

LULLABY IN STORM LIGHT

I have heard the slamming of hatches.
I have witnessed the railman's grunt and heave.
I've stood by while my deck boss catches our chief
in his arms, too drunk to leave the Elbow Room on his own.
I've staggered under the weight of a young deck ape
who'd mourned his marriage with vodka
then tried to bugger an obese and weathered whore,
her scorn for his failure crowning him like Jesus.
I've seen storm light burn black as a Bible,
an illuminating darkness, its locus
the eye of a lone sailor unable to look away.
I've listened while screamer captains ream their boys on deck.
I have lifted my eyes to the wheel house high among fulmars
while a skipper on the loud-hailer riffed
hard and long on themes conceived in anger.

Purified by wind, assayed by fatigue,
a fierce language has pierced my ears,
drawn-thin syllables of labor and hurry,
of danger and fear, of rage and despair
in God's worst place in Creation to be alone,
where sailors groan in their sleep,
piled up like puppies while we steam
down to the next string of pots,

stanza continues

their slickers cinched tight to their chins,
hoods up, rain pants taped snug about their boots,
slumber come quicker than God's wrath or gales
or a captain's rant, tossed in exhaustion's odd dreams.

I have been lulled by the slamming of mild steel.
I have learned fear as the barometer plummets.
Gulls have shat on the hood of my foul weather gear.
The deck boss has poured me my coffee.
The chief has lit a cigarette and leaned back and drawled.
Gruffly, the rail man has offered me a seat in the doghouse.
Green water has broken across deck and we wait. God
hath spoken. The whole ocean shivers. Heaped
in our rain gear until the storm abates,
we sleep while our vessel booms and quivers.