

Poet Afloat

**Xmas: on the rocks**

(Mary A Whalen)

We all run aground  
    sometime,

        if only  
into our graves  
    (Flood the chamber, open  
the gates, and drift  
    gently to the dunnage)

unless detoured  
    through fishes  
        Nibbled & torn  
Processed into meal, canned  
    amid the ribs,  
Flushed in cold blood;  
    or floated in dry dock,  
Languishing, wound  
    In a Tyvek chrysalis,  
Or paused  
    on the flats  
        for a 'tween-tidal mend

But sometime  
    or other  
        every helmsman  
falters onto  
    hard  
        or soft sucking ooze,  
Stiffening sand, flaking shale, or gravel  
All  
    immobilizing,  
        thick enough to plow

And so have we  
    One eve of Christmas Eve  
At Rockaway,  
    —What role'd  
        this windlass play?

Stefan Driesbach-Williams

Poets Afloat 2019

Poems inspired by tanker MARY A. WHALEN

Drop anchor  
    Hold fast  
        For some assurance  
While hoping  
    For the wave that bears us off  
And run the rode out  
    As the breakers threaten  
To smear the cargo deep  
    Into the sands

Dead forests  
    Dead, buried, packed, and processed  
Not Lumber, paper, kindling, nor the cloth  
But hellfire and brimstone  
    High sulphur fuel  
Born of and bearing out  
    Catastrophe

That's Oil:  
    This town feeds on  
        Power  
        Horse  
Fodder, water,  
    All the fuels:  
        Wheat on wind,  
coal under sail, even oil square-rigged,  
then coal for coals, and coal for oil,  
And oil for oil (and coal and wheat)—  
Always the wheat (and rice and sugar and  
Cotton and crap)—and wind and electric,  
Till electric for oil, coal, and wheat

These bulkers, float dense fluids on water,  
Ballast floats an estuary through the seas  
Poisoning one place  
    with its other self  
On arrival  
    When the load becomes too much

Black or amber  
    waves  
        On the wine black sea

To risk, if not rage, against  
    The storm  
Slow and creeping  
    Blowing  
        Over Brooklyn  
The keeper run out to the opposite pier  
To ready for The Big One and its surge,  
With proper preparation, all is well

This small cog  
    In its private disaster  
One twinkle in a cosmos  
    Of cold fire  
Conflagration of turbid unconcern

The winch drum band brake seems designed to fail

Young veterans  
    Boasting of their greenhorn  
escapades  
    death-brushed boneheaded bungling  
Tell tales of the brake  
    On the great ship's bow  
Eased too much and the chain paid out  
    too fast  
So the wiser heads drive the erring crew  
To safety  
    And the bit pin blasts through deck,  
and all  
    Plummets  
        To the ocean sole

The fecund shallows of our origin  
Ensnare the hopeful cable of our doom

It's all linked  
    All chain  
        With an anchor on  
One end and  
    A bolted beam the other

Push toward  
    Your vision but not

so rudely  
To lose your wind  
In irons  
But gentle  
Smooth,  
Far,  
but not extreme,  
Keep your helm  
just inside  
the rub rail and the gunwale  
Your senses keen  
Your actions quick but sure

For friction  
both makes and  
breaks  
relationships

Attention is all  
—One cannot attend  
Too much—  
the old oiler speaks lovingly  
Of his steam engine, the variations  
In voice, timbre, heat  
call for more  
or less

Each whistle sang its polyphonic part  
Each pilot played them in his trademark way  
The songs wove an opera  
On the harbor air  
Lost to the storm winds  
Out at Rockaway

Six foot swells and the ship  
Up on its knees  
Praying for a crest  
Going nowhere soon  
Watching the moon turn its phases, with wife  
And daughter home somewhere  
on that bright shore  
Waiting for the pull  
and the architect's  
Approval, to kedge free

On the next wave

Mu

theta

Theta: angle of wrap

Mu, the coefficient

of friction

No worries here

No math

Just bite the sand

No deeper than the draft,

Run chain

brake free

Even the greenest hand

Can manage that

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### **Slocum & Distracted by the Library**

Our museum boats

collect the beloved

Discards, the curios, named

and mysterious

Cardboard hard bound

cheap paper

backs in stacks

Pulp

is poor flotation

the kapok,

Rotten, broken free

from ragged, threadbare

PFDs

floating on the flood

over

The congregation of Klein Deutsch Lutheran

As they wait for Jesus to raise them from

Their final baptism while the bonfire

Burns out

on the beach at North Brother

Some stories can be heavier than stone