

BLEEDING COD

Gills sprung, some pop
when they kiss the crucifier.
Mouths trigger, huge as buckets,
bodies arch sideways all their length,
and every fin flares from pectoral to caudal.
Inboard from gaff and roller, the longline
crackles under strain, steadily threading its machined
narrows. Cod lips hit the slot, hooks rip free, leaving
cantilevers of jaw in ruin, and fish thresh crisply,
skidding the chute to the tank, lashing like little storms.
Ruptured up from depth, each crosses the rail
busted in its guts as gasses expand the swim-bladder
and blow mesentery, living gaskets torn, anal flues
breached, dying even as hydraulics crucify
by kiss. Circle-hook after circle-hook
wrenches from flesh and flesh
sloshes the bleeding trough.

Charles tips his blade into membrane ahead of the collar,
dividing blood from cod.
Miguel touches bright steel through a sluice
of crimson abaft the last gill raker.
Drew lifts an edge honed along fifty-eight degrees north,
slips it perpendicular to the isthmus,
working arc-wise right toward his own grip.
Operculum rifts from pectoral girdle
when Matthew's knife-hand sighs through
as if to release light glyphed in a red spurt.

Shift relieves shift.

The inclined conveyor grinds to starboard.
Mist, frosted adrift of its plate freezer, slews
outboard, swaddles the bleeder, then separates.

Sometimes blood, dead and pooled in the heart sac,
suddenly darkens the trough,
plumed somber as predawn tilted cold
upon metal smelted to sheet and weld.
Sometimes blood pelts
like stormlight loosed from its furnaces
and drawn gusty under nimbus, decrypted, unflumed
from the large-bore artery charged by the gills.
Scarlet curdles to steelwork until the deck hose
peels color away, flushed to the sumps.
At last, a few twitches of muscle,
the cod pumping out as it rides prongs
up the conveyer, final crimson
frayed and hanging in scraps, clotted and swaying
from the grating of the belt, blood-shreds
draped over bolt-heads like some wrecked lace
once knotted from a thread
spindled alive
out of the dark of a world
unseen, the axle of which turns unseen.

stanza break

At the end of his sixteen hours,
Charles gazes past his left hand,
a claw drawn to.
His left elbow hitches sharply,
recalling every broken jaw, every neck plate
forced and parted. Stiff ligaments
articulate a body of law spoken in salt,
a story of sea chamber and torn aorta
and muscles knotting in his lower back. A legacy
ancient as hunger, no older than fear. Sunrise
blusters ragged at the end of watch.
The day tatters, bleeding out
as if nicked by steel,
the man become mere matter.

October 2008, B-Season
58° 39.78' N, 177° 02.32' W
F/V Alaska Mist