

One night in Roaliguen

“One night, we were alone in the world; one night, the sea and me. For shelter I had a small wood cabin suspended in the storm, like a crow’s nest in the masting but set on the sandy ground. It was as if it were not attached to anything, the wind and the sea made its head spin, as they did mine. It seemed no more substantial than a handful of straw blown about by the squall over the fields at night.

However, we struggled together in fear mingled with a bitter pleasure. I had closed the shutter that opened towards the sea, for fear it would enter my home as if it belonged there, dressed in a robe of spreading, rustling waves. But a sort of porthole on the side that faced the fields, through which you could still see the sea if you leaned out, stayed open, grazed by the black plume of a resinous tree, a thuja grown to its full height - as high as the porthole, and battered by the tide on a grey night that crept in little by little. My gaze and the grey eye of this window were in confrontation with each other all through that night.

The cabin, swinging in space, was a navigation light beneath the sunken stars. We did not concede, we did not disarm; the ocean on one side or me on the other in that precarious cell which showed such fortitude. We were face to face, the only survivors in a world that had succumbed. The human spirit which I represented - stripped of all personality - swelled with a sense of pride to acknowledge, in its fragility, the ability to stand its ground.

Everything else had been erased, even the few low fishermen’s cottages a hundred steps inland, crouching fearfully against each other, kept awake by the fear of a tidal wave in their livid limewash cocoons beneath their thatched roofs. The fields were motionless, those too flattened, and the darkness that enveloped their pastures was the colour of burnt kelp, deposited by a storm at the equinox. The wind was nothing more than the language of the sea, by which it spit out its spray, bombarded us with its whining messages which, in the boundless expanse, sought us out like points of contact. They fell on us like thousands of arrows become almost harmless through their blind frenzy, their ineffectual rage.

An inner calm eventually reigned in my confined domain, in the swaying to which my mind had grown accustomed. Just as a boat accommodates the swell, so my spirit embraced the rhythm with the kind of intoxication one feels when crossing a terrain where danger lies, tiptoeing on winged feet. And suddenly I knew there were two opposing forces in the night: the brutal, inhuman force of the sea, and the other: that which is latent in all beings and becomes manifest in times of danger. The inhuman force could not touch me, no matter what it did. Well might it ring in my ears with its stormy blast and chime in my head where the little warm glow, which nothing could extinguish, kept vigil, as it set the inundated roof in motion.

Outside, the grey night assumed an expression of curiosity at the edge of the grey window, or rather the edge of the porthole, trying to see what we were doing inside. In the end it took our part, harassed like us by the brutality of the assaults. It licked its face, misted up with the sea-spray which we saw through the window was now clearing. Calmer now, I followed the proceedings as a spectator, although I could see nothing of the battle taking place outside in the dark. When the rising sea threatened to overturn its cradle, I was prepared to let myself go with it; if anything happened, an old song would hum beneath my closed eyelids, perhaps the Irish ballad I’d heard a few days before, at home, on the radio.