

# Sea Longing

An Original Drama for Radio

by **Elizabeth Kuti**

First Broadcast BBC Radio 3, 23/12/2018

Drama on 3

A Sweet Talk Production for the BBC

Producer: Karen Rose

Director: Jo McInnes

Original Music: Philip Selway

Cast:

Stephen Dillane (Robert Whyman)

Anastasia Hille (Laura Whyman)

Mairi Hawthorn (Morag)

Eva Traynor (Margaret)

Jo McInnes (Rachel Whyman)

Lee Ross (Angus)

Kiki May (Young Robert)

Broadcast Assistant: Sarah Tombling

Sound Engineer: David Thomas

Director: Jo McInnes

Producer: Karen Rose

Music performed by Philip Selway, Quinta & Laura Moody

Archive: Brucie Henderson recounts the story of 'The Strange Selkie Boy of Breckon' - clip supplied by the School of Scottish Studies Archives at the University of Edinburgh.

'The Crofter's Mistake' is adapted from a story recorded and told by Duncan Williamson.

## Acknowledgements

*Sea Longing* began as a proposal to the BBC Radio 3 commissioner to create a free adaptation, or creative response, to *The People of the Sea* (1954) by David Thomson. This classic work itself originated as a radio programme, and in it Thomson writes of his pursuit and recording of the selkie tales as told by the people of Ireland and Scotland, collected on trips to Shetland, Hebrides, the Orkneys and the Aran Islands.

In the process of writing this script, however, my focus began to shift, from the tales and tellers, to the archivist - to Thomson himself, and his passion for the collection of folk lore. Why was he so drawn to these liminal explorations of the human and the animal? What was it that fired his imagination and sent him on his quest to some of the most remote corners of Europe to record these voices and stories?

As I began to speculate on answers to these questions, it was no longer possible or right to have a character called David Thomson in the drama. The creation of Robert Whyman was initially inspired by Thomson, but became a wholly fictional and invented character, an imagined archivist, through whom I could freely explore the themes that arose - of obsession, taboo, longing, curiosity and desire; of exile, otherness, and transformation through love.

I drew on other selkie tales and collections of recorded voices and oral histories, including those of Duncan Williamson, and the recordings in *Tobar an Dualchais*, curated by the School of Scottish Studies, University of Edinburgh. My understanding of Thomson and his work was also informed by Julian Vignoles' biography of him, *A Delicate Wildness: the Life and Loves of David Thomson* (2014). I list a range of sources which informed this script, below. *The People of the Sea* and other writings by Thomson remain the central inspiration behind *Sea Longing*, and there are some moments where I have dramatized, adapted and fictionalized encounters that Thomson describes in his writings – so here I have provided endnotes (p. 46) to indicate clearly where these moments are. However, this work remains a fictional and creative response to Thomson's works, and the selkie lore he documented; Robert Whyman's history and biography are my own inventions entirely.

I offer *Sea Longing* as a homage to the work of David Thomson, and the other folk-lorists and archivists I encountered while researching this drama - whose curiosity and care have preserved, and bequeathed to us, such a rich legacy of human art and fantasy.

### Sources

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Thomson, David. *The People of the Sea*. Edinburgh: Canongate, 1996.

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\_\_\_\_\_ *In Camden Town*. London: Hutchinson, 1983.

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# Sea Longing

A Drama for Radio

## MUSIC

### A CRACKLY, ARCHIVE RECORDING OF AN OLD MAN FROM YELL, SHETLAND

OLD SHETLAND MAN: Well, I suppose about probably 130 or 60 years ago in Breckon in North Yell there were a young woman – and she come home one night and she told that she was seeing a beautiful man come ashore

And she said she wished she could get this man for a fiancé for she just loved him<sup>i</sup>

### KNOCK AT DOOR - UNLOCKED BY KEY

RACHEL: Dad? It's me. I brought some milk - do you fancy a tea?

### CLICK OF RECORDING STARTING:

RACHEL: *10<sup>th</sup> April 1997. London. First interview session with Robert Whyman. By Rachel Whyman.*

### CUT TO INTERVIEW WITH ROBERT WHYMAN; RACHEL INTERVIEWING:

RACHEL: So how many stories did you record?

ROBERT: How many? I think - recorded on tape, you mean? – maybe close to five hundred – six hundred stories – five fifty. Thereabouts

Oh and then there were some I heard when I didn't have my recording equipment with me, in the pub or whatever, so I wrote those down, but I don't have them on tape

One wonders now what it was – all about really – seems a bit mad

People talk a lot about the psychological or the religious symbolism of the seal stories, or whatever, which I'm sure the Freudians would have a field day with –

Especially now, at this juncture, given the – current prognosis – which I think I told you about, but we don't have to go into – all of that - pretty grim territory

It's all right, I mean, I don't mind talking about it but I don't want to bring you down –

RACHEL: ... *whatever you prefer* -

ROBERT:        yeah, we can stick to the work, let's stick to that because that's – what we have

**EXTERIOR, LIGHTLY BREEZY DAY; A ROWING BOAT AT SEA.**

**GENTLE SPLASH OF OARS; WAVES; BIRD CRIES.**

**LAURA, 52, ROWS AND SPEAKS AGAINST THE WIND. THIS IS ROUGH, DOCUMENTARY STYLE. HER DAUGHTER IS FILMING HER AND WE ARE HEARING THE SOUND-TRACK.**

LAURA:        - oh have you switched it on now? – are we filming now?

Oh my goodness – did you see that? What was that? Gannet or something just there? Like a rock falling, did you see! Boom - splash! Did you get it, on the thing? – I think he's caught something – has he? Yes – yes, look – he's got something – bravo – hey, gannet, good job! Great diving.

**DRINKING CHAMPAGNE**

I'm actually patronizing the birds now, your dad would kill me

**VOICE-OVER - RACHEL:**

RACHEL:        *September 1997. Shetland. Scattering the Ashes. Laura and Rachel Whyman. And a bottle of champagne.*

LAURA:        We're not very far out but I think it's far enough because as I said – I'm nervous – Robert would be scoffing, the old dare-devil – I hated it, especially when he took you kids out – do you remember that?

The fishing trips to the island

I couldn't bear to watch – thought every minute was your last

RACHEL:       *That's weird because you always seemed fine about it*

LAURA:        I might have seemed fine but inside I was terrified you would all die

RACHEL:        *Why didn't you stop us then?*

LAURA:        I didn't want to spoil your fun.

RACHEL:        *I was terrified.*

LAURA:        You always came home safe. And daddy was a good swimmer. Wasn't he.

WAVES LAPPING; BIRDS; WIND.

INTERVIEW BETWEEN ROBERT AND RACHEL WHYMAN:

ROBERT:        So –yes – I - like you, did my Ph.D, I was pretty diligent and I then became a researcher and I had an actual proper job at the BBC for a while, various projects – published a few papers – bits and pieces, articles, collected lots of stories, lots of archival material

and then later when I started this place –

RACHEL:        *when was that - ?*

ROBERT:        When -?

We bought the premises in – God I dunno – 1975? No, no, later it would have been, we got married in 1977 – yes, that's right, '77, course it was, it was the Silver Jubilee, before your time – a big hoo ha, God Save the Queen, the Sex Pistols all that – you wouldn't remember

It was all Laura's idea, to get me out of the house really, she saved me from a very deep pit I was in at that time

she found the site and it was pretty run down but she said, it would be great for a bookshop, do all that antiquarian stuff you do, and – I said it would never work but

She was right - it was niche, I grant you, but turns out the folklore community is bigger than you might think – and what with the twitchers and the psycho-geographers and the academics and the radio producers and just the generally slightly mad enthusiasts, between

them all, they bought books, and it was a way to earn a crust you know? A little off-beat but – good, you know-

And for a little while I had a very weird, very selective kind of fame amongst about seven people

Because I was Robert Whyman the go-to selkie guy

And a shopkeeper – which I guess would have horrified my parents – all the better

### **EXTERIOR, BOAT, SHETLAND (LAURA AND RACHEL, SCATTERING ASHES):**

*RACHEL: So, tell me, mum, tell me about meeting dad -*

LAURA: Meeting your dad? I've told you this, haven't I?

