

The Refuge Box

Original audio version

Sound of Holy Island sands – wide, empty – spring, early morning, tide out.

At the edge of the Low, the wind blows cold.

A world that is water and not water
Stretches away, reticulate;

Shaken within it, redshank, godwit,
Their scraps and patches of safety shrinking,

Spreading. Miles of sand-flats. Glittering
Streams and ribbons of water, weaving

Earth and sky; between them, the golden
Island, afloat on equivocation,

Or safely grounded there, the tide
Either coming or going around it, the road

Snaking towards it, narrow, human.

***(Lifeboatman) They look across and they see a vast expanse of sand, and they think,
what could possibly be a danger here? Little do they know that within a few minutes
the water very quickly and speedily comes across those sands
and they can end up being stranded.***

***(First Island fisherman) When the tide comes up it doesn't come up and over the top of it.
It comes up around it. It's like a moat around a castle. Ye understand?***

Fade up seals, low Hooooo.

You reach the Danger sign, and stop.
You want it, that Island, stretched out like a ship

Ashore on its saltings, adrift in a sea
So blue and endless, you'd think the sky

Had swallowed it up, or else had fallen
Smack down into its own reflection.

Out from the causeway, over the sand,
Guideposts narrow towards the Island,

The mirror-image of their own
Vanishing – an invitation.

The Slakes answer the sky's question:

Blue?

Blue.

Now, will you

Step out into an unknown element?

End seals.

***(Refugee) I am a refugee from West Africa. The reason why I fled here is a political reason.
You can't say you feel safe – I can say you feel safe because you are still alive.
But you don't feel secure.***

*Tick tock, tick tock,
Hurryin', scurryin',
High wetter, low wetter,
Spring come early,
Hour-glass, weather-glass,
Berrellin', derrellin',
Tick tock, tick tock,
Time runnin' oot.*

*Cobwebs doon the lonnen,

Blue lowes i' the fire,

Thick foam on the wetter,

Better watch the tide.*

***(Second Island fisherman) O, there was a man and woman lived two doors down from me.
Bowes – that's what they called the man and woman that was lost. And it was
a right dirty night in the winter, well it was just afore Christmas. They went away
one night and they were oldish, and I think they just got lost, and they got down
onto the mudflats. They got the woman's body out the Lee Side, just atween
the sheds and the Castle.***

*Creeping, seeping,
Icy, salty,
Softly, slowly,
Tortuous, sinuous,*

*Winding, twining,
Bitter, briny,
Seeping, creeping,
Infiltrating,*

*Steeping and
Insinuating,
Drenching, drowning,
Inundating.*

***(Aux. Coastguard) I've been there when people have driven into it thinking it's a stream,
and it's not – it's the North Sea!***

Summer, traffic, chatter, children, ice-cream van.

An hour before the tide, the road
Is carnival, and miracle.

The ice-cream van, the picnic rugs,
The shrimping nets. A snake of cars

Breathes its heat-haze up the hill.

The ebb-tide tugs against the wind.
Trousers rolled, sandshoes in hand,

A straggle of visitors ventures out:
'Whoa! It's cold, man!' Hot, impatient,

The line of motors swelters, ticks,
Fumes at the sea's edge; and is still.

(First Island fisherman) There was somebody just last week, and they drove into the bloody water. I mean, you'd think they would stop when they saw the water, wouldn't you? Too quick a turning before Haggerston! (Laughs).

Waves on shore.

Undercurrents. Tide-rips. Sudden
Snatching torrents. The road hidden

And, before you,
A small white shed on stilts.
A stairway.
A door.

Sound of feet on steps.

(Lifeboatman) There's a telephone in the Refuge Box at Holy Island. It's perfectly safe there. If people are in there they will not be drowned by the sea. They're well above high water level.

Door to Refuge Box, entering.

(Refugee) When you leave your own country you're trying to go to a place where you can save your life, because you are persecuted in your own country. You are frightened about your life. You don't know what is going to happen to your life. So you have no plan.

Sound of swans' wings beating.

*I am in flight
Away from it all. Away
From the wheel and the whirl of it,
From the can-you-just and the screen and the phone and the in-box,
From the treadmill, from the deadline, from the daily grind,
This wi-fi broadband mobile buzz –
It's an illness,
This noise in the head, this headlong race, this rush –
I am in flight, I am in search of*

Stillness.

