of Phuket in southern Thailand. Their place of origin is a mystery.

2.

Now opaque, his eyes could see once—
but why should late blindness matter
to an old man whose oars would make

the dolphins skip? When a man becomes
a spirit his flesh no longer mourns the grave:
memory's the place where colour sings best.

He's a capsule of days before these huts,
a catechism of the winds and waves
that brought their probing pod here

to moss this narrow reach. The children
clamour to touch his stomach for wisdom,
watch him chip bits of god from dry bark.

3.

Naked boys peek behind you for faces.
“Hello . . . bye,” they say, trailing you down
to the dock, circling with stamping feet.

“You—one baht!” they plead, diving in
to float on their backs, genitals bobbing up
like buds seeking sun, until you flip in coins.

You photograph their eager, lupine faces,
hands uplifted with the glinting coppers.
“You—” they shout, waving. “You one baht!”

4.

Fishermen stand in water up to their thighs,
fingers busy at knots and bait, boats leaning
into shore like sharks sleepy with air.

They chart the course of clouds, paddling
to where their nets will swell. They read
the skin of sea like a trembling lover's back.

5.

Hands behind her, a young woman listens
to a Frenchman murmur tales of St Denis.²
Her nipples harden in the evening breeze.

DAVID P. REITER

² Denied access to Paris, the early *bohemians*, as the French called them, were lodged at La Chapelle, St Denis.