

DECEMBER DINNER, MANHATTAN ISLAND

Embossed and tasseled menus offer sole,
Fresh-caught, sauteed with lemon, chives and dill,
For twenty 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 northeast course, a bold
Approach, the ridge's curse. But 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. They search for troughs
More calm than either side, and keep on going,
Never mind the storms, or Jarl's deep 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 wingbeats.

The latest catch stinks illing-sweet, no matter
How the blowing scours the culling pens.
Afoot in mucus, ice and offal-spatter
On the deck, Dan guts each fish then pins
The rattling tarps despite his low 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.

(cont.)