

TRUE TALES FROM THE SEA BY A FISHERMAN'S WIFE LG THOMSON

OPEN BOOK UNBOUND WRITING

His face is weathered, leathered, and lined by the sea. Salt crystallises in the creases of skin behind his ears. I joke that the ocean runs through his veins. When I am in labour with our first child, I press my face against his hand. My sense of smell is heightened, and I tell him I can smell the herring he uses for bait on his skin. But it has been two days and many handwashes since he was last in the boat and I realise that the smell is not on him, but part of him.

He has never been afraid of the sea, not even at the bow of the island where the big waves roll in from the Atlantic. Here, timing is everything. Get it right and a fleet of creels containing inky-black lobsters will be hauled aboard. Get it wrong and the *Orion* will be pitched onto ancient rocks, the small boat redesigned as driftwood. The contest exhilarates him, as does fishing in the turbulent waters foaming at the base of the High Rock. Here, beneath the faces of craggy giants watching from the towering cliff-face, is where the sweetest lobsters are caught.

On good days, as many as one hundred of his two hundred creels will yield a prize. When the fishing is poor the catch is in single figures, but no matter how rich or scarce the bounty, he gives thanks for every lobster caught, his murmured appreciation caught on the wind and carried to Poseidon, lord of the sea, protector of seafarers.

Twice he has drowned and twice Poseidon has shown mercy and released my husband from his watery grasp. The once he was a boy, breathing in water as he sunk to the depths, feet first. Desperate, his father reached after him, pulling his son to the surface by his hair then pumping the sea from his lungs. The twice when he was a man, a father himself, unconscious when the dive company loaded him onto the coastguard helicopter. He was blind when he came to, the darkness lasting fearful hours. The consultant said they'd scanned his brain and found nothing. I laughed. After a moment the doctor saw the joke and he laughed too.

The day he drowned and came back was Easter Sunday. I took to calling him Lazarus. Lazarus tells me that when he stopped struggling and surrendered himself to drowning, it was a peaceful experience, that it only hurt when they brought him back, though he is glad they did. Within a week, he returns to the sea, fishing for lobsters.

He comes home one evening, hair tousled by wind, thickened by brine, eyes wild with excitement, his words as tangled as seaweed on the strandline. When he calms, he describes a pod of orcas swimming alongside him. Their surging, leviathan bodies dwarfed tiny *Orion*. He was aware that with the smallest of tail flicks they could smash the boat to smithereens and make a plaything of his body. The orcas knew it too. He felt his smallness, his vulnerability, but although awed by the mighty predators, there was no fear, not even when he saw that they were watching him, that one in particular was studying him. Perhaps it was Poseidon, in one of his shape-shifting forms, checking him out.

Many lobsters later, I am the one in turbulent waters. There are five of us in the boat, a 21ft skiff, clinker built. We are rowing across a stretch of the north Atlantic known as the Minch. Our passage, from Stornoway on the Isle of Lewis to Ullapool on the mainland, is some fifty miles. We're rowing the Minch to raise awareness of MS, a disease prevalent in our corner of the world.

We set out in the early hours when the heavens are dark and deep with stars and the sea is tranquil. At dawn we are joined by a gang of carousing dolphins. Their joy is infectious but as we propel the skiff into open waters, the swell gets up and the wind is against us. The palette of our world is muted by overcast skies. Vibrant blues and greens have become hues of grey. The ocean pulses deep and full, sending wave after relentless wave, each one hitting us beam on, making it difficult to row. Every seventh wave splashes over the gunwales, drenching our bodies, flooding the boat.

The cox and the stroke bail water from the bottom of the skiff while the rest of us keep rowing, one stroke after another after another. I see the cox staring out at the grim walls of green water that keep on coming. I see the concern in his face. We are on the edge. If the splashy waves increase in size or come closer together, we will be swamped. He calls for us to row hard. We obey his command.

It is then, when we are on the brink of disaster, that I see the kraken arcing through the water. Slivers of cloud-filtered sunlight strew highlights across the creature's slate coloured skin. I try to call out to my crewmates, but my face is numb with cold and no sound emerges. The titan disappears as silently as it appeared but rather than disturbing me, I feel a sense of peace. Poseidon is watching over us.

For five hours we battle on, soaked to the bone, cold to the marrow, before reaching the calmer waters surrounding the Summer Isles. Fourteen hours and twenty minutes after leaving Stornoway, we come around the point at Ullapool and there on the beach, on the edge of the cheering crowd, Lazarus stands waiting for me. My old man of the sea, his face weathered, leathered, and lined.

LG Thomson's latest book, Modernist Dreams Brutalist Nightmares, is a searingly honest and brutally funny memoir about being part of the first generation to grow up in Scotland's most ambitious and experimental New Town. She now lives in Ullapool, a small Highland fishing village lying on the same latitude as Lost Cove, Alaska.