

The Change

by Philippa Shadrach

You leaders made of air and straw
Who are supposed to end this war,
Don't you know that you let it in?
With immense arrogance and sin.
You did not listen to the words
Foretold by wiser ones for years.
You have failed to prepare the way
And now its us who have to pay.
You make a show with rhetoric.
While all around are falling sick.

Where now is your humanity?
Your deeds defy all sanity.
Does not one of you understand
That if our ties of love are banned,
That if you break the bonds of kin,
What pain and chaos you let in?
You cannot tear us all apart
Without rupturing every heart.
What price is a life lived alone,
With an unheard, despairing moan?

Don't you know you people of stone
What it means to die on your own,
To marry with few there to cheer,
To suffer with nobody near,
Not to cuddle your new grandchild,
Or be old in a home, exiled,
With no loved one near to touch you,
Funerals held with just a few?
Let us see beyond this madness
To find healing for our sadness.

But we are but the little ones
No voice, no power and no guns.
How can we ever win this war?

How can we challenge each new law?
Do not extinguish all our souls
For your own political goals.
Do not put your economics
Or your vast egos in the mix.
Don't you know you people of wood
What makes us human, makes us good?

I do not want to live this life
Alone in misery and strife.
I would far rather be dead than
Live apart from my fellow man.
So do not treat us all as fools
Who blindly must obey the rules,
But allow all to have the choice.
Listen now to the quiet voice
Of us - and heed it without fail,
So together we may prevail.

Mackerel Sky

by Martyn Sullivan

Thanks be to God there was a mackerel sky this morning. Lir's lips were already dry and beginning to swell in the early heat. A sky like that meant rain would bring relief soon, so he muttered as encouragement to himself 'Mackerel sky, mackerel sky, never long wet, never long dry.' He exhaled at the thought of rain and rested his teeth on his lower lip as he breathed back in slowly, thinking about how cool the water would be and how the wet shirt on his back would cling cold to him. The skin on his lip cracked beneath the point of his front incisors and he tasted metal. His teeth had always been sharp and he ought to have known better. His eyes watered at the sudden sting and he reached out with his tongue and caught the wet salt trails trickling to the corner of his mouth. He whispered again 'Mare's tails and mackerel scales make lofty ships to carry low sails.' He'd never seen a sail furled or unfurled or a ship upon which one might be found, he'd never been allowed. The African slaves who had been taken to market to sell on or to help drag and carry what Tall John Tiller brought back from Richmond, Virginia, they knew about ships and sails, most nights they sang searing songs of pain and remembrance about the voyage from home to the red and gold misery that was Virginia. The indentured Irish that walked beside them, hard worked but comparatively privileged were allowed to travel on their own to Richmond. Lir was forbidden. He'd not been the only one to always stay behind at the plantation. He remembered his mother from the time when he was small, she was not worked like the Africans or the Irish but she was never ever free. He thought of the Scottish Tiller family they lived with who had brought his mother, already pregnant with him, across the sea but he had never fully understood why and nor would anyone explain. He could see Deborah Tiller in his mind now, she was the matriarch and John Tiller's mother, her skin weather-beaten to match the colour of her wooden porch chair, always wearing a blue dress and owlish in her reading glasses. Her eyes would snap in suspicion at the world beyond her porch and they would particularly flare at the movements of Lir's mother if she left the shade for even a moment. He would burn quickly in the heat but his mother had to hide most of the year, running out for mere seconds to right him when he stumbled.

He remembered the older Tiller boys and girls but not their names, they had left a long time ago for farms and marriages of their own and a hard land does not make hosts or guests from busy folk. Mary Tiller, the master's wife, had died in labour with her seventh child. The master, John Tiller, the man who some claimed in whispers was Lir's father, strode everywhere about the plantation. Lir's mother always denied these rumours. How John's bellow filled the lush, thick fields of tobacco that ran uncontested further than young Lir could see!

