

Gary Geddes/COMING UP FOR AIR

1

When water
closes over your metal casing
and light recedes
into memory,
you dont panic;
your hands inspect
connections on air-hoses
and brass clamps
tight around the helmet base
and little windows.

You inhale deeply
to regulate your breathing
and hear, down
the length of air-hose,
the reassuring heart-beat
of the pump.

Cells
smile in their dependency;
blood-race dwindles
to a trot.

2

You meet in the lunchroom at Kelly Douglas
in November, foghorns
in the harbour, Lions
visible above the cloud-line.

Later, when you kiss her hair
in the elevator,
it smells of tea leaves.

Darling, you whisper.
No, she replies,
darjeeling.

3

Something about elevators.
No time to decompress there
either, the boss
stepping into the lift
as you stuff the contraband cookie
into your mouth. So
surprised, you offer him one.

Shafted
in the leanest of times.
From imported tea and biscuits
to the flower business
on Alma Street.

She's beside you in the front seat,
hair done up in a bandana.
Fresh manure in the box
of the dump truck
wafting in the windows.

What bouquet, she says,
crooking a little finger
and screwing up her mouth,

Formosa oolong.

Laughing so hard
you stall in the middle
of the intersection.

4

When you descend the ladder
at the side of the diving-tender,
the water is only 40 degrees.

A hundred yards offshore,
light rain, a gauze mist
gentling the cedars.
Crew in slickers.
You notice Johnson's turtleneck
frayed at the collar
from the action of his red beard.

Rain eases entry:
border-blur, no longer
two elements.
Kelp trailers,
a half dozen coho
fighting the current.

Descent in stages, diagonal
even with lead shoes.
Grips and cutting torch
on your belt.

Tin-pot freighter,
not worth the cost
in peacetime.

5

Working alongside your father
at North Van shipyards.
Crusaders in welding masks
move in their galaxy
of sparks.

Shift-bell, the foreman
shouts from the control shed —
A boy! — and the yards
ring with the sound of hammers
on the empty hull.

So I enter
the narrative,
slipping down the ways
at Grace Hospital,
nine months pickled,
tidal, amniotic,
a recruit
for the war effort,
romance of production,

to store in my mind
your square mask tipped back,
torch in hand, grin
and slicked black hair,
a medallion, image
to be coined.

6

Insecurity, panache,
to paint the world
with such extravagance.

Saturday afternoon
in Kitsilano, the trunk
of the blue coupe open
and you are dispensing chocolate bars
to a hundred kids
from a damaged shipment
off the waterfront.
Chocolate moustaches,
street awash with wrappers.
Pied-piperling them
from blocks around
while she of the laughter
and darjeeling hair
hangs back, embarrassed,
behind the screen door.

What eludes us
lies nearest the heart.
Before Jules Verne
there were no words for what happens
under the sea.

7

Mixed signals, your
body turned on from the pressure
at 60 feet below.

Supply vessel, all hands lost
in fog. A tooth of rock
in the Narrows,
long gash
in the starboard bows.
You imagine the hole
opening straight into the forward mess,
waterlogged faces
startled to see this arc of fire
burning in water.

Trying to work, force
of water driving you back
against the hull.
Half an hour of grace
at slack waters,
then the reversed flow
catches the freighter
and tilts it on top of you.

8

To own
our emptiness,

times when the normal fare
of words and touch
won't suffice.

Not that you fit
perfectly inside each other
like Russian dolls.
One is always wanting
in, for warmth,
or out of the suffocating
enclosed space.

Something
must break the shell
of vanity,
before it is too late
and we vanish

for good.

Only the helmet
saves you,
that extra cranium
of steel.

Twelve hours trapped
until the tide changes
and the ship lists
to port. Your bones
ache from cold,
the cells cry out
for nicotine.

Now, father,
the tank of oxygen
beside your bed,
face mask and umbilical
hoses. What joins us
but memory, the miniscus
of blood, deep-
water salvage.

All this time, the lines
intact, coded messages,
the long and short
of it.