

“On the Waterfront Between Wars”

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What happened—that’s the law—

Warehouses of luxury cars
two generations after one hundred twenty thousand coffins
in cargo nets passed through Brooklyn Army Terminal
from ship to train without touching the ground
on their vexed branching journeys into the earth,
six generations and four miles
from where fetid British prison ships
divulged the mismatched mortal remains
of another victory.

The harbor gathers up the sorrows of the world
for markup and resale.

Pigeons adorn the hospital cross
squat rockets of water towers ossify
livestock-yard signs bark at amateur trespassers
railroad ghosts crease the pavement
U-Hauls idle full of skinned lambs
dead rusted axles and live chickens gaze out
eagle mural marks the body shop, cobra the massage parlor
the borough sleeps or sneaks back from where it slept
bright garbage chokes the sewer grate after rain
child-fist bottles of maniacs’ cognac line the genital-thigh crease
of the gummed-down curb of Lutheran Halal Deli
lactation consultants swallow cigarette smoke by the highway park
men spraypaint religious icons in an unventilated basement.

God does all things, says the faded bumper sticker
The problem’s that He does exactly all of them, every day,
complain the pavers, the painters
the mourners in the bodega funeral parlor.

The sun hides in all that light
You need a dirty harbor to see it
And every reverie breaks on a black minivan hearse
blocking the narrow sidewalk path through the snow
Coffin rolls out—cheap pine, seams loose, strap dangling

A screech escapes a warehousing —a bird or pig I hope.

Between wars, the waterfront remains, torched and tortured cars
line up like an alphabet of how things go wrong
Bullet-proofed bellies scrape cash register drawers
Oblique characters finish off the murder they glimpsed.

All spins around this margin
Past ferments, unseen becomes seen
and the seen vanishes in turn
Obscurity turns a profit and every profit
makes us more obscure.

The harbor is a different color every day
Workers stream across uneven surfaces
Children in cheap umbrella strollers take it in
as the incredible inheritance it is.

Sea, industry, history, betrayal
death and the defiance of death—a landscape finally worthy
of the mind beholding it.