

The Boogeyman

He glances around the store. It is dark and cramped with things, something like a pawnshop. Swords and muskets dangle from the ceiling. He points. The little wrinkled man follows his finger and nods. "Oh sure. Good stuff, you betcha."

"How much is it?"

The Oriental smooths the twists of his mustache, creeps through the junk underfoot, and takes the scarlet coat from the hanger. "Very important coat. You see the back?" It's a letterman's jacket but made with silk without the vinyl sleeves. He flips it over. Embroidered at the shoulders is "Live Free Or Die." Below that is a rainbow-colored slant-eyed dragon with yellow flames curling out of its mouth.

"Yeah. That's what I want. How much is it?"

The little man crinkles his eyes and grins. "I *give* it to you, Soldier."

He drinks Mai Tais, swivels on his bar stool, and tells her this: That he rolled a live grenade in Lieutenant's tent, split Top's septum with a single punch, stitched Major's back with a full clip of an M16 and then, with the blood oozing through the punctures in Major's sweaty shirt, poured on a canister of salt.

She listens, open-mouthed, and sips from his glass. "You not so tough, G.I.," she says. "I hear plenty worse than that."

Third Whore passes her hand over his starched khakis, listens to his Seiko watch, squints through the viewfinder of his new Nikon camera and photographs him crossing his eyes, spreading his lips grotesquely with his fingers, inflating his chest. He puts on the coat and she marvels. He turns his back. She's silent.

"You know what it says?"

"Sure I know. I read English good."

"Okay. What's it say?"

She pauses. "It say you want me to stay with you tonight."

Third Whore's no geisha, has no tricks with string, smells like cigarettes snuffed in a bottle of Coke. All that day she tells him magic stories of a scary giant who kills tigers in a fight, who strangles water buffalo, who cooks men on a spit.

"Hasn't met me yet," Soldier says.

She speaks of voodoo, curses, many things. She straddles him, works on him, looks between her legs. "Whatsa matter you, G.I.?"

He looks down. "I don't know!"

She giggles, says, "I show you someone. I take you there."

An afternoon breeze pushes the drapes. He closes his eyes and sees his colored coat. He sleeps.

Soldier gasps at the foul air, tilts as Third Whore pulls him around the corner. She lets him straggle as she ducks in a shop. When he stops outside he can see her short legs and the high slit of her dress. Above him are rows of plucked birds strung by the neck, wheeling in the wind, and skinned, pop-eyed rabbits hung in a run; before him bins of green eels, tripe, tangled snakes and gutted fish. There is a tank where squid throw out their bundle of arms and glide down to a darker corner.

Here the men dress in baggy shorts, go barefoot in the streets, scurry as though they had boys on their backs. Steam blasts through the doors. Smoke curls black from stoves.

Third Whore comes out showing her gapped teeth, a wet, paper-wrapped package in her hands. "See, Soldier? What you think? No joke, huh?"

Third Whore points. Soldier turns.

A heap of rags rocking from foot to foot. Black hair scraggly. A dark down on her upper lip. Skin brown, glistening with oil, sagging like wet dough hung from a spoon. Her face warted and bumped. Men hustle around her shielding their eyes, like sliding around a door.

Third Whore speaks the word he taught her last night. "Witch," she says.

Witch stares at him through her left eye, the other patched. "You Amelican?"

Soldier looks to Third Whore who hands him the package.

"You got for me?"

She tears off the papers, gnashes at the live fish belly, finds the heart with her fingers, pops it in her mouth. Her fingers mull around in the entrails. She wipes her face with the juice. She stares. "You got trouble down there?"

He blushes. "No."

"You gonna then." She sniffs the scales. "You got somethin special." She seems to get dizzy, staggers, rolls her head. He starts for her but she cackles, "You live."

Then Witch raises the patch. The eye is brown, the pupil white. Soldier feels as though he's swallowed wood.

"You will meet him," she says.

He turns. Third Whore's gone. He turns. The fish lies where Witch was, its gills pulsing.

Soldier rushes down the hotel corridor banging from wall to wall. When he hits his door it swings, unlocked. The drapes rustle and lift up light to

him. His Seiko watch, his Nikon camera, his scarlet coat, are gone.

Then he sees him, or thinks so. It is a bright Sunday morning, his last day. He packs. He looks down to the street far below and sees Third Whore strolling with a white, bald giant who listens and smiles and raises his eyes to the window.

