

SEABIRDS  
CRYING  
IN THE  
HARBOUR  
DARK

CATHERINE  
COLE



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*For Becky*



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Tell her this  
And more, –  
That the king of the seas  
Weeps too, old, helpless man.  
The bustling fates  
Heap his hands with corpses  
Until he stands like a child  
With surplus of toys.

*The Black Riders and Other Lines*, Stephen Crane, 1895

This quiet roof, where dove-sails saunter by,  
Between the pines, the tombs, throbs visibly.  
Impartial noon patterns the sea in flame –  
That sea forever starting and re-starting.  
When thought has had its hour, oh how rewarding  
Are the long vistas of celestial calm!

What grace of light, what pure toil goes to form  
The manifold diamond of the elusive foam!  
What peace I feel begotten at that source!  
When sunlight rests upon a profound sea,  
Time's air is sparkling, dream is certainty –  
Pure artifice both of an eternal Cause.

*The Graveyard by the Sea*, Paul Valéry, 1920

## The Sea, The Sea

Lucy Nugent wrote the words THE SEA on the blackboard, on a faint, chalky palimpsest of the previous day's classes.

'Okay,' she shouted, 'how many of you boys have seen the sea?'

'I have, Miss.'

'Have you, Johnnie?' She tried to keep the disbelief from her voice. 'Yes, Miss, on the TV.'

The rest of the kids sniggered. 'Anyone else?'

'We've *all* seen it on TV, Miss.'

'Has anyone really been to the seaside and stood with their feet in sea water?'

The room rustled as the children looked around. They knew no one had been to the coast but they checked in case, for liars, for the too dumb to know the difference between the real world and the television, for the dreamers.

'Right. Let's try to imagine it. I'm going to write some words on the board. One at a time, put up your hand and call out a description, please.'

‘Wet, Miss.’

‘Good boy, Eric.’

‘Blue, Miss.’

‘That’s right, Ian, but sometimes it can be green too.’

‘Is it ever purple, Miss?’ Johnnie again. The class laughed more loudly this time.

‘Yes, Johnnie, at sunset the sinking sun can turn the water lots of other colours, like orange, red, purple, yellow. It can make the sea look like it’s on fire.’

‘I’ve seen a picture of a sunset on the sea, Miss.’

‘That’s wonderful, Peter.’

‘The water would be deep, Miss.’

‘It would be, Sam, especially the further you go from the shore.’

‘It would be salty, Miss.’

‘Correct, Liam.’

There was a pause as the boys sought more adjectives.

‘Rough, Miss.’

‘Yes, on a windy day.’

‘Smooth, Miss.’

‘Yes, the opposite, on a still day.’

‘Sharky, Miss.’

She sighed. ‘What do you mean, Johnnie?’

‘There would be sharks, Miss, and whales and dolphins and fish. Tortoises and stingrays like the one that killed Steve Irwin, Miss, because he swam too close and got in its way.’

‘The sea is full of marine creatures, boys. Please write down the words. Marine. M. A. R. I. N. E. Creatures. C. R. E. A. T. U. R. E. S. Later we might draw some of them, okay, but first I want you to think about the sea and how else you might describe it.’

She walked to the window and gazed out at the schoolyard while she gave them time to think. Heatwaves radiated off the corrugated iron roof of the toilet block. A dust devil spun past the bike racks.

‘Miss?’

She turned slowly. ‘Yes, Johnnie?’ She could see the anticipation in the other boys’ body language. They were waiting for a silly question, something typically Johnnie, something not quite of the herd. Johnnie had his hand up, still.

‘It must be very old, Miss.’

She tried to keep impatience from her voice. ‘What do you mean, Johnnie?’

‘The sea must be ancient to get that big, Miss.’

Lucy saw a vast stretch of blue, a millennium of stories flowing with it, the sea as ancient as Ulysses, Vikings, armadas, sea battles, fleets and fleets of explorers, boat people.

Eric put up his hand. ‘What’s the difference between a sea and an ocean, Miss?’

She turned his question around to the class. ‘What do you think, boys? How would you answer Eric’s question?’

Johnnie’s hand shot up. Lucy looked to the other side of the room, willing another child to reply. ‘Yes, Tom,’ she said at last, ignoring the chopping impatience of Johnnie’s arm.

‘An ocean is bigger and a sea is closer to land.’

‘Very good, Tom. Who would like to add something to that?’

Up Johnnie’s hand went again. Just then, a bell resonated through the classroom’s prefabricated walls. It was time for playlunch and the boys began to stand.

‘Sit down for a moment. Sit down! Geography homework for tomorrow. I want you to draw a picture of the sea

as realistically as you can. Eric! Tommy! Did you hear me? Right. For tomorrow, lots of lovely colour and detail. We'll pin them up and each of you can explain what you've drawn.'



