

Wharf

1

Overcast tonight, and at the concrete dock,
Empty of ships, there is no difference
In the green-gray sky and the choppy lake
Miles out where they meet, and no moon
Vies with the harsh light over me.
Hungry nightjars cry *bee-ik*
As they wheel for prey, as they fly
Over pairs of lovers, who walk slowly
After the dance at the club, and talk of
Dim bars near the quay, where they may drink
And be ignored, where old men
Stare off, and leave them alone.

2

Near the toe of my shoe are minnows:
Five or six of them, all lined up in a row,
Catching quartz light and keeping it
In their tiny scales. It is as if
They were laid that way on purpose
All facing east, as if they were
Turned that way by children — a burial
Without the wilted blossoms
Torn from gardens. I think on
That bone from a long-dead bird, found
On a dig at the Point, lit up in its own
Glass case, riding on a crest of cotton.

3

On my left is a wooden pier
That tilts in the middle, where planks
Are rotten and gone, and at its end
A solitary light faces in.
It is forbidden to walk out to it.

Tonight it glazes the tops of waves
To make them whitecaps, to make shadows
That eddy and turn: at the rim
Of my face I see tentacles wave
Like hawsers in a storm, and at their base
A red eye watches me, and when I move
It dives to the bottom of the bay.

4

Rose, when we first met,
You loved those fancies of mine:
You'd ask for a goofball tale
If you were down, and I'd make it up,
And sometimes you'd laugh out loud.
But then you went away, and the stories
Got bitter and grim — I felt them
Gnarl and darken as they ran down my hand
To the edge of a pen. Now I'm afraid
A thought might rise I can't shrug off,
For you're not there to chaff it gone.

5

All of a sudden, the bar
Seems a very nice place to be. I go in,
Find the lighting appropriate, subdued,
The crowd pleasantly sparse. One man
Sits before bottles, his hair
Thinning out on top, his gaze
Locked on a moving electrical sign
Touting ale. From two seats down
I smell fish on his worn tweed coat,
And he turns toward me with a grin
As if he were my old camerado, saying,
"It's a rough lake tonight, eh?"

— *Philip St. Clair*