

MARY PINARD

## SONG NET FOR AN ESTUARY

From a worn dock on this rainy tidal inlet, I can make  
out its estuary, just there, where fresh and salt  
waters knot, now unknot in a tug's wide wake,  
its barge's hold low, deep in the reach, slow vault,  
loaded with what spoils: gravel, milt, mercuries?

A long day's journey at 3 knots to the dumpsites,  
diesel engines' *grrrrrr*, batter, dark hearts sunk in the rib  
cage of commerce: this ancient drowned river basin  
made navigable by our Corps, ready experts with wing  
dams, dredges, but mostly those rubble-mound jetties

that scour wide the ever-silting throat of Grays Harbor  
for how many generations of Dungeness crab, sand eel,  
or floras of sweetgrass? I have always loved you, pouring  
Northwest rain, how your plunging sounds a song net.

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I grew up near an estuary  
north of here, nearer Puget Sound  
where land and water are reeled  
together, gravity bound,  
first for containment—two worlds  
held close, edge of fire or flood—then  
for splicing, that lapping, like words  
made, little waves on the tongue. When

anyone asks what a Sound is, whether it's a long  
channel, that watery stretch between two larger bodies,  
or the air bladder of a fish, or the making of longing  
into words : voice : I say yes, these all are its buoys  
of meaning: to mark, fetter what we might forsake.  
From a worn dock on this rainy tidal inlet, I can make

out the fairway buoy tipping, half red, half  
white, in the channel current. Navigational,

it signals a shipping lane, or nearby landfall.  
That it's anchored, somehow, in the baffling

ocean bottom, that eternal flux, is supposed  
to show the waters surrounding to be free

of hazards. Since 1500, though, Spaniards, then maybe  
Drake, Russians from Alaska, namesake Gray, nosed

their laden sloops nearby, thinking it was new, a basin,  
teeming with beaver, otter, gold in the ears of the Chehalis,

first people here, who must have wondered at the trade  
offs: a salmon for a nail, a river for a blanket, a skin

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for a rain-soaked city. I wonder what this Cosmopolis would be with-  
out its estuary. Just there, where fresh and salt

waters mingle, a weave of Olympic glacial melt  
with coastline meshings of abyssal sediment.

Who can know the work at hand? Strands of finned current  
caught up in the wave loom, wrack and spume shuttled to a coarse felt,  
some kind of net cloak, a warp against falling, being let go. As far back  
as Homer, nets appear, for trapping fish, adorning hair. His Odysseus  
is saved from drowning by Leukothea, goddess of sailors in distress,  
who offers him her enchanted veil, sea silk filaments, a spun lifebelt.  
When he safely reaches shore, she tells him, untie and let it drift  
back to me in the wine-blue sea.

It's an open work, like anywhere  
where hand and textile meet: that wish to be found by a line, if  
cast from the true deep, shaped, saved by loops lettered across air.

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I carry with me my lined notebook, pencil, an ache.  
Waters knot, now unknot in a tug's wide wake.

What is older, the push  
or the tug? The thrust,  
or the pull to haul, lug?  
One towboat can push  
15 loaded barges on the upper  
Mississippi, thousands of bushels  
of anything it seems: iron, sand, cellar dirt, mud—  
whatever's left after a new city's dug.

They were bound to find each other, the tug and low  
barge, now notched, a perfect marriage of pushing  
technology: the tug's massive hydraulically activated pins  
stitch it to its barge, efficiency, all haul and cargo.

A body of water like this is a surface for the story of a tug,  
its barge's hold low, deep in the reach, slow vault

hauled by the Marie M. Before I see it, I hear its diesel engines hammering horsepower to drive shafts, then to the steel twin screws grinding below, live gyres of jetsam, bits of fish, sequin, and silt. Someone waves from the wheelhouse, mate or merman?

I know these tugs are made from the stuff of sea and land, iron works mills dug in the fringes of coastal bays in Maine, or Louisiana, near Houma, where I once saw fitters and tackers, the skilled hands of welders and blasters, painters, all shapers of hull, deck, berth,

gunwale, and smokestack. Like some kind of sculpture garden, the bayou boatyard held up its silver propellers, crank shafts, bulwarks curving in the morning light—even the idle heaps of tow rope a paean to form formed. The day before, a new tug was launched, birthmarked

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I was told with its makers' names, hidden histories.  
Loaded with what spoils: gravel, milt, mercuries?

The barge passes by me today like a floating hearse. Yesterday its empty hopper received load after load from the toothed bucket of a clamshell dredge, scraper of the shifting bottom of the bay. Who knows in that deep-seeping dark what is disturbed? After the distant seascape's churned turbid, a lethal fog must engulf the salmonids, their tiny smolts especially, who suddenly can't see, or breathe, and irritated, flare and lacerate their air-thin gills—some ascend the water column, but only as easy prey for circling seabirds. And what of other hidden biota? The epibenthic communities at Moon Island, or the neritic zoea, megalop larvae, the harpacticoid copepods, the cumaceans? I name you here, unwitting passengers on this, a long day's journey at 3 knots to the dumpsites.

To qualify for deck work on a tug, you have to be able to lift a hundred pounds, pass a simulator class, radar training, a physical exam. You have to be as capable of coiling 3-inch steel chain, or nylon hawser, as you are at marking time, 6 hours on, 6 hours off. And then there's the closeness to the edge, ever-shifting: fen or pier, salt marsh or dock.