Soldier jerks and bounces and leans into the canvas on curves. Across from him are two other replacements, a PFC and a Warrant Officer. The white Private with the crewcut and the snigger is called Skeeter. After they have rocked in the truck for a while, he lifts his grin from the muzzle of his gun and holds up his hand. Long yellow nails, three fingers, thumb, his trigger finger just a nub, like a bullet glued to the knuckle. Says he blew it off with a .38 the day he got drafted. Shows his other hand. Ditto. Says they taught him to shoot left-handed so he slammed a jeep door on it. "I work a radio now," Skeeter says. "Plan on goin deaf." Then he takes a toothpick out of his pocket and begins jabbing it in his ear.

The black Warrant makes a sound through his teeth and shakes his head. He had another name but he goes by Kenya now.

"He's been here four years," Skeeter whispers, changing ears.

Kenya's eyes are loud and rowdy. There's a scar through one like a cent mark. For an hour he doesn't speak. Then he says, "This is a crazy Company."

Finally the truck guns up a hill, clutches a corner, squeals. Dust rolls in on them. Kenya brushes his pants. "This Captain a boogeyman."

Him. Standing there with his head shaved, a broad, waxed mustache, pearly teeth; maybe six-foot-eight, maybe three hundred pounds. "Well, well," he booms. "Kenya Brown. Back for gold? Har." He peers at a paper in his hand, looks up. "And you're Skeeter? Climb on down! Ha ha. Careful with those fingers!" He squints. "Someone else in there, huh? Well, we'll take you too. Plenty of room, eh boys?" He takes Soldier by the collar, pulls him out, slaps the creases out of his shirt, kicks at the scuffs on his boots, thunks his helmet with his hand. "Welcome to the front, Ragman!"

To the three of them he opens his muscled arms. "I'm Captain St. Jones!" "Boogeyman," Kenya mutters.

Ragman. He feels hexed. He weakens. His pants suddenly tatter, his collars fray, the seams crawl open leaving tiny legs of thread. Sometimes he discovers fruit rinds in his pack, dung in his boots, webs and dust and weeds over everything. He cleans his M16 and finds it clogged with ants.

A stage is made from a flatbed truck and they have Variety Night, with skits, gags, barbershop quartets. A corporal balances a bayonet on his tongue, the gook K.P.s roll and spring and barrel over one another. The men

groan, shout catcalls, settle back on their elbows in the grass. Then St. Jones walks on the stage. The men stand in thunderous applause. He bows to them, removes his shirt, revealing his brawny chest. His head gleams in the light. He poses, flexing his arms, turns his wide back to them. It is corded and knotted and bulging with muscle. His audience gasps. He lifts a bazooka overhead and bends it into a loop. He bites off the neck of a bottle and chews the glass. He ripples his abdominals. A truck mounts the flatbed and drives over him in low gear. He lifts it off. The men jump to their feet with whistles and wild applause.

That night he touches all the things in Captain's tent. They crack, fade, rip, spot with rust.

In the morning he sees Kenya crouched low in the jungle, watching Captain tuck a clipboard under his arm and stride off. Kenya squats back in the bush, spits, and wipes his mouth with the back of his hand. He says aloud, "We get him, Ragman. No sweat."

There's a meeting for the Sergeants in Captain's tent. The night is blue and stormy. Yellow lantern light is pitched against the billowing walls. There is much murmuring, many oaths and brags. Their steins ting in toasts, their fists rap the wooden table, someone shouts "Hear hear." Skeeter is ushered in. He straightens his tunic, clears his throat, and pipes, "In the days of yore, when knighthood was in flower . . ."

St. Jones lifts the flap of his tent and puts his white-gloved fists on his hips. The sun is big behind him. The men sink a bit and shade their eyes. He wears a plumed hat of black velvet. Black leather boots are pulled to mid-thigh and the tops folded over. A dazzling silver sword clanks against the studded belt crossed over his shoulder. His spurs ching when he moves. "Patrol, men." He waxes his mustache and beams. "Patroll!"

Ragman packs for him. The tears in his blankets have been neatly patched, the seams sewed, the rust spots burnished out, the cracks cemented together. When the tent is down, the cot folded, the air mattress stamped flat, he discovers an old wooden trunk. He breaks the catch and lifts the lid. There lie his Seiko watch, his Nikon camera, his shiny scarlet coat. But he's afraid, too afraid to steal them. He merely presses the coat to his face and feels the embroidery next to his cheek.

