

HARD WEATHER PRAYERS

Dolphins dive in their turnturtle dust
The rippled seals streak down
To kill and their own tide-daubing blood
Slides good in the sleek mouth.

Dylan Thomas, POEM ON HIS BIRTHDAY

Was it here I wore a crown of birds for a moment
While on a far point of rocks
The light heightened,
And below, in a mist out of nowhere,
The first rain gathered?

Theodore Roethke, The Rose, NORTH AMERICAN SEQUENCE

Prelude

Craggy as the shell of a dog whelk,
these prayers spiral outward, ordered,
disordered, devised to help me live
with what I do not know:
When I was a boy something happened.
I am not being coy. If I knew what *it*
was, I would tell you clearly. I know
that I knew more about tide pools and the beasts
that grapple to pilings, about gulls buckling
their songs to the rain, and about the storms
that swept across the Gulf of Alaska
to crash against my little town, than I knew

(section continues)

about the tide and the weather rising through me.
Because it happened when I was a boy, as a boy
I noted the purple slow sea star, how it killed,
striking imperceptably between low tide and low.
I watched the basket cockle speak ridges into its heart-
shaped armor, secreting added strength
against the claws of the dungeness crab.
I studied the names of those creatures that stayed alive
by hiding or by clamping down or by building walls
or by taking the phrases of camouflage into their skins
and striking the unwary. While I was still a child
I taught myself to hunger quietly, under cover of drama.
I taught myself the language of not knowing
and subjugated my tongue to the tongues of sea gulls,
leaving for the Holy Ghost only gibberish
out of which to carve the Word aflame,
out of which to carve the words for rain.
I taught myself to extrude my gut like the sea-star,
vulnerable and deadly and unrecognizable
and the rain veiled it all
and I worshiped the rain.

Under Cover Of Gales

The sky foundered under its own weight.
The wind's brisk strides out of the south
whisked gulls on a good ride over the tide-way.
Off Cape Edgecumbe, a wall of rain
stood grey as a soul, poised
to fall stone-hard on my little town,
a cluster of churches and bars
clamped to this shoreline
tighter than limpets to granite.
Waves fell and rose and fell again
like believers battling reason.
The rain broke its language
and the shells that were my ears
filled with a season of weather without end.
Tideward under nimbus that billowed
the shape of prayer, a vault above the horizon,
I hid my prayer among the scrape
of combers knuckling cobbles,
rising waves leafed open and scored
like hailstones, witnessed by gulls
in arcing tones.

Weather As A Mode Of Speech

Christ, walk to me across this water.
The wanton I get,
the colder you fall.
What fails, what alters rain
and the slate of the sea, salts
your grace where the wind sliced.

Across this water I want my way.
Christ wait to me along the drawn wind.
When I hurl my sound out to meet the gust of you
I cast the shell of my ear against the horizon.
I lift the world in my eye
to the cross-

hairs that a sextant navigates to what fails. Christ savor
the silt filtered up through my skin from the sheltered deep,
enter my weather rained to death and the sea shifts its altar.
Altered by rain, the surface of sleep, stippled
by the spare drizzle, dimples
quietly over eelgrass blades,
green chapels unfurled for the sea-hare.

Hunger As A Mode Of Prayer

The *Abbie J* rots on the ways.
She'll never deliver another load of salmon.
Mist erodes the troller in waves, her hull's planking
warped, skin etched by rain, spruce gone dull.

Drizzle blurs the public ways on Front Street.
Their timbers gleam like ice
under vodka, the bankrupt boat tilted
high and dry at low water.
Shacks perched above her are so full
of dark that their windows reveal
opaque records of nothing.

Abandonment is weather.
Its brute fist beads mist, dissolving
her rub-rail, blistering paint into flakes.

Because this weather strikes me mute
I hear grief when gulls chant,
I hear mourning in their sailed liturgy.

But hunger
is the gulls' cargo. They cry
for food. Not for failed keels.
Not for sorrow.