And while the sea rhythms of tide and gull swirl play here, deckhands endure drums, the constant *clatter-dum clatter-dum* of internal combustion, fuel pistoned through cylinders, plugs that spark spasms mechanical: *WHOoshh huff huffa WHOoshh huff huffa WHOoshh huff huffa WHOoshh huff huff huffa WHOoshh huff huff huffa WHOoshh*—diesel engines' *grrrrrr*, batter, dark hearts sunk in the rib-



bony thrall of access for our land use. Oh adjacent cosmopolis, with our mills and marinas, our resin acids, fallout, outfall: residential, commercial, how we're spent by municipal funding, awash in agricultural soapsuds, and all our recreational and maricultural facilities. Who

doesn't need housing, drains, timber, moorage, fish processors, oyster beds, bogs, paper, paint, boat glue, deep harbors for container ships? Still, here's a latish wish for everything else plying this estuarine weave—

Brown Pelican, Marbled Murrelet, Cutthroat Trout, East Pacific Green, Leatherback, Loggerhead and Olive Ridley Sea Turtles, Bald Eagle, Humpback, Blue, Fin, Sperm, Sei Whales, Steller Sea Lion (*Eumetopias jubatus*)—be un-

caged from commerce.

This ancient drowned river basin

pelvis for these intertidal bowels,  
mudflats, their mercurial fluctuations: upliftings  
and downdrift, ephemeral etching, persistent paths  
of transport, vibrations...gra vel, s and, cl a y, fine vowels  
of sedimentary siftage, formed from igneous  
rock and living organisms, or by the eroding action  
of water, when, say, sea level rose after repeated glaciation  
in the Pleistocene, that iciest of epochs that found us,  
hominids, evolving then into our present form. Weren't we cast  
close to the shadow of earth's center? That solid mass  
of nickel and iron, covered, under pressure first from charred-  
looking basalt, then a layer of granite. Our living here's been hard  
on the earth: a long raping, or when we weren't sure, a longer yearning  
made navigable by our Corps. Ready experts with wing

commanders, officers, the USACE has always been a civil and military works effort, some so epic: building the Civil

War forts, zigzag trenches, the Panama Canal just as World War I began, then the Pentagon and Manhattan Project in World War

II. And lesser acts along the way: acquiring, protecting, war-fighting, maintaining deepwater ports, locks, and levees war-

ranted by a flood, or because someone might have imagined a Katrina. At the beginning, we had Generals and Presidents—

shapers and fortifiers of land we claimed as ours—who lent their fierce desire to the Corps. It took root, something akin

to a prairie compass plant's reach: 15 feet deep. Root: more at scion (*chiefly Biblical*); or imbedded part; or (*slang*) the penis; or the bottom,

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a real basis, including the heart (*fig., obs.*).

And now we've got  
dams, dredges, but mostly those rubble-mound jetties:

Oh stone braces for ocean-mouth  
bathymetry: block tide, wind, waves  
and freshwater inflows. Protect,  
we earth engineers beseech you, drain,  
maintain, gain. Cause ebb constriction.  
Create a jet-like flow that ex-  
tends a few miles in, and abrades  
at the same time the uttering  
passage. Mind not the currents' snarl,  
the way they rage across the bar:  
shhhhh, shhhhhh, shhhhpping, hear our scraping  
incantation. In turn we  
vow to dredge, barge, dump, de-harbor  
that scour wide.

The ever-silting throat of Grays Harbor

opens to the sea from a riverine body of land. All estuaries beckon with their hidden velocities and inscrutably sure lees. Conrad called their fascination *the attractiveness of an open portal*. He was writing in 1906 of the Thames, marshy road to the North Sea, ancient mixologist, with its air of history,

so many messages left, undone yet lingering. Keats passed almost a hundred years earlier over that bar, sailing from Tower Dock, past Gravesend and Dungeness, to his final port in Italy. Some say he revised en route "Bright Star," his sonnet on desire for constance

in a world of flux. Not even his star can hold over *The moving waters at their priestlike task / Of pure ablution round earth's shores*. Waters mix, flow under me here, on this dock, my worn threshold, chance

to linger at the edge, be.  
For how many generations of Dungeness crab, sand eel,

moon snail, have you, Sweetgrass, provided cover? Salt marsh perennial, *Schoenoplectus pungens*, cousin to eelgrass, you offer forage to the surf, longfin smelt, the threatened snowy plover. From a distance, you appear ordinary, grass, though you are a triquetous fruit-bearing culm. Since prehistory, you have been used by the Nitinaht, Chehalis, Quinault, Skokomish for basketry, rope, clothes. Oh, threatened yourself, you still mark the slippery estuary's moment of salt and fresh water mixing, and so teach my eye to see the invisible lines below this surface, why I must write of floras of sweetgrass I have always loved.

yourself, strong-stemmed sedge, into arching stands along the edges of this wetland basin. You can survive long periods of drought and total tidal inundation, but can you stand to be carelessly severed from your roots?

Like Rumi's reed, cut from its reedbed, do you make a crying sound? Are you...*friend to all who want the fabric torn and drawn away...hurt and salve combining? Intimacy and longing for intimacy, one song?*

Let me leave you,  
your roots intact. Yet leave me to twine your voice, one strand with this many-voiced recitative, free rhythms, rhyme marked by this place—filaments, twists, its orphan riverbeds, shoalings oceanic—contrapuntal, sung by this Northwest rain: its plunging sound, our song net.