So it was this café opposite the Senate House library in London and it was 1969 and I was doing a piece for the magazine and I'd stopped to get a cup of tea in this ratty old greasy spoon across the road. It was raining.

And I walked into this café which had some curling up ham sandwiches and ancient battenburg cake and dirty mugs

And I ordered this cup of tea

And there was this rather strange scruffy man at the till completely ignoring me, very intensely reading a book, as still as a post but with this aura

like he had dropped from another world

And I drank my grotty tea out of this grotty mug and went over my notes all the time sort of half-looking at this chap on the till

only he wouldn't bloody look at me

### **INTERVIEW WITH ROBERT AND RACHEL:**

ROBERT: ....it was only really as a student that I began to realise this was a – proper subject - I suppose I was finishing my degree and I could string a few words together, and I liked hanging out in libraries, and one of my tutors said Robert, have you thought of oral history and I could do a Ph.D. and it sounded preferable to a job

Same as you, I expect, no?

RACHEL: *Absolutely. The eternal student –*



ROBERT: . . . the eternal student, indeed - and the project meant I had an excuse to go up to the Hebrides and to Shetland which I loved, so – why not, you know – I got my little tape recorder – or rather my big tape recorder it was in those days not like this natty little thing there – this was a great hulking behemoth with actual tape and so on, and – off I went

### **STEAM TRAIN HISSES AND HOOTS HORN**

MOTHER: Auf wiedersehn, Robertchen

ROBERT (aged four): Wiedersehn.

FATHER: Das ist fur dich, Robert, Papas Uhr fur dich. Kannst du sagen wie Spat ist es?

ROBERT: Ich weisse nicht.

MOTHER: Halb sieben, Robert.

### **STEAM TRAIN HISSES**

### **WE RETURN TO THE OLD MAN FROM YELL ARCHIVE RECORDING AS AT TOP:**

OLD MAN FROM YELL: . . . Nine months after this she had a baby  
And this baby was a freak of nature. . . . and he was all covered wi' hair and he was like a seal or a selkie – and his feet was the same as if they had been webbed and his fingers was the same  
But the woman, wi' the surprise of the freak of nature of a child coming she was so good that she got heart broken and she only lived a year and three months after this baby was born<sup>ii</sup>

### **EXTERIOR, SHETLAND, BOAT, LAURA AND RACHEL:**

LAURA: So. Right. I hope this is far enough out for you, Robert! Perfect day - Let's go for it.

Right. Oh Christ - I can't get the lid off!

I told them I'd need it very secure and now they've –

Bloody thing! Can't get it off -

This is ridiculous, we can't part like this, it feels like we're having our last row –

Can you do it?

Do you have strong wrists?

Can you –

I can't get daddy's lid off

RACHEL V/O: *15<sup>th</sup> of May. London. Second session with Robert Whyman.*

#### **INTERVIEW RECORDING, ROBERT AND RACHEL:**

**RACHEL:**       *So - is the attraction – that the seal stories are a link with the past?*

**ROBERT:**           Yes – they are really - In part, yes – they're a remnant of the past – I mean even thirty, forty years ago, it was a world that was coming to an end –

- so you used to see these old Black Houses up in the Hebrides, where the crofting families lived – but even in the 50s lots of them were in ruins, and the people were being moved into what they called 'white houses' – the new council houses, you know, made of concrete, with electricity and so on, which people were very proud to own of course

You can hardly imagine what it was like before. . . it was a way of life that hadn't changed in a thousand years, literally - I mean, for instance, the animals weren't kept separately - the cattle lived at one end of the Black house and the people at the other - and there was a fire right in the centre – not a fireplace you understand, where you must sit in a semi-circle, but an actual fire in the centre of the house and people sat in a circle all the way around and that's where the selkie tales and so on were told and passed on<sup>iii</sup>

And the fire was at the centre of everything – and with the fire, the story-telling

And there was a prayer for everything you did in the day you see

Every single act you did in the day was holy and sacred

And the last prayer of the day was for when you 'smooored' the fire – the fire had to be smothered, but not put out – just made safe for the night, and there was a special way you raked the ashes to keep the embers alight –

It was an almost artistic ritual

I was told the prayer once –

You smooored the fire in a ceremony which protected the souls in the house

You made a circle out of the embers with a little heap or boss in the centre, and the circle is divided into three – the first peat is laid down in the name of the God of Life; the second in name of the God of Peace, and the third in name of the God of Grace –

So those are the Three of Light

and the heap slightly raised in the centre is the Tulla nan Tri, the Hearth of the Three. <sup>iv</sup>

RACHEL: *Did you learn that from someone?*

ROBERT: Yes –

RACHEL: *Where was that?*

ROBERT: I believe in the Hebrides.

#### **INTERIOR: KITCHEN - MORAG AND ROBERT, SCENE 1**

**(This is one of Robert Whyman's recording)**

#### **CRACKLE OF OLD RECORDING EQUIPMENT AND THEN A CLICK AS THE RECORDING STARTS**

ROBERT (*younger, 1960s*): – So I wondered, if I might ask you - if you could remember the prayer – would you tell it to us?

ROBERT (OVER): Her name was Morag McAllister.

MORAG: I thought it was the selkies you were after

ROBERT: Those too, but what you told me about raking the fire, and the prayer that went with it – it sounded very interesting and I'd love to record it – for the archive – if you can remember it

Do you smoor the fire anymore?

Do you still – rake the ashes like your mother did?

MORAG :                   No. We have a stove now. You can't even see the red of the fire.

ROBERT:                   That's a shame

MORAG:                   'Tis an iron stove. But I'd like a gas one, like Maggie Henderson's in Glasgow, she has one. They tell me you get a whole flame in a second just by switching it on.

ROBERT:                   That's true.

MORAG:                   Have you been to Glasgow?

ROBERT:                   Yes I have, a few times.

MORAG:                   I bet it's nothing compared to London.

ROBERT:                   It depends what you like.

MORAG:                   I wish I could go.

ROBERT:                   Well, why don't you? – if you want to go–

MORAG:                   Tis well for you, I haven't the money.

What were we saying?

ROBERT:                We were talking about in the old days – before coming here, before the council house – when you had the other kind of fire - you would put the ashes over the cinders at night, have I got that right, and that's what you mean by raking the fire - ?

MORAG:                   Yes, my mother did that. In our old house. Long ago. It's all different now.

ROBERT:                   Could you perhaps show me how it's done? Just with some old ashes?

MORAG:                You can't do it with ashes that are dead. Nobody can rake a fire that's gone out.

### **INTERVIEW ACOUSTIC AGAIN:**

ROBERT:                   She looked at me as though I was some kind of distant animal that had come close and tried to speak.

I don't know what age she was – nineteen? Twenty at the most? Younger than me at the time I expect – and it was hard talking to the younger people because they were often almost – embarrassed by the old ways – even in the 1950s and 60s

Yes. It was Morag who told me the prayer

KITCHEN, RADIO – (end of Morag and Robert, scene 1.)

**1965 RADIO IN BACKGROUND**

ROBERT:        Would you remember the prayer?

MORAG:        Not very well, some of it maybe.

