

## WHALER

Great-grandfather,  
    whaler out of Nantucket,  
the harder sort  
    who threw the harpoon,  
    drew warm blood,  
made huge death on the open sea.

Came home one year  
    to find his land fenced  
for ecclesiastical uses,  
    tore it all down,  
told the priest to go to hell,  
    and would do his own praying  
    after that.

Sailed till his knees went stiff  
    with beri-beri  
on a ship stuck  
    in Antarctic ice.

My father worshipped him,  
    remembered his deft hands  
that could "put an arsehole in a crackie"  
    with a hammer and a handsaw.

    The old man signalled  
his affections:  
    crafty hard of hearing,  
heard the boy's words,  
    even took his daughter's orders  
    when she called him "Sir!"

Grew old jigging cod  
    on the southern shore,  
then fell from a roof  
    and lingered days to tell  
    his last stories,  
empty his mouth of good oaths.

What I have of him  
    is my father's reverence for  
his silence,  
    a sense that pain will kill you  
if you speak of it.