When the boys had gone Lucy set about tidying the room. Arithmetic was next and the transition between subjects was important if they were to concentrate on the new lesson. She removed all traces of the sea from the room – some library books, a map and a small plastic globe. She tidied each boy's desk, picking up any rubbish and putting it in the bin. That done, she went to the window again. The boys were hurling themselves around the playground. Some played tag, others kicked a football to each other. She looked for Johnnie but couldn't see him. She took her mug from the drawer in her desk and a neat pink fuji apple, then went to the staffroom to make a cup of tea.

The school's two other teachers were there before her, Miss Elwick, who was the girls' teacher, and Mr Howe, who managed the older boys.

'Hello, Miss Nugent,' Mr Howe said as she came in. 'Ready for a cuppa?' He reached over and switched the electric kettle on. 'Shouldn't be too long. It's only just boiled.'

Lucy smiled and went to the sink to rinse out her cup. She found it silly that the teachers addressed one another so formally but it was what the parents expected, or so Mr Howe had told her when she first arrived.

'Having a good morning?' he asked.

‘Not bad.’ She looked across at Miss Elwick, who was buried in the newspaper – probably looking for a new job, Lucy thought. Who could blame her?

‘My lot were restive,’ Mr Howe said. *Restive* was one of his favourite words. He made his students sound like a herd of buffalo or steers. He’d grown up around here so that made sense. More cattle than people.

‘We’ve been doing geography. The sea.’

‘The sea, eh? That’ll come in useful in these parts.’ He bent double at his joke.

‘They need to know about the world beyond their own,’ Lucy said.

Mr Howe chuckled on. ‘Should we teach them the difference between a surfboard and a cow?’

Miss Elwick looked up from her paper. ‘Some of them might want a better life, Mr Howe. Some might even want to go to *university*.’

Mr Howe chuckled. ‘Say that when they’re through high school. Most will be needed for their parents’ farms or businesses. They’ll be lucky to get past Year Nine.’



Lucy took her tea outside. The older boys from Mr Howe’s class were gathered in a far corner of the yard. Were they smoking? Surely not. She started to walk towards them.

‘Miss?’

‘Yes, Johnnie.’

‘I’ve got a seashell at home, Miss. I can bring that in tomorrow.’

Lucy took a sip of the tea. 'Really, Johnnie? That would be very useful to our discussion.'

She'd already been wondering where to gather some props. She could print some pictures from the internet tonight; she had a couple of library books about the sea. She might even bring in some of the tins of fish she had at her motel unit: sardines and tuna, the tuna tin specially marked 'dolphin friendly'. That might spark some interesting discussion.

Johnnie was regarding her intently.

'What is it?' she asked.

'My father's got one of those fish that sings and wags its tail. I could bring that too.'

She had no idea what he was talking about.

One of the older boys had seen her coming and the group separated like curdled milk, one lot going into the toilet block, the others towards the basketball court.

'Sorry?'

'It's got batteries, Miss, and it sings.'

She realised he was talking about the kitsch singing fish that had reached town a few years after its popularity had waned in the city. 'Oh, right. Don't bring that but do bring the shell. Okay?'

'Okay, Miss.' Johnnie ran off and Lucy went back into the kitchen.

'I think some of your boys are smoking in the toilet block, Mr Howe.' She washed and dried her mug.

Mr Howe looked at his watch. 'Bell's about to go. I'll catch 'em at lunchtime.'



At four, Lucy packed up her room and walked the few yards to the motel where she was billeted. The afternoon was still hot and a dry wind was stirring the red dust. A flock of budgerigars had landed in one of the ghost gums by the pub and they chattered and called to one another, a yellow, blue and green crowd against the stark contrast of the gum's white branches. She stopped to admire them. Nothing had diminished her wonder at such things. Only a few days ago she'd walked down to the near-empty creek after work and been startled by the screams of a pair of black cockatoos. When she'd looked around for the source of their agitation she'd seen a wedge-tailed eagle soaring high above them, brown and wide-winged in the hard blue sky.

She kicked off her shoes and spread out on her bed. The air conditioner droned. When the evening was cooler she'd go for a walk, have an early dinner at the pub, then she'd prepare tomorrow's class with the TV on. But she slipped into a heavy sleep, from which she woke befuddled, the smell of the rough bedspread in her nostrils, the crisp cold breath of the air conditioner on her head. The sky had darkened and through the open venetian blinds she could see cars pulling up at the pub and men getting out of them. She liked to eat early to avoid the boisterous, man-filled bar, but it was late now and she had no choice but to tidy her hair and brave it. She could always ask for her food to be takeaway, she decided. She'd return the plate tomorrow on her way to school.

She needn't have worried. Mr Howe was in the dining room with his wife, Elaine, and when they saw her they called her over and insisted she join them.

'I was saying to Bill only the other night how we never see you in here, love,' Elaine said.

‘I usually eat early,’ Lucy said. ‘The motel room’s got a microwave if I want to heat something up.’

Elaine clicked her tongue. ‘That’s no way to live. You and Miss Elwick should come out to us. I’ll make you both a nice dinner. You can’t eat on your own all the time.’

‘Thanks,’ Lucy said. Her steak arrived and she dipped a chip into the tomato sauce that accompanied it.

