

A FISHERIES SCIENTIST SIGHTS A LARGE SCHOOL OF MYTH
SWIMMING IN SHALLOW WATER IN SOUTHEAST ALASKA

for Theodore Roethke

Who rise from flesh to spirit know the fall:
The word outleaps the world, and light is all.

1 *I Cut The Outboard*

Silence opens out.
Mosquitoes whine.
Dolly Varden trout shine their silver
messages in the mouth of the river. Myth-
like, the silence fills with silences. Slapped red,
flattened when its drill said hunger to skin,
a mosquito dies.

The river runs thin,
sighs through the salt marsh, a voice
almost alive under a heron's harsh cry.
Over gravel, in the clear shallows,
a school wheels to travel up narrowed current.

2 I Remember The Journey

Sitka is behind me now. I face
home each way I point my bow.

A story keeps singing in my head, no words,
the thin, red whine of a mosquito.

I find my way by fish and water,
by myths the current utters,

a voice almost alive, blind with tides.
Sitka is behind me now.

3 *After The Chainsaw*

Silence is the dark blue that dwells in the clear-cut,
in the juice of huckleberries swelling their taut skins
to split between the teeth of brown bears.

Silence is the redolence of brown bear shit
speckled with huckleberry seeds and the sloughed, blue-
black skins of huckleberries, fecund in a green tide,
the light sluiced by alder and devil's club in summer.

4 *The Season Of Myth*

After winter's infinite night begins to break
and herring school their ninety ton clouds of silver
up from the fjords to lighten the nearshore shallows
with goutts of roe and milt on kelp; after the thaw
discolors the streams, and the mountains
shed another year of gravel and silt, scattered over
tideflats; after alders spread a green space
above stream-beds and devil's club unfurl leafy tents
over blown down spruce; after ruby-crowned kinglets
wage turf-wars in antiphonies that rise like rejoicing,
like praise through the vault of quiet gathered
in the limbs of cedar; after humpback salmon leap
to slap salt a last time in the estuary at the far end
of each fjord, gathered for the failure of the infinite
day named "summer," the females' bellies taut with roe,
the hook-nosed males hunched to the taste of fresh water
("water marked" the purse seine skippers call it); and

after the first ticks of snow needle
icy among lodge pole pines that straggle
runty in the muskegs or huddle in clumps
and the long dark filters down out of the north.

5 I Try To Sing

Because there are no claws,
because there is no bear
to tear out the belly and feast on roe
and guts, because there is no hunger,
I have made noise
within my space of myth.

6 *The Myth Of Herman Kitka*

I know a Tlinget ancient in his bones.
When he kills he kills with grace, speaking thanks
to salmon dying in his seine. He hones
his prayer on net twine and hydraulics, yanks
knots tight to mend web, hard as little stones.
I know a Tlinget ancient in his bones.

I do not know all killing in the world.
I do not know the beast that preys on hope.
I've seen a killer, his fingers curled
to a net needle. His meshes are tropes
on fins and scales when his power block groans.
I know a Tlinget ancient in my bones.

His silence fills with fish. Their gills speak blood.
The language of dying has no meter.
I know a Tlinget whose boat slowly scuds
the fjords with thanks. He listens to water.
He tells me water, tells me I am known.
I love a Tlinget ancient in my bones.

I do not know the dark grounds where hope schools.
I've dragged my trawl in hundreds of fathoms
for knowledge. I've killed fish bright as jewels.
I've danced wild upon the ocean's rhythms.
The beast that preys on hope hungers alone.
I love a Tlinget hunting through my bones.

7 I Have No Totem

I am a white man.

If I say I have a totem I steal
someone else's myth. But, in a hard
time, when I walked among spruce
and hemlock down to the alders
on the bank of Indian River to pray,
a kingfisher chattered at me
from a dead branch above
a clear, green pool.

8 *The Myth Of Faith And Then Kirk Died*

The kid next door and I learned faith
together casting for Dolly Vardens, working hammered
nickel spoons over the tideflat in front of our houses,
throwing brass lures all winter long for starving trout.

