

**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