‘Keep the local farmers happy, that’s what I say,’ Mr Howe said approvingly, towards the meat.



The next morning Lucy packed her bag with the tins of sardines and dolphin-friendly tuna, and a menu from the pub she’d borrowed the night before in an inspired moment when she’d seen the words *surf and turf* on the menu. She hoped it would prompt some discussion about identity and the difference between people who lived by the sea and those who worked on the land. She had her geography books and her pages about the Great Barrier Reef from the internet. She had a page on the First Fleet and a map of Botany Bay and a picture of Bondi Beach shot from above, the people on the sand looking as small as bull ants.

Mr Howe was in the staffroom when she walked in with her things. He looked at the rolled-up printouts, the pub menu in its blood-red plastic binding. She’d explained at dinner what she wanted it for, though he’d seemed sceptical.

‘Surf and turf,’ he said now. ‘They aren’t big oyster eaters, these kids.’ Again he bent over as he laughed.

Lucy didn’t think many of the people around here were. If seafood arrived from the coast it was usually in tins or jars.

The dam offered yabbies, she'd heard one man say in the bar. 'Good with beer. You lure them with a bit of old meat on the end of a string.'

She went to her room to set up the class. She stuck the printouts to the wall and artfully arranged the tins of fish on her desk. She drew down the map and wrote the names of all the oceans on the blackboard. She placed the plastic globe at the centre of her display then pulled a string from one end of the window to the other, tightened it and took some clothes pegs from her bag. In a school with limited resources, you learned very quickly to improvise. She glanced out into the schoolyard. The boys were arriving, the ones who lived in town slouching along the dusty main street, some riding battered bicycles that had been passed down from fathers and older brothers who now worked on the farms. Cars pulled up – utes mostly, some with dogs of uncertain pedigree tethered in the tray. As she watched, the bell rang and the latecomers began to run. The classes lined up, Miss Elwick's girls' class in their yellow uniforms on the far side of the schoolyard by the basketball courts. The boys marched inside. Lucy waited at the door and counted them as they filed past her. Twelve of them, the sons of the local farm labourers, railway workers, people who couldn't afford to send their children to boarding schools in the city, whose children made do with this red-dust education, gathering motes of knowledge to get them through a life of uncertain work, droughts and political indifference a long way from anywhere else.

'Right, have you all drawn the sea as I asked?'

'Yes, Miss.'

There was a rustle as crushed pictures were pulled out of schoolbags.

She walked between the desks to look. 'One by one I want you to hang your picture on the string across the window and explain what you've drawn.'

Starting with the front desks, the boys rose and went to the string. 'This is what it's like under the sea, Miss.'

'This is an iceberg, Miss.'

'My father said there are rainbow fish, Miss.'

'This is a tsunami, Miss.'

'Miss, this is a sunset over the sea, that's why it's orange and purple.'

Johnnie stood and went over to the string. The smallest boy in class, he had to stretch to pin his drawing to the line and as he did so his shirt pulled away from his shorts, exposing the elastic of a pair of grey and grubby underpants.

'This is the sea, Miss. It's got waves and this white stuff is foam.'

Lucy wondered what the boys' parents had made of the exercise. 'How many of your parents have seen the sea?' she asked. Most of the boys raised their hands.

'My parents went to Bondi Beach for their honeymoon, Miss.' This caused a collective giggle.

'My father once worked on a fishing fleet, Miss, off Kurumba.'

For a moment they all looked silently at the blue line of the paper sea they'd created, each page lifting like a live thing in the already-hot morning breeze.

Tears flooded Lucy's eyes. The boys had not yet smelled sea salt, felt the damp kiss of ozone, the roar of waves as they rushed to meet the sand. They were people of the dust, fashioned from the red, dry interior of a country which lacked that other dimension so vital to human

life – water – that partnering of sea and land. They had not yet felt the peace that came from the unassailable encounter with a vast ocean. Forget about nations based on land boundaries, she thought, what links us all is our shared origin in the sea.

The boys were whispering amongst themselves, pointing out the details in their pictures. And the pictures really were very, very good. The boys had taken a good stab at something that had come to them second-hand and they had got it right.

‘Miss. Miss!’

‘Yes, Johnnie.’

He held up a large white shell. It was a conch, perfectly formed, its pointed spire, its white-tinged frill ancient and imposing on the boy’s upturned hand.

Lucy gazed at it for a moment before taking it from him.

‘My great-grandfather brought it back from the war, Miss. He was in New Guinea, Miss, and he found it on a beach just before he came home.’

She looked at the boy carefully now, at his little damp face and searching eyes, his hair perpetually in need of a comb.

‘Well, thank you, Johnnie, for bringing this in. Boys.’ She called them to her. She placed the shell against her ear first, a conspiratorial look passing between her and Johnnie. He knew what was coming. Had he done this with his father, his grandfather, perhaps even the great-grandfather who’d found it on a beach on his way home from war?

‘It’s the sea, Miss,’ Johnnie shouted as the other boys clamoured to take the shell and listen too. ‘It’s the sea, the sea.’