ROBERT:        Some of it would be wonderful, even if you can't remember the whole thing.  
If you wouldn't mind.

MORAG:        An Tri numh

A chumhnadh,

A chomhnadh,

An tula,

An taighe,

An taghlaich,

An oidhche,

An nochd,

O! an oidhche,

An nochd,

Agus gach oidhche,

Gach aon oidhche.

MORAG:        That's it. Most of it, anyway.

ROBERT:        Could you – would you translate it for me?

MORAG: It doesn't make any sense. You wouldn't want to hear it.

ROBERT: – oh but I would, I really would –

MORAG: I'm sorry it's late, I have to get on–

ROBERT: Sorry –

MORAG: Another time, maybe.

ROBERT: Of course – I'm sorry –

**CLICK AS TAPE RECORDER SWITCHED OFF SOMEWHERE MID-SENTENCE – STATIC CRACKLE  
AT END OF RECORDING**

RACHEL: Did you ever hear the translation?

ROBERT: Not for a long time.

But even then, in '65 or '66, or whatever it was, those times were over - nobody raked the fire anymore, or nobody even had a fire to rake -

The whole way of life, all the old ways. The connection with traditions like the selkie tales, all of it was - dying. I was a kind of King Canute - trying to hold back the waves with my tape recorder -

**ARCHIVE RECORDING - MARGARET**

ROBERT: Robert Whyman - archivist. Would you tell me the story that you began last night – about Seal Island?

MARGARET: Aye well there was once a crofter called Donald MacManus up above in the north part of the island and he had a great croft with many fields, and Donald MacManus had two good fishing boats, and he had four sons. But four sons was too many to croft so the fisherman said, let the oldest two work the croft and the youngest two shall have the fishing boats. And I'll work with the oldest two on land and we won't go near the sea. And the youngest two can fish, and make their living as fishermen and they won't have anything to do with the land. And so it was arranged.

Well the two youngest went out in the good strong boats but soon their nets were ruined by the seals who came to eat the best bits of the fish – their nets were cut where the seals went right through them.

And one day the youngest of all said look there beyond on Seal Island, where the seals gather and bask in the evening. Let's take the boats into the cove and bring clubs and let's kill all the young seals that we can and stone the big seals and rid ourselves of these creatures that take our fish and ruin our nets.

So the two youngest brothers rowed out to the island with their clubs, intending to kill every seal on the island –

but when they went ashore there wasn't one seal there – not one – the beach was empty – they sat and made a wee fire and wondered what was going on.

And then the youngest said 'sshht – what's that?'

And when they looked round what did they see but hundreds and hundreds of people – the like of which they'd never seen before, dressed in strange furry suits - and they were moving towards the brothers with a strange murmuring going on, half Gaelic, half broken English – and there was no escape for the boys they were surrounded and very afraid for they didn't know what these folk wanted to do with them –

When suddenly an elderly man in a long black coat said – Stop! These are the sons of Donald MacManus who was ever kind to the seal folk and threw fish to us and one time he pulled a knife from my side and saved my life.

And these are his sons, and for Donald their father's sake we must be merciful.

And the seal people let them be and instead slipped away into the water, diving in, and as they did taking on the form of seals and swimming at great speed gracefully away.

And the sons were astonished and vowed never to hurt the seal people in future but instead to share their catch as best they could.

And from that day to this, Seal Island has always been a haven for the seals and no man has broken the vow made by the sons of Donald Mac Manus.<sup>v</sup>

## MUSIC

RACHEL (VOICE-OVER): 12<sup>TH</sup> June. London. Third session with Robert Whyman.

## INTERVIEW WITH ROBERT WHYMAN

RACHEL: When did you first encounter the stories about seals?

ROBERT: I first encountered them as a boy.

We were sent to my aunt Sophia's house in Scotland. My sister and I. It was the war, they sent us out of Germany -

I can barely remember - I was four - I suppose we went by train - we must have got on the train at Munich and then the boat I suppose - but I don't really remember

Helen remembers more I expect - she was twelve when we left

I know I had a little rucksack thing with my toys in it

I couldn't get enough toys in it

And I had my father's watch - and my last gift to them of course was my failure to be able to tell the time

#### STEAM-TRAIN HISSES AND HOOTS

MOTHER: Liebe liebe Robertchen, bitte nicht weinen, bitte, Robertchen

Kuk mal - du tragst Papa's Uhr!

FATHER: Wie Spat ist es?

ROBERT: Ich weisse nicht.

MOTHER: Halb sieben, Robert.

FATHER: Halb nach sieben. Eines Tages wirst du ein kluger Erwachsener sein und dann wirst du die Zeit wissen.

#### INTERVIEW

ROBERT: They were both doctors, at the children's hospital

they weren't stupid, knew the score I suppose

They sent us away

Very rational decision



and then later I went to boarding school when I was about seven

that was the last year or two of the war

terrible purgatory – the smell and the games and the disgusting tapioca

but for a long time I thought they would come and get us –

Especially after the war ended I certainly believed that at any minute that they would come and get us – but when they didn't I suppose at some point I

– unpacked my rucksack as it were –

INTERVIEWER: *That must have been very - ?*

ROBERT:       It wasn't all bad

In the holidays my aunt and uncle would take us to Shetland where they had a house, and we had these weeks and weeks of just – running wild, my sister and me, in this empty, lonely place

And I heard the stories – about – you know - Mrs Carmichael in the post office whose legs are all joined in one with flippers for feet and that's why Mr Carmichael never lets her go alone by the sea -

Or what happened if you found a seal stranded and you took a knife and killed it – which was of course that a young man would leap up out of the skin and thank you for breaking the spell – not that I ever tried it

MUSIC (under)

ROBERT:       It is one of life's great moments

you're on the shingle looking out at the sea and you know that it stretches out unbroken to Iceland and Norway – and suddenly this head with huge eyes rises silently up out of the water, staring at you - at you! intently gazing at the shore – for minutes at a time

and then it sinks silently into the water only to rise up again in another place, not very far away

– it feels like a visitation from a consciousness that is ancient, that comes right from the depths - but it's up searching for something

And of course the old songs have an answer for that - 'I am a selkie in the sea, and a man upon the land' and the seal-lore says it's because of this dual nature that they are always restless - on land they have a longing for the sea, and at sea they have a longing for land

Which is why they are never at home

### LAURA ON THE BOAT:

LAURA: - There was this rather strange scruffy man at the till, completely ignoring me, very intensely reading a book, as still as a post but with this aura

like he had dropped from another world

And I drank my grotty tea out of this grotty mug and went over my notes all the time sort of half-looking at this chap on the till

only he wouldn't bloody look at me

He was genuinely aloof

Genuinely wrapped up in this other world

It was so provocative

Because obviously I was bloody gorgeous

### INTERVIEW BETWEEN ROBERT AND RACHEL

ROBERT: In my aunt's house everything was very ordered, it was a very sedate world, everything was done by the clock

whereas I always longed to be part of the world of these people who were so wild and so tough, the crofters and the islanders, but

but - it was the same as at school, no matter what I did – I was never like the others, they just instinctively knew I wasn't the same

and there was a war on, of course,

I just couldn't fit in – my classmates kind of smelt I was different even though I had this posh little English accent I remember my sister Helen drilling it into me, making me sing these stupid songs – to get my accent better – but I don't think I needed it really, I was only four when I arrived and kids know to blend in, they know it's dangerous to be different, I think, so it wasn't that, it was something much more - much deeper and more complicated – a kind of sixth sense people have for sensing - loneliness, it's a kind of sickness, people feel it in you, and it alienates people

loneliness - oddity

whatever it was

#### CUT TO ARCHIVE RECORDING OF OLD MAN FROM YELL

OLD MAN FROM YELL: And this baby was a freak of nature and he was all covered in hair and he was like a seal or a selkie – and his feet was the same as if they had been webbed and his fingers was the same

