

Never At Sea

‘For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in.’ (Matthew 25:35)¹

Home secretary Suella Braverman describes migrants crossing the Channel in small boats as: ‘the invasion on our southern coast.’ (31st October 2022)²

‘STOP THE BOATS’ (Press conference held by Rishi Sunak, 7th March 2023)³

We approach from the streets of Aldwych, weaving between marching suit wearers, those swift arrows toward productive targets.

We approach from the brackish waters of the Thames, bubbling our way up amongst the swirling flotsam of plastic bottles and raw sewage, tugged by undercurrents from marine police and party boats.

We approach from the Westminster air, once laden with grey smog, the particulates now displaced beyond this central zone.

We tunnel up from underneath the city, past the bedrock, past the building foundations, past the subsoil containing small fragments of maypole that once turned a spiral dance, up into the crypt where the bodies of the long dead are stacked.

Here we are strangers and foreigners in this land, but we are also women who have birthed and loved and grieved.

We stand at the door and knock.

This door is a portal, a ramp, a runway up and into the body of the vessel.

Nave Latin (*navis* – ship)

In medieval Europe the church is symbolised by a ship, whilst the sea represents the profane world outside. The ship of the church bears souls across life’s passage, navigating the dangerous waters of suffering and temptation. The ship is an ark, a place of sanctuary and survival. Some medieval images suggest a celestial or ariel boat, voyaging heavenward.⁴ The mast is emblematic of the cross, and the ‘nave’ or hull for the space for worship. Nave remains the term for the section in a church where congregants gather to participate in the service. The vaulted ceilings often found in churches mimic the water tight interior of the hull, turned upside down.

This imaginary of church as ship remains. End times obsessed evangelicals stand at Texan pulpits and exhort us to save ourselves and ‘Get in the ark!’ They image the church as a boat destined to sail away from a volatile planet. A world beset by the ungodly and the apocalyptic signs of floods, earthquakes, corruption and social unrest. The building-boat carries the (select) faithful onward, upward, away from earthly disorientations.

Anchor Latin (*ancorare* – to fix or secure in a particular place)

St Mary’s, ‘the Jewel in the Strand’, is an island church, a quiet sanctuary, a haven. Located until very recently on a traffic island, bodies and vehicles flowed around it amongst the thrust and

charge of Westminster. It has been built, pulled down and resurrected over centuries. This building-boat, here on the Strand, is a vessel. It is a secure place in a sea of change. Its foundations, both material and mythic, are an anchor planted deep into the sea bed, one that stabilizes a vessel on a slippery horizon, where squalling winds churn the water. But what is this anchor-foundation, and who does it stabilise? Who finds their mooring amongst Westminster's sites of power and prestige? Efforts are directed to sustaining and restoring the building-boat to its former glories. It stands as a monument to our myth histories, but even stone is made liquid as it weathers and erodes.

June 24th. There are other people gathering. The bodies come together, crowd around the wooden pole. It is the summer solstice in seventeenth century Aldwych. The civil war has not yet erupted. Now the music starts up, followed by a forward propulsion of laughter, noise, a mass of movement. The maypole rotates, a great wheel turning. Bodies and ribbons thread and weave, colours blur, skirts and shirts fly out. It is a clock, drawing time into a vortex as feet rhythmically tap ground, toe to heel, marking out the seconds, minutes, hours that accumulate with the strata below our feet. History and myth weave together to make a foundation scattered with Saxon coins and Roman hairpins, medieval bones and Victorian clay pipes.

We women move because we are displaced.
We are moved by the urgency for a resting place for our weathered bodies,
a place we can again make a home.
We move or we will perish.

The building-boat of St Mary Le Strand has been consecrated for worship for three hundred years. It seems fixed into a moment in time, but it resonates down through decades and centuries, echoing its repercussions into the bodies here now. There are 'complex relationships between space and worship, architecture and meaning, religion and society.'²⁵ The site was once a way to materialise power, to fix the authority of religion and state. The tallest building at the time of its creation, its steeple forms a finger pointing to a transcendent God. It visualises prestige, guiding attention up and away from the realities of eighteenth century London, its grimy streets and red light district. Even the bricks that form the carapace are travellers from another land. The walls are made of Portland stone, excavated from a colonised island, an expenditure on behalf of power. Such walls enclose and provide protection, but they can also exclude, can be as unyielding and unforgiving as the white cliffs of Dover to those who might seek a new life on these shores.

Inside, immersion in an atmosphere of refinement and taste drifts out from the scrolls and embellishments of baroque ornamentation, a visual saturation forming a rarefied world, mirroring the surrounding buildings that are the inheritance of London's elite. The bodies of colonised islands, like all other bodies used up to serve the mother country, the mainland, become pockmarked with absence. They are forcibly impoverished in the pursuit of colonial and civic power. Built at the beginnings of Empire when the seas became the playground for the Navy, the buildings of Westminster were founded on an imaginary of national greatness. Such arrogance, and the resulting domination and suppression of less 'civilised' lands, continues into contemporary racialised and gender based inequalities. But our national foundations are built on subsiding ground. The ebb and flow of Empire is returning a tide of climate refugees that will

soon wash up on our shores, following the routes of former generations of travellers, migrants and enslaved people. A cycle of loss set in motion: a flood of bodies coming up from the Thames. Communities of movement pool together, but then disperse and fragment, spiralling down under the sea when vessels fail to be secure. There is no beauty in losing everything you own, in being set adrift from all you are, in drowning.

