**1989**

Sean Sutherland

1986. Two men have just jumped off

a Polish National factory fishing trawler.

The U.S. Coast Guard Cutter is not far.

The one in front with cupped hands

white as house paint, pulls hard against

the dark Pacific, three miles from Coos

Bay, Oregon. The one behind won’t put

his head down, beats back the water

as though he’s being robbed.

They reach something the papers will say

is their freedom.

What if I had to commit my body to an act

so urgent? Would it make me more grateful

for everything yet to come?

How to know? Yet today, one yellowed page

of notebook paper, folded, soft from age,

flutters down from a book I had forgotten.

Written at the top far left is the word *Polish*,

in the hand of Marek, the good swimmer.

Opposite, is the word *English*, in mine.

I hear Bruno, the one who flailed, call

the sea a bitch. I am back in a bunkroom

on a Norwegian factory trawler. I welcome

these two, with four other Poles on board.

It is 1989. We are in our twenties.

All of us have come from other trawlers.

We’re after stories, jokes that can’t hurdle

a cultural divide, which makes them funnier,

or want landscapes described to us so we

can imagine them as our own. Although nobody

asks him if he has a love of his own fate,

Marek declares, “I have Trans Am, can see

Heavy Metal bands I like, get one month

off a year!” I listen; the one who has read

*On the Road* one too many times, but if

asked by his Polish friend why he is here,

that 25-year-old would first look confused,

mutter something about the sea, or

that he wanted to escape the predictable

which ends tomorrow when we will work

16-hour days for six months with

an exhaustion that can make our hair hurt.

In this room there is only one thing.

You can hear it better if you didn’t know

what you would do if you smelled cut grass,

weren’t able to watch the seasons change,

or not know whether its day or night for days

because you stand six feet below the surface

in a white noise of scissoring filet machines,

and always two inches of cold seawater `

on the factory floor.

It’s there behind the words of one young

Pole who points a finger at me, excited,

and asks, “What do you like to do?”

Not, what do you like to do on a Saturday

night, or more than anything, just, what

do you like to do? Then someone asks on

behalf of another, can I help him with his English?

Then they all ask, and we agree to teach

each other our language. What is here is

deprivation. Or call it a hunger for everything.

In the one porthole, a heavy snow falls

fast in the yellow light of the dock’s

only streetlamp, and beyond that dark,

it is easy for me to believe the tree-less

Aleutians, and the world have slunk off

and are no longer there. Except on this paper I hold,

someone is tearing out of a notebook,

we begin to put it back, one word at a time.

Not one of us brings their cigarette

to their lips or draws from the bottle

of lukewarm vodka. Each suggestion

is said like a question. *Man?* One asks.

Then another, *Woman?* Then, *Child*.

And as we go around, a strange freedom

takes hold, then *Factory, Knife, Water,*

*Fish;* our days; then *Time, Song, Home*,

in which you can hear great distances

pull the silence taut around them, and

I am overwhelmed by the cherishing for

these words, how each asks me to say

their name once more; once desired,

again, they become the thing itself.