Under The Fish House

My sack full of hymns, the rain-
sparkled skin of the temple I am,
barked loud as a sea lion,
cried wild as a fish house gulled to the rafters
and streaked with guano. My hovel,
burdened with Heaven, staggered its load
between ling cod spines and halibut vertebra
beached among pilings at low tide.
My shack of worship worked the bones
into high ritual and mighty introit
and gulls climbed the staves it hymned,
screeched my praise, sodden under the dark.
Receiving a rain of gurry, night-blue mussels thrived
on pilings, their byssal threads taut as harp strings,
and my cockled chapel flew to sea with birds of praise,
skirled in a flock where skin suffers prayer to flow in a tempo
slow as the hunger of a sea star
forcing a mussel to open to its gullet.
Wild as a sea lion and loud as a gull-humbled fish house,
my bone-bag filled itself with sanctum sanctorum, repented
glory in the cathedral hidden under the dock,
safe to sing in the dark always rain.

Names

If the sea is a cathedral, a tide pool
is a chapel. Sculpins dart under the wind
that blusters their cupped oceans.
Sculpted by wave on rock, their pockets of salt
grow thin from the rain, the suffocating
fresh water. Sculpin and hermit crab and limpet
endure the sea's absence, the lost comfort
of constant temperature, while the unconceived
sky drums the roof over their pooled world
with litanies of unbreathable torrent.

Christ, I have no praise for you.
Beyond saying a vodka-wrecked troller
and shacks the color of the desire to die, beyond
saying predatory snails that glide on their bellies
like the penitent, flexing their borers,
beyond saying seraphim that bicker exactly like gulls,
the shells that are my ears
sing no psalms except I can name
many small creatures in the world of a tide pool.
Christ, have mercy on all things that drown in air,
I have no praise for you. I say the tide:
Tide!

(section continues)

Tide!

Tide!

I say: *Ebb!*

Flood!

Ebb!

Flood!

I always start with “Ebb!”

I always end with “Flood!”

Drought

Make me
a cathedral
from a shack stove in like a hull.
The wanter I am
the clearer your gulls fail my name
and slack water burns the gills in barnacles
and rain roasts clam siphons exposed to air.
The sea chews the snail's cast-off turban.
Kelp-tatters, strewn along the high-water berm,
gleam as the sky glides down. Tubes of polychaetes
gape, torn from pilings, drowning
in a drizzle sifted grey from clouds
until mist sweats one clear bead at a time.

What fails, the horizon, kelp blade and tube
worm, keel and feather and everything that carries me,
streets paved in gravel the color of shacks,
a grey more comforting than the desire to die, fails.
Rain cannot ease drought at out-tide.
I have worshiped on the flood and on the ebb.
Wind has flailed rain, sharp as prayer,
poisonous and altering as prayer,
and my shack up-tilts, slipping under,
poorly weathering the Scripture scrawled
by nimbus, the rain curling in,
my shack awash in gulls' calls.

Breathing Into It

Plankton darken the sea's chill, afloat
in a wealth of dissolved oxygen.

Christ have mercy on all creatures
that drown in air. Christ have mercy,
all creatures drown in air.

I battled reason and Creation failed.
Aground among legacies of burned gills,
stove in among broken language, broken weather,
beached among the glass hulls of diatoms
cracked like green-stained grails,
I watched the sea pull back.

Kittywake, glaucous-wing, and slatyback
mewl over the gale that sweeps my cheek.
The gulls bear the weight of nimbus on their shoulders,
navigating in the cadence of feather,
their wind-guile the measure of quill and fiber
and all the phrases I have failed
to weather.

Where gulls cry drought
and pry mussels up with inflections
cracked like diatoms' glass hulls, the cold
hardens, beckons shacks beached among driftwood,
their keels broken.

(stanza break)

Prayer breathed into my shack,
the color of wind, loud as a gull
and, hiding my shack along drift logs, among skirts
of torn root reaching like tentacles of kraken,
I heard my prayer dwindle
while rain fed me its clear gruel
and I learned to breathe the air.

Community

The direction of hunger is out.

Predation is a constant.

I want the sea and the rain drifts in,
a blessing under which I drown, a child of a people
of rain-clean lips, a child of a people praise gulls
on their lips. A town of a child of a heart-ribbed
cockle, a town childless of a heart's cracked ribbing,
a town half-cockled with a child's heart.

