Salt and Lamplight

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Poems

IRIS HALLORAN

INDEPENDENTLY PUBLISHED

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for my mother, who kept the light on

The sea does not explain itself. It comes back, and that is the whole of its argument.

— from a notebook, 2019

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I
Harbor

Low Tide, Six A.M.

The water has gone out to think.
It leaves the harbor floor
like a table after dinner:
rope, a bottle, one blue shoe.

My father walks the flats in boots
and does not look for anything.
That is the trick, he says.
Then you find it.

My Mother Mends a Net

She holds the needle like a pencil
and writes the same short word
a thousand times across the hole,
until the hole forgets itself.

I ask her what the word is.
Again, she says. *It's always again.*

Outside, the boats are knocking at the pier
like guests who came too early
and will not go home.

Inventory of the Boathouse

Three oars, one of them broken and kept anyway because my
grandfather carved his initials into the handle the summer
he was twelve and nobody has had the heart to burn it.
A tin of nails, mostly rust.
A calendar from 1998, still on March, as if the year agreed to
stop there and wait for us to come back for it.
Paint in four shades of white.
The smell of tar, which is the smell of every summer I was
young in.

One life jacket, child-sized.
Mine.

Gulls

They argue on the roof
about bread,
about wind,
about who stood here first,

and when the ferry horn goes
they lift
all at once,
a sheet shaken out
over the bed
of the bay,

and settle back,
and argue.

The Lighthouse Keeper's Daughter Writes Home

Dear Mother, the city is loud
in a way the sea never was.
The sea was loud like a body breathing.
The city is loud like a drawer of spoons.

I have a room with one window
that faces another window.
A woman there waters a plant at nine
and I have started to wait for her.

I still wake at two, then four,
to check a light that isn't mine.
I lie there and count to twelve,
the way the lamp went round.

I tell the people here I'm from the coast
and they say *how lovely*,
and I do not know how to tell them
that it was mostly work.

continued

The Lighthouse Keeper's Daughter Writes Home *(continued)*

Brass to polish. Glass to clean.
The log, in Father's hand, then yours,
then, for one winter, mine:
wind SW, visibility good, all well.

All well, Mother. Visibility good.
I keep a candle on the sill.
Nobody here needs it.
I light it anyway.

Brine

Salt in the jar, salt on the step,
salt in the seams of my coat
a year after I moved away.

Some things you leave.
Some things you carry out
in the lining, without knowing.

II
Inland

First Apartment

A mattress, a lamp, a kettle.
I own three forks.
At night the radiator knocks
like someone who has the wrong door
and is too polite to leave.

I let him in.
We sit together until morning.

Night Bus

Everyone on the night bus is going home or leaving it.
The driver knows which. He doesn't say.
A man in a work vest sleeps with his mouth open, his lunchbox
    held against his chest like something that might still be
    taken from him.
The windows give us back our faces, tired and yellow.

At my stop I say thank you
and the driver lifts two fingers from the wheel,
which is the most anyone
has said to me all week.

What the River Knows

The river behind the warehouses does not know it is a river. It thinks it is a long conversation that keeps being interrupted: by the weir, by the shopping cart, by the heron who stands in it for an hour and says nothing at all. It has been told it once reached the sea. It does not believe this. It has never once arrived anywhere.

I walk beside it most evenings. We have that in common. I tell it about my day and it tells me about the rain three counties north, which is the only news it trusts. When I leave it keeps going. It doesn't mind. That is the thing I am learning from it, slowly, the way you learn anything worth having.

Laundromat, Sunday

Twelve machines, and in each one
somebody's week goes round:
the shirt from the interview,
the towel from the beach,
a child's sock, alone, again.

We do not speak. We fold.
It is the closest thing I know
to church.

Staircase

Four floors up,
and every step
a smaller version
of the day:

the bag,
the keys,
the door that sticks,
the quiet on the other side of it.

Letter Not Sent

I wrote you a long letter
about the river and the bus
and the woman with the plant.

I put it in a drawer.
I think that some letters
are for the one who writes them.
I think this is one.

III
Weather

Forecast

Rain by evening. Wind from the west.
A chance of you calling,
clearing later.

Fog Comes In Over the Point

First the far islands go,
then the buoy, then the bell on the buoy,
which keeps ringing
like a word you can't remember.

Then the end of the pier.
Then the pier.
Then my own hand on the rail,
and I stand inside the white
and I am not afraid,
and that surprises me most.

October

The light goes yellow and lies down on the floor of the kitchen
    like an old dog that has decided, after years of thought,
    that this is the warmest place in the house.
I step over it to make the tea.

It is the season of keeping.
Jars on the shelf. Wood by the door.
Your coat, still on its hook.

Salt and Lamplight

When I go home now
the lamp is automatic.
Nobody climbs the stairs.

But my mother still leaves
a light in the kitchen window,
and the salt still finds the step,

and when the boat comes round the point
I see it before I see anything,
and I know which way to steer.

NOTES

Low Tide, Six A.M. is for my father, who said it first.

The Lighthouse Keeper's Daughter Writes Home: the log entry in italics is copied from a real keeper's log, with the date removed.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Earlier versions of these poems appeared in *The Tidewater Review* ("Gulls," "Brine"), *Harbor Lights Quarterly* ("Night Bus") and *Small Rain* ("Forecast"). My thanks to the editors.

ABOUT THE POET

Iris Halloran grew up in a fishing town on the north coast and now lives inland, near a river. *Salt and Lamplight* is her first collection.