

TRACI BRIMHALL

The Sunken Gospel

The sea is thirsty and the shadow of a whale
moves below the ship, angry at anchors, harpoons,
the weathered breasts of the mermaid on the bow.

And the sailors on deck strip the flesh
to find the fat, they sever the head and drain
the oil. All night their hands on their faces.

Not from shame. No. There are blood blisters on their palms,
but their wrists smell like women. As it dies,
the whale hears its mother singing two miles away,

a fathom deep. Now for the ruthless season.
Now for the dreams rising out of the whale's split heart,
moaning blue zodiac hymns to the sleepers.

There are three canals in the ear, two windows,
one voice from the beautiful dead. One omega anthem.
One mind editing between hammerfalls, the promise

of a devout music and a common enemy. The lights turn
away as the men turn in their hammocks, their hearts translating
the sunken gospel, wondering if they hear women singing

green valentines in the water or deaf angels chanting before the war.
Tomorrow they'll kill the birds because there's too much music.
Tomorrow they'll wake with dirt in their hands.

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TRACI BRIMHALL is a former Halls Poetry Fellow at the Wisconsin Institute for Creative Writing. Her work has appeared in *New England Review*, *Virginia Quarterly Review*, *FIELD*, *Southern Review*, and *Missouri Review*. Her manuscript, *Rookery*, won the 2009 Crab Orchard Review Poetry Series First Book Award and is forthcoming from Southern Illinois University Press.