

There and Here

Gail Anderson

HE IS AWAKE, WALKING, LEAVING HIS RADIO, the shipping forecast. Fisher, Dogger. Dawn flat as pewter, a fag in his lips. His grip on the match shows dogwhelk fists, pied, palsied.

He fills these empty streets with ghosts. There, the talkative midwife, there the grocer, fishmonger, sailmaker. Creels and floats, cats herring-hungry, flower-boxed sills, there laundry, there nets line-drying

Snow swirls like moths, salt-silver, slicking the road. Cold moves him onward. Each day, each night is the same. Waking, walking, drifting as the moon and sun slip from cloud to cloud, handing the days between them.

In the aquarium warmth of the cafe, open early though no one comes, the oilcloth under his elbows will smell of bleach. He will nurse his coffee, watch the dawn come, watch the sea shake and shoulder the breakwater, watch wisps of haar along the vacant quayside.

At the top of Ship Street he stops. Below, the cafe window burns yellow in darkness, and he sees them there, at his table. Remembers the town's tutting. *Incomers, strangers*. One black, one white, unmarried, they have rented the old cinema, the Electric, pulled the boards from its doors. The man's dark curls, the woman's bare shoulders shine like pearls in a jeweller's window.

When the bell on the cafe door rings him in, they don't look. The man eyes the ceiling. The woman gazes down at the pavement outside, lips pressed to the crook of a finger. He takes a new table, one with no cloth, its wood etched with faint figures. *5, 12, fish, dog*. A long-ago child, pen-pressing thin paper.

If I sit here long enough, he thinks, this winter mind will melt and they will all come back. The cafe brimful with voices, pipe smoke, wet wool. The child murmuring sums; her father barking headlines, snapping his paper. *Herring for Holland, a councillor on the fiddle, a fisherman on the mend.* Words spill outside, bubble through the cobbles, and he is carried on them, floats high above rooflines. There – once again smoke issues from chimneys, and there, boats laid out on a blue-dome of sea.

The young man leans forward, speaks low of small matters, of money, of business. The woman won't answer.

Hesitation is weakness. This thought comes unbidden. And looking again, he sees only duty, loyalty, each for the other. Hears his brother, his sister declare they are leaving, would die if they stayed, because nothing was left but narrowness, a single way. That final train's whistle, the rattle of anchor chains sold from the pier, the town growing smaller, the voices more shrill. *We are a place in desperate need, he thinks, and yet we cannot not hear.*

She is rising, leaving, looking out on the morning when his rusted voice stops her. He will tell of the old times. Of trawlermen, drifters, decks glassy with fish scales; of dances and music, of nights at the Electric. But before he can speak, a leeward wave hits him, pulls him over the gunnels and into the sea. The land heaves behind him, the lights of the town dim. His grip is loosed, the old net slips, writhes away, octopus.

Instead, he asks them their names; and shy at first, and glancing, words, their words reach out across the water's washboard peaks to sweep the slipways, guide him home.

When the cafe bell rings them out into morning, he moves to their table, their warmth, to watch them. Here – they walk through fins of sunlight; and here, cross to the proud Electric. Here, they turn to wave again. *They are here.* Their smiles redouble the dawn.