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.