(Island Vicar) And then I say to them, but now you must let the Island speak to you. Let the silence speak to you. Let the stones speak to you. Let the ebb and flow of the water speak to you.

Widgeon calls.

(Island Wildfowl Warden) Widgeon, teal, and the geese, they all call in the dark. So you hear them long before you see them. And you can tell the different rushes of the wings, as well. Particularly in the dark, you get things like the barnacle geese, which are protected. As soon as they take off they start yapping to each other, and you can tell – I mean they yap like dogs compared to pinkfeet. You can tell pinkfeet to greylag. Greylag, they growl at the end of their call compared to pinks, who 'ink-ink'. You know, a high-pitched...So you get used to all these calls. And widgeon'll just whistle at each other.

As if one world was not enough.

As if

Sanctuary was always further off,
And even the Island was not sure, or safe,

Beyond the shore, beneath the church, another.

Timeless.

Its clock
Ticks round in neaps, springs, weather, moons,
The flocks

That pause here in their tides, migrant between
One elsewhere and another. Small birds, knots,

Settle and unsettle,
Swerve and fall

Together, purposeful
As one heart, one

Single indrawn
Exhaled breath;

One truth.

Flickering within it,
Countless convergent

Streams, flights, currents
Fasten and unfasten –

Uncertainty, evasion,
The soft equivocation

Of mist, or rain.

Sound of wings passing over.

*(Second Island fisherman) There was one afore my time with a horse and trap.
A butcher from Lowick. I think they called him – I think it was Foreman, I think.
Getten oot the horse and trap and started to walk. I think it was a dirty night
an' all, a poor night, and he lost his way. And they got his body at St Cuthbert's
Island. When they got him, he still had his money bag around his neck.*

Seals Hooooo.

Who

*Moans like the wind in an upturned keel on an autumn night
When a ship might crack her back on Manuel Heed,
Smashed to matchwood on the Ploo;*

*Who howls
And sings round Guile Point, Goul'stone, Parton Steel?*

*Like hounds on a line
Or wind in the wires
Or geese on the wing on the Slakes, or the cry of the wild
Wolves hungering under the sea,
Or women weeping;*

*Searching,
Seeking*

*From the Low to the Sandeel Beds, over Fenham Flats
To the Mill Burn, the Foolwork Burn, the Blacks,
And the Stinking Gut, to the sheer of the Old Law dunes
And out to the lea, to the shelter under the Farne,
To the Haven, the Fairway, the harbour, the safety zone
That can turn in the flick of a tail from a port in a storm
To a place of harm,
To a shoal, to a squall, to a wreck of a rock:*

Who mourns,

*Moaning, groaning, rising and falling, soft and low
Or nothing at all,
Like women weeping;*

*Like the sound of nothing at all;
Or women weeping?*

Seals cross-fade with wind.

***(First Island fisherman) Now Mrs Bowes must have drowned, floundering about in the water,
I would think. Because there was no street-lighting on the Island then, and there was
only one light, and it was Tommy Douglas aside the water tower there.
And they used to keep this light going. Now we worked out that she was making
for this light from the Swad. She would see this light, probably the one light
glowing in the dark, and she would make for it. Now if she did she would come
straight into what we call the First Burn. And of course the tide doesn't come up
straight like it comes up the beach. It comes round the Swad. So if she was making
for that light and she came to the First Burn, she would come to water, y' see.
So when she got into the water, it wouldn't matter which way she went, she would
still get deeper. And I think that's what's happened, Katrina. Well, that's what the old
men said. But they were both drowned. Never got retirement at all.
The house was all decorated for Christmas.***

Seals Hooooo.

*Out on the far Sand Rig or the Lang Batt,
They loll like slugs on the dry all day, ready to fight*

*Or mate, or to slip in an instant
From a lumbering sack of cockles, out of weight*

Into a missile – deadly, graceful. Who

*Are they, easing between known ground and the uncertain
Cold blue element, so almost human?*

Tick tock, tick tock,
Hurryin', scurryin',
High wetter, low wetter,
Nivvor trust the weather, boys...

