

Michael Crummey / SIX POEMS

SOUTH OF BADGER

South of Badger the forest stutters effortlessly
over low rolling hills
long stretches of birch and alder
the darkness of spruce trees crowding the road

My people came this way by river from the coast
Englishmen carrying rifles, trinkets, smallpox,
a distrust of the unnamed
they stumbled on a habitat for nomads
for hunters and gatherers
the barrens opening onto acres of shrub land
brush land, miles of moss covered rock
where nothing has ever grown by design
bog land, breeding ground for water fowl and insects,
for pitcher plants
deep fresh water lakes home to the crooked snouts
of salmon and nine pound trout

Somewhere in there they found a pocket of ore
laced with veins of copper, zinc
a little gold and silver
they traded all they had brought but the rifles
constructed a town over shrub land, brush land
building houses, schools, a hockey rink
and eighty miles of dead-end highway
men burrowing thousands of feet into earth
to harvest dust

busted rock winched out of darkness for seventy-odd years
till the mine was defeated by the country's stinginess
and the company shut it down

Coming up that road for the first time in years
through Buchans Jct. in the dark and driving slow
half-a-dozen times the headlights answered by
the dumb stare of a moose happy to be free
of forest underbrush
they can't believe their luck
to have stumbled on a clear path north
and there's not enough traffic these days
to give it much human meaning;
they relinquish it with some reluctance
looking back as they lope into the near trees
the cars passing by on the temporary pavement,
already the forest is working to bury what's
been left behind

MORNING LABRADOR COAST

Morning Labrador coast
my father is thirteen
no, younger still
eleven maybe twelve
shivering to warm himself in the dark

The rustle of surf behind him
the passiveness of it at this hour
the grumble of men waking early
in the shacks
the steady muffle of piss
smacking a low mound of moss at his feet

He's almost given up on childhood
works a full share on the crew
smokes dried rock-moss rolled in
brown paper out of sight of his father

Each morning he makes fists to work the stiffness
out of his hands and wrists
the skin cracked by sea salt
the joints swollen by sleep after hours of work
he soaks them in the warm salve
of his urine
shakes them dry in the cold air

and turning back to the shacks
he sees stars disappearing in the blue
first light breaking out over the water,
the dories overturned on the grey beach
waiting

COD (1)

Some days the nets came up so full
there was enough cod to swamp the boats
and part of the catch came in with other crews
once they'd filled their own dories
to the gunwales,
the silver-grey bodies of the fish rippling
like the surface of a lake
the weight of them around their legs
like stepping thigh deep into water

Most of the work was splitting and curing
the thin gutting knife slivered up the belly
and everything pulled clear with the sound bone
liver into the oil barrel
the thick tongue cut from the throat
and the splayed fish ready for salting then
set out on a flake to dry

This until one in the morning sometimes
a river of cod across the cutting table
in the yellow swirl of kerosene lamps
and everyone up by three or four
to get back out to the nets with the light
There was no talk of sleep when
the cod were running strong,
a few good weeks could make a season;
if they dreamt at all

in those three brief hours a night
they dreamt of the fish
the cold sweet weight of them,
fin and tail flickering in their heads
like light on the water

COD (2)

August.

My father has sent the crew
home early for the second year in a row
the cod so scarce he can do
the work himself and still have time
to sit in the evenings
time to think about the flour and molasses
the netting, the coils of rope and twine
the tea and sugar and salt he took
on credit in the spring

Every night he dreams of them plentiful
the size of the fish years ago
big around as your thigh,
the thick shiver of their bodies
coming up in the cod traps

He turned seventeen this February past
his father has been dead two short seasons;
alone at the water's edge he sits
mending a useless net and smoking,
already two hundred dollars in debt
to the merchants

There are no cod in the whole frigging ocean

LILACS

The well is contaminated and we have to
drag a bucket of water up from the brook;
we pull handfuls of lilacs from the trees
outside the open windows and set them
in glasses through the house to mask the smell
of rooms shut up with themselves for years

There are old saucers of poison placed
on countertops and mantelpieces, spoor in the pantry
and Dad tells me how he'd chase mice through
the house with a stick when he was a boy
although it was considered bad luck for the fishing
and his father forbid killing them
during the season;

in Labrador, he says
you could follow the paths they'd beaten
through the long grass in the dark
but no one raised a hand to them all summer

There are still two beds in the room
where my father was born in nineteen-thirty
and we roll out our sleeping bags there,
then walk to the corner store for food and beer;
later I watch his face in the pale light
of the coleman lantern
try to connect him to what I know of that time
dust bowl photographs, soup kitchens

stories of vagrants at back doors offering
to chop wood for a meal
but I know I have it hopelessly wrong —
he wanted nothing more for me
than that I should grow up a stranger to all this
that his be one of the lives I have not lived

After the lights are put out
there is a silence broken only by the sounds
we make as we shift in our beds and
the occasional scuffle of mice in the hallway;
the age of the house gives a musty
undertone to the sweet smell of the lilacs
and it seems stronger in the darkness
so that I imagine I am breathing in what's left
of the world my father knew
while the part of him that has never
managed to leave here is asleep across the room

CIGARETTES

When my father gave up smoking
the thing he found hardest was knowing
what to do with his hands
with the first fifteen minutes after a meal,
and driving into town is like that now —
what you notice first are the things that are
no longer here
the double row of bunkhouses torn down
the green clapboard mess hall
the old storage shed behind the pool
that had once been a stable for
the company horses
long before the road went through

After supper Dad and I take a swing
onto company property, circle in behind
the fenced crater of the Glory Hole where
almost everything is missing
the deck heads at Rothemere and MacLean's
felled like trees
core shacks and warehouses bulldozed
the concrete stumps of the shower rooms
left naked in the ground where they were poured
fifty years ago
Only the mill is still on its feet
ash-coloured, useless
waiting to be taken down like an old photograph
and turned to the wall in an attic room

Thirty years my father says
turning slowly
and I remember a story about a horse he drove
when he came here to work in '47
the mare nuzzling his shirt pocket for tobacco
first thing in the mornings
snatching hand-rolled cigarettes straight
from his lips if he tried to light up
in front of her

Gone now, sold off by the company
and dead somewhere
Molly, I think her name was

Still, I have only a vague idea of what's been lost;
my father is surrounded by more than
the simple absence I can see here
a life he's not quite finished with going on
just beyond what he's able to touch
like the impossible ache of a phantom limb
or that craving, the automatic fumbling for
the cigarette pack he's forgotten is
no longer there