We have lost everything, except the clothes that cover us.
Absence echoes through our bones.
We women remain outside, circling the exterior.

Religion Latin (*re-ligare* – to re-bind, re-connect)

To be ‘all at sea’ is to be lost, set adrift, disoriented. But in sites that create community, orientations are found. ‘Never at Sea’ is the motto of the Women’s Royal Naval Service, a group united to serve in troubled times. Although disbanded in 1993 on integration into the Royal Navy, St Mary Le Strand remains its’ official church. Women, seafaring, conflict and loss are represented here in the Book of Remembrance, beginning with the first woman to die at sea during the First World War, and in the woven blue kneelers for prayer. Whilst White women are celebrated, are remembered as heroes, a collective amnesia occludes those enslaved Black women of the Middle Passage trade route. These women are our history too, but there is no book of remembrance for them, treated as cargo, thrown overboard into the Black Atlantic when no longer profitable. Their names have disappeared under the ocean with their brutalised bodies. These excluded women haunt our national consciousness.

Ballast Middle English (*bar* – mere + *last* – load or burden) Also Low German/ Scandinavian (*balg-last* – belly-load)⁶

For those held safe inside the vessel of the building-boat, believing bodies provide ballast, weighting and steadying the ship, making it sea-worthy. The bodies inside the church hold within them the rock like concretion of words, the repetition of a story of hope, of a better life that might be found, providing stability.⁷ Since the eighth century churches have been oriented eastwards in adherence to the early custom of praying toward the orient, believed to be the direction from which Christ would be seen when he returns at the Biblical culmination of the world as prophesied in Revelations, when all things will be made new. This ship of bodies imagines itself on a journey to a promised land, an echo of all other migrations to lands which flow with milk and honey.

We listen through feet planted into the ground.
We listen through our hands and faces pressed up against the walls.
The site tells us that we are all water bodies, even those lost at sea in the service of that great
stony body of Empire.
We are all dissolving in a fluid watery circulation.
We are the same.
We are one body.

The erosion of river banks, of islands, of buildings is an Empire spiralling into decline. Even this building shifts and sags. It is performing a slow collapse back into the ground. Falling masonry has historically been a problem, echoing the crumbling façade of wider civil governance, of kindness, of welcome. Underneath the site are the skeletal fragments of human and river life.

We women speak:
'Will you open the doors now, or later?'

What we mean is:
Will you extend that wealth that was never truly yours to own?

'Ecological disasters displace an average of 24 million people per year... However, the rate is likely to increase.'⁸

We stand at the door and knock.

'Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me.' (Revelation 3:20)

'The Convention further stipulates that, subject to specific exceptions, refugees should not be penalized for their illegal entry or stay.' (Convention and Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees, 1951: 3)⁹

Kate Pickering, May 2023

¹ Translation: New International Version

² Alasdair Sandford, "Inflammatory": UK interior minister Suella Braverman slammed over migrant 'invasion' remark,' *euronews*, accessed 31st May 2023, <https://www.euronews.com/2022/11/01/inflammatory-uk-interior-minister-suella-braverman-slammed-over-migrant-invasion-remark>

³ 'PM statement on the Stop the Boats Bill: 7 March 2023,' GovUK, accessed 31st May 2023, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/pm-statement-on-the-stop-the-boats-bill-7-march-2023#:~:text=Prime%20Minister's%20Rishi%20Sunak's%20press,of%20the%20Illegal%20Migration%20Bill.&text=Today%20we%20are%20introducing%20new,comes%20here%2C%20not%20criminal%20gangs.>

⁴ Michael McCaughan, "Symbolism of Ships and the Sea: From Ship of the Church to Gospel Trawler," *Folk Life*, 40, no.1 (2001): 54-61, <https://doi.org/10.1179/flk.2001.40.1.54>.

⁵ Jeanne Halgren Kilde, *When Church Became Theatre: The Transformation of Evangelical Architecture and Worship in Nineteenth-Century America*. (Oxford; Toronto: Oxford University Press, 2005), 9.

⁶ 'Ballast,' Middle English, possibly borrowed from identical terms in North Sea Germanic and Scandinavian. Dutch *ballast* "ballast," literally "belly-load," is a folk-etymology corruption. See: <https://www.etymonline.com/word/ballast> a folk-etymology corruption.

⁷ Chunks of ballast within the walls of the thousand year old All Saints church in Kings Lynn, the site of a Norwich anchorhold, echo the link between the city and ship building, and the church as a vessel that transports the holy.

⁸ Institute for Economics & Peace, *Ecological Threat Register 2020: Understanding Ecological Threats, Resilience and Peace* (Sydney, September 2020), accessed 31st May 2023, https://www.economicsandpeace.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/ETR_2020_web-1.pdf

⁹ 'A refugee, according to the Convention, is someone who is unable or unwilling to return to their country of origin owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion.' The UN Refugee Agency, *Convention and Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees*, accessed 31st May 2023, <https://www.unhcr.org/media/28185>