Cobwebs doon the lonnen,
Mackerel
i' the sky,
The dog afore
it's maister,
Better watch the tide...

Waves on shore.

(Lifeboatman) We did have an incident a few years ago – a good few years ago now – where we had an elderly lady who tried to wade from her car to the Refuge Box, and her feet were washed away from under her, because she just failed to appreciate the weight of water flowing over the causeway. And walking on slippery stones and slippery seaweed covered roadway, she lost her footing. I think there was an off-duty policewoman on holiday in the area close by, saw what happened and went into the water and got the lady, before she was actually washed into the main channel.

Waves.

The tide is 'closed', the Island made perfect,
Spread out in its blue sea, a locked box, a casket

Of relics, jewels; a kist and a cradle.

Summer, seas.

(Island Vicar) We've got the Island which St Cuthbert lived on for nine months from our bedroom windows, and the cross there to remind us of his sanctified life, as a hermit and as a healer.

*Waders' calls.
Sound from inside stone church.*

For him to whom the eider
Was daughter, the crinoid

His rosary, his cross
The cormorant's outstretched wings,

To pray was to listen.

The boat he travels in
Now a nailed box.

The oak that teemed with life,
Hewn; fixed with bees' wax.

Sea-salt, keep him safe
And bitumen preserve him

From rot; from time.

St Mary's Church bell tolls.

'Pagans from the Northern Regions came with a naval force to Britain...And they came to the church of Lindisfarne; laid everything waste with grievous plundering, trampled the holy places with polluted steps, dug up the altars and seized all the treasures of the holy church. They killed some of the brothers, took some away with them in fetters; many they drove out, naked and loaded with insults. Some they drowned in the sea.' (Simeon of Durham).

***(Refugee) Going away is like a kind of psychic problem.
You will keep that in mind that some time you are thinking about the life
back home. But you can't go there. You can't go back if you feel insecure,
because you fear about your life.***

The mason has carved a stone.
Axes, swords,

Tell without words
What became of us. Fire,

Blood, tears. Prayer.
Flight our only answer,

The sands before us. Flight
As the goose before the wind.

***Sounds of geese in flight.
Sheltered dunes, small birds, hiss of bent-grass.***

At Green Shiel, the sun beats down
On the shapes of deserted houses,

On willow bush and fireweed
And the white grass of Parnassus,

On stones of byre and bedroom,
Hearths, hidden in bent-grass.

A doorway, a threshold, a beginning.
Here, snail and bunting

Have made their shelter. Peace
Is life, continuing

Oblivious, without us –
Our better selves, our children –

Here, in this hollow of ruins.

Sounds of children playing in the distance.

***(Second Island fisherman) O, it's a safe place alright – more than the mainland.
People with kids come here on holiday, they just canna understand how our kids just roam
around. Well, there's kids playing with my grandkids for a week, nearly a fortnight now,
and their mother and father just lets them go, cos they know where they are,
and they know they're safe.***

A burst of rapid chatter from the nest.
Into the shadowed
Dark and tarry upturned boat-shed flits
A swallow.

Last month it was safe in the egg,
The egg secure in the nest,
The nest shrugged tight in the scarphed oak frames
Of the upturned wreck,

Its planks stiffened with sailcloth
And its sails with tar;
And heaped inside from gunwale to keel,
Anchors, rope, oars –

Woodworm and rust.
All the Island possessed.

Then out of the white egg, out
Of the nest, the cupped hands
Of the boat, beached, never to sail again,
Into the sun

And the wind's currents
Bursts – a bullet,
The blue of Africa on its wings,
In its bandit's mask, a red flash of desert,

Already burning in its skull,
A spelk of magnet.

*(Refugee) I can worry about something, but not about my life, now.
I can worry about other things, maybe crime and so on;
But not about life and that maybe I will be put in prison.*

Cold wind rush, waves. Thin twitter of birds.

And the year turns. Sudden
Exposure. Cold. The seas

Pounding the North Shore,
Ice in the wind. Winter

Hacks the dunes, scours
Old walls, sandstone

Arches, the roofless
Vaults of the righteous,

Bows down the hawthorn
On the Crooked Lonnen.

