

DECEMBER DINNER, MANHATTAN ISLAND

Embossed and tasseled menus offer sole,
Fresh-caught, sauteed with lemon, chives and dill,
For sixteen dollars. I'm not hard to sell.
My mind flies back to offshore Maine: A shrill
Breeze blows; two fishermen are braced until
A wave plows by. One checks the last end-knot
In seven-hundred pounds of ice-caked net.

The day drains into dark-- an eerie glow
On bitter spindrift near Three Dory Ridge.
The pair make ready for the longest tow.
The hungry net flares out to form a bridge
With mud-slime ninety fathoms deep, to nidge
Through ancient green dimensions. Spools unwind,
The dragger boat aims high into the wind.

Dan begs the cable not to twist. "All down!"
He cries, his teeth bared in the salty cold.
The trawl will prow the bottom until dawn.
Five hours on a northerly course, a bold
Approach near the ridge's curse. Jarl can hold
The dragger true if anybody can;
One eye is cocked on weather, one on Dan.

They keep their senses honed on winter, knowing
No one else is out, slipping into troughs
More calm than either side, and always going
For the fissures between storms. Jarl coughs,
A brine-hack, one of fishing's ons-and-offs.
Whenever seas are docile, all the boats
Come plying, trailed by waves of white wing-beats.

The price of fish sinks like a weighted trap.
Now grays will bring a buck a pound or more,
But then it drops to forty cents like tripe.
If these two drag luck's lap enough before
She rolls away and orders them to shore,
They'll own their boat. Moon dirties comber caps
As numb lips hover over coffee cups.

(cont.)

The latest catch stinks illing-sweet, no matter
How hard the blowing scours the culling pens.
Afoot in mucus, ice and offal-spatter
On a writhing deck, Dan guts fish, and pins
The rattling tarps, working out his back pains.
A sprawling hillock angle-slaps the bow;
He almost slips. He wipes his spray-stung brow.

Their thoughts are never easy in the bag
They tow. They're after flounder, giant hake,
Gray sole and other flatfish if they're big.
Is this place right? The time? They watch their wake
And wonder. Far below, did something break?
A different dip and shudder in the pull,
Uneven drag. They don't believe they're full.

They man the winches, play the cable, reel
The snarled mouth of the mesh maw up. They set
Their own jaws, wrestling with the plates of steel
To free them. Spirits start to rise with net;
It isn't ripped! They see enough to whet
Their hopes again. The back half holds its fill;
Enough good ones, maybe they still won't fail.

The struggling sack is pierced with bony fins,
A single gasping monster hoisted high
To dangle and then burst into the bins
As Jarl yanks on the knot. With sharp know-how
Dan wades the mound, outlandish alien who,
With crystal in his hair and beard, assort
The flapping gourmet silver from the quartz.

The North Atlantic pickets round their craft,
Hurls foam invective. Jarl shoves in the throttle,
Eyeing shifty winds. Dan shouts from aft,
"Mostly grays! We pay off the Aristotle
Tomorrow!" Pre-dawn brings a bluish mottle,
Bias-lighted clouds. Spume climbs the hull,
But grins crack tension as Dan works the haul.

The biggest part of being best is knowing
When to leave and live for next-time risks.
Now in the wheelhouse they begin renewing
Silent pride in their boat, their skill. Whisks
Of rain accent aloneness. Panel discs
Of light ignite their eyes. I long to rub
Their poor shocked hands and draw them a hot tub.

(cont.)

My husband doesn't know, nor does my brother,
How much I miss them now, how much I pray.
I should have known there couldn't be another
Place for me. My most is in Boothbay.
My plans swirl by in mounting disarray.
The New York waiter pours our fancy wine;
I watch his hands instead of drinking mine.

He spoons the ritual lemon butter on
My sole as my companion nods and smiles
And I would give up everything I own
To put behind me all the stubborn miles
Between the spot where ocean reconciles
Ambition, love and discontent. I hear
Another diner say the price is dear--

I long to say he only pays a fraction
As he complains that sole should cost much less.
Beneath my skin I feel the rising friction,
And tell the man I'm with: "I can't say yes.
I'm sorry, but more time won't help. I guess
The job is not for me. That sounds insane
I'm sure. Good night. I'm going home to Maine."

Grand Prize, SHORELINES, 1987