

Wrack

Also by Carol Watts:

Poetry

brass, running (Equipage)

alphabetise (eBook, Intercapillary Editions)

Criticism

Dorothy Richardson

The Cultural Work of Empire: The Seven Years' War and the Imagining of the Shandean State

Wrack

Carol Watts



REALITY STREET EDITIONS
2007

Published by

REALITY STREET EDITIONS

63 All Saints Street, Hastings, East Sussex TN34 3BN

www.realitystreet.co.uk

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Cover image by the author

Printed & bound in Great Britain by Antony Rowe Ltd

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-874400-38-7

for Catherine B

I

cockle shell black-limbed slacks off
gelatinous red ghosts gouted
by the tide are sealed the salt air

mending after interminable micro storms
no greater than the swell in a pool
raided by children for crabs and living things

or the rush along a cut in the rock
hearing the shale adjusting then a final
combination an endless series

of settlements there must be a key
in the writing of barnacles where fibonacci
makes sense of the spread of bladderwrack

at the height of spring tide blackened
even in meagre sun wrack taken as a word
in a wider universe not portent

but principle of addition or in a briny manual
discovered *A Dreadful Alarm upon the Clouds
of Heaven, Mix'd with Love* shared

with crows whipgrass the barking of gulls
the busying sands and fingering waters
readying to come again to keep oraginous order

say it like an American and there is no order
 but the intention of it *richly laden*
 words roll in the dark stretches are heads

not smoothed to glass or bone in the swell
 nor do pearls work up from the beauty
 in resistance only movement tells

the restlessness of word booty the pain is
 where you left it say: I *rack such Wrack*
 it accumulates on the strand between my toes

is walked in to the streets in my bedsheets
 rolling a continual account the grit in sweat
 and dreaming *what if you had got the whole world*

what would all of it signifie a drop of cold Water
 I *rack such Wrack other Business thrown aside*
multitudes abundant hearken a little

look home

consider Matter

3

Suppose you were Cast-away
this is no laboratory of election
in a Strange Country flesh decays

in proportion to a rate sun and time
erase mephitic exhalations water
more sinewy than the strongest

fisherman it is said matter is
an object of no small terror
while salt preserves you imagine

your survival cheerfully there is
horror in this maintenance your
snapshots of preservation shared

with crowds on the cliff-top
wolverine hymnals *compassionate*
others keep cuneiform counsel

notating mud-borne ledgers tide-laced
in the desert knowing (as you do not)
that land also abandons

cowrie shells are marked faint inscriptions
 denominate their currency on the strand
 two blots of an ancient pen the rarest now

this hour the sea caul not yet with us
 as it will have been the sun hot you hold
 the shell in your palm a child's milk tooth

abandoning infancy to the bulls and bears
 a nocturnal calculus not yet established
 in the fold of what is inanimate and lasting

in us but found in a line on the sand
 fetched up by the night tide disclosed
 as if for the first time *I shall treasure it*

always tracking a parallel economy
 shells etched with lines frequencies lit
 like the bloom of flesh ringed and grained

I remember their demonstration the glass
 box of the collector who ranking the binary
 blots and lines assembled his Rejuvenator

in homage to their circuitry wiring people
 to a promise of youth popular in Rio de Janeiro
 though undoubtedly fatal near water

near water

the mind has fuses

they short and spit

jerking firecrackers in the dusk

dry burning sand becomes glass

a lens eye for the saracen

out in the bay the owlers' mark

the stone foreigner

sba Adad shubarrassu iba'u shamê

mimma namru ana da'ummati utterru

there is no accounting for

shipwrecks it is you on the brig

before the catastrophe scents

unanchored decked out in bloodiest

carnelians blue stones along the collar

bone what it takes for a girl

to laugh *I fail to remember*

the mind has fuses

anticipate

squalls

Sequential Quandary in world weather

typhoon somnambulist is approaching
 the coast say Macao rain like duck eggs
 the surge brings a metre high dune of nike

trainers while the search is on for left feet
 a cold front in Mozambique is untracked
 they say informational apartheid is to blame