#### MUSIC

ROBERT: One of the very first stories I heard was from one of the crofters who lived near us – and he had this amazing tale about a young woman he said his great grandfather knew from Breckon in north Yell

And I never forgot the story so I came back to find him, a few years later, when I started recording everything, and he was still there, just about, still alive! When I was very young, I must have been about sixteen, he told me this story of a young man that his great grandmother had known who had fallen in love with a beautiful selkie man; and the selkie man returned to the sea but nine months later she has a baby – but the baby is – special – he's a seal boy - all covered in hair, and later he has these very soft hands and feet and he can't walk very well or do manual work – but his aunt cares for him and there is silver provided for his keep that she just has to dig up at the Geo, where the sea breaks into the land - and eventually the seal boy dies young, at about 31 or so but his whole short life he has these special powers over the sea –

John told it much better – and I got him to record it – it's not great quality, this was the late 50s, maybe 57, 58, but it's still – makes me shiver

#### MUSIC

#### ARCHIVED RECORDING OF THE OLD MAN FROM YELL

OLD MAN FROM YELL: And this boy, this selkie boy as they called him, he said, 'Sea, sea, come wi' mi ket – sea, sea, come wi' mi ket' – and against the wind , and against the tide, the ket came right into his hands and he dangled hem and took up the salt water to his haim.

#### MUSIC

ROBERT: what I loved was the way the story quite matter of factly puts these – magical powers – right at the heart of this life which was such hard work, so uncomfortable, so difficult, so lacking in all our “modern conveniences” –

And it was the most vulnerable people who were most special – who had the greatest power

Like the seal boy – who has these soft hands that aren't 'steady' so he can't do much work, he has these weak muscles, and the other boys laugh at him but he can summon the waves and he can get the sea to bring the bucket back to him and what the story does is assert – a belief in mystery – and also a total reversal of the normal order

Of who is strong and who is weak

And who is blessed and who is cursed

I loved – this magic that people believed in so naturally and easily

what I longed for I think all my life was to be like them - to lose myself in the world of the crofters and the fishermen

or else to be an animal with no consciousness of myself at all –

#### **LAURA IN THE BOAT:**

LAURA:        So eventually the rain stopped and I went to the till – and he'd been like a statue the entire time – I really hadn't seen him move a muscle – but I came to the till and he finally put down his book and glanced up at me

And because I was curious I held his gaze for a minute – which was this incredibly steady, bluey-green -

And I felt this - leap towards him, this great leap inside - and I thought oh my god what's happening here, I didn't know what was going on – and when he said the price I got kind of flustered because I couldn't find my purse and then when I could find it - there was just a whole bunch of coppers and I had to tip it all out on the counter -

So while I was counting out my pathetic pennies my hair which was really long kind of fell across my face

and suddenly this man reached out across the counter and moved my hair away from my face, he sort of lightly moved it aside and tucked it behind my ear like it was the most natural thing in the world

And I swear to God I nearly fell on the floor because it was so sexy it was the single most erotic thing that had ever happened to me in my life – this stranger who had touched my hair

And I was totally shocked

And when I glanced up I could see he was totally shocked as well – like he'd done it without thinking

And we just kind of stared at each other

### **INTERVIEW WITH ROBERT**

ROBERT: - hints of this intensity of life between people and animals, this shared struggle for food and survival

and there's no battle or bargaining with morality – there's just acceptance of these hard facts of life

No questions

Just sickness and health, and day and night, and food and hunger, and life and death

### **LAURA IN THE BOAT**

LAURA: And that was it

That's how we fell

*Slainte!*

Slainte darling. I'll tip you soon, I will, I just need a few more minutes

### **MUSIC**

ROBERT: The only remnant that I recall of my other life -

It was one time in August and I'd been out on the rocks and missed my footing and had this quite bad fall

I was unconscious for a bit - they were quite worried, my back wasn't quite right so my aunt called the doctor – it was all fine eventually but I had to lie flat for quite a long time – weeks it was

And of all things my mother came to visit

Just that once

I think it was just that one time

### **DOOR CREAKS**

ROBERT:                    - and I knew it was her by her smell

MOTHER:                Robertchen?

ROBERT:                it was dark but I knew she was there by her scent. . . soap, maybe lavender . . . and her hair . . . and the silk dresses she wore, which were just a little musty –

So I didn't move in case it was a dream and it went away

I can smell it now

MOTHER:        Liebchen -

### **CREAK OF FOOTSTEPS RECEDING, AND A DOOR CLOSES IN DISTANCE**

ROBERT:                Then she took her scent away with her–

and I remember crying but for her scent – not for her - it was her scent going away that upset me so badly

That was the last time I saw either of them

I mean, apart from –

That other time – the trip to Munich – which was

But that's not so relevant

kind of a closed chapter now

thank God

### **MUSIC:**

#### **LAURA IN THE BOAT**

LAURA:        Oh my God, one's personal mythology, it's so minimal, isn't it, when you try to tot up what's left –

A shred of something

And you know that all those moments, some supper on a rainy night in November with the curtains drawn and a glass of wine and you, my lovely Rachel, doing colouring or watching the Muppets, and stroking his hair and both of you telling some adventure from the day, some stupid work trouble and you both laugh about it and make it small - send it packing – and that was it, that was love, that was life, that was the field with the treasure in it – if only you had known

But it's gone, it's slipped away

The wedding day pictures are lovely but I wish I had more pictures of wet Wednesdays when nothing happened except my life

Except my life

Do you know what I mean, darling?

RACHEL:       *Yes...kind of... except we're making this aren't we?*

LAURA:       This isn't a wet Wednesday

This is special and terrible and momentous

**(POURS HERSELF A DRINK)**

## **MUSIC**

RACHEL: How are you today? Have you eaten anything?

RACHEL (VOICE-OVER): *25<sup>TH</sup> June. London. Fourth session with Robert Whyman.*

**ROBERT :**       But yes, Shetland was where I first got to know the selkie lore – it was full of strange stories about people I knew, or half-knew, or knew the children or grandchildren of, who peopled the estate and the village –

people who jumped into rivers or disappeared at sea whose bodies were never found –

or babies born not quite right or with no father

or unexplained treasure –

in fact - any kind of stroke of luck or fate, whether for good or ill , or strange habit of personality, or oddity, could be explained with a story –

So I remember, for instance, there was this man on Fetlar, who owned a croft-house on the north part of the island -

. . . whose wife was never seen all the days of their marriage, but was just glimpsed through the windows of the cottage?

Until the day the old man died – and the people broke into the house

### **MUSIC UNDER**

### **BATTERING DOWN OF DOOR AND SHOUTS OF VILLAGERS**

And there in one bed was the old man dead and in the other bed – there was a skeleton  
but – so they say - not a human skeleton

### **EERIE MUSIC - STING**

the skeleton of a seal.

And the person who told me the story was adamant that it was true and that the bones were kept by the priest of the parish and I could see them if I wished -

### **BACK TO CLOCK TICKING AND THE INTERVIEW**

Always this tightrope of truth and lies

So there was always a selkie child which had been born to a young woman, and you'd be told *it's not true, it's just an old tale* – and in the same breath you'd be told *and over there's the very house where the bairn was born* –

So you would always be left with this wonderfully open question mark – this door into a world just beyond what can be known

RACHEL: (INDISTINCT MURMUR)...*Do you remember your first selkie?*

ROBERT:                      My first selkie?