Soldier sits in the hatch of the helicopter, his legs swinging in the wind, watching grass spray as they lift off. Jungles waver under them, green and yellow birds bolt and soar away. The open fields are gold and steamy and roll in their blasts like broth. They haven't gone twenty minutes before Kenya dips the craft so St. Jones can see the weeds part for a few sneak-

ing, hump-backed shirts of black. St. Jones smiles, winks at Kenya, rubs his palms together.

St. Jones hangs by one arm from a wheel strut, sword pressed between his lips and glinting in the sun. He crashes through the shivering bringdan trees loud as a truck. Kenya snorts gleefully, the chopper lifts washing the julappa grass toward the jungle. Foliage swoops and crackles under his giant form. The chopper cuts and sways and hammers the air over the two gooks' heads. They cower, hiss, shake their fists. One of them stands with his rifle then tilts his head as though the ground has just called to him. He's sucked down into the shaking grass. Then the other stands and fires a shot.

Soldier slides behind the chopper's mounted machine gun and sights on a black shirt with gray sweat stains, a gourdlike head with topsy hair, and a huge hand sliding up his back to the collar. Suddenly the gook reels back as though trying to touch his heels. Stiff bamboo and keyong shoots rattle in a fight. The chopper hovers. Soldier trills a hundred shots into the racket. St. Jones stands, waves, winces at the chopper's wake as it lands. He walks over, unhurt, grinning, dragging his black duffel behind him.

"Thanks, Ragman, but I didn't really need it." He hefts the dead gook to his feet. He's riddled with Soldier's holes, his eyes are bulging, he's swallowed Captain's sword to the hilt.

"These are for you, Kenya," Captain says. He hands him two ears.

Nights, Skeeter smudges the sword gray with polish, buffs it off into blown pellets, runs a whetstone along the edge. Kenya whispers to him and his dull eyes slide to St. Jones hunkered down in his white gown and warming his hands in the fire. Skeeter wipes the blade and polishes as though he hasn't heard.

There are many other soldiers in the Company. Some are tall and have no teeth; some are short and wear eye-patches; some knock around on peg-legs or tie machetes on the ends of their empty sleeves. They plunder the mountain hamlets and St. Jones parcels out the booty. Once they have lured the gooks into kill zones and dismembered them, St. Jones threads the eyeballs on a string and the bravest of them wears the necklace for the rest of the day. When they patrol on foot, they wind through the forest following the creak of his leather, the music of his spurs. Skeeter is led by a string, the gleaming sword slung over his shoulder.

A journalist, his green fatigues sopping black, ducks his head and scuttles from under the whirling blades of the chopper. He patrols with them for a day, stumbling through thickets, murmuring into a tape recorder, taking pictures with his camera. He takes a group portrait with Captain sitting in the low bough of a tree, the patrol loitering/sitting/earnestly

kneeling on one knee below him. There will be a dark photograph too, of a villager hung by his ankles from that tree. Captain halts his interrogation to smile and regrip his baseball bat. And there will be photographs out of the shade: of Soldier standing over a hunched, spiny boy, of Soldier pressing his bootheel on the boy's ear, of Soldier kicking his toe into the boy's wincing face. Captain will not be seen, frowning, in these shots.

Before the chopper wobbles down again, the journalist clicks and whirs his camera at Captain's dazzling sword and boots and velvet, broad-brimmed hat. He hustles about setting his focus as Captain rips the clothes off a dead girl to show six rifle magazines taped to her thighs, two grenades nestled at her tethered breasts. Captain points at his bullet gouge that split her sternum and scooped out her back like a spade. He touches her flesh delicately with his sword, shaving some curling black hairs.

"How about it boys? Wanna take her on?"

He surveys his men, avoiding Soldier's eyes.

"Fifty bucks to anyone man enough." He looks. One hand holds his crotch. "Huh?" He smiles, unbuttons his pants, stops smiling, stares at Soldier, then bellows with laughter, closing his fly.

Before the chopper sinks into the wheaty grass, the journalist takes many pictures of Soldier just standing there, his head hung and arms folded, or pulling starchy keyong roots through his teeth, or helping Kenya hang the girl from a tree and carve on her skin the native word for warning.

Soldier rests his chin on his bedroll and sees Kenya in a low crawl to the place where Captain sleeps, a grenade swinging from the pin in his teeth. He tumbles the grenade up the slope and scuttles away but it comes back down and blows.

"That you, Kenya?" Captain asks. "Better get some shut-eye. Leaving bright and early in the morning."

