

New Narratives for the North East

Finfolk

by Carmen Marcus

Prologue

Ask where's the North? At York 'tis on the Tweed: In Scotland at the
Orcaades, and there at Greenland, Zembla, or the Lord knows where.

Alexander Pope, *An Essay on Man*, 1733-34

*I wash up fins first on the knotty shingle. A net for a dress, dulse in my hair and the
nub of a tail between my legs. Rolling in with the muck and treasure, wound pink
shells and feathers. This is the Tide's library, if you know how to read it. But I'm not
written yet. No title, no pages; just beach smoke and a question – Where is the
North? I can't get home without an answer in my empty bait-box, hope-chest heart.*

*— Lord knows, the man said. Well how can he, when the North begins where
his laws end? There, look, the saucepan in the sky, a shiny pot full of dark, and a line
to the North Star.*

— Up, it says, so up I go, to the town below the cliff.

The Navigator

The bony cat of the Abbey hunches on the cliff above, ready to pounce on anyone who takes too long going in or coming out of Vinegar Sal's. Sal's is not a tourist café. It's a wrecker's yard for fishermen, fortune tellers, kipper smokers and blow-ins like me. I've asked them all where North is. I've offered my good blessings at sea for a bearing, but I'm not true family so none of them will share their ten-story teas with me – except for the Priest. I see myself in his face, an expression of violence and time that makes me think he's more lost soul than saver, but there's always space at his table for me.

— I got something for you, he says, pushing a splinter of wood, no bigger than a Wagtail towards me.

— Got it from an Alaskan Whaler. When he rolls up his sleeves you can see little people dancing up his arms in inky circles. — Yorkshire oak, grown when there were still wolves on the moors. Then Fishburn got it and made it into a flat-bottomed collier. It found the unknown lands of the South.

He takes my hand. I let his fingers nose the webs between my fingers.

— It's all that's left of the ship. He drops the splinter on my palm. — But it still homes North.

— *What do you want for it? I can knot you a fair wind or curse your rivals.*

— A patch of skin will do. Where is up to you.

— *Here.* I touch the place above my breast, the last place I felt North.

*

The Priest's House dangles at the bottom of the cliff. His tools are set out on the kitchen table alongside his bread: a bent needle, ink and a stick. He sits me by the fire.

— Please, he says. — You must thank the tools first.

The needle finds inlets in me. Sounds me. Estimates me. Until I am nothing but a raging edge.

— I helped a man draw lines around the edge of the world. He marked the bites the sea had taken from the land with ink. He was faithful to his lines; a priest like me. I liked him very much. But when he finished, his people took the land inside the line, gave it their names and made their homes there. Because I am drawing this line on you, it means this is mine.

— *I want to see.*

The place above my breast is a wound of bloody capes, bays and points. A new island I've never seen.

— *Can I have it now?*

But he throws my splinter on the fire. It spits and sparks, just like my skin. Just like me. I grab his empty hand, dig my nails in.

— Remember what it is, he tells me, — to have a part of you cut out so that you are always a stranger to it. He presses my chest to help me remember. — Then you don't need a bit of firewood to find North.

I walk up the beach, my back to the Abbey cat. The stone arms of the piers almost meet. Their little lights make it seem that it is only a small thing he has taken. It's hard to tell what his island will look like when it heals. Like looking back at the darkened windows of the town.

Sea Lover

Water has a skin. You can touch it. You can read it. But it never tells the same story twice. It can mean a storm if it swells. It can mean a storm if it dips. So it doesn't help to be uneasy – just go in, get under. But I can't.

— It's beautiful isn't it?

A land-woman stops behind me and just drops her thoughts on the sand for me to pick up. Do I tell her the other story, that it can be as faithful and forever as green and then crack to black and drop you in hell? Why should I? Words spoken above the water are flimsy, throwaway plastic things.

— *It's lovely.*

— That's how I'd like to go.

— *Go where?*

— Pass on, you know – die. At sea. Peacefully. Quick.

— *Me too.*

— Really? Not many people get it.

The gelid sand is not deep, only wet. Depth is not something you consent to. It comes to you if you want it enough.

— My aunt died after a fall, stuck in the house for seven months, her body so full of water she should have drowned. My dad died at home holding his hands like he was trying to row out to sea, like this.

I take her hands. Her skin is terribly dry. Her need for the sea unbearable.

— They wanted water in the end. Oceanic, Freud calls it, that need to lose yourself in a body bigger than your own.

I lead her towards the sea, a wave swells, rises in white crests but it's a tease and dissolves into the sand without touching us.