The other constant at the plantation had been the youngest Tiller girl, the seventh child, she hadn't known what to make of Lir, she didn't understand if he was a servant, slave or an equal but she played with him and when he and she were older she bathed his scorched back, treating the coin sized brown spots across his shoulders that had burned red in the high hot sun with oatmeal, milk and honey.

When they were older again, and frail John Tiller yelled alone from the plantation stoop, no longer with any matriarch beside him, and Lir's mother herself already deep in the dry Virginia soil; it was then that Bessie Tiller kissed the pattern across his shoulders and snaked her arms about him as they lay entwined beneath the nicotine flowers seeping sweet fragrance and below the wide green leaves that granted deep concealment all through every summer dusk.

Love is an anchor for the living and what Lir's mother had left him lay still wrapped in the depths of a leather clad sailor's chest. Lir would never be master while John Tiller lived and what he was to Bessie and her to him surely defied the words and understanding of priests. Lir learned young that existence can only ever be what you make of it and all roads seem infinitely long when you have no heart or permission to travel so the Tiller plantation remained his whole world. In such circumstances it is likely better to accept your lot and remain and rest contented in the shade with what you have than it is to rove.

Besides it was true that ever since John Tiller had been young and strong and had first brought Lir's mother from over the ocean to live beside his family there had only been a cold welcome at best for the clergy or indeed any outside judgement at the plantation, and so Lir and Bessie were able to live in their own limited Eden. But as all who read and listen know, Eden is brought to an end by the work and will of others.

Seventeen seventy-five came and for the first time Virginians lifted their arms and voices in freedom and then clenched their fists first to the sky and then against their cousins. Word spread that the British had declared that any slave who fought for his majesty would be freed. Men

looked from one militia to another as they weighed their allegiances and began to own the truths in their hearts.

For the first time Lir questioned just who he was. His mother had never given him his father's name not even in secret, she just whispered that he was 'far away, over the sea.' She had stroked his hair and told him that when she was gone he must take the old skin from the box they shared and swim in the ocean, defy Tall John Tiller and his orders that they never see the sea again, then he would know just who he was.

'Why won't you go back to the sea, now?' he had asked

'Because I loved him then and the young fool that I once was swore words to obey him and I promised that as long as he lived I would stay with him and not return to my home. I never swore on the length of our love because I didn't understand that it could end or diminish as fast as it did. Because I've now been so long from the water I'll burn up before the noon comes, because the coast is two nights of walking away and because you are here with me child Lir, and there is only one skin between us and I never learned to make another. Never let oaths of your own or those of others bind your feet and heart from wandering.' When Lir heard the distant drums of war he left Bessie, and weeping Bessie knew why, because Lir would never be master by her side while her father John Tiller lived, because Lir would not kill other men, be they John Tiller or a stranger, he was not set at odds against either British or American because he counted himself as neither. And because when the world turns towards war those who are trapped cleave towards exits. The slaves had already fled and the Irish had slipped away in the following nights, some to the American bands, fewer to the British, others to whatever lay in the west.

So Lir began walking, the skin wrapped in a sheet at the bottom of a tan hemp sack, held down by portions of bread, hard cheese, smoked fish and two cork stoppered bottles, one half full of spiced red wine and the other water. He walked in the day and he burned, the dry heat turning the soil to a fine dust that insinuated into his lungs and coated his lips as he travelled, he slept through the night shivering beneath a tree as he had no fire, knowing he dare not risk one with bands of armed men roaming the countryside. He arose thirsty and chose to continue to walk onwards on the second day, soon the early dawn warmth had made him sweat the shirt slick to his back, but then with new urgency he began to hurry in his hard pinching shoes after hearing the white and grey gulls cry.