Men die. One stumbles, then slumps to his knees like a Hindu in prayer. There are no wounds but his eyes roll back when he's lifted. Another suddenly begins to trot, keels into a malaka bush, slapping at the flames he feels licking at his ears. Another leans against a nyudok, swats mosquitoes, raises his canteen. The water trickles down his mouth, then surges out, the canteen bucking with air. The First Sergeant seems to faint, a small, corkscrew hole in his throat.

St. Jones, in boots, hat, sword, has them pile the enemy bodies. He takes one from the heap, sets his teeth, throws it over his shoulder, and jingles in a run to an archway of the road. He blocks passage with the body, splays arms and legs and ties it there. He shoves in his sword at the body's crotch and with a terrific, groaning heave, brings the blade up to the chest. The flesh bursts open with an exploding swarm of bats.

The men recoil. Soldier sees the shadow in the woods.

They slosh through a fetid swamp, burn leeches from their skin with cigarettes, wipe their weapons with the tails of their shirts. They enter a village of grass huts. A single morning fire smoulders in the center with boys beside it, hunched down like catchers. The men have gone. The women line up with naked, stinking babies at their hips. Kenya questions them in their sing-song tongue and they shake their heads. Skeeter runs out of a hut bawling words, a dozen Chinese rifles clattering in his arms. Far off in the steamy clearing, gliding out of a heat mirage, comes an old woman. The villagers murmur and take a step back. Her bare feet slide as though slipped on glass, her eyes are closed, her smiling mouth seems full of stones. Captain slaps at his holster, draws his pistol, squints. The bullet slams into her forehead. Her arms fly up rocketing grenades as she falls back. The blasts pock the ground. Shrapnel chews a hut. Then the villagers circle the woman, babies hiccup milk, children wail. Captain pushes through the crowd and strips the body. She is dead, old, ugly; cut and sewn together many times. Something about her makes him lose his breath. He pants, "That offer still stands, men."

Kenya sits, drops his head, draws in the dirt with his finger. Skeeter now has an armload of rice. Two of the others have prayer candles that they use to fire the huts.

Captain shouts, "What about it? Hundred bucks this time. Let's see what you're made of."

Some of the men laugh, crack jokes, shove her legs and wobble her knees with their boots. Soldier walks forward, pulled. The village women frighten; the children scatter. He stands over her and feels his knees sink, his body lower.

Then he wakes with her stiffening cold beneath him. He fights to escape but somehow she holds him. And for the briefest moment she is Witch. The woman's eyes open and they're Witch's eyes. She fouls the air with Witch's stink. A smile grows on her lips.

He jumps to his feet and it's just the woman there, but "Boogeyman" Kenya says. And now the others join him, even the women who don't know the word, even the naked children fingering their mouths, even Captain in a startled, raspy whisper. "Boogeyman."

Soldier, Boogeyman, follows at a distance. If he stops and listens hard he can hear their sounds. Occasionally he gets too close and they ward him off with silenced shots that slap through nodding fronds and rap the trees, shaking birds and monkeys into jabber.

He is aware of other trudging footsteps though these make a softer sound, the faintest crackle in bamboo, tiny snaps in sticks, their moves through

thigh-high grass something like a sigh. Sometimes it seems he is following these sounds and sometimes they follow him.

He is aware of her too. She does not speak but he smells her rancid breath. She does not show herself yet the trees rot, stones go mealy, clouds dissolve the sun along the path.

Strange things happen when he sleeps. Morning comes and his face is scaly with dried mud or he finds himself cloaked with tickling white moths or the pond where he drank last night is now a dry cup in the earth loud with a thousand frogs. Rations turn to feathers in his mouth, soup into sludge, meat into a fistful of writhing worms.

He is beset with fever. He's constantly chilled, his head throbs, his muscles ache, his ankles swell until his bootlaces pop, and he's racked with stomach pains that cramp and bend him double. He gags for a solid hour, choking each breath, and finally vomits a white, gutted fish, its gills pulsing.

The little men are in a circle eating raw meat and rice from wooden bowls. Cross-bows lie at their feet. They chat, rub themselves with oil, and pat their yellow skin with leaves. One of them touches another's arm and points.

He stands in shadow, still as he can.

The village men get to their feet, pick up their bows, and slowly back out of his sight into the jungle, bowing low with a soothing chant that continues until morning.

He sits where they sat, collecting their thoughts, their body heat, like bundles. At dawn he gathers Skeeter's bones and floats them like clacking toys down a brook.

