

I could say: those mountains have a meaning
but further than that I could not say.

To do something very common, in my own way.

1970

1971

Diving into the Wreck

First having read the book of myths,
and loaded the camera,
and checked the edge of the knife-blade,
I put on
the body-armor of black rubber 5
the absurd flippers
the grave and awkward mask.
I am having to do this
not like Cousteau¹ with his
assiduous team 10
aboard the sun-flooded schooner
but here alone.

There is a ladder.
The ladder is always there
hanging innocently 15
close to the side of the schooner.
We know what it is for,
we who have used it.
Otherwise
it's a piece of maritime floss 20
some sundry equipment.

I go down.
Rung after rung and still
the oxygen immerses me
the blue light 25
the clear atoms
of our human air.
I go down.
My flippers cripple me,
I crawl like an insect down the ladder 30
and there is no one
to tell me when the ocean
will begin.

First the air is blue and then
it is bluer and then green and then 35
black I am blacking out and yet

1. Jacques-Yves Cousteau (1910–1997), French underwater explorer and author.

my mask is powerful
 it pumps my blood with power
 the sea is another story
 the sea is not a question of power 40
 I have to learn alone
 to turn my body without force
 in the deep element.

And now: it is easy to forget
 what I came for 45
 among so many who have always
 lived here
 swaying their crenellated fans
 between the reefs
 and besides 50
 you breathe differently down here.

I came to explore the wreck.
 The words are purposes.
 The words are maps.
 I came to see the damage that was done 55
 and the treasures that prevail.
 I stroke the beam of my lamp
 slowly along the flank
 of something more permanent
 than fish or weed 60

the thing I came for:
 the wreck and not the story of the wreck
 the thing itself and not the myth
 the drowned face² always staring
 toward the sun 65
 the evidence of damage
 worn by salt and sway into this threadbare beauty
 the ribs of the disaster
 curving their assertion
 among the tentative haunters. 70

This is the place.
 And I am here, the mermaid whose dark hair
 streams black, the merman in his armored body
 We circle silently
 about the wreck 75
 we dive into the hold.
 I am she: I am he

whose drowned face sleeps with open eyes
 whose breasts still bear the stress
 whose silver, copper, vermeil cargo lies 80

2. Referring to the ornamental female figurehead that formed the prow of many old sailing ships.

obscurely inside barrels
 half-wedged and left to rot
 we are the half-destroyed instruments
 that once held to a course
 the water-eaten log 85
 the fouled compass

We are, I am, you are
 by cowardice or courage
 the one who find our way
 back to this scene 90
 carrying a knife, a camera
 a book of myths
 in which
 our names do not appear.

1972

1973

Power

Living in the earth-deposits of our history

Today a backhoe divulged out of a crumbling flank of earth
 one bottle amber perfect a hundred-year-old
 cure for fever or melancholy a tonic
 for living on this earth in the winters of this climate 5

Today I was reading about Marie Curie:¹
 she must have known she suffered from radiation sickness
 her body bombarded for years by the element
 she had purified
 It seems she denied to the end 10
 the source of the cataracts on her eyes
 the cracked and suppurating² skin of her finger-ends
 till she could no longer hold a test-tube or a pencil

She died a famous woman denying
 her wounds 15
 denying
 her wounds came from the same source as her power

1974

1978

1. Physical chemist (1867–1934) who with her husband investigated radioactivity and on her own discovered polonium and radium; she

received the Nobel Prize in 1911.

2. Discharging pus.