

Escape to Grosse Isle

It happened quietly
as night bled into darkness,
as light poured into day,
and he walked slowly
over the land where his family
lay like soldiers under the loose
sheets of earth. Here they had labored
and endured, plowed and hoed,
and dug the raw white jewels
from the fields, knowing all along,
I suppose, there would be no letting go
of the ropes, no mercy flowing
from the fists of those who held them,
bent their spines to the dirt.
They were expendable as stones
back then—these broken shards,
these torn threads of him
buried in the murmur and shadow
of an island. This is not a happy tale;
it happened a long time ago
when my great, great grandfather
was young, too young to suffer such
sadness, carting death around like a child
in his arms. I imagine he boarded the ship,
ran his hands along the rails, mingled
with the wretched and famished souls,
their bodies all tangled up like knots—
arms entwined, backs humped against
the hull's planks. Soon, fevers struck,
boiling up from the darkness, rising
from the hold toward the sails that billowed
overhead like a thousand white shrouds.
Surely the priests had taught him
that death is only life again as he clutched
the crucifix to his chest, fingered the black beads,
closed his eyes to the scalding filth,
praying one day he would light some lamp,
and turn some corner in a place where time
dulls the cruel claws of memory,
and escape into a new life in a new land.

ANN GIARD-CHASE