### **DISTANT CHILDREN SINGING ORANGES AND LEMONS**

CHILDREN: *Here comes a candle to light you to bed, here comes a chopper to chop off your head – one, two, three, four,*



ROBERT:                    Yes I do. I do remember

God -

### **TERRIBLE MOANING OF A SEAL**

Even now when I think of it - I – this – I don't know what to call it – a kind of intimate feeling of foreboding – yet excitement – this terrible anticipation on the brink of catastrophe

*CHILDREN'S VOICES: . . . five, six, seven, eight, nine – TEN! And you !*

### **CHILDREN SCREAMING**

### **VIOLENT KILLING OF THE SEAL –**

### **THUMPS OF HEAVY WOOD AGAINST SEAL'S HEAD – TERRIBLE MOANING AND SCREAMS OF ROBERT THE BOY**

ROBERT (AS A BOY, SCREAMING): NO! STOP! Stop . . . stop ...No – please -

ROBERT:                    God.

When I think of it, it's absolutely present in my mind in every detail, the smell and the sight–  
It's very vivid.

### **CHILDREN SINGING, PLAYING 'ORANGES AND LEMONS':**

It started very innocently - with the party – the ninth birthday party of Mrs Clancy's daughter in the village – I don't know why they invited me, they must have been sorry for me or something-

### **CHILDREN PLAYING 'ORANGES AND LEMONS SAY THE BELLS OF ST CLEMENTS' – CONTINUING UNDER**

ROBERT (interview): - and there were games and raspberries and cream cake and lemonade in the garden and I could see that everyone about me was happy –

But I hated parties, and I had this sudden terrible longing to get away– So I just ran to the bottom of the garden, and over the wall, -

### **HEAVY BREATHING OF ROBERT AS A BOY RUNNING**

ROBERT:                         and out to the sea and to the beach –

## GENTLE WAVES AND SOME GULLS

... and I was running along the sand, and along the carse. . . which isn't sand anymore but has some rough grass and whin bushes and broom and you sometimes find a dead rabbit or bones bleached white or dead wood bleached like bone -

. And it was by now past sunset and I had wandered quite far and it was getting darker and darker – and suddenly my foot slipped in something sticky and I heard this terrible groan -

I stepped into something warm and wet and sticky

And at the same time I felt what I thought was an old man's hairy head brush against my ankle -

And then came this terrible moan again – but the moaning sounded like a woman – there are two of them I thought – drowned people – or dying – on the beach – or they have jumped from the cliffs and their heads are smashed in – there was this terrible sticky stuff – and a mound of fishermen’s nets nearby too, so the smell of fish was so bad that I started retching and I was sick all over whatever it was on the ground –

And then suddenly I heard footsteps and someone coming and I screamed – because it was dark and I could no longer see properly in front of me

## ANGUS SHOUTS

ANGUS :        Who's that there?

BOY ROBERT: It's me. Robert. I've been sick on your nets. I'm sorry.

## MOANING OF SEAL

ANGUS :               What's going on, boy?

BOY ROBERT: There's a woman and an old man and they're dying or wounded or something -

ANGUS : (shouts in Gaelic)

**HEAVY BLOWS, THUMPS AND GRUNTS AS BOB BEATS THE SEAL AND SOMETIMES THE WOODEN FLOORBOARDS WITH A HEAVY PIECE OF WOOD – BOY ROBERT SCREAMS IN HORROR**

**TERRIBLE GROANING DEATH RATTLE FROM THE SEAL**

ANGUS :        There now.

She's dead now. Dead as a crow.

### **BOY ROBERT SOBS IN SHOCK AND HORROR**

ROBERT (AS ADULT – NARRATOR V/O): *It was Angus, the fisherman, and he had killed the selkie in front of my eyes.*

ANGUS :       The lads told me for sure she was dead and there'd be nobody to interfere wi' her til Monday.

Och man, there's eneuch o' greeting – wipe your eyes that's a boy.

Pass me yon rope there. Yourself and me will drag her out and lay her by the midden.

### **ANGUS AND THE BOY ROBERT PULL THE SEAL'S BODY OUT OF THE BOTHY**

ROBERT V/O: *(as a man): So I had to help him haul the seal's dead body across the pebbles to the midden.*

*Its nose was battered and its eyes closed and its whole head clotted with blood. When we took the rope off it rolled over on its back and the two front flippers lay against its chest like hands – like human hands with five fingers webbed with skin. When Angus's back was turned, I felt the hands and stroked the long, round body.*

*When we had hauled her to the midden, Angus took me to the bothy where they mended the nets and he lit a fire and boiled water for tea*

### **CRACKLING OF FIRE; POURING OF TEA**

BOY ROBERT: Why did you have to kill her?

ANGUS :       Now listen laddie, I wish it was not me that had had the killing of her. God knows I would not have done it if I hadn't had to. 'Tis bad luck to kill a selkie.

BOY ROBERT: Then why did you do it?

ANGUS :       The others had tried to kill her afor me, did ye no' see that? She was lying there half-living. The boys didn't finish her off.

There's only one way to kill a selkie and that's to hit her on the nose. The back of the head's no use – she's all fat there. If you hit her there, the life'll come back into her.

If I had left her like that half-living she would travel down to the sea again maybe and the lads would be at me o'Monday morning thinking I sold her for the skin.

BOY ROBERT: But what are the selkies really?

ANGUS : They say that they're people under a spell. They've been banished to the water, which is why they hang in the water and stare at the land – and if they come ashore, they can take their true form.

Or some say they are just a class of fairy

Will ye have a jammy piece?<sup>vi</sup>

BOY ROBERT: Yes please.

ANGUS : There now.

BOY ROBERT: Thank you.

(THROUGH EATING) How do you mean they are fairies?

ANGUS : Some say the selkies came from the Norway Finns

**SEAL MUSIC AND SEAL CALLS UNDERNEATH THE FOLLOWING?:**

And some call them angels that God threw out of heaven when Lucifer rebelled and they fell into the sea

They can rise up out of the sea and take on human shape and turn waves into dark horses and ride across mountains and take lovers from among the humans, and their children may look like people but they have power over the sea and can bring objects back from the tide, and summon ships and so forth.

BOY ROBERT: But they're animals - ?

ANGUS : Oh aye, they are.

BOY ROBERT: Can they speak?

ANGUS : Tis said they lost the power of speech a long time ago

BOY ROBERT: Then they did speak long ago?

ANGUS : They say all the animals and birds had the power of speech a long time ago. My father would say the animals had the power of speech in his father's father's father's day. It's all just stories now. But it was true once, long ago

And they are tender - the seal is a loving mother, and will nurse a human baby if she finds one abandoned

there is no milk richer than that of the seal

ROBERT: Do they – care for each other? Do they think and feel things like people do?

ANGUS : Aye. Everything we feel, they feel.

They mourn their dead –

And they'll mourn a dead Christian too – I have seen them make a great procession in the water, alongside a boat that bears a coffin

But still ye'll find the fishermen do for the most part hate them

BOY ROBERT: Why?

ANGUS : The seals are like toffs – they'll not even eat the whole fish, they'll just take a bite of the best bit and throw away the rest – and they may kill just for the sake of killing like cats with mice

and just one of them can do hundreds of pounds worth of damage to the nets in just a few minutes - that's why the fishermen will kill them if they can

And for some it's their trade – to kill them for their skins – my own father's father was a seal-killer

But then my father himself did not go into it for he was afraid

BOY ROBERT: Afraid of what?

ANGUS : Of the trouble that comes to those who kill or do harm to the seal.

BOY ROBERT: What sort of trouble?

ANGUS : More tea in your cup?

