

Jo Gardiner

Boat Harbour

Over a glass or two of wine, your voice breaks in low
waves, throws out a net into the tender
dark and hauls from its neap tide, a school
of memories—distant as the stars
whose light arrives in this silver world from so long ago.

In the fifties, when days, unmoored, went on forever
and your boy-bones were light as a gull's, your clever
mother saved the Child Endowment and bought a shack
on the edge of the world
in Boat Harbour—south of Cape Grim on the northwest
coast whose sea's a hymn you learned by heart.

Every December, you follow the purple iris strewn
along Postman's Track to Sisters' Beach where rocks burn
orange with lichen.

Released from school, you scavenge barefoot
all day in sea caves and rockpools, or spend early mornings
on the crayfish boat with men
who smelled of diesel and sweat
and once hauled cray from the tide cycles of Killiecrankie,
and the glacial waters of Spain Bay.

Bait with mackerel the pot plaited with tea-tree. Drop
it overboard. Watch it sink, claimed by the deep
without question.

Later, the boat's ribs straining, chug back through wind
and spindrift, pull the pot from the grip of thick bull kelp,
hear it break the surface
and the wet slap of a tail.

Catch sight of the carapace of a big red cray. Chuck
back the berried female, you were always told,

and her eggs will hatch the future.

On the boat in rubber boots slick with brine,
you shiver—back sore from swinging pots—and crave
the soft white flesh
you suck from bony bodies
boiled on the beach in a forty-four-gallon drum—
such sweet juice wrung from the mouth of the sea.

In its native tongue, the fabled bell your mother rang,
rises through dusk aching with the song
of summer cicadas—

like something sacred or long
forgotten—and summons home nine moons: faces
that bloom from night, called from the wildness
of the ocean to the wildness
of nine brothers and sisters,
your beds lined up outside on the veranda.

You brush your teeth at the railing, rinse, and spit
into shadows where the fireflies'
insistent script, like windblown foam,

scatters those things that lie beyond the rocky reef
of language, and that can only be understood
in the sheltered cove of night, a home
anchored inside the soft pouch of sleep, and in the scent
of the lines
of salt written on your skin.

Now, in balmy air, its lips forgiving, your friends leave
their glasses and trail off—
but you lie awake and listen
for the bell, and sleep only when dawn spawns light
at the edge of the darkness, then swallows it whole.