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The Fish Barn

Dave Smith

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otherwise a loaf of white bread rising
on her own existence, a stranger in the town.
It’s a fine place to hunt ducks, and that’s the worst
of it, crouched, ready for the light to let me see
how many are sitting with the decoys, will jump into the air
when I rise like Jesus to blow them down.

The Fish Barn / Dave Smith

Raw nuggets of croakers cleaned in the wind, trash-hearts
flipped on a lace of snow. Prisms. Rubies.

Always cats, but you couldn’t catch one because they,
before Christ, were wild, oh yes, and would
come even before the fish in barrels
fell, some of them, still flopping

and you might have been one of the ones saying
if a man could have a coat out of those hides, why
then he would be a rich sucker

inviolate as a cat that never thinks of weather, maybe,
and slick decks would turn safe as heaven.
If you were that man you’d every fall
would end up right.

Backed to the fire, you’d throw out the meat
quick-freezing, sugary with snow as if battered
to fry, glistening, a jewel watched from both sides.

But you couldn’t catch the wild cats who used to come
here, silent as nightmares, all sizes ready

to snatch the least living thing, eyes full of the fire
from barrels, all you ever saw. Those
coming when there was no more reason, too,
since the fish petered out, shards

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of the family line shattered like the gritty glass
from the barn's busted window. What good did it do to name
what never once answered or showed a face

until the guts were given, laid out on the white bed
dainty, delicate as scales you can still see?

If you can answer that, do you know why they loved best
the blue, stunned eye grieving for the shimmer
of sea-depths, thumb-plucked like bait?

And why do you ache, returned to this half-way house,
for what crouched, invisible, to eat blue eyes
as if that translated a way
to stay alive? Or

if not that, at least, to see how a dark thing hungers.

Captain C. F. Hoyt (1826-1889) / Donald Hall

"In mid-August, in the second year
of my First Polar Expedition, the snows and ice of winter
almost upon us, Kantiuk and I
attempted to dash by sledge
along Crispin Bay, searching again for relics
of the Franklin Expedition. Now a storm blew,
and we turned back, and we struggled slowly
in snow, lest we depart land and venture onto ice
from which a sudden fog and thaw
might deliver us to the providence
of the sea.

"Near nightfall
I thought I heard snarling behind us.
Kantiuk told me
that two wolves, lean as the bones
of a wrecked ship,
had followed us the last hour, and snapped their teeth