BOY ROBERT: Yes please –

**CLINK OF TEA BEING POURED; CRACKLING OF THE BOTHY FIRE; CREAKING OF THE WOODEN CHAIRS; SIPPING OF TEA UNDER**

BOY ROBERT: What sort of trouble comes to the seal-killers?

ANGUS: Those that hate the seals only end up hating themselves.

ROBERT: What do you mean?

ANGUS: Did you ever hear the tale of the fisherman's niece?

I'll tell it if you wish.

God to my lips! Death will come!

Great the tidings!

The blessing of God on the souls of the dead!

And here is what folk say:

### **MUSIC TO UNDERSCORE THE STORY**

ANGUS V/O: So they say long ago there were two brothers Iain and Duncan, and Iain the elder loved the seals, and used to take fish from his boat and fling them over to the seals - but Duncan the younger brother cursed them with his whole heart and hated them <sup>vii</sup>

And the elder brother Iain met and married a woman who came from no one knew where – she just arrived on the beach one day, and her name was Seda.

And Seda and the older brother Iain lived in great joy in the little croft house – along with Duncan, this bitter and angry younger brother who cursed the seals for destroying his nets, and would kill them if the chance arose.

And one day this bitter and angry younger brother was sick so the elder, Iain the husband of Seda, had to go off alone in the boat to fish by himself.

And Seda waited anxiously for Iain's return, but return he did not, not that evening, nor the next, nor the next. A whole week went by, then a month, then a year, and the kind elder brother who loved the seals never came back and his body never was found.

So poor Seda his widow lived on in the cottage with the younger brother Duncan for she had no other home and nowhere else to go, but she cooked and looked after the house and looked after her brother-in-law and he grew accustomed to her being there, his brother's widow.

And in due course she fell sick but it turned out it was only that she was having a baby and she had the baby and it was a girl, and so the niece of that angry brother Duncan.

What'll ye call it he said?

I'll call it Seda after meself, she said. And the child grew and became a bonny wee girl. And Seda her mother loved her, and so did her uncle the angry younger brother, though the mother grieved constantly for the husband she had lost.

And one day the girl's mother went for a walk down to the beach and she never came back.

And her uncle told the little girl Seda that her mother was gone and never would she see her again. And the poor thing was full of sorrow but her uncle found he loved this young one

and he raised her and reared her as his own, and he took care of her and sent her to school and loved her like nothing else in the world!

And she reached the age of 12. . . and her uncle was sore afraid for she went often down to the beach and would sit on the rocks staring out to sea or swimming amongst the seals and they were her friends and she spent all the time she could with them. And her uncle was afraid and he said – Look Seda, they took your father and your mother – watch out now they don't take you!

And she said but the seals are lovely and they are my friends and – I love their life, they're free and they swim in the sea!

And he said to her, keep away from those beasts, they are neither fish nor beast but they long always for what they can't have – they took your mother and your father and they will take you too if you don't look out –

And one day he came home in a drunken stupor to the cottage and found it dark and nobody there and he was so afraid that he ran to the darkening shore and there on the rocks he saw his beloved little niece, Seda, only twelve years old and maybe 14 or 15 seals about her!

### **MUSIC – SEALS - SHORE**

ANGUS V/O: And he grabbed her by the arm and pulled her away in a drunken rage and dragged her back to the house, saying, 'Seda, I love you more than all the world but you will never join these people' – so he took her into the hut to where he used to kill the goats

and he said to her, 'you must know that my father and my grandmother told me a long time ago that there's only one way to stop a human from joining the seal people and that's to chop off their fingers and chop off their toes and that's what I must do'

and she shouted and she cried but he held her fast and chopped off the points of her fingers and the points of her toes

### **MUSIC**

ANGUS V/O: The child took to her bed and when the drink had subsided in him the uncle was full of sorrow and he brought her drinks and food to tempt her to eat, but she turned her face to the wall

And the following day he went out to fish, alone

And in the middle of the sea he saw crowds of seals swimming around and below the boat and they nuzzled and pushed at the boat, harder and harder until he was frightened and shouted at them to be off, but they just nuzzled and pushed more and more until the boat was rocking dangerously

And one large seal gave an extra hard shove and they capsized the boat and he was tipped into the sea – and the seals crowded in and fell upon him and they snapped off every one of the points of his fingers and they snapped off the points of his toes til the water ran red.

The fisherman crawled ashore and dragged himself home and when he got there he cried out –

UNCLE:           Seda! Seda, come and help me! Please help me! I've lost my fingers, I've lost my toes – Seda please help me!

ANGUS V/O:    But the house was empty and no sign of his niece but a trail of blood that led along the path and towards the beach

And so enraged with anger and sorrow was he that he drank again from the bottle of stiff drink and he shut the door of the cottage behind him and left on his way vowing never to return

And the ivy grew over the abandoned cottage and the walls began to crumble and the doors to crack and children threw stones at the dark windows and they broke

And it was uninhabited for years until one day a woman from the village was passing on her way home from market and said she saw three seals – Now what they were doing inland who knew? – but there were three seals nosing about the place – a large father seal, and a smaller mother seal, and a seal cub, and they were nosing about the place in curiosity

And when she looked closer she saw the seal cub had something wrong with its flippers – half of its front flipper was cut across and missing and half of its back flippers were missing.

But when they had seen enough the family of three dragged themselves off to the beach and the rocks and dived into the waves and disappeared, to be seen no more. . .

And of the jealous brother? – Well, no more was ever seen in that village but they say there is one aul fella of the island who hobbles the roads of the island from north to south and from east to west and is a familiar sight to people who say some accident must have



befallen him for he walks with a terrible limp and he is always drinking from a bottle which he holds with fingers an inch too short.

### STORY MUSIC ENDS

ANGUS:           So there now. That's what becomes of those that hate or kill the seals

ROBERT (*as a boy*):   But we just – you just killed her – aren't you afraid?

ANGUS:           She was half-dead already

ROBERT:          But you hit her -

ANGUS:           I hadnae choice. She was suffering. Twas a mercy to release her

ROBERT:          Do you really think so?

ANGUS:           Finish your tea. It's late now – we should get you back.

ROBERT:          Get me back where?

ANGUS:           Haim. Where's haim?

ROBERT:          I don't know

ANGUS:           Are ye lost?

ROBERT:          I don't know

### MUSIC

### ROBERT INTERVIEW

ROBERT:        Yes, so that was my first selkie. And my first proper story which Angus told me, with the body of the poor dead seal just a few feet away.

That one was never recorded but it was so vivid in my mind that I never felt the need.

But down the years, there were so many others. And some were about the love between selkies and people, and the children they made. But others were full of horrors.

The point about all this stuff is that it transcends the individual. It's about a culture and people - None of this belongs to one person, none of it belongs to a single person, do you see -

#### LAURA IN THE BOAT

LAURA: We'd only been married, maybe six months, – and he said he needed to go to the Hebrides, for some stories but also there was some girl he wanted to visit,

So - we'd had such a lovely wedding day and such a blissful honeymoon that I didn't quite see at first, the trouble he was getting into

Well having said it was a blissful honeymoon, it was around then I think it started

said he had unfinished business – which was a bit weird but I didn't want to start cramping anybody's style because I didn't want to be 'married' like that, you know?

and I said fine, do what you have to, what the hey, so he went

#### ROBERT AND MORAG, ROBERT'S RECORDING: SCENE 2, 1971

##### ROBERT starts recording :

MORAG: So did my father ever tell ye of the seal-wife who lost her sealy hood?

ROBERT: I've heard quite a few stories like that –

MORAG: You must have heard all of them by now - I didnae think we'd be seeing you again , Robert. It's been such a while. How did you find me?

ROBERT: I just asked at the post office and they said you were here. They said you were married.

