

THE DRUNKEN BOAT

(A free translation)

The rivers I came down were strictly off-limits;
My pilot and helmsman jumped ship in a fright;
Rivermen picked them up – frogs in a bucket –
And roasted them over their fires at night.

What did I care for them, for any crews?
Haulers of cotton and satin and wine?
I left them behind me like yesterday's news
And entered those rivers, crossed over that line.

I've heard of a woman who chopped off her hands
To prove that she loved beyond virtue and vice;
But rip tides will sever you from where you stand
Like children who find themselves trapped on the ice.

Blessed by the tempest, I woke on the water;
A ship from a bottle, I danced out of sight;
Rolling past galley slaves sent to the slaughter,
For ten sunless days and for ten moonless nights.

Sweeter than café au lait in the country,
Soaking up sugar with yesterday's bread,
Ocean flowed into my cabin and swept me
Clear of my compass and anchor and bed.

Since then, it's been me and my voice on the waves,
Singing past starlight and buoyed on the foam;
I've lived on my verses and watched as those slaves
Floated past, raptured and bloated on poems.

Where, tingeing the blueness, delirious reds
Fermenting the far scarlet arms of desire,
Rhythmic and slow, took my barque to their beds
Stronger than alcohol, vaster than lyres!

Lightning and waterspouts, hatreds and loves,
Flashed out the future and gushed what has been;
Sapphiric auroras, flotillas of doves –
I've known things that you've only thought that you've seen!

I've seen ancient actors walking on water –
Wavelets for bracelets, their stages awash –
Clotting the sunset like ink on a blotter
Or black and white movies that shutter and flash.

I've kissed ocean's eyelids, taking my time:
My midwinter sap just beginning to flow;
As fish, phosphorescent, darted and sang
On emerald evenings, blinded by snow.

I've ridden the swellings as cows in a meadow
Stampede for no other reason than spring;
Sheltered by Mary's illuminous shadow
I fetched them from reefs without halter or ring.

Floridas struck me from under the mizzen;
Human-skinned panthers dropped down from the trees;
Rainbows like bridles reached past the horizon
To horses that pulled me from under the seas.

I've seen a leviathan caught up in nets
Rotting away like a free-floating swamp;
Cataracts, sudden storms, geysering jets,
Shooting up smack in the middle of calms!

Icebergs and silver suns, barbecue skies,
Hideous strands within sunken ravines;
Gigantic serpents, devoured by flies,
Dripping perfume from the vineyard of dreams!

Winds from no quarter have given me wings,
Past singing fishes, past fishes of gold;
I would have shown children, mere infants, these things:
The hollows where sea urchins tumbled and rolled.

Exhausted by icecaps and temperate zones,
The ocean then lullaby'd me on her swell:
Like women who set up in shacks by the Seine
With parasite-laden sea flowers to sell.

Almost an island now, poising on rails
Gaggles and guano of garrulous birds,
I watched drunken sailors, asleep at their sails,
Drowning in dreams they had too long deferred!

I let my inebriate carcass float where
Ever it wanted, nor gave I much thought
To trade winds that blew through the albatross air,
Coast Guard and league Hanseatic forgot.

Steaming, free, mounted with violet mistings,
I, who pulled smoking wet bales from the hold
Dug in the hayloft, where, dampness persisting
Would have caught fire and ignited the world –

I, who tripped over electrified wires,
Chasing the hippos from sea-heaving fields,
Laughing like farmers whose only desires
Rest in the prospects the countryside yields –

Me, as I shuddered to feel through the mere,
Behemoths rutting in thunderous skies,
All that I wanted was to return here,
Threading the blue through eternity's eyes.

Islands flung down like a handful of stars
Open their mouths to the circling wings;
Is it in these that you sleep, nursing scars,
Healing the future from past wanderings?

I've wept in excess of decorum, it's true;
I should have stayed quiet, upstairs in my room;
I shouldn't have noticed the punishing blue,
The aspic-flecked sun or the hideous moon.

I should have sailed butterfly boats in a pond,
A sadder but wiser child, hunkered in mud;
Why did I have to go fetching beyond?
Oh, let my keel burst in the mothering flood!

I can no longer, you languorous waves,
Rock past the prison hulks chained to the sea;
I've burnt all my banners, abandoned my slaves,
Pray open their fetters; let them go free.

Ward McBurney, après Arthur Rimbaud