Labour/Le Travailleur

Work Poetry / Poésie de Travail

Zoë Landale

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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 penton & 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 powerful 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;
exact 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.

Zoë Landale
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