From such storms fall
Goldcrest, fieldfare,

Exhausted, shivering,
The Isle their shiel, their shelter.

Tick tock, tick tock,
Summer in November,
Low wetter, high wetter,
Nivvor trust the weather, boys,
Hour-glass, weather-glass,
Nivvor beat a tide, lass,
Tick tock, tick tock,
Time runnin' oot.

The dog afore its maister,

Blue lowes i' the fire,

Thick foam on the wetter,

Better watch the tide.

RAF fighter-jet screams overhead.

(Lifeboatman) Chap and his wife went into a café on Holy Island and asked to be served with tea and scones and things. And the lady, the proprietor of the café, told them that if they wanted to be off the Island, they needed to move reasonably quickly. To which they replied, 'O, that's just to scare the tourists!' and continued to have their tea and scones. And about half an hour later they found themselves swinging off the end of a helicopter wire, being winched clear from their submerged motor car. The car was actually floating and bumping on the causeway at the time. The husband managed to get onto the roof and the wife was hanging onto the vehicle, up to her waist in water. And they were very, very frightened, and rightly so. Because if that car had actually washed off the causeway, all those four people – the two children and the two adults – would have been in real, serious difficulties, if they'd got into deep water.

Brent geese, quiet and far off, building in volume.

Slanting over the Sneuk, over
Goswick, that sky-writing, ominous, ancient
Far away, frightening, almost

Legible. Whose hand, whose voice
Whispers over vast distances, ice

Creaking in it, snow?

No one. But for miles at the tide's edge, geese –
Dark straggles of them – raise

Oaths, hymns, gutturals; and Fenham,
Stirring in its sleep,

In its own rank, spicy smells, its dribbles,
Its ooze, its salt-juices, its tidal creaks,

Opens itself to the sky, to the world, absorbs
Streams, strings of cells pouring

Down from nowhere into one dark body –
A rabble, a squabble, a whole hullabaloo
Trying to make sense of its singleness, an orchestra

Tuning its thousand primitive instruments,
Half bagpipe, half trumpet.

Loud hullabaloo of brent geese ends.

And day breaks. On the mainland,
At Beal, from behind the Island,

Flooding the sands, the mud, as far
As Ross Beacons. At Fenham Le Moor

The narrow road runs down to the shore.

Footsteps up stairs to bird hide.

Balanced on this edge,
A kind of church; a refuge,

A place to be still, and listen.

All day they arrive at the Hide –
Wash in and leave – the retired

Insurance salesman from Hull,
The grandmother from Liverpool,

With their telescopes, tripods, flasks,
On their way to another place.

Widgeon on mudflats.

But another place is here

As the tide creeps in, a living
Breathing lung, its shallows

Flooding, slowly filling,
Draining again, its shadows

Lengthening, a place

Where hawthorn and robin
Meet face to face with salt-grass

And just as the season ripens
And turns, and again, the evening

Darkens, widgeon gather
Under the Mill, their voices

Carrying sky and winter
From long ago and farther

Than any road.
Now, you

Step out of your element. Listen.

Closer. In this moment
There is no one not a migrant

On his way to another place.

As the Island catches fire
In the sunset, and the mirror

Of the mudflats and the water
Returns it whole, desire

Catches you like the tide –
That longing to belong here,

That hunger for a likeness
Across so great a distance

No telescope can bridge it –

And flight its only answer.

Sound of swans' beating wings.

*(Island Vicar) Sometimes we're immersed in troubles and things;
other times we feel we're very close to God.*

*(Refugee) We can't plan with God. We can't plan. And everything is a gift.
So this land I can say is a gift, because when we got difficulties we didn't know where to go.
We weren't sure where we were going to be accepted. So being here I will honour God,
and say Thank You for getting me in this country and make my life safe.*

*Curlew, godwit,
Lapwing, plover,
On the run
Before the weather,*

*Brent goose, white wing,
Migrant, vagrant,
Bird of passage,
Traveller, emigrant,*

*Pilgrim, refugee,
Believer,
Fugitive,
Asylum-seeker.*

*Creeping, seeping,
Icy, salty,
Softly, slowly,
Tortuous, sinuous,*

*Winding, twining,
Bitter, briny,
Seeping, creeping,
Infiltrating,*

*Steeping and
Insinuating,
Drenching, drowning,
Inundating.*

*Wave on shore.
Seals Hooooo.*

The wind dies down. The tide advances. All is still.
Out on the far sand rig, the seals

Raise their voices to the darkening sky.