Unless Absolution required press red button

armed with local knowledge women give birth
 in trees they had seen the deep coming in the dry
 season and knew its harvest they said meanwhile

off Timor a hoard of silver is dislodged by the swell
 bringing wealth to the unsuspecting sailor who compares
 fishing wrecks to throwing a parachute off a church

Liberate Longevity

in a high wind adding that the continental shelf
 was tranquil the oil flowing peaceably when last
 seen no matter the season and its conflagrations

nor the rising of waters even the Mississippi
 has its tribulations but wrack delivers: 'yes',
 confirmed Vasco (23), 'there is a felicity in tempests'

Selectively

7

after you were made we lay
at the day's end a ritual
turning fingers against the light

and silence would break
the drone of planes and streets
in tessellations

selecting one your fist small starfish
held its pattern contemplating capture
it was a dance we shared

in our palms wrists rotating with the axis
of things you grasped
the certainty of balance

as you dig your route to Japan
a hole in the dark sand wondering
if the ocean will cover your eyes

how you might breathe and dive down
laughing it is only your heel
I can see and then

why Achilles was never saved
why others take to boats
staking all to find some surety

8

late Spring 1772 leaving the *Grenadoes*
she saw the turquoise sea

and herself a white slip of light gilded
fish fin naked in the water

a freedom she could not confess
to fellow passengers its grand imprudence

nor in all honesty could she say for certain
on a later lee-shore if it had ever been

It's the rocks says Ur-shanabi boatman
 and your words plying the lead line
 plumbing life at the first catch of breath
 before her cry birthed in betrayal
 breached when she was nothing more
 than a rumour on the air a revision in time
 the tain on the first blast of doubt

Ur-shanabi and the stone ones know the sands
 always prove more treacherous than the tides
 their predictable in out with the moon the rasp
 of an elemental addiction outdone
 by the infinitesimal shifting of grains
 forging channels and gulfs where there were none
 and then in their ultimate trickery liquidity

Down go limbs and spades on the cockle beds
 those believing the meniscus of a working world
 mistaken their existence in question
 as it has always been but not to those who love them
 a red bag of lucky items scar from an operation
 a mole under one eye the bleep of phone connections
 Zhang Xiuhua whose husband knew her green charm

there is a truth about islands
an archipelagian consensus
that they come in two kinds

some are accidental broken fruit
of a weakness testimony to a once
solid landscape of connection

others bud in the steam of self-making
or from the deaths of a thousand creatures
dedicated to the art of communal living

these are always originary both confirm
an armistice between sea and land
thus it is we live with desertedness

is there a third rising under your feet
causeways assembling out and back
surfaces drifting or berthed in sleep

cays where sailors turn to swine or
get good advice reputedly insularities
more peopled than they appear

though remaining empty where oars
dug in don't sprout green shoots
this the pain in discovery

cargoes wheel out with the curvature
of the globe coming in on the tide
or stream in the stratosphere

satellites tracking in the far south west
spirit trails bringing goods
by boat and plane such ariel necessity

the payment for devotedness
I shall have share in northern conceit
this gift a handover without cost

perhaps all shipwreck is of this nature
in its magical return needs held
and convincingly relinquished catastrophe

loved back in things a sorcery we depend on
rites of satiety in wrack and pelf
now becomes time's contraband:

300 tuns of sea vessel *Chanteloupe*
carrying rum, sugar, coffee, Madeira wine
and twenty persons and in its silent hold

in its saccharizing breath more
mosquitoes, pine-apple, monkeys and mangroves,
zumbadores and fire-flies, boneta, winged fishes,

eddas and calaloo and *Obia-men* the chant
of *teeth-fil'd Ibbos* the fruit of golden shaddoc
speech of its creaking timbers *I shall have share*

the singing wolf approaches *the main*
a moving burnish'd mirror I shall have share
in this most happy wreck

Finding *A Treatise on Superfluous Things*
 I discover Wen Zhenheng its diligent
 determiner flushed with considering
 market share that rainy morning
 had faithfully listed *Water* and *Rocks*
 in chapter three followed by *Birds*
Fishes *Calligraphy* and *Painting*
 Wondering at the superfluity
 of these elemental forces as if persuaded
 like the woman in the tale to sell
 her soul to remove their perilousness
 I became convinced by his accountancy
 their value not that it might be spirited
 away or subject to other vagaries
 of an alluvial or computational nature but
 that on the page in his wet black ink
 brushstrokes contending with dampness
 in the air *Water* and *Rocks* produced
 their own collisions a flowing beyond
 carried on his fingers to a woman's skin

