

**JOHN AKOMFRAH**

## **VERTIGO SEA**

### **Oblique tales on the aquatic sublime**

Inside the net... there was big, big fish.  
I can't really explain.  
If anyone fall inside, they would eat that person, because those fish were very big.  
The waves, it can even move a house.  
The waves.

There were 27 of them on board. None had been to sea before.  
They come from all across the continent, travelling northwards to the coast.

I shout: "Jesus, save me. Jesus save me".

Numbers reported dead or missing here this year are the highest ever.  
Nearly 500.  
Last month, on one day, 14 dead bodies were found floating in the sea.

Jesus, save me. Jesus, save me.

They clambered onto one of these. A tuna cage. Exhausted, unable to swim.  
Stranded.  
The migrants' boat started taking on water.  
The people traffickers told them that the crossing would take less than an hour.  
The pilot swam back to shore. They headed off on what was to become one of the most dramatic survival stories from this year's crossings.

### **Kiss me with rain on your eyelashes: Arran 1832**

I am a wanderer and mountain climber. Whatever may still overtake me as fate and experience, a wandering will be therein. It returns only, it comes home to me at last.  
In the end one experiences only oneself.

### **Then came men with eyes heavy as anchors: Spitsbergen 1781**

Farewell and adieu to you Spanish ladies.  
Farewell and adieu to you ladies of Spain.

Sometimes I think there's nought beyond, but is enough.  
He tasks me. He... he moves me. What I've dared, I've willed, and what I've willed I'll do.

Whatever she had wanted to give him, when he left her that morning she had given him.  
He has landed.  
It is finished.  
She had been right.  
They had not needed to speak. They had been thinking the same things and he had answered her without her asking him anything.

### **The sea is History: the Caribbean 1781**

I know  
—the mate of a ship who purchased a young woman with a fine child about a year old.  
In the night the child cried much and disturbed his sleep. He rose up in great anger, tore the child from the mother, and threw it into the sea.  
Why do I speak of one child when we have heard of over a hundred men cast into the sea?

My soul mounts up.  
I leave a white and turbid wake.  
Pale waters, paler cheeks.  
Yonder, the warm waves blush like wine.  
The gold brow plumbs the plume.

Is then the crown too heavy that I wear?  
This iron crown?  
'Tis iron, that I know, not gold.

Many other families have waited and wondered for years as to the exact fate of their loved ones  
—and it's a form of prolongation of the torture that was applied to the original victims, and to members of their families.

Amongst the women who would disappear, those were pregnant were brought to this hospital.  
As soon as their babies were born, the military took them away.

#### **Memory does not stamp his own coin: Argentina 1974**

What exactly happened to the mothers of the missing babies after isn't clear.  
One known method of disposing of them was with what's become known as the death flights.

Every Wednesday, on average between 20 and 30 people were designated to die.  
They were taken to the planes.  
During the flight they were undressed.  
Once the captain of the flight said we were in the right area  
—they were thrown out into the waters of the South Atlantic.

Free from land-based pressures  
—larger brains evolved.  
Ten times as long as man's.

The accumulated knowledge of the past.  
Rumours of ancestors.  
Memories of loss.  
Memories of ideal love.

#### **Feeding the ghost: Newfoundland 1575**

Deep down, in another country  
—moving at different tempo.

Bruno Bigeard came up with the idea.

#### **The way of killing men and beasts is the same: Algiers 1956**

Pick them up from the Kasbah. Question them.  
After that, tie heavy objects around their feet.  
Then fly them out to sea.

They are desperate people who found a desperate remedy.  
Only 40 per cent of the people who set out from Vietnam by boat to reach Hong Kong ever made it.  
Given the 50,000 or so who have reached Hong Kong, that means a much bigger number drowned on the way.

#### **With her South China Sea eyes 1978**