

Rick Madigan

Beauty Harbors Here

Country music's on the radio in Hatteras clinic
 when you go back inside
 with the doctor and I wait,
 watching the rusted boats scroll past
 rocking from their slips
 into the silver-blue channel,
 Merle Haggard driving white line fever.
 It's your 37th birthday
 but Ocracoke is off —
 no ferry or feral horses —
 food poisoning, maybe,
 from last night's steaming shellfish
 which you knew could
 do you in but then still ate.
 The man at the museum told us
 yesterday the famous lighthouse here
 would soon be gone,
 lifted up on jacks and moved
 a quarter mile away
 from erosion threatening to claim it,
 as far from the Atlantic
 as in 1868 when the Civil War veterans
 had built it. We'd come out
 of season so the old lighthouse was closed
 all 208 feet through the air,
 we couldn't climb two thousand steps
 to look out on Diamond Shoals
 that had sunk 600 ships, Torpedo Junction
 where the U-boats found their prey.
 Past those stacked brick sides
 of barber pole striped black and white

we stared up to the very lamp itself,
 computer-driven now, 200,000 candlepower,
 signature at sea become a seven-second interval.
 I knew we were mysterious
 even to ourselves, and isolated
 more and more from everyone around us,
 alive on a wind-swept spit
 of beach slowly being taken by the ocean;
 we were something you might
 shout out loud walking up the pier
 without context or relation,
 another conversation you were having with yourself,
 and then begin to laugh
 at each tar-dripped piling
 propping up a blemished gull,
 each pieced-together
 pelican drying out its wings
 like God's own confabulation from spare parts.
 No more ruefulness
 today on the country radio,
 no one terrified or quaking
 in the middle of the night,
 everything around him pitched in black —
 fresh rose-leaves from Lowell
 return to mottled green
 in the book of poems
 I've brought along to read,
 soon as he lets the morning light
 stream in, across dull rumpled bedclothes
 and a child's crushed velvet hat,
 clear sailing or snug harbor one whole day.
 And that's when you return
 from behind the gray partition,
 scowling, fanning your prescription
 in your hand, and I jump up to follow you
 across crushed shell and sand
 moving out through salt and stinging gravel.