— It won't work, she says. — My grandad saved a sea god; just a little thing but it dragged half the net under. He cut it free and it swam back and blessed our family with luck at sea. The next wave bulges and smacks against our ankles, sucks back, pulling the sand from under our feet, small rocks smack bones.

— But it's a curse.

Families fill the beach, shake their towels, lick their sun-wounds and the water opens for them.

— When they've gone, I force myself to go in, a little further each day. When I take off my clothes I see flukes, fins, tiny venomous things. Once I lay on my belly and put my hands on the seabed. I still had all of my clothes on, but it was warm enough for them to dry before I got home.

Next to us a woman unmoors from her kids. A faint shark bite of scars track under her costume. A flatness where a breast has been. She goes under – the sea loves all the tender parts of her that the sun won't touch. Yet me and the blessed woman are stuck at the water's edge.

Only from a distance does it look like a true edge. The way the kissed imagines being kissed: the surprise that water is attracted to itself. She feels the tug of it, the yank of that love. I don't. The sea's skin rises. It could mean anything.

— *I take back my curse.* I say in words only the sea can hear.

Now they come, her brothers and sisters from the sea, whiskering, grey-bellied, fluked and finned. To rock her back to a bodied thing. Lucky her.

I watch her for a while from the shore as the salt dries on my skin. When everyone has gone, I force myself to go in – again and again – the water pushes me out breech with the gull scraps and those sad and deadly plastic things.

Whale Funeral

— Is it dead?

— *Is this North?*

I don't think they can hear me. They swaddle and carry me up to the dune slacks, to the smell of smoke and meat, and the laughter.

— *You having a party?*

— Funeral.

Her voice is slow and studied like she's turning earth.

— *Sorry, I'll go.*

— Not in that state.

This one's more water, her voice moves easily between stones.

— Come and eat.

This one keeps her eyes on the pan. The one who hasn't spoken yet is young, she throws me a smile that sparks and fades over the fire. The smoke smudges them into one motherly creature with a thick coat and full hands, but their voices are not rooted here. And though the fret is rising cold, they are warmed by a different angle of the sun.

— Here, take a bite.

The meat tires my teeth. I've only ever been suckled by the sea.

— *Was it family?*

— A whale.

— We thought it was you, come back.

— You from around here?

— *No.*

— Well that makes you family.

The pan lady stops stirring to hand me some wine and tinks my glass with her own.

— They're my aunt's, I brought them over with me. You've gotta bring something of home right?

— I took the keys to my old flat. Everything else, books, toys, I left.

— I left my children. They were adults by then. But here, I'm more than a mother again.

— I left Tahinli, the smell of sweat and cigarettes on buses, loud high-pitched talk that never stopped.

— Do you go home?

— It's not the same. You?

— Even if I could go back, it's not my country now, it's anti-Semitic, anti-science.

— I default to pounds now and take a raincoat everywhere.

— Me too.

— I love the moors here, barren, kind of familiar.

— There are things I don't get. We bake cakes for everything – new friends, neighbours who're sick or have lost someone. I'd show up with a plate and they'd be so shocked.

She passes me a square of brown sweetness, like something sliced from the ground.

— *How did the whale die?*

- It was half starved already.
- There was nothing for it to eat here. Too far North.
- Tell me about it.

The pan lady stirs up salted smoke – I smell spinach, garlic, nutmeg.

- So what were you doing in the water?
- *Trying to get back in.*
- We tried to get the whale back in.
- There was a big crowd. The lifeboat. TV.
- Until they realised it was pointless.
- It was just us left. That's how we met.
- We weren't going to leave it on its own.
- We knew what it meant – to wash up here.

If the waves had taken me back I would have had a crashing lullaby to drown me but not this – not family or the heat of these women.

- Why do you think it beached?
- Love.
- Nowhere else to go.
- Maybe it never asked to leave.
- What about you?
- *I can't go home.*
- Me neither.
- Where's home?

I point to the sea.

- *Same place as the whale.*

— Same place as us. We're out there somewhere. The part of us we cut out to get here.

— *Where's North from here?*

Every time they laugh they stoke the fire.

— North, hon? Is warmth, cyclones, tropics, wet season.

— It's low sun.

— It's wet cold.

— It's tough.

— It's mystisk.

— *What does that mean?*

— Fathomless.

— Absolutely.

— You want to come home with us?

— We can give you a bed.

— Till you find your feet.

I want it. I want raincoats and mothers to wash them. I want gardens to sun in and baths to wash the salt away in. I want beds and lullabies that won't drown me. And North to be something on TV that doesn't matter to me. But my empty bait-box, hope-chest heart rattles.

