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★ Shipbreaking

Robin Beth Schaer, Author

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Schaer worked two summers as a deckhand on the tall ship *Bounty*, and the churn of the sea powers the work in her impressive debut collection. These sinewy, taut poems move seamlessly between ocean and city and natural disaster as if all were elements of the same landscape. Entering this book means diving into a world where the speaker is both Odysseus and Penelope, struck by the world's beauty and ultimate callousness. In these poems, it is usually nighttime, and the atmosphere is appropriately ominous: buckles rattle as belts are removed and eyes watch a lover like "a pair of dark fish" as the "future clock of disappointment chimes." Though the verse forms are traditional, Schaer innovates through skillful linguistic play. The poems' strength and tension arise as the expected shapes shift and swell amid her surprising verbiage and vocabulary. Here, a lover becomes a "sweet locomotive" careening, "hunger/ sings the strident percussion of limbs," and the "sleepless alarm of instinct strung/ every nerve on a trigger of quills." Solitude and starvation seem inevitable. In Schaer's voluminous, shipwrecked world, everything is beautiful and no one is safe—it is from this suffering that song is created. This is a gorgeous debut from a smart, incisive young poet. (Sept.)