Who are they singing to sleep with their lullabies?

Who? Who?

*Seals Hooooo.
Hydrophone whoosh.*

I, Mark Bell,

Of Wooler Haugh Head, employed on the afternoon
Of September the fifth eighteen-hundred and one, conveying a gentleman

Onto the Island, turned for home, with another postilion
Over the sand, dark having not long fallen,

The coach creaking into the fog like our own funeral.

Who?

Hydrophone whoosh.

I, Jean Bowes, who, with my husband,
Clicked off the lights and locked the door behind us

And headed in our purple Triumph Herald
Into the dark, the windscreen wipers waving

Goodbye, goodbye. We were looking forward
To Christmas, the holly berries blazed

Brightly over the mantelpiece. Before us lay
Rain, spray; the headlights useless, hard to find

The road, impossible. The car door slammed.

How cold your hand was, John, out on that sand.

My ticking watch, stopped at 3.30 a.m.

Who? Who?

Hydrophone whoosh.

I, Tommy Foreman,

Butcher of Lowick in my blue-striped apron,
Bid ower-lang in the Northumberland Arms wi' Geordie Wilson,

Red nose, hot fire. One for the road? Why not, son. Soon
Cold in my liver, in my heart cold, cold in my marrow-bone,

My money-bag around my neck, an end-stone.

Hydrophone whoosh

*Creeping, seeping,
Icy, salty,
Softly, slowly,
Tortuous, sinuous,*

*Tick tock, tick tock,
Hurryin', scurryin',
High wetter, low wetter,
Summer in November,*

*Winding, twining,
Bitter, briny,
Seeping, creeping,
Infiltrating,*

*Berrellin', derrellin',
Nivvor trust the weather, boys,
Low wetter, high wetter,
Tide flowin' harder,*

Steeping and
Insinuating,
Drenching, drowning,
Inundating.

Hour-glass, weather-glass,
Nivvor beat a tide, lass,
Tick tock, tick tock,
Time runnin' oot.

Hydrophone whoosh.

*(First Island fisherman) I could remember that hand as if it was yesterday...
It was pure white, Katrina. And the fingernails, clutching – like that.
She was lying face down, and the bag – her arms were kind of out like that,
and her bag. And her left hand, like that – I can see them fingernails yet.*

(Actual telephone recording)

*'Hello, it's the Coastguard calling.
Are you the people on Holy Island causeway?'*

*'Yes we are. Yes. It's getting really high now.
Please just come now, please.
Come now.'*

RAF Search and Rescue Helicopter radio: 'Steady...Steady...' rises up occasionally through following:

*I am in flight
From the spin, from the things that I know that I do not know,
From the crush, from the crowds, from the push, from the shove, from the street,
From the ice-age, from the heat-wave, from the fluttering heartbeat
At the core of it all; from the unseen hole
In the ozone's eye; from the fossil-fuel
In the soot-black, oil-rich mouth of the melting-pot.
From the permafrost.
From the drip, drip, drip
Of its shrinking ice; from the jumbo-jet;
From the stink, from the smoke, from the smog, from the slick
Of the gridlocked highways' car exhaust;
From the desert's breath, the glacier's roar,
From the sun's frank stare, from the climate police,
From the blazing forest, glimpsed from space,
From the rising tide, from the sea at our feet –
At our children's feet –
Send us an air-lift, a lifeboat, an ark –
Or at least*

A refuge box.

RAF Search and Rescue Helicopter fades into distance.

*(Refugee) You say, my God, maybe they will send me back home and
that will be the end of my life.*

Sound of feet on steps, door to Refuge Box, entering.

A bench,
An opaque window.

The stench of piss. Fag ends.
A telephone on the wall.

Facing the incoming tide
Or the firing squad,

Or your own conscience,

Prisoner, when you lift
The telephone receiver

To your chill lips, whose number
Will you call?

*(Actual telephone recording) 'It's getting really high now.
Please just come now, please.
Come now.'*

Katrina Porteous

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