

1976

# 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

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