MORAG: Aye. You too?

ROBERT: That's right. How did you know?

MORAG: By the look of your left hand. How is it going? Married life?

ROBERT: Very well. How about you?

MORAG: Would you like a cigarette?

ROBERT: Thanks.

THEY LIGHT UP

MORAG: Everyone says that one of my aunts – not aunt but a great, great aunt, on my mother's side - she was one of the seal women. Her people were of North Uist.

ROBERT: Is that so?

MORAG: They say she came out of the sea naked, and my uncle found her sealy hood and hid it from her, and she was married to him for years and could never find it. And she had children with him, and lived with him for years and years, and then one day one of the boys said he had seen her sealy-hood hidden in the chest in the barn, and she took it back and went out to harbour, and could not hold herself back but put on her sealy hood again, and dived into the sea, and there was no sign of her body from that day to this

No sign of a body - ever

You don't believe it?

ROBERT: I don't know. I'm not sure.

MORAG: When I hear those stories I think – that was no seal-wife, just some poor woman so sad and alone and out of her mind that she went down to the water and killed herself

ROBERT: Morag –

MORAG: You could switch it off now, I don't have any more I can tell you

ROBERT: Morag-

MORAG: Have you got what you wanted?

It's late and I should get things ready –

ROBERT: I brought you something – it's a wedding present – I was clearing out and I wanted you to have this –

MORAG: What is it?

ROBERT: It's for you. I honestly don't want it. It's just to say thank you for all the time you have given me.

MORAG: Jesus.

My God it must be solid gold.

I can't take this

ROBERT: You can -

MORAG: What's the time on it?

ROBERT: Oh, it's wrong, you'll have to wind it up –re-set it -

MORAG: Twenty to nine

Robert, I can't take this it must be worth a fortune

ROBERT: You can, really. I never wear it –

MORAG: Where did it come from?

ROBERT: my father - he had it engraved, apparently, and gave it to me when they sent us to England, but I haven't seen him since then – not in thirty years. Take it – use it. Sell it – whatever you want.

It really is fine. I want you to have it

MORAG: I've got nothing to give you.

ROBERT: You could give me the translation you promised me, of the prayer – do you remember?

MORAG: Oh – that? Smoothing the fire? You can't still be on about that. That's no class of a gift.

ROBERT: I'd really like to hear it in English.

MORAG: It's no repayment for a watch.

ROBERT: You don't have to repay me.

MORAG: *"Robert Bernhard Weissman, 1938"*

Who's that? Is that your father?

ROBERT: No. It's me.

**CLICK AS RECORDING EQUIPMENT IS SWITCHED OFF**

**LAURA IN THE BOAT:**

LAURA:        They say that for every animal on the land, there is a creature under the sea. Every pig, cow, snail, elephant, butterfly – there is an equivalent in the ocean. But the seals – they are the people of the sea.

We all have our shadow selves, under the waves, don't we, our counterparts, the people we are going to love - and I think we are searching them out our whole lives, aren't we?

And then you find them – and you have to figure out how to keep loving them

Everything that attacks your beloved becomes your enemy too

Daddy had always had these – grey moods

These times when he just went blank - that was the worst

I'd come in and he would just be sitting in a chair in the dark not reading or writing, not doing anything, just sitting in the dark and I would know it had descended on him and there could be weeks of it – months of it

And the job he was doing, at the café – he couldn't even do that after a while – he chucked it in, which meant money was tight for a while

But when he came back from the Hebrides that time, quite early in our marriage, it was like something was eating him – it wasn't just the grey mood – it was as though something had happened

#### ROBERT INTERVIEW WITH RACHEL:

RACHEL (VOICE –OVER):     *6<sup>th</sup> July London. Sixth session with Robert Whyman.*

ROBERT:        I had been in a bit of a jam – I suppose – for a long time

Since my teens really, but it was only in my twenties I actually went to the doctor

There was no safety rope out of it – he gave me something, I took it for Laura's sake really I didn't want to take it and I stopped as soon as I could – it was a chemical cosh – they just smash it down on your head and it brings a kind of peace but it's violent you know, like the peace of a battlefield when everyone is dead and vanquished

RACHEL:        *What prompted this mood?*

*Did something trigger it?*

ROBERT:        I don't know. I mean, yes – in a way.

#### 1965 RADIO PLAYS IN THE BACKGROUND

MORAG:                   *(whispers the prayer in Gaelic to ‘smoor’ the fire)*

An Tri numh

A chumhnadh,

A chomhnadh,

An tula,

An taighe,

An taghlaich,

An oidhche,

An nochd,

O! an oidhche,

An nochd,

Agus gach oidhche,

Gach aon oidhche.

Why are you crying?

Robert –

ROBERT:       I don't know why I was so overcome when I thought of that prayer

it was the language

it was the deepness of the roots

The sacredness of the everyday

You smooored the fire to consecrate it, to protect the souls within the house through the night

It was so utterly beautiful

And I was so utterly outside everything that it meant

Peace or safety or home

Or roots

I had fragments of a language – that had deserted me

Some baby words I knew

Mutti and Vati

But no words for myself as an adult, no words for the life I had grown into, I was stranded in a world that had rejected me again and again

And I did then realise what it was I had to do

#### LAURA ON BOAT:

LAURA:           - then one day he comes home and I was working and he just threw this envelope on the desk and said I've done it

And I said – done what?

And he said – I've bought a ticket?

And I said, a ticket to where?

And he says – to Munich.

#### MUSIC

ROBERT:        They were retired, obviously, and they were as old as the century

They had a rather nice apartment in the city centre

We went out for dinner

And they talked a lot about music, and about the most recent exhibitions – had I been to the Deutsches Museum and the Residenz museum yet? As though I was a tourist and they had polite advice for me. The children's hospital was doing well – it had a new governor, but they sometimes saw old colleagues, one or two -though not often. Many had gone away. My father kept up a little with the profession, read academic papers – over the plum tart we discussed my studies politely and my doctoral thesis? Had I undertaken a public defence? It's not like that in England I said. I would have liked to see that my father said, which was the only thing he said to me in German.

So they drove me to the Hauptbahnhof – a tidy little pair, very spruce, both with waxy white hair and shoes shiny as conkers and neatly buttoned raincoats – but it was only when my father excused himself to use the bathroom that my mother appeared to fall apart in some subdued but perceptible way.

### **RAILWAY STATION, MUNICH**

ROBERT:                    She picked up my suitcase, struggled, dropped it, wiped her forehead with a linen hanky and then she clutched my arm and said – you mustn't believe everything you read. People said very cruel, very wrong things and I know that professionally, everything your father ever did was to help people, and everything was in response to pleas for help, for a merciful release –

And I said what do you mean mother?

And she said, look we thought we did the right thing, perhaps we didn't – we made the referrals - that's what she said – we made the referrals to Hartheim and other places but we didn't do anything ourselves –

– there were people looking for vengeance, wanting to find scapegoats

Scapegoats? I said.

Look – Robert - perhaps we were misled. But the hospital is in good hands now. And it's important that a person can look back and be proud.

And I said mother, I have no idea what you are talking about, and she just gripped my hand and said – good then, good then, no need to say more. He helped so many families, she said helplessly, tears in her eyes. So many mothers and fathers who despaired of their children and their children's suffering.

What are you talking about? I said to her – what are you saying to me?

I know – I know – she began

I waited but she couldn't go on

Know what? I said.

I know that you must wonder – she said and she kept stopping but I wouldn't help her

You must wonder why

We didn't want to interrupt your schooling, she said.

