

RMS Leinster

During the interview for my role as the writer in residence here at the library, one of the first responsibilities noted for me was speaking on the centenary of the sinking of the RMS Leinster. Since the afternoon that I found out I would be spending my year's days here, I have had the thrumming image of a century old marine disaster buzzing around in the space in my head between stories, between novels. I look out at the blue water from my desk on the 5th floor of the library, and I think about the power of that water. What is so tranquil also holds such violence, such potential for incredible tragedy. This is the nature of being island-bound people. We have always been in a conversation with the water. It both keeps us here, and it is our passage out.

There are two poems, neither of which I wrote, that I used like prayer when I thought about the sinking of a ship in this harbor – one is called *Diving Into The Wreck*, written by Adrienne Rich. The other is called *On This The 100th Anniversary Of The Sinking Of The Titanic, We Contemplate The Buoyancy Of The Human Heart* – by Laura Lamb Brown-Lavoie. Both works not only look at the catastrophe of wreckage, but they place us as mortals within the same context

as the boats that have been sunk, and lost. They make boats of us, deep-sea explorers of us, and most importantly, survivors of us.

Rich writes,

We are, I am, you are

by cowardice or courage

the one who find our way

back to this scene

carrying a knife, a camera

a book of myths

in which

our names do not appear.

And what are we doing today, if not climbing into the wreck? If not, in our way, diving deep under the heavy water of history and exploring, seeking what we have lost, gathering pieces of the story to which we in some way belong, by virtue of family, or locality – we are deep sea explorers on this day but we are not merely looking through the split open helms of a sunken ship. We are looking for something about ourselves, some moment of recognition in that book of myths.

Brown-Lavoie's narrative poem is a conversation with the split open sunken wreck of the Titanic, wherein she seeks romantic advice from the gargantuan arc. She asks the great floating hotel, 'with enough ballrooms in you to dance with everyone I've ever loved,' about how to be torn open, how to flood with ice water, how to sink. 'I was hoping you'd teach me how to sink, you who have spent a century under water with 1500 skeletons in your chest,' - because her honey's leaving town, and she's kind of a wreck. What the Titanic tells her, as she sits on the seabed with her suitcases strewn open, is that humans can allow themselves to sink. We can go way down and then come back up again with our lungs, our hard, kicking legs. We aren't made of metal. We float. Though there are times for all of us where we feel like we have spent a century under water, with 1500 skeletons in our chest – our hearts are unsinkable. Though they are sinkable. Brown-Lavoie calls our hearts the gargantuan arcs, the floating hotels.

It is this metaphor that I keep coming back to. This buoyancy, this floatation, here as we gather to collectively honour those lost at sea one hundred years ago today in a shipwreck, just in that blue beyond us. I ask that when we think of this disaster, we take something hopeful from it for ourselves. We look at all of the disasters we may come upon in our lives, all the wreckages, all of the times in which we sink. And we kick ourselves free. We allow ourselves to be lifted by the air in our lungs.

We swim our way back from that which would blow us to pieces.

I've written something in this spirit as a parting note.

The thing about submarines

Is that we can't see them coming

Crawling towards us, disasters in the dark

How many times have we been swept from below

Some cold surprise and we are torn open then

A wound in the hull of us we couldn't have foretold

And we are blown apart

Gulping blue

Split, sunk torn asunder under the big heavy

But we never do stay there

Our bodies have so much water and salt in them

It's almost like we are more sea than ship

And there may be pieces of us left on the ocean floor

But we rise

And the tide will carry us to shore eventually,

Homeward

Eventually landed

Thank you so much for listening. Go raibh mile maith agat.