

## 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*