

Phillip Barron

The problem of history

Under sky's gray lid
black birds spot the yellow safety rails
framing the site of creation.
Sunday morning at the quarry
caws weigh heavy in humid air
thread the silent gantries
conveyance belts poised
to tumble granite upward
deliver the foundations of kingdom
from layered contingency
to the steepest angles of solidity.
Time was digging a pit.

The gate which may never open
may never have been open.
In the silence of machined boundaries
in the absence of a mechanism
we trespass in a place
that asks not to be kept.

The problem of identity

There would have come a time
 when all the wood was new.
 Rotted planks replaced

 so as not to forget a debt
 paid in voyages. The ship

 of semaphores killed both
 Minotaur and king,
 was it still the trireme

 of Theseus? The curious
 constructed another
 from the saved planks of the first.

 Its blackened boards
 weaken with each passing day

 the conviction that identity's
 vessel is reflection
 in a vanity mirror. If both

 sit moored at port,
 then which is the ship
 of Theseus?

 What stories build
 and a city saves
 might be another sort

 of self, the distance
 between the first
 draft and memory's lapse.

 Perhaps the city renewed
 the ship with a different
 lastingness in mind, to recall

 not the children saved,
 but the ones lost to his restlessness —
 the lover he deceived,

 the father he killed,
 the sentinel to the city of Dis,
 and the beast he became.

a cleaner sort of lastingness - Linda Gregerson

There came a time
 when all the ships renewed.
 Fresh paint covered rust

 so hulls could move on.
 A city pays its debt in festival.

 Ships freighted
 with a trough economy
 of the gantry crane,

 was this still the work
 of Theseus? Stevedores
 construct another

 ballast in imitation of labor
 to pass the day's

 arbitration. Is this a ship
 to stay executions or one
 whose black sails endure?

 Tended flame embargoes
 thoughts of blame
 in a cacophony of mistakes.

 What stories build
 and a city saves
 might be another sort

 of self, the distance
 between the first
 draft and memory's lapse.

 Perhaps language raises
 the dead from language.
 Translators decide which

 sails to raise, whether
 to say a text has been slain
 or to owe a debt to the past.

 Some translators forget
 to change the sails.
 Others decide not to.