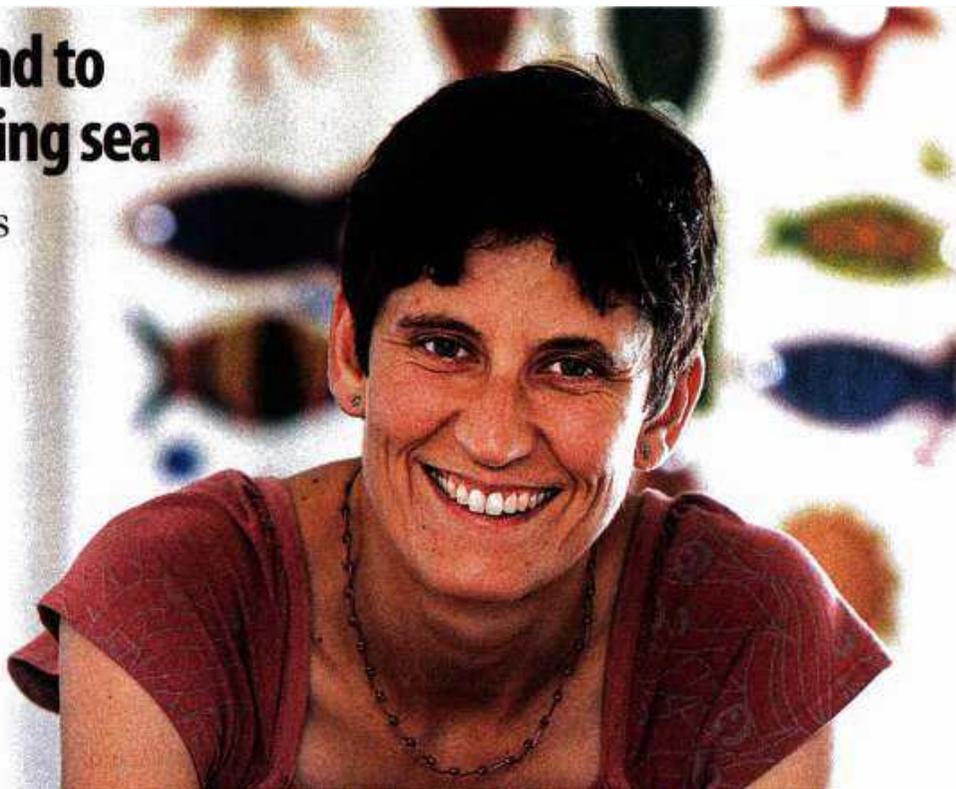


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Ceding sand to the tumbling sea

Sarah Broom's final poems before her death in April are full of unflinching curiosity.



by **TIM UPPERTON**

The lyric poem seizes a moment and preserves it in time. No wonder, then, that for millennia it has been an enduring vehicle for expressing our feelings of loss in the face of death: not only does the elegy lament and console but it also confers immortality on our all too mortal condition. Who would remember 19th-century poet Arthur Henry Hallam, dead at 22, if not for Tennyson's great elegy, *In Memoriam*?

The elegy is often fighting talk: Dylan Thomas's "Rage, rage against the dying of the light". This is great poetry, but bad advice, and others take Tennyson's more philosophical route, attempting to reconcile the irreconcilable. Still others meditate

on their own impending deaths: the tubercular John Keats desiring "to cease upon the midnight with no pain"; the no less tubercular DH Lawrence's valedictory "it is time to go, to bid farewell/to one's own self, and find an exit/from the fallen self".

Gleam, Sarah Broom's second, and last, collection of poems, was written while she was suffering from terminal lung cancer. She died in April. Lawrence used the metaphor of preparation for a voyage in *The Ship of Death* ("Have you built your ship of death, O have you?/O build your ship of death, for you will need it"), and Broom, too, returns again and again to images of the sea, outgoing tides, letting go: "This much sand/I will hold fast/and the rest I will cede/to the tumbling sea" (*Of Necessity*).

Some poems turn towards the shore: in the love poem *You Are My Harbour*, "your entrance is marked/as perilous, definitely unsuitable/for a craft in my condition/ but still I persist". But more often her gaze

Sarah Broom: she wrote *Gleam* while suffering from terminal lung cancer.

is seaward. In *One Story and the Other*, she writes of death as seduction, "the harbour with its come-hither looks", and beyond the harbour "the open sea - /you knew I would return to it - //the open sea/of which, in fact, we know nothing".

If the prevailing tone here is one of surrender to a mystery, that doesn't lessen the sense of loss. In *On not being very Zen about it all*, Broom likens herself to the fish that "thrashes and gasps/ on the floor of the boat", and concludes wryly: "We are flesh and blood, after all//and we do not like to die."

It's usual to distinguish between the writer and the speaker in a poem – the "I" is an invention that exists on the page for the purposes of the poem and may or may not relate closely to the writer. In these poems, although the poet's craft is everywhere apparent, that distinction seems beside the point – they feel like urgent, personal communications.

There is courage in defiance of the Dylan Thomas kind, but there is another, rarer kind of courage in acceptance, in looking unflinchingly at one's own death with such an exploratory, curious spirit. ■ **GLEAM**, by Sarah Broom (AUP, \$24.99).



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