

Poetry

INSPIRED BY: LISA YUSKAVAGE



Lisa Yuskavage *Cliff* (2007), oil on linen, 195.6 x 157.5cm

The Death of Alcyone

by Claire Crowther

Alcyone, daughter of the guardian of the winds, leapt into the sea when she heard that her husband had died in a shipwreck

On an unfenced cliff, frightened
at the edge, in a million
silverfish of rain, I found

my sister, Alcyone.
To me, it was just sand
crowning, a bitten earth

on which silt has built
for eight thousand years, an inch
a month. Still builds. She listened

to gulls whittle the neediness
of quiet. She watched a ship
slip into pearl while sunset

picked up importance. Look,
how brown bracken squats,
prickles with brittleness

under squalls that dig into
the shoulder muscles of gusts. Gusts
coil and bounce to tower beyond

all elastic limits – young winds.
Young winds, I think like you.
I'm not over that hour.

ABOUT THE POEM:

"The two women in this painting gripped and haunted me for months after seeing it last summer in Vienna: their different ages, their physical linkage, their extreme vulnerability on a high place. The older naked woman has become part of the cliff itself, its front and edge, a root or foundation stone exposed by its unlikely height. I have written about cliffs and, extensively, about ageing women. What is striking about Yuskavage's picture is its depiction of anxiety – of place, of age, of lifestyle. Her cliff hints at an imminent end to the 'civilized' world. Cliffs can be a geological reminder of our current anxiety about a coming catastrophic thaw. This work reminds me of Elizabethan 'memento mori' pictures with their slick and glittering surfaces hiding skulls and decayed flesh. The viewer is invited to supply a narrative to this ancient and moving vision. The final scene in the Greek story of Alcyone, adjusted to a contemporary suicide, felt right to me."

Claire Crowther

ABOUT THE POET:

Claire Crowther's poems "present a world that is uncannily fractured, but not entirely fragmented" (April Warman, TLS, 2008). Her first collection, *Stretch of Closures*, published by Shearsman Press in 2007, was shortlisted for the Jerwood/Aldeburgh Best First Collection prize. Her most recent book, *The Clockwork Gift*, appeared in February 2009. In 2008 she was poet in residence at Dorich House, Kingston upon Thames, a museum dedicated to the life and work of the sculptor Dora Gordine (1895–1991).

Image courtesy David Zwirner, New York