Far at sea the streets shift and flow. Far at sea
the streets drift a slow current
paved in diatoms and filter feeders.
Front Street shining childless as a gull cries
pavements and gravel and displacement hulls
sinking at the dock. The world contained in a gull's
eye flies over the whorled streets paved in cast-
off crosses and altars, town of a child of a heart-
ribbed cockle. Wind navigates gulls, crying
Scripture, the holy rain across the mode of tides,
navigates these streets, navigates my shack I
navigate by breathing I breathe
by praying I pray by hunger
I hunger by grace.

Ghost Weather

Christ, what strange mercy do your gulls cry
that I cannot bring even one
other human being
into this world of rain and tide?
What flood can repair
that I leave myself
alone among dog whelks and sea stars,
cockles and limpets and hermit crabs, barnacles
and mussels that crack under my boot?
There is something in this that I choose.
I have emptied my town of its people and made sea birds
scream requiems over the rain-altered streets.
But even here, where I am safe
and no hand but my own exists
much less reaches to touch, I am
touched. Abandonment is weather and
there is no such thing as alone,
only a turning away.

Learning To Praise

Christ, make me an instrument to navigate
kelp, to keep my shack on course across
the brown blade paved in diatoms.
Make me an instrument to navigate what fails,
the cymbals of waves clanging the beach,
the empty shell singing, the tongues
of gulls over the sea that surges
through the narrow channels in basalt
between Three Entrance Harbor and the Gulf
of Alaska, southeasterlies and tall swells,
over the abalone treading its house among surf,
stepping its single foot along kelp fronds,
bolting its slow motion gallup from the slow burst
sprawled by the sun star, many armed killer
in the low litoral, scourge of the sublitoral.
As diatoms cluster to the abalone's radula,
as the nudibranch scours holdfasts of kelp,
rasping up glass tests with radula that grow always
forward, the soft jaws of gastropods,
I would scrape my way through light in layers
while blades wave above the stipes I wander.

When I anchored my skiff behind the outer rocks
and entered the surge, the icy seethe of it filled
my wetsuit and I clenched my snorkle. Among kelp
stipes I clung to rock until my need to breathe
drove me to the surface. I rose to the roof
of the world to blast my snorkle and prayed in
the air, the salt-tinged grace of air.

Navigation

I navigate this shoreline
by an instrument tuned to breath,
tuned to rain and the rain-burnished
cries cast by gulls across Middle Channel.
Kayak Island and Near Island ghost in from the obscured
horizon, silky as trollers gliding home.
Their bluff shoulders, clutched by sea star and dog
whelk, break waves as they bear their wakes
down on me, white as prayer,
vague within their veil of rain.

I love this rain. I always have. I loved this rain
even when it sucked so much warmth from the core of me
that I could no longer pincer index finger to thumb
and I stared at my rain slick hand
as if it were a sea creature I had never seen before
so that out of numb wonder came a wonder
at this hand's otherworldly beauty.

I drove the skiff against winter,
my wet suit soaked and hardening
my thighs. I loved the rain
blown to snow against my cheeks.
My bag of abalones stiffened in the skiff-
belly beside my snorkle. And my hand,
clawing itself to the tiller, found my way home
for me through the snow-heavy sky
slung low to muffle the sea.

Praise As A Mode Of Hunger

Through snowfall I walked with snails
down cloisters paved in silt, paved in shell chipped
by the claws that crabs lever to their hunger.
Blurred among churches and bars,
chapels and taverns, I swam down the straits
of my town and glided Front Street,
silent as gills fanning, silent
as tentacled caverns of anemones.

Mussels closed steadily through snowfall.
I grazed the clustered, blue-black mollusks,
their lustrous valves clasping the shape of chapels.
Over the house held in place by gulls and rain
I have no praise. I had no praise.

All the dying mussels clamped their glory.
For love I dived through vertebra strung along a nerve.
I squabbled with gulls over slaughter-
shack gurry and all the dying barnacles
keeled along the swerve of my spine.
Through snowfall I heard myself
tell boisterous lessons in prayer.
To me.

Requiem

The angels I love
bicker over cod guts and snapper spines.
They joust for flounder skulls and pick the bones clean,
screaming. Their harsh, fine voices
break across my town
in a language lost to my kind,
thoughtless in the clear now of now
without death. Christ, walk down streets paved
with rain to me and you drown in my choir,
my angels beating prayer under wing
which is the want I have not loved
well. Where did my weather go? Meet me
where my hidden weather went,
where praise and rain
are never spent.