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MICHAEL CRUMMEY

NEWFOUNDLAND SEALING DISASTER

Sent to the ice after white coats,
rough outfit slung on coiled rope belts,
they stooped to the slaughter: gaffed pups,
slit them free of their spotless pelts.
The storm came on unexpected.
Stripped clean of bearings, the watch struck
for the waiting ship and missed it.
Hovelled in darkness two nights then,
bent blindly to the sleet’s raw work,
bodies muffled close for shelter,
stepping in circles like blinkered mules.
The wind jerking like a halter.
Minds turned by the cold, lured by small
comforts their stubborn hearts rehearsed,
men walked off ice floes to the arms
of phantom children, wives; of fires
laid in imaginary hearths.
Some surrendered movement and fell,
moulting warmth flensed from their faces
as the night and bitter wind doled out
their final, pitiful wages.