Then an armless, legless stump of a man named Jack, wedged in the nest of a tree. A tiger pit with a poisoned soldier spreadeagled on stakes. And a hollow in the jungle, two bodies charred black. He tugs off one of their boots and counts twenty festering sores.

When he walks among the village men at night, they moan and sing and prostrate themselves.

The soldiers groan and toss and suffer him in their dreams.

Kenya knows when he comes and extends a knife to him. But Captain has always gone, crept off into the forest where Kenya says he weeps.

Gifts are left for him: the watch, the camera, at last, the scarlet coat.

The deer swings its head, stares, blinks slowly. Its hooves nervously lift and dig in the peat. It tears a nyudok leaf from the stem and chews. It bends to forage and he's on it, binding its flanks, arms wrenching the head back, riding it down in a thicket. The doe squirms, shows the rim of white in its eyes, chops and flails its hooves. Then the knife rips through the hide

and it rests. Its tongue droops. The offal steams. High up in the cavity he stuffs his things, even his folded coat.

The arrows thunk in their backs. They will be shuffling along, their eyes crazed, and there will be the squeal and then the sound of a round stone heaved into water, and a soldier will seem to itch at his back even as his eyes float to the rough, bleeding button in his breast.

Three villagers run like rickshaw men along a road. A sergeant directs the last of the troops to find cover, to belly down in the ditch, to crouch and wait for his signal. St. Jones glances around and steps back into the high shielding trees.

Their bare feet tisk in the dirt. The sergeant howls but the rifles fail. Bullets jam, firing pins ping, triggers go stiff with rust.

Her work.

Then arrows shriek and fold men over like empty bags. The other hunters come out of the jungle, machetes in their hands.

St. Jones is gone. Kenya is not among the bodies.

He races through the forest, trips on a vine. Kenya swings into the path, dangling by a foot. There is a gaping flap in his throat. Carved on his skin is Captain's word for warning.

And yet, Boogeyman stalks him. For a day there are many signs: bushes kicked awry, bootholes in the mossy waters, slammed bark shredding from the trees; at night, torrents, thunder, fields aflame, a purple wisp from his plume.

Then for a week there are no signs of him at all. The vegetation is unspoiled, the mint-green earth is dappled with sunlight, the breeze is warm and soft and flowered. Birds chirp, wild boar scruff through fens, monkeys drop and swing and chatter in the branches, a white parrot nibbles at a nut gripped in its claw.

He slashes madly through the forest, yowls, roars with a voice much deeper than his own, sharpens a stick and carves jagged ruts in his belly, paints the trees with his blood, in anguish calls to her, and, smashing his head down, breaks his teeth against rocks. He stumbles in a river and silver fish school around him rending his clothes. He sinks in the water and wheels like bones.

He wakes, up to his mouth in mud. Tiny fiddler crabs climb out of their holes and rattle in dozens towards him. He calls to her and grinds his broken teeth.

"Turn," a voice says behind him.

"I can't."

"Turn."

He fights the mud then twists until his neck crackles, until a tendon tears, until his chin lolls on his spine. She rocks from foot to foot in the dark, her head swaddled in black, her body draped in heaps of calico and blue wool and gunnysack. She takes a step forward and opens her warty palm. "You got for me?"

"Nothing," he sighs.

She throws her hand up and lightning shatters the sky.

"What can I give you?"

The mud sucks away from him, he's raised spinning, like a ball on a string, and hurled against an ancient bringdan tree. He lies at its roots, moaning, crumpled. His bones grate when he moves. "He took all I have."

"He give it back, one by one. I see."

He remembers his loot stashed in the bowels of the doe. "My Nikon camera!"

She whips her shawl aside. The lens glints in the moonlight. He's picked up and bashed to the ground. His tongue bleeds.

"My Seiko watch?"

She frowns. Her hand casts out. The luminous dial glows green. She twitches her finger and an icy wind prickles his skin, his feet go numb, a little toe falls off and is hauled away by a crab.

He closes his eyes. "The coat."

She grins. "You can get?"

He nods his head. She disappears. A white parrot swoops out of the dark and drops a claw-held pellet down his throat. The parrot cackles. He sleeps.

He wakes at sunrise with his head against the mealy hide of the deer. He gags at the smell, holds his breath, and jams his hand in among the crawling maggots. He works through soup and the withers collapse on his wrist. He pulls out his arm in disgust, dries it with leaves, and scowls at the boot-prints leading away.

