

1975

The Desertion of the Women and Seals

George Mackay Brown

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Recommended Citation

Brown, George Mackay. "The Desertion of the Women and Seals." *The Iowa Review* 6.3 (1975): 28-28. Web.
Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0021-065X.1884>

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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 Hundaskaill'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.