

Signals to the Disappearing Shore

SAMPLE

ALSO BY AIDAN SEMMENS

A Stone Dog
The Book of Isaac
Uncertain Measures
Life Has Become More Cheerful
There Will Be Singing
The Jazz Age

AS EDITOR

By the North Sea: An Anthology of Suffolk Poetry

SAMPLER

Aidan Semmens

Signals to the
Disappearing Shore

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Impressionism, though for the poet fascinating, by itself is
certainly not enough

—*Jean Cocteau*

He knows good Englishes

—*Roy Fisher*

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Another country

for Geraldine Monk

by boat, for how else would they come?
Sigurd and Thorfinn and Salif and Ali
fishers and fighters and farmers
spirits of the sea investing true life in hope

of happier returns
to (or with) Sigrid or Sarah or Alyson

or a reunion on the Island of the Young
off the shore of Eynhallow, Scilly or Ceylon

land always out of sight (but only just)
to misted eyes where spirits roam
where you are ever approaching
and never arrive – or if you do

never leave (investments may go up or down)

and what is the name of the island?
no one knows, or accounts differ

words are not to be trusted
for who is to know if the name
you have signed on this form
is the one you will be known by
in the land of the gods? (isle of dogs)

then standing at the cliff edge
watch weather approach across the water
wavetops whipped off by the wind

tell of those adventurers fallen
into the earth's mound

Svejn awaiting rescue scratching
in clumsy runes Olaf the oaf
thinks his wife is faithful ha ha

but this occurred
in another time

so consider
what the uniform and the grey suit won't
countenance: that the evidence
may have been tampered with
files redacted, photos retouched or clipped
(in matters of importance there's always
trial by scissors and paste)

it's all there in black and white (before
panchromatic film
red or pink became black, blue
or green rendered white – but who
remembers now the world
was not so simple then?)

and by air on curlew wings
clambering up the sky then
parachuting down, that curlew cry
bubbling across tidal mud and moor

the martin and the martlet
merle in the marginalia
shapes of a faith
inked, painted, sculpted
not compassed in the liturgy

and yes, who was the model
for the Kilpeck sheela –
generic or sui generis? (and who
wielded the tool, or decided –
she or he, they're
written out, uncarved, unlettered)

bread and circuses, bread and circuses
(but who bakes the bread, who
walks the wire?) – so we're trussed/concussed
unworthy of trust

unworthy words
but this dream occurred
on another shore
another landing

another border scribed
across the map, razorwire crazing
a once gentle landscape
blank walls awaiting
only the (unborn?) graffitiist
the intoxicant paint
slow leakage on the littoral

A raga for Enheduana

Something was built here
that was thought important,

a funeral ziggurat perhaps,
memorial to a fallen tyrant,

an ancient palimpsest inscribed
with layer upon layer of dream,

seals and ceillures, precious beads
commemorating epic deeds.

Here are toys, idols, weaponry
held forever in a ruined fortress,

stripped femurs and the skull of a horse
laid bare amid the desolation,

fishtraps and walkways woven basket-fashion,
an imprint of wickerwork in vessels of clay,

residual rituals implicit
in goatherds and pot sherds.

Married to the moon, Enheduana
is the mortal embodiment,

a living cultic likeness
of the astral goddess Ishtar Inanna,

consort of the wise one Nanna
whose name may be Sin,

whose crescent horns
herd the stars like cattle

while she, cast alone
into the rebel-held wilderness,

must yet prepare sacrificial feasts
for errant deities

and centuries of dead women
interred beneath the floors.

Stains in the stonework
become scenes of rural life,

a lush green land of milk and honey,
sheep and goats shaded by olive and palm,

landscapes to locate a crucial figure,
places mapped to hopes and fears,

healing and wisdom to witch lore;
and does it matter if the story isn't true?

For who will speak of the buildings destroyed,
the political framework of human bone,

missiles aimed at targets,
habitations near the border?

These laments are not meant to express sorrow
but to avert future catastrophe,

the as yet unimagined brutalities
of Agamemnon, Caesar, Lionheart, Assad.

Law, legend, transaction are preserved
in reed-cut indent on clay,

baked into permanence
in the burning of the library,

genealogy and astronomy
hardened into artefact.

Some of the words are lost
while others remain indecipherable

from which architects of the new city
construct a misleading narrative.

Fabrics depict ritual grieving
in moments of agony and intimacy,

childbirth woven with growing grain
gives rise to the birth of writing,

the name of the writer revealed
as the weaver of reminiscences

text woven into textile,
table built into tablet,

the interlaced marks of Inanna,
fatal goddess of war and metamorphosis,

whose power to be infinite
has lesser gods fleeing

like bats among the ruins –
those furtive future gods

of Abraham and Zeus
descend like fallen angels

bearing gifts of survival, art and joy,
submission, fame and insignificance,

desire and lust, profit, absence,
poverty and wealth, the art

to destroy and to create,
to plant and pluck out;

a cargo of stolen powers –
weapons, wisdom, justice,

musical instruments and old age,
objects and practices,

elements and destinies, precious
metals and memorable food,

all the lost languages
entombed by the windblown sand,

green hills and gatherings in a fertile crescent,
cities without a city wall.

A few fugitive traces of pigment remain
that perhaps served images sacred or profane,

archives of pilfered portraiture are made
absurd and mythic by displacement,

routes of desperate migration
deadlier than ever,