

Herring

Before he was fourteen my old man
shipped as a cook with Ned Mullender
 on the *Fame*, I think,
out of Lowestoft for the home fishing,
 drifting for herring.

He learnt how to cook his beef pudding
and his plum duff, how to fry the herring –
 half a dozen each –
for breakfast and came to relish the rusks
 you had to soak

in the brine to kill all the weevils off.
It was either that or the fish market.
 Herring was king
and any lad hardening in his service
 counted for something,

could wind up skipper, like my old boy,
after the years spent coiling the warp,
 hauling drenched nets,
swinging the quarter-cran baskets of herring
 onto the wharf,

fighting off sleep. In the dark so many
working Smiths Knoll, he'd blink sometimes,
 thinking it a fair-
sized town forward. not the fishing grounds.
 So dense with herring

that often the drifters coming in
had to moor not broadside along the quay
 but stern on, three deep,
and wait, wedged in thickets of rigging,
 sometimes half a day

with the silver herring still to scutch;
or they'd force open tenacious cracks,
 working the winch,
and screw themselves up through the barrage of boats
 and language, bucketfuls.

Troubled most by glut, by the market
depressed and fresh darlings to dump,
they simply assumed
the herring was inexhaustible.

Crass maybe,

but not greed. With us five kids to clothe
and feed, he was glad of the new purse-
seine nets, his short
wave radio set and would have welcomed
the echo-sounder

and the Decca navigator, if he'd lived.
The fleet vanished, efficiently steaming
after the shimmer
of herring grown dimmer, thinned in the end
by each advance;

and left him wildly, weakly threshing
in a net we smaller fry slipped through
with no effort.
Now with a steady sou'westerly blowing
and a full moon –

ideal for herring – I lie fifty
miles inland and listen to my wife
breathing deeply.
She cries out once from a long way off,
lost to my touch.

Tomorrow night, if I'm not too late,
and we can, we'll talk, tease at these black
knots remembering
how, when they freed the cod-end, herring
deluged the deck.

Reproduced with permission from *Thinking of Happiness* by Michael Laskey, Peterloo
Poets, Cornwall, 1991,