

## Work Poetry / Poésie de Travail

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## 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 periton  
 & 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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