

Dunt: a poem for a dried up river

Very small and damaged and quite dry,
a Roman water nymph made of bone
tries to summon a river out of limestone

very eroded faded
her left arm missing and both legs from the knee down
a Roman water nymph made of bone
tries to summon a river out of limestone

exhausted utterly worn down
a Roman water nymph made of bone
being the last known speaker of her language
she tries to summon a river out of limestone

little distant sound of dry grass try again

a Roman water nymph made of bone
very endangered now
in a largely unintelligible monotone
she tries to summon a river out of limestone

little distant sound as of dry grass try again

exquisite bone figurine with upturned urn
in her passionate self-esteem she smiles looking sideways
she seemingly has no voice but a throat-clearing rustle
as of dry grass try again

she tries leaning
pouring pure outwardness out of a grey urn

little slithering sounds as of a rabbit man in full night-gear,
who lies so low in the rickety willowherb
that a fox trots out of the woods
and over his back and away try again

she tries leaning
pouring pure outwardness out of a grey urn
little lapping sounds yes
as of dry grass secretly drinking try again

little lapping sounds yes
as of dry grass secretly drinking try again

Roman bone figurine
year after year in a sealed glass case
having lost the hearing of her surroundings
she struggles to summon a river out of limestone

little shuffling sound as of approaching slippers

year after year in a sealed glass case
a Roman water nymph made of bone

she struggles to summon a river out of limestone

little shuffling sound as of a nearly dried-up woman
not really moving through the fields
having had the gleam taken out of her
to the point where she resembles twilight try again

little shuffling clicking
she opens the door of the church
little distant sounds of shut-away singing try again

little whispering fidgeting of a shut-away congregation
wondering who to pray to
little patter of eyes closing try again

very small and damaged and quite dry
a Roman water nymph made of bone
she pleads she pleads a river out of limestone

little hobbling tripping of a nearly dried-up river
not really moving through the fields,
having had the gleam taken out of it
to the point where it resembles twilight.
little grumbling shivering last-ditch attempt at a river
more nettles than water try again

very speechless very broken old woman
her left arm missing and both legs from the knee down
she tries to summon a river out of limestone

little stoved-in sucked thin
low-burning glint of stones
rough-sleeping and trembling and clinging to its rights
victim of Swindon
puddle midden
slum of over-greened foot-churn and pats
whose crayfish are cheap tool-kits
made of the mud stirred up when a stone's lifted

it's a pitiable likeness of clear running
struggling to keep up with what's already gone
the boat the wheel the sluice gate
the two otters larricking along go on

and they say oh they say
in the days of better rainfall
it would flood through five valleys
there'd be cows and milking stools
washed over the garden walls
and when it froze you could skate for five miles yes go on

little loose end shorthand unrepresented
beautiful disused route to the sea
fish path with nearly no fish in

Alice Oswald (from *Falling Awake*.
W. W. Norton & Company 2016)