Faith is bitter, unsafe, off Necker Cape,
our skiff down in the trough, the sea
crested so high that the mountain tops,
though right above us, vanished.

We had to believe
she would carry us
back to protected water.

9 *The Problem Of False Myth*

I would speak the unspeakable
language if I could,
the bitter sting of a hook
barbed through a jaw, the soft whistling
as raven feathers climb the shadows
under spruce, hemlock, and cedar,
the itch as a mosquito zings its wet,
red song worded in salt and hunger.

This is the myth I would kill:
Because I was not loved
well
there is nothing in me
to love.

10 *The Myth Of Fragments*

There is a cracking of self and my fingers curled
around the outboard's tiller. The anchor line
smacked between its hitches to fore and aft cleats,
every little whitecap slapping nylon rope at fiberglass.
My old skiff and her beach-eroded bottom
beat back the weather like an animal.
My ass always ached after her rough ride.
I have pounded her hard against waves.
I have driven her the length of Peril Straits:
Kakul Narrows to Poison Cove to Sitkoh Bay.
I have rounded Povorontni Point and skimmed
Dead Man's Reach. The strength
I've taken from the cold
and from the rain
helps me to know that silence
fills with silences and mosquitoes
whine harmonics to a song
beyond sound, beyond violence,
beyond hate, where killing and healing
are spoken from the same mouth,
where the fragment of self who hates
the Self is loved and I can love.

11 *There Never Was A Sitka*

Sitka is behind me now. For twenty years I've grieved
a town that never was. I have dragged
my trawl into hundreds of fathoms and killed
and believed my killing righteous
because it is easier to love
killing than to love living
and the loss of hope
that what is false is not
false.

Sitka is behind me now.

12 *The Myth Of Fishing*

I step into Katlian River, work my streamer
along the far bank where Dolly Vardens
hold in quiet water, resting in the back eddies.
The main current thrusts
heavily against me and parts, a bow-
wave curling white at my thighs.

A Dolly strikes. I kill it
and lumber ashore.

When bear-stench shuffles through underbrush
a few paces behind me I kneel
to wash the Dolly blood from my hands.

13 *The Scale Of Myth*

Tiny singing of mosquitoes
wings the Vast close to an ear.
Their silky rubatoes

rise up on the rain-softened air.
Blood thrums like a tympanum.
The Vast swings close to an ear.

Mosquitoes needle venom,
stitch thirst into salt.
Blood thrums like a tympanum

as they harvest red silt.
This is the source of myth:
thirst stitched into salt

by an insect's lancet mouth,
a song across distance.
This is the voice of myth:

wordlessness distilled
to mosquitoes' tiny singing,
distance brought close
in their bloody rubatoes.

14 *Unsuccessful Myth*

Suddenly white socks had been eating Kirk all day. The cigar he'd clenched in his teeth, a boy impersonating a man, had failed to ward them away, though he'd thoroughly stunk himself up. White socks bite so silently, inject such potent anticoagulants, that blood trickles the cheek and dries to a fine brown long before the itching begins. The prey gain awareness only well after white socks have landed, bored through skin, pumped their gut cavities full, and labored off heavy with platelets and hemoglobin. When Kirk shambled back down river skunked, not even a single Dolly, his face was so swollen and blood-crustled that I thought he'd been slugged by a brown bear. Sick with cigar smoke and insect spit, he curled in the belly of the skiff while I skimmed us home, sliding through the summer twilight drawn out between Old Sitka Rocks and Halibut Point and on south, into dusk without end.

15 *The True Herman Kitka*

Tlinget-stubborn, my hero still fishes hard
but I don't think he runs his crew
too well anymore, those wild boys.
He should quit but his cancer'd
kill him for sure if he did.
I think he'd rather die making one last
set on some August humpies or, better,
autumn dogs in hard, slanting rain.