He looked up to the streaked pale blue and tumbled white sky, the clouds scraped hard into ridges, that was when he knew relief was close. Babbling rhymes as though they carried the power of prayer and sorcery together he forged on, feeling the ache in his thighs as he pressed up the hill. At the top he gasped and held his stomach and head as for the first time he saw the shining deep blue and grey sheer scrape stretching from the land out to meet the sky at the horizon. He forgot the sweat on his back, the blisters forming on his heels and in the links between his toes, the rage of his red, exposed skin and the sore wounds on his lips and he dipped his head to charge down to the shoreline.

But what did his mother know? He was unbaptised and she had seen to that, some apparent pact she saw in her favour at least to offset their confinement at the plantation. Despite that, because of the common language all at the plantation shared, because of the daily prayers at the table maintained despite John Tiller's agreed outward facing hostility to the Richmond ministers and the fragments of Bessie's lessons he overheard, Lir could only see a supposedly revelatory dive as one clear thing, baptism, and he shook his head.

This instruction from his mother was less something rare that the priests had considered forgotten or gone and more the echo of something crude and unrefined and it made his heart ache hard at the gulf between his and Bessie's raising. Without his mother's bargains perhaps he might be standing now betrothed at the plantation with what Bessie called 'the constellations' on his back covered up in a gentleman's coat. Perhaps it all might have been different and he wondered at what his mother really believed and what she had hoped for him to become.

Breathless he walked to the surf and unfurled the skin, the skin was shaded evenly in grey and grease brown smears and picked out with soft edged spots of darkness, it felt alien to him, like he was cradling half a life in his arms. It sat heavy and awkward in his grasp but nonetheless he peeled and shrugged off his stained white shirt and let it fall into the liminal wet grains that clashed with and surrendered to the bubbling lip of the surf. He held the skin up on to his shoulders and dived forwards. He arose a minute later from the water gasping for air, half drowned, and still clutching the wretched skin. What madness had his mother believed? Witchcraft and water, charms and curses and the like were just old stories from old countries he had never seen and she couldn't remember the names of by the end.

He sat on the edge of the surf, the precious, useless skin on his lap and he wept for having left Bessie. He knew he should be at home with her,

rebellion and war regardless, this was a fool's errand. His own skin stung from the salt and he wished fervently that he had stayed where if the sun had touched him Bessie would be there to bathe his shoulders and wrap them. He would fry her small cakes in the skillet and boil water for her tea and then they'd leave in the evening together to walk in the untended tobacco.

While his eyes were turned down to the lick of the surf and his thoughts were entirely filled up with Bessie, the mackerel sky at last darkened and the water from the above met the sea underneath. He'd forgotten all about the weather in his excitement at first seeing the sea and so he cried out in joy as cold raindrops lashed at him and the ugly skin in his hands. As the drops fell, he shuddered and felt the world stand still. His vision filled up with brightness overwhelming and just for a moment as the light faded he could count every wet comet plummeting to earth as they hung suspended and glistening in the air around him.

Out of the sea, a wave swelled large and hit him in the face and he felt the strange skin flex on its own and pull close to him. His mind tingled on the edge of remembering something from a half forgotten lullaby, no, a rhyme his mother told him sometimes when she lay him down to sleep 'I am a man of the land, I am a selkie on the sea, and when I'm far from every strand my dwelling is in Sule Skerry.' Where was Sule Skerry? His mother could never say, just another of those far off places she had ceased to remember but still spoke of when he was on the edge of sleeping.

Then his mouth and eyes were full of salt water and he could only swim and swim. One now with the seal skin and quickly he learned to smile inside the water, his head and heart still ever full of Bessie. Later, exhausted but now knowing in ways he could not share or describe he dragged himself from the shore and stepped out of his new skin. He placed it back in the sack and began the long walk back to the plantation past Richmond.

In the distance sails and drums competed for his attention but he paid them no mind. He thought of the sea and he thought of Bessie. There would be time in the future to swim again, there would be time to understand everything that his mother had told him and later left him, but now he knew his place wasn't at the plantation, his place was beside the sea, in a small house he would build and that he hoped Bessie would one day share with him, but first he had to ask her to come and she had to agree freely without binding and without oaths.