

**THE
LIFE-
GUARD**

THE LIFEGUARD

I

You have to start somewhere
in these morose times,

a clearing in the forest, say,
filled with golden shafts of sunlight

and skirmishes. A little later
your itinerary will take you past

weathered churches on plains that stretch
as far as the eye can see.

Their horizons elude you,
not just because the earth is circular

like the argument you can't bite off
and spit out, but also

because of your restless
dissatisfaction with a status quo that,

more and more, reminds you
of everything you've been at pains

to forget. 'Return all that stuff you borrowed
when my better nature

was in the ascendant!' you bark,
but nothing ever comes back

once it's gone. To your left, out west,
a bitter coast of ghosts, shipwrecks,

vengeful expeditions, short rations
and lies, lies, lies. To your right,

on the suave east, are the glittering lights
of private properties as far

as the eye can see, pink palaces
of coral bricks and parades of people

you've watched before so many times
you know they don't exist

except as the repetitions
that fame and fortune fabricate.

Bleak indeed are the days
that smash themselves against

the galloping thighs of lifeguards
on the western flanks of this god-forsaken place.

But sweet the dawns that gild the shoulders
of giggling vacationers

up all night celebrating their windfall lives
on the eastern beaches

of islands whose tides come in
and just as smoothly go, like contented but

mediocre cover bands
from the patios of three-star resorts.

Here, among the useless, easy-to-please
recidivist idlers the lifeguard lolls,

but out west his counterpart
watches arms upraised

where the surf breaks against its own backwash
and the maws of hideous fate

gulp down every last gasp of air
the unfavoured sinkers ever hoped to breathe.

How can they meet, these brawny
brothers in arms, the gaze of one

running its tongue across
the sweat-glazed clavicles of celebrity,

the other's eyes averted
from redemption's hopeless odds?

There's always a middle ground,
a light-filled clearing in the gloomy forest,

where all the non-returns accumulate,
where arguments conclude,

horizons cease to recede
and a different silence falls.

This is not the silence that follows
the mediocre band's finale

or the silence
in the helpless lifeguard's mind

when that upraised arm out at the breakers
drops from sight

and the surf's arrhythmic roar
pours into salty gullies behind the dunes.

This is a silence you may not hear,
the silent silence

when it's too late for the lifeguards
of west and east to meet,

share a boast or two, a drink,
some platitudes, swapping yarns about

the shrieks of fear
and those of idle pleasure

commingled like the wrecks
of either coast,

nothing to distinguish them
as their phosphorescent glows go phut.

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Of course it's always in the west
that the sun sets

and my endlessly recursive hopes
erect themselves

like scaffolding against
a verdigrised monument

to the lifeguard. How anomalous
this seems, how pitiful,

abject and irrational, how like the message
to inflate your life jacket

at the moment your jumbo jet
impacts at speed on the ice floes

of some southern ocean
leaking its consequential chemistry

into a fate minus the carapaces
of those minutely self-contained creatures

whose bodies will become continents,
the building blocks

of aqueducts, of upthrusting
mountain ranges down which

the off-piste daredevils
of carbon-fibre innovation

will plunge headlong into futures
we've only now begun to imagine.

What am I supposed to do
with this crazy optimism

that has been the bane and blessing
of my life, besieged on the one hand

by sunsets that throw apocalyptic
paint bombs against the

brooding monument of the lifeguard,
and on the other

by dawns that soothe
the languid limbs of budget revellers

determined to make their last
dollar count? Is this a question

that can be answered
from the grip of paradox,

tightening daily as things
go from bad to worse?

Julia Roberts embracing orangutans
in the rainforests of Java

remains a compelling image,
the 'Man of the Woods'

extending his tubular lips in a tender,
cooing kiss, his ferruginous pelt

gripped by Julia's conflicted fingers –
to hug or not to hug,

to leap to the aid of the endangered
'Man of the Woods'

whose upraised arm
has a querulous finger at the end,

curled over like a gentle
question mark? Even harder,

sadly, the decision to embrace
the thirsty children

who stand knee-deep
in filthy saline scum

leaching from salty shrimp gher
into those packets of pre-shelled prawns

that adorn the pizza marinaras
of fast-food joints

whose products
are relished equally by surfers

risking their lives against
the west's black-fanged rocks

and those on the east
whose snacks arrive at speed

on scooters powered by palm oil
the 'Man of the Woods'

can't stomach. But I salute him,
the watchful lifeguard

whose warning voice rattles
my thoughts as the wind does

the rain-pocked panes of perception
through which I view

what must be memories
of mountainous rubbish dumps