

Turner's "Slaves Thrown Overboard"

The sea has brought me tribute from many lands.
Chests of silver, barrels of tobacco, sugar-loaves.
Swords with gleaming handles, crucifixes set in pearls
Which marvelled at, but with the years grown rusty.
And mouldy, abandoned—cheap and counterfeit goods:
The sea has mocked and beggared me for centuries,
Except for books in different letterings
Which, before they dissolve I decipher
As best I can. These, and the babbling
Of dying sailors are my means to languages
And the wisdom of other tribes. Now the sea
Has delivered a child sought from the moon in years
Of courtship, when only the light from that silent,
Full eye saw me whilst many ships passed by
Indifferently. She hides behind a veil
Like the brides of our village but watches me
In loneliness and grief for that vast space
That still carries my whisper to her ears,
Vaster than the circumference of the sea
That so swiftly drowned my early cries
In its unending roar. There is no land
In sight, no voice carries from that land,
My mother does not answer, I cannot hear her
Calling, as she did when I dragged myself
To the bank of the pond, my head a pool
And fountain of blood, and she runs to me
Screaming, plucks me up with huge hands,
Lays me down on land, as the sea promised
In earlier days, clasped and pitched me sideways
In the direction of our village, my dazed mind
Thought, across a distance big beyond even

The grasp of Salvador (he scribbles numbers
In his book, face wrinkled in concentration
Like an old seal's mouth brooding in crevices
Of ice for fish; like my father
Counting beads at the end of each day,
Reckoning which calf was left abandoned
In the savannah, lost from the herd, eaten
By wild beasts. He checks that we are parcelled
In equal lots, men divided from women,
Chained in fours and children subtracted
From mothers. When all things tally
He snaps the book shut, his creased mouth
Unfolding in a smile, as when, entering
His cabin, mind heavy with care, breeding
And multiplying percentages, he beholds
A boy dishevelled on his bed). For months
It seemed to speed me to a spot where my mother
Waited, wringing her hands, until I woke to find
Only sea. Months became years and I forgot
The face of my mother, the plaid cloth
Tied around her head, the scars on her forehead,
The silver nose-ring which I tugged, made her start,
Nearly rolling me from her lap but catching me
In time, and when I cried out in panic
Of falling, pinned me tightly, always,
To her bosom. Now I am loosed
Into the sea, treading water. I no longer
Call, I have even forgotten the words.
Only the moon remains, watchful and loving
Across a vast space, woman I whisper to,
Companion of my darkest nights.

DAVID DABYDEEN