Interrupt my schooling - those were her words –



And it was like I had no breath in my body – my chest was exploding – I was deep deep underwater

And I backed away from her faded blue eyes and her scent of soap and silk and lavender, and I said I have to go for my train now – I didn't wait for my father to return from the bathroom, I just backed away from her, and then turned and ran for my platform - . I pushed myself out of her life and out of his life and they are gone now

### LAURA IN BOAT

LAURA:            So he came back from Munich and if the mood had been grey before, on and off

Now it was –

I was scared for him

He wouldn't tell me what it was, what had happened

He said he couldn't he said he literally couldn't speak the words to me, he was sick

The words made him sick

ROBERT:           I was so afraid, I knew I was heading for a bad place – and nothing really helped and my life had collapsed into a tiny, tiny square space about three cubic inches inside my skull – and this thing my mother had said just went round and round – I called Helen my sister – just once – she was the only person I confessed it all to

LAURA:           On days when there was some small respite I tried to get things off the ground – I bullied him into the shop – I found the site and my parents had died and there was some money I had so I bought it and I forced him to run the bookshop – which he did, most days,

Most days he could do it – and some days it helped – a little

It was a job

He was a shopkeeper

He liked that

ROBERT: I called Helen just one time and she said she was busy with the kids' tea, could I call her later?

But - I said - I was in Munich

Oh yes said Helen

I spoke with mother –

Oh yes?

you know the children's hospital in Munich where they worked?

Yes, said Helen

You know it was the subject of extensive investigation for the role of its staff in what was termed after the war Aktion T4 and the so-called 'racial hygiene' policy which was responsible for the deaths of –

I'm not listening, said Helen, please, please, stop –

Thousands of children and adults whose parents wrote in to ask for – 'special treatment' – to be referred to the 'special treatment' centres -

Mother said they made referrals to Hartheim, do you know what that means, at the request of parents and relatives – do you know what that means, Hartheim Castle, do you understand what they were involved in? What mother was trying to tell me?

Helen said stop, stop, please stop -

She put the phone down

I don't think we spoke for – I don't know – a long time

I didn't go to the funeral – either of them -

#### LAURA ON BOAT:

LAURA: And it was – God, I don't know, a decade at least - there were flashes of his old self but they were like mirages in a desert of empty empty nothing

and my beautiful stranger had become a monstrous terrible stranger squatting in my life in my bed eating away at the love I had once had in my heart

he got himself to work I guess and I guess he sat in the shop taking money, ordering books sometimes, still as a post, just like he had been when we met

but at home he did nothing, he said nothing, he cooked nothing, he went nowhere, he cut off his friends, he cut off the phone, he threw his post in the bin

ROBERT: I actually wished I could stop loving Laura because then I could at least get out of there and stop ruining her life but the cruelty was that I loved her too much to leave her, so all I could do was just wish that she would get rid of me somehow

LAURA: and at last we had the row of all rows and I said - I screamed actually – I screamed him out of bed

I don't know what happened in Munich but whatever it was it is killing us and I'm going to throw you out and burn everything you ever touched in my house – and take your fucking post with you, and she threw this envelope at me

### MUSIC

ROBERT: And there it was – a letter had arrived –

LAURA: On the door mat was this letter which had been forwarded to us by the BBC and I just threw it at him and said you can fucking burn it I don't care

ROBERT: It just said – Dr Robert Whyman, Folklore archivist – care of the BBC

LAURA: And the BBC had forwarded it

ROBERT: And I was about to throw it in the bin

LAURA: When I said – do you really want to do that – it's from the Hebrides

ROBERT: So I opened it

LAURA: He hadn't opened and read a letter in ten years

RACHEL (VOICE –OVER): *31<sup>st</sup> July 1997. Final session with Robert Whyman.*

ROBERT: And inside was this scrap of paper - from Morag McAllister

And it said 'The sacred three'

“To save  
To shield  
To surround  
The hearth  
The house  
The household  
This eve  
This night  
Oh! This eve  
This night  
And every night  
Each single night  
Amen”

**ROBERT INTERVIEW:**

ROBERT:       And it was one of those completely strange and inexplicable things - but the arrival of this scrap of paper did something –  
  
It felt like a spell had been broken  
  
The words just lifted the curse I was under  
  
This particular awful enchantment - just broke apart

**MUSIC**

**LAURA on THE BOAT:**

LAURA:       I think there is this magic of the everyday, that’s what Robert was entranced by – that’s what he pursued –  
  
The magic of work, and love, and fate  
  
And the wet Wednesdays where you took no pictures  
  
Because a picture wouldn’t be enough

It should be a stained glass window

A sacred rite to protect the souls within the house

ROBERT:        you think you have find your shadow self beneath the waves - And you recognise them and it's joyful and then you immediately want to join them in their world - or drag them from their world into your own –

but that doesn't always work; you can't live in their world; and they can't live in yours

we can only partially understand ourselves and partially understand other people

what is animal in us and what is human in us will be always in constant tension and that is unresolvable

These contradictory truths about love are so painful to us that I think we can only approach them through stories because that's a place where we can hold several truths in our heads all at one time

LAURA:        Have you got it open?

Are we still filming?

RACHEL:        Yes.

LAURA:        shall we do it now? Shall we let him go? Goodbye darling.

DAUGHTER:    Bye Daddy.

LAURA:        Slainte.

RACHEL (VOICE-OVER): Rest in peace, selkie guy. Robert Whyman 1936 to 1997

**MUSIC - ARCHIVED RECORDING – AND THIS TIME WE HEAR THE REAL THING FROM 1954  
AS RECORDED AND KEPT AT TOBAR AN DUALCHAIS – A WOMAN BEARS A SEAL-BOY  
AFTER MEETING A SELKIE:**

OLD MAN. . . But then she went some time after that and she was a long time away – and then her brother and her sisters gone to seek her when she come back home all smiles and they said , Oh is it you've met your man the night and she said yes, she'd met him

And she was sitting under the banks with him and they'd a long talk, tells 'em, and she didn't know if he earthly or unearthly because it seemed he had come oot a nothing and it was the same as if he went as well, but he went to the sea, and she saw no more of him

INTERVIEWER: And that story is from Yell?

OLD MAN: Tis indeed and I can show you the very house where the child was born

INTERVIEWER: Ah really? Thank you, yes - and thank you - that's a wonderful story

### FIN

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<sup>i</sup> Recording from the online oral history collection *Tobar an Dualchais*; Brucie Henderson recounts 'The Story of the Strange Selkie Boy of Breckon': SA. 1954.112. Quoted with the kind permission of the School of Scottish Studies, University of Edinburgh.

<sup>ii</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>iii</sup> See p. 26 and p.30, David Thomson's *The People of the Sea*, for references to the coming of 'White Houses' – the modern council houses which replaced the traditional croft-houses; the demise of the circular fire in the centre, and the tradition of 'smoorring' the ashes.

<sup>iv</sup> See p. 45, Thomson, *People of the Sea*, where Thomson discusses 'smoorring' and the prayer, and also quotes from Alexander Carmichael's *Carmina Gadelica* (Edinburgh, 1900) which contains the prayer in full.

<sup>v</sup> This tale is adapted from Duncan Williamson's, 'The Fisherman and His Sons', pp.128-134, in *Tales of the seal People: Scottish Folk Tales* (Interlink: New York, 2005).

<sup>vi</sup> This section from p.24 to p.27 - of Robert running away from a children's party, along the beach and coming across a dying seal, and then sitting near the bothy with a fisherman – is inspired by and adapted from Thomson's anecdote, recounted pp. 11-18 in *The People of the Sea*.

<sup>vii</sup> This story is adapted from the tale 'The Crofter's Mistake', re-told by Duncan Williamson in *Tales of the Seal People*, pp.47-59.