A tractor's chug puts out their laughter.

— *I need to get home.*

— You can make one.

I shake my head.

— OK sweetheart, but here, take the raincoat.

The fishermen back their boat into the water.

— *Can I catch a lift?*

— We don't take owt in the boat that's not necessary, they say, laughing at the flapping rag of me.

But, I see, they're first out to trawl in the dark, desperate to be first back, to get the best prices on the beach.

— *You don't need some luck?*

Landmarked

Look at them. They are beautiful, these fishermen. Two grown men and a brindle boy, his hand too lively yet to steer. The quiet unbroken attention they give to the sea. Above the drunk mirror of the water they always seemed ugly. I try to tell them what I need in the language of the sea but not one of us can speak it now.

— She's feverish; the heat's rising off her. They wrap me in an oilskin that smells of tar and fear, a smell I've licked off diving birds.

— She's been marked look, here.

— What is that, a map?

They've found the unowned part of me.

— It's infected.

The grief.

— Get some sea water on it.

I want to let them clean me because I want to keep them easy. But now I feel a dangerous cooling.

They feed the nets into the water; no one speaks against the rhythm of the work. They stop only for the sunrise. The younger man leans over the side of the boat to wet his hand, and thumbs the little lad's head.

— If you take life from the sea you offer your own in exchange. She can take you. Any time she wants. She'll call you to her and you will go like it's home, and not struggle.

I see his skinny body stretch twenty feet tall. I didn't know. I didn't know they made that bargain with me.

— You're made now lad. Best get the gear back in though. It's going jet black to the North.

The cloud is cut with capes, points, bays. It's that cut and raging part of me coming from the North. I get up, help them haul the net; it's only half in when the rain comes in off the sea.

— Ready on the bilge pump, the older man shouts. — Our Little, you're on the tiller next to me, in case I go over.

I'm scared. They're not. Though they're lost in the motions of surviving, under that they are begging me to call them. The rain comes like a punch from the side. Then the wind. I hold their wriggling names between my teeth like a careful bitch.

Look at them. They are beautiful. These fishermen. But I've been under them. The grim shadow of the boat; the muscle of their rope. I've felt the ugly touch of air and clammy knife. I've chewed those careful hands until they threw me back and trailed the gutting lanes for my family. And I have been as cruel and worse. And they have seen me: flukes, fins and fearful venomous things. We've seen each other now from both sides of the water – and look, they still love me.

— St Peter's, The Look Out, Coatham Spire.

The old man is calling the landmarks for home until we can see them. The tractor is waiting at the low tide and landing is as easy as being weaned from the sea.

5

The Way Finder

The fishermen drop me at the jetty. It's slippery and uneven, and the swell washes it with mean slaps. I'm still not used to my feet or the rough way that air just lets you fall, and for the first time I realise I'm afraid of the sea. The last climb up the cliff is hard, dressed in my raincoat, too blue to be welcome.

I hear him first. He's singing into the caw and kee-aw of the birds, his note a sentinel rock under them, the sea a fussing chorus.

—Will your anchor hold?

I see an army shaking their speared beaks at the sky: gannets, guillemots, and the white-striped clackers of razorbills. Puffins pout wild rainbows. Fulmars, grey as faith and the day, hover above them all, bored by the wind.

He sits on an upturned crate waterproofing his boots with pig fat, his bare feet on bare rock.

— *Hey.*

The wind hooks the breath out of me.

— Have you come about my book? he asks, as though I'm an every-day thing.

A raven drops a slug of pig fat at his foot, and he dips his rag and starts polishing again.

— Mischief, he says to the bird which lets him rub its hard beak clean. — Is it right to call them beasts? He looks at me, waiting for an answer – but I don't know to which question.

— *No, seems to fit either. — I came to find North.*

Cloud shadow, dark enough to believe in demons, rushes over us.

— Oh, I hoped you'd come to help me find my book.

And I can see now that he's a writer. Long fingers, small feathers caught in his hair, his cap; the tender attention he gives to his boots, a careful expression of soul. And I'm grounded by it – the fabulous tangle of an old man's heart.

— I can help you find your book.

He nods and waves me to follow behind the flotilla of eider chicks that graze his ankles. His home is cut into the rock. There are signs written on the walls, instructions to anyone who might need to know:

The ducks like to sleep under the bed, don't be alarmed.

Lift the door to close it tight: the hinge is loose.

The ravens bring the pig fat for your boots so keep them happy.

The shelves are full of labelled boxes and jars as well as a stack of notebooks and stout pens. He hands me his boots.

— That window faces North, the way you came.

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