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Etymology

1. Portage

First the earthquake tore
the Alaskan ground, spitting
out the shoreline six feet down in half
a minute.

Next the great wave swept
the houses from stone to shingle,
drowning the mountains
a thousand feet up.

For a time landscape
was ocean floor.
Then the water rushed out
Turnagain Arm to the proper sea

leaving just one crippled tilting house
and a rim of skeleton pines,
their groping roots awash in salty poison.

2. portal

When the Alutiiq saw the whale,
breaching in bone-cold water,
it was

ar'uq

the door to understanding one word wide.

Through it

blubber blowhole baleen
fins tail the blood-red meat

sacred spirit of essential whale

In naming, perception—
So we believe, and swallow
dictionaries whole like medicine,
scour the Web for definitions
and wait to know the thing, as if
vocabulary and syntax
forge keys into insight.

Look listen

here I have words,

adenocarcinoma, carboplatin, taxotere

but this language, my language

neoplasm, taxol, neuroendocrine differentiation

curves its clinical tendrils round the frame
but cannot unlock the *why*, the *what next*, the *will I*

Like a stone into the sea
it disappears within the murky green
and finds the secret place
where terror sounds the astounding deep.

3. port

Two cuts to place the metal
disk, stitched down tight
into my breastbone. An opening,
a secret known only
to initiates, its password spell
a Latinate cantation
to ward off the evil eye.

Two snaky tongues feed
their venom through the larger vessels,
light chemical backfires
burning burning burning
no tidal wave can quench.

Two nurses, gowned and masked, float
near and then away, then near again
like blue paper lanterns on an unseen current.
The TV's drone cannot drown out
the simplest of facts: You must

let in the beast to kill the beast.

My mouth corrodes like rusted metal.
Timor mortis conturbat me.
Don't come in. Come in.

4. portage

Even now there is no easy passage, no
fathoms-deep canal carved
to let the gravid oil tankers through.
Even now, the only way is over.

A thousand generations of footsteps
imprinted on this beach,
where the first Alutiiq
hauled ashore their boats of bark and skin,
strapped them tight across their shoulders
to navigate a route to
more distant water.

That night they watched
the sparking embers of their fire fall back

hissing in the frigid snowmelt.
They wondered when they would find
the sea, when what they carried
would carry them again.

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