

## ABSOLUTE SEA

Cecília Meireles  
(Rio de Janeiro, 1901–1964)

Translated by Chris Daniels

It was always the sea.  
And past multitudes towed me  
like the forgotten boat.

Now I remember how they spoke  
of the revolt of the winds,  
of sailcloth, cords and irons,  
of mermaids, their backs to us.

And the faces of my grandparents fallen  
through the Eastern seas, with their corals and pearls,  
and through the ice-hard seas of the North.

Then, it was me they told, it was  
I who must go.  
For there is no one else,  
no, there will never be another  
so pledged to love and obey her dead.

And I must seek my drowned, distant uncles.  
I must bring them nets of prayers,  
fields converted into sails,  
supernatural barques  
and their messenger fish,  
their nautical saints.

And I become dizzy, suddenly  
awake on tumultuous beaches.  
And they hasten me; nor do they allow me to view the wind-rose.

“Onward! To the wide sea!  
Free the body from the fragile lesson of sand!  
To the sea! — Human discipline for the enterprise of life!”

My blood knows itself in these powerful voices.  
The land’s monotone solidity

seems weak illusion to us.  
We need the greater illusion of the sea  
multiplied in a perilous mesh.

We want its robust solitude,  
a solitude on all sides,  
a human absence opposed to the paltry ant farm of the world  
makes time of a piece, free from daily struggles.

The heroic breath of the sea has a secret pole  
sensed by men seduced and fearful.

The sea held to none is only sea;  
a regenerating suicide,  
it charges like a blue bull at its own shadow,  
in bravura assaulting no one at all;  
and afterwards, pure shadow of itself,  
by itself conquered. It is its own great act.

It has no need for land's fixed destiny,  
for it is at once  
dancer and dance.

It has a kingdom of metamorphosis to experience:  
its body is its own play,  
and its ludic eternity  
is not gratuitous, but perfect.

It entangles its high contrasts:  
epic horse, mild anenome,  
it surrenders all, disdains everything,  
upholds in its prodigious rhythm  
gardens, stars, tails, antennae, eyes,  
but is defoliated, blind, naked, master only of itself,  
of its conclusive, despoiled grandeur.

Do not forget that it is water when its visions unfold:  
water of every potential,  
yet lacking the smallest weakness.

Thus water speaks to me,  
hurls whelks at me, as recollection of its voice,  
and bristling stars, as invitation to my destiny.

It does not call me to follow above or within,  
but to convert into itself. Such is its greatest gift.

It wishes neither to trawl me like my aunts  
and uncles of old nor lightly lead,  
like my grandparents with serene, well-aimed eyes.

It accepts me only converted into its nature:  
plastic, fluid, disengaged,  
equal to it, in constant soliloquy,  
without exigencies of beginning and end,  
untied from the earth.

And I, who approached cautiously,  
to seek my folk now gone,  
I suspect that I am self-deceived,  
that there are other orders not well heard;  
that another mouth was speaking: not only that of the ancient dead,  
and the sea that calls for me is not only this sea.

Not only this sea reverberates on my panes,  
but there is another resembles it  
as do shapes of slept dreams.  
And between water and star I study solitude.

I recall my inheritance of ropes and anchors,  
and I encounter everything super-human.  
This visible sea raises  
a terrible face to me.

And withdraws, when it tells me what I need.  
Soon it is a little teeming shell,  
an unstable, liquid blob,  
a blue cell dissolving  
into the kingdom of another sea:  
ah! the Absolute Sea.

.  
.

translation dedicated to [Tiff Dressen](#)