Burial At Sea

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by Ted Kooser

"... and was consumed from the rising of the Sun on the seaweed by the shore keeping in the depths of his heart like an arrow in the liver, the burning wound of the great Kypris."

THEOCRITUS: The Cyclops

I
I shall be kissed by fish
the color of coral.
I will not remember
the iron and the guns,
only the needle's song
and the smell of canvas
and the breasts of a girl
in a misty orchard.
I will feel the fingers
of the browsing ocean.

II
I will listen to songs
of anemones as
the sea floor envelops
my body. I will count
the various species
on my twisted fingers.
The eyes of the seer
shall cleave to the still floor.
The corpse shall be rendered
to dark veins in the stone.

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III
The earth will upheave me,
vomiting my body
on the fringes of land.
I shall lie quietly,
harboring the seedlings
of flowers and herbs there
in the folds of my arms.
I shall dismiss the time
with the slightest movement
of a stone-laden wrist.

IV
I shall bake in limestone,
carving a hollow cup
in the shape of my heart,
cupping my hands; fingers
as dry as alum cubes,
to catch the tumbling froth
as the chalk-white ram tups
the timid ewe above
in the grass of my skull.
And I shall be alone.

V
The wind will eat of me,
devouring my body,
and I shall be the soil,
heaving my darkened thighs
in the Umbrian fields
until burnt to pigment.
I shall be the shadows
behind fruity harvests
spread on the oak tables
of the painter's canvas.
VI
The rain will deface me
and I shall be a stream,
licking the slim ankles
of girls, washing their clothes
in my writhing body.
Old women will moisten
their foreheads with my flesh.
I shall temper the steel
of men's swords.
I shall see
them turn from their women.

VII
I shall remain the rock.
Swallows will nest in me
and I shall kiss their young
and covet their warm eggs.
Generations of men
will tread on my stained face
and green trees will take root
in my solemn belly.
Soldiers will spill their blood
on my innocent hands.

VIII
Rose quartz and veined marble
will be taken from me
like sharp, glistening thorns
from the foot of a dog.
Children will find the quartz,
their fathers the marble.
I shall be the treasure
of both, inheriting
a wet denim pocket
and a façade of glass.
IX
My marble will be hewn
into statues and vases.
My arms will be broken,
ferns will inhabit me.
My wasted body clings
to the hill, but I shall
return to the salt sea
as the ballast of ships
and the crystalline sand,
alone in the river.

X
I shall be born again
in the clear green water
and the azure shadows.
I shall be unnoticed
as I lift my sleek form
onto the jagged reef,
first lifting my left fin
and then my right, alone
and with the innocence
of the first lidded eyes.