On the banks of this brown river
 there is little thought of catastrophe
 save the contemplation of judges

at the *Prospect* twisting fruit
 toasting the fatal tree in its defence
 of silver lengths of cloth and bread

On Pelican Stairs Queen Sive
 reviews her pocket dragon's teeth
 ah it is not a moment for insurgency

the quiet river peace the drift
 of bells a change of watch perhaps
 or shipman's axe off stroke

meeting iron his eye caught
 the white gulls ah
 the inexpressible thought of a storm

On a distant ocean ships lie are seals
 boarded by *a parcel of furies* among them
 Pelican's child beard pricked out

roaring like a catherine wheel knuckles
 tattooed with LOVE and HATE fingers
 too few for WONDER and SUFFERING

making his own entertainment a tree
 snarled across his back land-locked gibbous
 ah but this is not the fate of pirates

bodies racked in the *flux and reflux* of the tides
 and not this gentle morning she says
 the seaweed on the Stairs dry to her touch

predictions break serene
 falling from a clear sky
 no means of grasping

its altitude or direction
 as if the earth is weeping upward
 and time reversing

or her face lifted to the spray
 is already in retreat casualty
 of melancholy reels

why is the art of prediction
 lost in human scale aquifers
 so devastating in their dryness

that not one crimson drop might find its way
 to Eden's well
 without contractual sacrifice

nor leach its path
 without tracing that same poor furrow
 of return

the sea's a steward it sorts
 possibilities of combining
 into imperceptible economies

crabs are small pickeroons
 building barrios in the shadows
 from the clink and glint of stones

the waters easing in and out
 a numerical constancy grading
 perfection on a scale

boulders are integers granted
 langorousness except
 in the physics of storms

when they rise are grandfathers
 on the shoulder of a wave
 their release

nothing to the energies of continual
 resettlement quartzite infinities
 played out in empirical surf

the more their *Forensical Invasions* insist
the more requisite it is
the Swimmer be an Artist

how will she fare on this grey burr
 of a coast caught in the *claws*
of a strangeness once called home

accustomed now to heat milking
 in her gut a pulse *chika tziika*
chika tzigachikatziikachiga

a million bows scrape air's blood breathless
 scald of sunlight quickening what she is
 capable of the blister of words

translate heat: a slowness sweat puckered
 tang of light sebum salted for bone keeping
 errant aspirations hot

hellish a host descending *air haut*
haut-fond err whore
 tongues are mangoes' flesh

she tastes the sweet wafer of her skin dark
 forgotten thing a warm ghost
 open abroad fortuitous

weaned in denial she fans herself on the brig
 wonders at the words arriving
 anon announce annunciation

say: anhydrous anise finch fathom
 one two three five fig fig eight
 fathom fathom

fronts skein sky assemblies
unravel the tempo of equilibrium
loosed not yet certain suspirations
lifting the pale breeze rising as
far as the eye sees it fails
arrested dramas of cold air now test
the thinnest of inevitabilities time to
hold to stoical resolutions plumbed and charted
or float in doubt its white narcotic
milk tapped from the cloud line
fast approaching how does change arrive
in temperate zones numbed intimation or
violent apology the gentlest notice of
exception pencilled in the sky
marked in the swell of the sea
your legs stumbling at its sway
land loving braced for eventuality
or betrayal know that these are constancies
vectors in the weather your skin barometer
evading the truth it registers
lightly a shiver of the dial
indicates arrival the ordinariness of
exception the brute want of it this
September day with summer breaking

late September 1772 nearing
 fog banks the green of cold currents
 she overhears it said

the World will return to the Waters a fact denied
 in cities of seaboard nations who risk
 the fate of Noah's countryman

once thought safe upon the mountain top only to find
 a *boisterous Ocean* dragging at his knees
 recording in her Book

the consequent repentances both terrestrial and waterlogged
 declared by shipboard *Creatures*
 of the *fickle Wave*

