

WORK POETRY / POÉSIE DE TRAVAIL

West Coast — for Howie White

These fishermen, come spring
they pack everything
aboard
but their soft emotions.
Paper towel, rum & hooks
winter-time strategies,
logbooks;
patient details of years.
Survival suits, to forestall
hypothermia.
Ketchup.

Boat by boat, the fleet
splinters from land,
closing universes.
At sea, elections
& earthquakes pass unnoticed.
Revolutions
are known only as
headlines
encountered in ancient newspapers
while painting.
Insulated
& comforted with ocean,
fishermen dream of
little;
fish, fragments of worry
about weather,
a smoking generator.

Packed away like photographs,
wives & children lie
one-dimensional
in drawers.

Every week or so, while
searching for something else,
fishermen will uncover their
images.

Some will phone home.
Others will shrug: *families*,
only able to recall
vague regret
as for an aged aunt, who
died the other year.

Vengeance

Inshore, faint spines of
mountains
curl about rim of coast, holding
away the world.

Sweet & empty from the waves,
air surrounds like a
gift.

Sea; windprints on mercury, bending
into the ritual of search

of flying hooks

& brainblows delivered with primitive joy.
And you, eyes still with plans, coiling perlon
& flowing steel through cut —
incised hands,
calling for loran bearings, coffee,
above dying tremors of coho.
Halibut dancing the deck with
flat blows of bodies too power-
ful to be stilled by
beating

(Remembering the story about the
 old Norwegian, found dead beside the mast
 tangled with a 200 lb halibut,
 2 broken legs
 rope
 & who knows what thought of indignant revenge)

Me after coffee, approaching the
 halibut
 with a wary knife:
 exacting vengeance for a dead man

At This Time of Year

Outside, it smells like rain,
 like Prince Rupert.
 Minus the canneries, of course
 & fish plants
 but the same damp promise;
 a scarf of cloud
 drawn loosely
 over the rock faces.
 (Solid under my hands, the
 wicker table, morning tea: I have organized
 protection, all the rituals.)
 Fuchsias clamour from the balcony,
 refusing entrance to
 haggard ghosts,
 who smell stalely of fish.
 Shouting "exile!"
 & demanding showers, they
 clamber past the fragrance of jasmine
 invade photograph albums;
 break my heart talking of
 familiar islands
 & price of mild-cure.

Rupert.

A dragger unloading at the Coop,
 scum from fishpumps caking white on
 greasy water,
 long lines of the hull dangerous with
 weight,
 stern half-submerged
 bow thrust up
 with the awkward pleasure of pregnancy.
 And the stench, tasting of
 disgust; money. Gillnetters waiting
 to unload,
 darting between wharves like
 eager needlefish.
 Eagles sheering heavily from the
 breakwater,
 beaks clogged with smell of diesel.
 Magnified calls of
 winchmen
 & the tarred vastness of pilings
 slimed
 with effluvia,
 rotting fish-heads, bloody ice.

At This Time of Year 2

I hold my weight of ropes
 my hands are light with
 emptiness.
 Then I think *of course*,
 & push away loss like a visitor
 whom no one has invited
 & no one knows what to do with

The jasmine smells so lovely this time of year

where the money-fish live for M.

in winter the sea begins to
 claim him again
 salt tears & ocean
 become confused
 as herring season slides into
 salmon.
 in this contest
 Hecate always wins.
 how can his woman compete
 with the shadowed breasts of
 northern mountains
 & secret depths where the money-fish live?
 with persistent hours spent for
 hands blunt with injuries,
 inlets & islands she has never heard of
 the brutal caress of blind fatigue;
 results for other men's admiration.

here, love is a weakness.
 let others have wives, he
 has 2 boats.
 in return, Hecate feeds him dollars
 spits him out in pieces:
 a finger joint in Prince Rupert
 an ulcer from Cape St. James to Rose Spit
 a woman who subsists on 3rd hand news.
 every few weeks when he calls her,
 landlines falter with practiced scraps
 of conversation;
 even the wounds feel rehearsed
 & he makes no promises, but says
 I'll see you soon
 I'm not leaving you
 forgetting he has never come to stay.

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