

Robin Vaughan-Williams



Anna Benner, Seal Woman
(<http://www.gingerbread.me.uk/design-and-illustration/seal-woman/>)

Channel Swimmer

She rubs herself in seal fat
pulls on the flippers
and tightens the pelt round her waist.

She feels the current with her whiskers
works the tide, waits for it to carry her
bullet body through the waves.

There are men at the shore
club-in-hand, and though she brings gifts
of silvery fish, they beat her.

They beat her till the skin falls loose
and she is left a damaged child
groping the sand at their feet

tough as seaweed, dry as driftwood
bladder wracked.

On writing 'Channel Swimmer'

When you swim you enter another environment and, through learning to feel the water, develop a different relationship with your body. When I wrote 'Channel Swimmer' I was interested in this sense of transformation and becoming other, which in the poem takes on mythological qualities, as the swimmer's rites of preparation turn her into a seal-creature. While in one sense this gives her a sense of wholeness and affinity with nature, at the same time she has been transformed in the eyes of others into something that is alien or unnatural. Hence her brutal welcome at the shore as the men beat back this threat of the foreign, perhaps trying to exorcise her sealness.

Reading back over a poem, it's amazing how many threads you can unravel that remind you of what you were thinking about and reading at the time. The 'seal fat' in the first line, for example—where did that come from? I knew that Channel swimmers often rub themselves in a grease, which is in fact part lanolin and part vaseline, but I'd also read somewhere about children being sealed in their clothes with goose fat to keep them warm for the winter. And there are many traditions where people wear or ingest an animal's body parts in order to take on qualities of that animal.

I'd also been reading about swimming technique and was fascinated with the idea that Michael Phelps talks about of swimming with the flow of water around your body. In videos you can see how his movement is so much more fluid than the mechanical technique many of us were taught. I'd been trying this out myself, and got a strong sense connection with the water, of moving through a dynamic medium rather than simply a block of fluid. This isn't what the poem is about, but it's one of the things that enabled me to make a link between mythological transformation and what this might actually feel like physically and emotionally, without which I think the poem would be much less convincing.

Robin Vaughan-Williams website is www.zeroquality.net