

BENNO BARNARD

Translated by Richard Gwyn

Two poems

Fisher, 50 B.C.

What else did I do by the river
but put out my fyke nets, listen to old
tales of blood and gore, enter her
with a growl, to make and bequeathe
a golden boy?

Sure, that was way back.
But it was on this very river bank,
by moonlight, while knotting
my nets, that I mumbled unfamiliar words
to the darkening woods,

words I couldn't grasp myself –
about a water-bird for instance, and not some great Celt.
What did they mean? Where did they come from? And why
my mouth their oracle, the mouth of a man
in a simple boat

on the Scheldt?
I listened to our sages but wasn't sure
if they themselves were able to explain the sodden earth.
I never believed we'd one day be building
cathedrals and stuff.

Never mind if you misunderstand.
In this great river's bend
I contrived to make a son,
whom I taught my knots
in the steaming light of dawn.

Woman Innkeeper

This stranger here, you can tell he's swallowed
the dust of many roads.
His accent thick, his shirt
torn; the hand he used to gesture for a beer
never in his life has steered
a plough: slender like a scribe's.

All kinds come in my place,
from drunken Genovese
to silent, sullen Balts. They all
promise me the world, you get my drift,
exotic spices, amber, silk. Ridiculous.
But this one

stares into his mug – as if I have no jugs,
like he sees to the bottom of things, or round corners.
I'd wager he's not picturing a scene of folk
who crouch around a smoking fire, sticking
their knives into a mystery;

nor some fancy lord on horseback and a falconer
(weird like that winged creature
carved out in the porch of the cathedral);
nor crow-fodder served
on the gallows-field in scuds of rain –

but what, then? What does my blindly staring
stranger see, why does it make me
think *I sit and smile for seven centuries:
never knowing, never knowing for sure
if we have met before.*

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