

"Words' Worth" Poetry Readings

Poets at the Culture, Arts, and Parks Committee of the Seattle City Council.

Reckoning By Victoria Ford

During the fall of 1990, U.S. government officials killed 200 seabirds, coated them with oil, and threw them into the currents of Prince William Sound for a project designed to better estimate the number of projected migratory birds that died in the 1989 spill of the Exxon Valdez.

The boat edges
into the night-lapped waters
of the sound, memories of oil
loosed like the sighs of the humpback
veiling the shore.
The boats bobs and coughs
swallowing water and fuel,
bearing orders from the Justice Department,
four men,
200 seabirds

Where the currents cross, a man
gloves an oil-slick loon,
tossing it like a bag of salt
over his shoulder; another
pitches a blackened grebe like a cat;
seven common murre
fall, glistening
like pieces of a broken mirror
as bodies splash and plop
and echoes hand in the mist.

Like incense, gray
breathes in to the dark, and the men
laugh at the rail, while below
waves chant against the boat,
and the mist closes
like a robe around the birds
the men netted, the birds
they drugged and counted, the birds
they slicked in the image of the dead.
The boat heaves
away from the 200; the men
toss words at the question
of how many will return
for the reckoning. The pumps disgorge
bilge water until the boat docks,
when in shudders off, the men
walking the pier
between the boat and morning

that comes with the yellow and white of the avalanche lily,
the morning that comes with grizzly and snowshoe hare,

gold and silver, buttercup and trillium,
the morning that comes mile by mile over the tundra,
over granite, over arctic willow,
over stovepipe, over steeple, over head,
the morning that comes on the legs of sanderlings,
the morning that comes on the crest of glaciers,
the morning that comes from the pulsing of a star
and the turning of a planet, that comes from fusion,
gravity, from entropy, from the east,
the light rising into its own ocean,
where day laps over night, water over rock,
with the whistles of the guillemots and murring
of the murres, the morning that comes with the tremolos
of the loons, and mewing of the gulls,
and the cla-ha, cla-ha, cla-ha of the emperor geese,
the morning that lifts puffin and sandpiper
into their winged, webbed, billed and feathered psalm.

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