When I was a boy, eighteen, working my first job
for Fish and Game, editing landing records
from the canneries and cold storages and tenders, Herman,
ancient even then, often stopped me on the floating
docks in Crescent Harbor where he moored the *Martha K.*
He'd bend my ear for an hour at a time, how my boss
should open up Peril Strait and Hoonah Sound,
stuffed full of fish. That tough old bastard scared
me and I nodded my head, oblivious to honor.
He knew I was just a kid. He knew he'd get
no satisfaction from me. He knew I was blind
to his honoring me, how, simply by butting
his big broad head against me
as though I was strong enough to butt back,
he was forgiving me my not knowing how to honor
him, his ferocity at the helm of his purse seiner,
the weight of his clan dark upon his shoulders.

stanza break

To this day I don't know if Herman was Raven or Eagle. I have not seen him in fifteen years, since the day I thought he would die in his bed in the Indian hospital and he named me "friend" in front of his family.

16 *The Myth Of Knowledge*

I've dived my trawl into the dark, filled her bag
with data, and winched her back heavy with cod,
bulging with soles. I've danced her among snags,
torn out her belly, and brought her back wrecked. Flawed
cable has parted overhead. The richest drags
are so rough I lose my gear every time. Only God
knows what schools gather over those rugged grounds
where lampfish glimmer like sapphires in a crown.

I take this cadence from a man named Roethke,
an ancient two-step younger than the Self.
I take it and I keep the damn thing, though risky;
my dance with dark and light is just as deft.
I cuss my words for wind, which burn like whiskey,
when my trawl tears loose to drift at that black depth
where lampfish mutter light thinner than a caul,
where I lose myself to loss and gain the All.

17 *The Myth Of Safety*

For a long time, when Herman yarned
of gales piling waves like walls
across the entrance to Lituya Bay,
I could only nod that yes I believed
him. But, even though the *Martha K* is a big,
cape boat, Herman's still a salmon guy,
a coaster, a nearshore boy, and now
I range far beyond the horizon to sound
water deeper than the *Martha K* can sink.
If Herman could make sense of this noise
I think he'd be proud of me.

When I misjudged the wind
at Tree Point and slammed my Fish and Game vessel
against Herman's, cracking *Clupea* to *Martha K*
starboard to starboard, the seiner's net under strain
in the water and she couldn't maneuver,
Herman scowled from his flying bridge
at the stupid white boy fucking up his set.
But he never said a word, not even back at Sitka
where he asked if I thought we'd open
Katlian Bay for dogs and I shook
under gusts of shame and made a fist
in my jacket pocket that hurt so badly
it stopped my tears.

18 *The Myth Of Danger*

Stay in your boat, never go ashore. You will be safe
from bears. You will be poor. The clear-cuts drip
with huckleberries. Streams chime light in the valleys.
Always the stench of brown bear,
unexpectedly immanent in a thicket,
a rustling soft as the voice of God.
Such is the taste of panic, sudden,
beyond logic. Silence hungers in the devil's club,
watching, a sow and her cub, while I labor upstream
and the river muscles a white wake around my legs,
the tops of my hip boots dipping nearly under.
The silver current clamors down from high
cirques, through midnight-blue fruit and fern-
haven, icy light that burns the thighs,
that burns, like a voice almost alive.

19 *The Myth Of Hunger*

I go where I am drunk
by mosquitoes and white socks,
their saliva thinning my blood.
In the shadow of the bear I seek my hunger.
I listen to silence open out and fill
with silences, with killing.

I go to a pool where Dolly Vardens
stack themselves along a sunken hemlock,
the speckled, sea-run trout fanning flame-
trimmed pectoral fins, green-flanked,
stippled pink, their sea-silver fading.
They hold position easily, the pool a stretch
of glass as pure as the cold,
lit slowly by a light that slips
from the deep, round, smooth, grey stones.

Here, in the infinite green center of water
I set my hook in the mouth of the Holy,
the sudden strike flashed out of nowhere
and I am caught.