

1

Angela Leighton

Angela Leighton is Professor of English at the University of Hull. She has written widely on poetry, and has published a number of critical works, including 'Shelley and the Sublime', 'Elizabeth Barrett Browning' and 'Victorian Women Poets'. Her new book, 'On Form: Poetry, Aestheticism and the Legacy of a Word', will be published next year by OUP.

She has always been particularly interested in poetry, and has taught various courses, including creative writing, at the University of Hull. In addition, she has published her own poems in many magazines. Her first volume, *A Cold Spell*, was published by Shoestring in 2000, and she is currently completing a second.

The poem

This poem was inspired by Steinunn Thorarinsdottir's sculpture, 'Voyage'. Its seaward tilt set me thinking about journeys, those made in the past between Iceland and Britain, but also those made every year by the birds which migrate between our two countries. Then, behind these, lie the thought of other journeys outwards, whether literal or figurative, which we make in life.

A figurehead

Hull, Immingham, Grimbsy, Spurn—
in the set sun's spilt cordial
P&O's big ghost goes out
night after night, like the dead from home.

Here's a leaning of the spirit, drawn
out from upright, off from true,
a header into the wind, full-tilt,
the bent of going, at a stroke, stopped still.

Exchange and pact, sagas of return,
a sea-sickening in the ear's dark hold—
yet out, out, sea-farer, wanderer,
Njal, Unn, old comers and goers,

like birds that trade their lands each year:
whooper, diver, plover, eider,
sandpiper, snow-goose, tystie¹, tern—
that urging back, that longing to be gone.

Is it this compass needle of the north
that sets the heart at ice and snow,
that draws towards its zero point,
and rocks our stand, unfathoms our roots?

Like I in italics, this bowsprit figure,
clean as a sloping drift of snow,
looks out and shows how close we are,
how far, how cold, the last sea goes.

¹ The Scottish name for the Black Guillemot, variations of which are still used in the Faeroes and Iceland.