*a Third Sort of Persons like Sea-men neither with the Living
 nor the Dead Lives hanging continually in Suspense
 but a Step an inch or two between us*

and our Graves voicing in her own assent
*well may Sea-men cry out I have not had a Morrow
 in my hands these many Years*

but adding in her secret hand
 as if leaved in a love's missive
consider Matter

for what would cause the Waters to rise
 but heat and breath a salt heresy
 refusing predestination augury hurricane

a dark drum of wind arrives from the South
 its black tympana the husks of rays rattling
 fetal truths broadcasting on the spume

pick your briny fortune cookie and read
 of eighteen million without shelter human
 krill ravened up monsooned

the wind sucking on flood plains and dead zones
 alike but this is no toss of a die nor will it fall
 evenly among 600 carpenters fishermen and weavers

as it does where people queue for ice Krogers
 letting in two by two ears deaf with the drone
 of hurricane warm wash short spin and what of

Chanteloupe like fourteen others foundering
 deep in the blast of time sails furled and molasses
 churning distilling rum spirit in its shaking hold

drunken with storm's abandon the wind ripping
 from Spitalfields to Lizard Point the cut of my words
 is fraying *I rack such Wrack* here is the account

an alighting knowing that there is no wind
 and bodies on the streets *Mesopotamia*
a Rock, o'er which the Waves do wash and swill

knowing that there is a wind

it is here

Santa Muerte on the pitching deck
 carried on the shoulder of a wave

a plantation sparkling about her neck
 the bone whiteness of her fingers

storm lit she is holding on to flesh
 refusing the dumb patronage

of beatitude still astonished
 by life its metal on her tongue

shorting in her eyes its electric
 measure a wrack salvation

caught in my *ex voto* word reliquary
 she meets her devoted in Tepito

Carlos, seller of pirate DVDs, skin
 tattooed in her image, leaves sweet

libations of coca-cola, Juana, sins
 her survival, wants delivery from AIDS,

Ernesto thanks her for jamming the gun,
 Lupe, for multiplying the chicken

to go around, and watching over her son
 as he risks all across the Río

esa mujer she does not discriminate
 accepting cigarettes and chocolate

In a time of shipwreck you may expect
your share in the dark yolk of catastrophe
a seizure echoing on the airwaves
its patina iridescent amoebic memorial
to a terroristic spectacular its bloom
marking the spot with personal effects.
Yet the consternation lies not in shock
but duration no-one knowing if wind
or an inch of water slopping in the hold
or the battle with maps and rocks or a play
of long domesticated conspiracies
once set the wrack in motion. Recall
the torpedo-men who heard the final
fracturing of the *Belgrano* as the shattering
of chandeliers a brittle physics mutating
second per second into acoustodrama
and their own part resonating white and clear
white and clear as breath on a mirror
or a cold windowpane

it was not until a planetary curve
sent me spinning across the black earth
of Dakota its tectonics

a patchwork of plains and light
stitched in the line of a child's horizon
from winds and grasses

and understood I was crossing the bed
of an ancient sea there to find
a truth in erosion

beyond the complexities of rain
its subsistencies and the deluge
of the Red River

it was not until a drift of time
could seem like loam
that she made landfall

so I might own the cruel tillage
giving her life
and plough her in

this year nineteen typhoons

beneath the brown water
internment comes and goes

have whirled out of their traditional

as if stirring, the earth
sinking into itself, the chance

incubating area

of a thousand last breaths, returning
to lungs that had not finished

economists said

with laughter, or the encouragement
of fire, cupped and blown

storms were major contributors

sparks smouldering in the moss, or
alighting like seeds

to a 3.6 percent drop

in a world without trees, Gonaives,
there is no lashing to the mast

in the Japanese cabinet's

nor the slender tie, the petiolate
certainty of continuing

monthly outlook

the land a flat roof

the waters without green shadow

index

searching for the colour
 of the sea's wrecking an ink
 crushed from shells

and prized the purple stain
 of lips sucking on sweetness
 or the blue deadening of ice

fading in the scrap of her dress
 and treasured its lace pressed
 in a blanket box

in an afghan rug to remind them
 among the piecing of yarns
 of the anonymity of catastrophe

