Kamikaze

Her father embarked at sunrise  
with a flask of water, a samurai sword  
in the cockpit, a shaven head  
full of powerful incantations  
and enough fuel for a one-way  
journey into history

but half way there, she thought,  
recounting it later to her children,  
he must have looked far down  
at the little fishing boats  
strung out like bunting  
on a green-blue translucent sea

and beneath them, arcing in swathes  
like a huge flag waved first one way  
then the other in a figure of eight,  
the dark shoals of fishes  
flashing silver as their bellies  
swivelled towards the sun

and remembered how he  
and his brothers waiting on the shore  
built cairns of pearl-grey pebbles  
to see whose withstood longest  
the turbulent inrush of breakers  
bringing their father’s boat safe

– *yes, grandfather’s boat* – safe  
to the shore, salt-sodden, awash  
with cloud-marked mackerel,  
black crabs, feathery prawns,  
the loose silver of whitebait and once  
a tuna, the dark prince, muscular, dangerous.

*And though he came back  
my mother never spoke again  
in his presence, nor did she meet his eyes  
and the neighbours too, they treated him  
as though he no longer existed,  
only we children still chattered and laughed*

*till gradually we too learned  
to be silent, to live as though  
he had never returned, that this  
was no longer the father we loved.*  
And sometimes, she said, he must have wondered  
which had been the better way to die.

Beatrice Garland