Hush. There he is, his huge back rounded, eating a snake, his silver sword resting at his side, winking light. Boogeyman glares at the scarlet coat, the emblazoned words, the rainbow dragon and torched breath. He slides over the grass and with hardly a rustle tries to steal the coat. He can't budge it, heavy as iron. He bends cautiously, grips the sword, jumps and hacks at Captain's head, splitting it from crown to ear three times.

"Har!" the giant roars as he stands. He scratches his head and drunkenly reels, the snake still squirming in his teeth. He spits, gibbers something, claps his hands. The coat is on his shoulders. He smiles and spreads his muscled arms, covering Boogeyman with freezing shadow.

He plunges the sword in Captain's shaking gut, pulls it, aims, and stabs at his heart, circling the blade.

“Ha ha ha,” he booms.

Leaves go brown and fall.

“Listened to her, did ya?”

Boogeyman shoves his foot against Captain’s heaving chest and mightily draws the sword. Captain wipes tears from his eyes and holds his side and hoots. Boogeyman races off and that night in his sleep, Witch steals an eye, numbs his tongue, thins and bows his legs.

Where there was once a river, a brook, a few burbling streams, the village men have now dug out a wide moat. It isn’t deep but enough for them. They sometimes come to the banks on the other side and chant. When Boogeyman steps out of the forest the wives are forced to turn away; they hide their children’s eyes. Young men are guided to the waters. Hands are put on their heads. They are given a potion to drink. Then they swim the moat with horrible carved wooden faces held overhead. They place these in the sand, bow, and rush back to their praying families.

A helicopter passes over his island but he can’t call to it; isn’t sure if he should. And yet he runs naked out into the burning open and waves his arms as it banks and drones away. Bees cloud around his head and sting him till he falls.

He wakes, covered with welts, shades his eye, and looks up at the sun. It is nearing full eclipse. The piercing coin edge is even now sliding away. He ducks his head, knows this is his sign. Pulled, he hobbles on his bowed legs towards the river, out into the open, and onto the hot sand. He splashes into the clear water, dives deep, and finds the sword gleaming where he hid it in a cave.

On the bank again he paces, the sword gripped in both hands overhead. He wades out into the water. Darkness blankets all the jungle. He’s alone. All is still. The animals cower. The river stops its travel. His heart thrums.

Then the river starts, light seeps down, caws and snorts and screeches rack the island. He raises his eyes and sees St. Jones naked and weak on the bank across the river, tearfully hunting for the heart of a gutted fish and licking blood from his hand.

St. Jones hardly has time to react. Fright colors his face, his eyes bulge, he starts to stand and the sword runs in him bowling him over. The point peeks out his throat. As Boogeyman drags him into the river, he tries to speak but only gurgles. Boogeyman kneels, puts his ear to the bubbling, bloody lips. St. Jones coughs and rasps, “You are welcome to it.”

Boogeyman pushes him into a float. He’s sucked under and eaten by the fish.

Boogeyman grabs the coat, touches his lips to the collar, swirls it over his head haughtily and puts it on.

The sky goes black again. There is a wild howl and a rush of wind. He

swims back to the island in a downpour. The villagers gather like children on the banks and weakly wave to him. The whirl of insects stops. The birds flock and fly away. The monkeys wobble to the river, the first to drown themselves.

He has another eye now, and a patch. Each day he walks his island. He wears his coat. He thinks about rescue and the homeward flight.

POETRY / BROWN, HEAD, CUDDIHY

The Desertion of the Women and Seals / George Mackay Brown

Howie gave sentence of slaughter
To the fifty seals on the skerry.
For a month now the inland lasses,
Bella, Jemima, Mary
And Hundaskail's cold beautiful daughter
—It was said, because of his hard grudging fist—
Denied their kisses.
A month he watched the drift of seals in the west.

A clean gale out of the sunset
Would cancel scent and sound
But make those creatures vivid upon the floods.
'Maybe,' thought Howie, 'a pound
Or thirty shillings, for powder and shot . . .'
He would change the flock to bag and slipper and brooch—
Entrancing gauds—
And gather the spendthrift girls back to his couch.

That sunset, shrug after shrug
The seals abandoned the shore.
Across the sacrificial rock
Drifted a delicate smirr,
Tresses of haar, a fleece of fog.
It scarfed in one cold weave the selkie-flight.
Then, rook by rook
Round Howie's impotence drew in the night.