I remembered the jointure of Géricault
 his trust in black as a principle
 of connection

where the use of bitumen
 set in motion his painting
 and its slow immeasurable decay

a chromatic composition that knew
 the nature of wrack
 at its first muriatic attempt

and then the crowd declared 'I will not serve
 as a mouthpiece for such barbarity'
 preferring to observe

the unrolling of ten thousand feet
 of canvas a *Novel Marine*
Perispheric Panorama

with accompanying strings and tubas
 to ride the drama of the *Fatal Raft*
 and weep at the rescue

of those reduced to eating sword belts
 and cartouche boxes a hunger
 that only flesh might satisfy

but not to bring it near
 in the tenebrism of their dreams
 the *Argus* slips lightly

across the horizon a hundred eyes
 unseeing its deliverance
 ever in recession while

the raft is closing a brut cathedral
 advancing in its wood and binding
 a deeper petrification

light directs

the mesmerisings of night birds
on the cording of the wind

their puling may be the sound

of piercing what it takes to brand
the darkness piss-holes

in snow or it may be words

spoken among the many trusting
the lamp lure

to reel her in while she wonders

if those are her eyes watching
her skin its dense white

pixels the pain the reasonableness

of being at the point of accident
as if her ring might argue it

no tengo I have nothing *más* more *que darte*

to give you might say it was
a misapprehension

but in the hungry mouth of the wind
 there is no reckoning
 nor suit the annexing

of each stolen breath only feeds
 a greater stream of taking
 the purest pitch of air now

channelled and converging
 the stone O a retina a storm's
 net and auricle

it moans waking sleepers
 from the closeness of inland beds
 to view the strand's pornography

thirled rock and ship's whalebone
 whewing and unravelling ropes
 singing burning

and then a spewing forth of bounty as if
 the *Chanteloupe* had souked
 with the heaving of its ribs

on the sweet mania of wrack
 its molasses spreading dark upon the waters
 in a slick

the thirled stone speaks of the time of forests
and of its rings etched in growth and scarcity
and of the drumming rain in Connemara
and of the shortness of her mother's fingers
and of the tang of blood upon a pillow
and of the overseer's crowing in the heat
and of the stitches counted on a handkerchief
and of his hands spanning her geometry
and of the punctuation of *it came to pass*
and of the inconstancy of finches
and of the kingfisher in a child's step
and of the heft of skirts in womanhood

it is a traffick and no mistake
what wreck delivers wrack takes

owling is an art
 denied by those who
 count and by counting

occupy theirs is the greater
 sleight a keener contraband
 mine *the apt and true*

reply I gauge the price
 in property its just measure
 in loss and bone and repay

by fashioning in the lure of salt
 emergencies a hydra home
 I share sweetness among lives

despised is that not love
 though empires seize and in seizing
 offer their inventory is mine

not a truer sense of cost
 salvation thieved
 from wrack's repository

for I will build on her a palace *if she be*
 a wall or *if a door inclose her*
 in boards of ship-worn cedar

poor wayward *beads* *you* roll
through the dark stretches

your fingers lost to writing
worm pathways in the sands

your ears cropped as conches
are deaf to distant landscapes

your eyes blank anemones
sway their polyps in the tides

poor lips *you* mouth shanties
in silent congregation

your hands flesh of starfish
are given to amputation

your hair thread medusas
cluster red as algae

your feet inert as river fish
find stillness in salinity

poor *lost* *beads* *you* forfeit
in the hunted ocean stretches

a wager now made tribute
in my dismemberery

were it (as the records say)
 a sublime philosopher
 who came

to recover kin too late to know
 her mutilation concealed in
 the partial modesty

of sand he would have had
 a better chance
 than many

of bringing her to view since
 he had long considered
 the beaching

of sensation in the form
 of objects *sea salt*
an exact cube sugar

a perfect globe and the vacancies
 between them were *black bodies*
 he said

which made him fearful
 such *endless labour* there was
 his dilemma her absence

net the morning its strong filaments
when leaves have dammed the breakwater
and freed blood bandage after the storm
clear breath mathematically precise
arrangements of plastic bottles new
accretions take time to find a level black
tar sticks the aftermath is resin and freshness
I see his edge joists cuttlefish dilations
of autumn rustling symptoms finding the high
point from where a smoothness takes over
limbs exposed skinless without accommodation
for now pace wave makers she is scattered
too far for the eye and rusting as occasions
demand cliffs stabilise choke the undertow
crabs work out prosthetic moments

in the story where the mother.
puts her baby in a painted.
box and it sleeps while.
the seas roar around her.
weeping and she says but.
if to you the terrible were.
terrible you would lend.
me your small ear what is.
often forgotten is that she.
wept remembering.
she was once a child in.
a painted box and her.
mother had whispered.
in her sleeping ear *if.*
to you the terrible were.
terrible and she had.
had continued.
sleeping.

so were I to ask
 these hands
 do you know me

they would have nothing
 to add since the sap
 flowing through their veins

was never only mine
 but they cup to allow me
 on occasions

the sound of water
 and I wonder then
 if she remains

in her cage the woman
 asking for a freedom
 her hands tied

and her voice gulled
 by words she knows
 she speaks their dearth

my hands believe
 they are
 outside justice

yet they love
 the man who fell
 among the pastures

of still water and whispered
 as if shock
 had found him

resting his skin white in
 the translucency of sleep
 I am hurt

and this in the absence of a storm
 the rocks gentle
 and restored

to an older arborescence
 the richness of tidal
 verdure no deception

yet he falls
 as if the guilt of movement
 provokes it

my hands
 touch his shoulder see escudos
 in the shallows

and this enough to kill him
what running there is on such
Occasions

when the words
 he carries
 are breath taken

in the swell they are
 pockets foreign to his
 touch and may sometimes

stammer but
 it has been his share
 to say them House Light

Fingers they say
 it makes no
 odds Lintel

Fig-tree Wall
 they build him
 a bed *Zumbadore*

he discovers himself
 turned around yes a seizure
 a cursive reparation

written on her skin its cold
leavings drawn out
with a hook

and landed the mounds of kelp
aghast still gripping stones
their roots

wind-blown trees anticipating
an amphibian eventuality
in tidal returns or

broken raped by the air stalks
blowholes jetsam
stilled and destitute

without recourse to the neap
flood or vagabondage
always stirring

in the sands there is no way
back the reeds bruise her
clay with such harm

no man woman cat or dog
accompanies her so the law
finds

her wanting she is wreck
 and subject to the blandishments
 of tiding

would that she had arrived
 as all she was and not bought
 passage

would that she had not opened
 herself
 to charges

would that she had claimed
 asylum at the point
 of entry

and not continued making
 life
 starfish

the pain is where she
 left it just reason
 for wrack murder

distrust the subjunctive
 I say
 you girls

in the story where the mother.
puts her baby under a shady.
bush and it sleeps while she.
keeps a bowshot's distance.
and the desert bakes about.
her weeping and she says.
let me not see the death.
of my child what is often.
forgotten is that she.
wept discovering.
she was once a child.
under a shady bush.
and in this mother's.
measure was a.
culpable resistance.
an anger at her own.
abandonment.
by water.

and there in bullion morning you ask
 will it come near raiding a league out
 spanning a tongue's length a ship or
 rock manoeuvring the tide rising small
 insurgencies shift the grains the cries
 inside the absences of air sound
 evolutions he digs floods arrive and go
 distributing stories of brine and punishment
as well as e'er a He that ever cross'd salt water
 she tells him yes it begins here no
 it will not arrive here others burn before
 the ground can reach them turbulent
 seaward without protection you move
 keel hauled breathing always
 another combination I tell you *lingua*
 ell-born when the updraught takes you
 seaweed is wet to the touch

Acknowledgements

Thanks to Caroline Bergvall, Catherine Boyle, Edmund Hardy, Ian Higgins, Rod Mengham and especially Denise Riley.

Among the flotsam and jetsam, I want to note a particular homage to Anne Carson's fine *Economy of the Unlost: Reading Simonides of Ceos with Paul Celan* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), in poems 33, 34 and 35. The two lines dividing poem 5 are translated as 'The stillness of the Storm God passed over the sky,/ And all that was bright then turned into darkness', in *The Epic of Gilgamesh: The Babylonian Epic Poem and Other Texts in Akkadian and Sumerian*, trans. Andrew George (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1999), pp.219-21.

And love for my time in Thurlestone, place of shipwrecks.

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