

Lost in Silver by Norman Coburn

Belle recovers consciousness with her head throbbing, her vision pulsing, ears ringing. She is lying on her side, staring at a wall of molten silver. Her sight is starting to clear but her mind reels awry. She can feel a solid, yet moving surface beneath her body as she watches ripples form in the metal, the globules tripping over each other, sliding down the wall in little streams. In this disembodied moment, the vibrancy of the freshly melted silver is the most beautiful thing she has ever seen.

"Are you aw'right lass?" A heavy hand grips her shoulder. She turns from the liquid metal to face a man with rough features and gentle eyes. "You took quite a fall."

She remembers her head and runs a hand over her left temple and up over her throbbing skull. Her hand comes back sticky. Instead of the blood, she expects to see, her fingers are daubed in golden caviar. She stares at the man leaning over her. His face, hair and waxed oilskin are smeared with fish scales. He holds his hands towards her, easing her upright.

"Look into my eyes, girl." He grips her jaw firmly, looking intently into her face for a few seconds before nodding. "Easy now. These decks are afa greasy when you're tired."

A younger man she almost recognizes appears at his shoulder and glares down at her. "Told you it was bad luck to have women on the boat."

The older man turns and scowls at him. "You ken whit I think. While there aren't enough sons in this family, we'll go tae sea wi' any daughter who cares to fish."

The younger man turns away. "Herrin' boats no place for a girl, that's all."

A voice booms from the stern of the boat. "When you're ready, ladies an' gentlemen." Belle can hear the grunt of men's effort and the creak of ropes tightening against wood. The first rays of dawn are casting their light on a busy harbour scene. Around her six half-remembered men and two boys work to send fish baskets up the high wall. She realises her molten silver is a river of herring scales, trickling out of boxes on the quayside above.

The old man touches her arm and points to an open hatch laid into the deck of the boat. "As soon as you can, Belle. Back tae the baskets." She nods slowly and starts to pull deep breaths down into her lungs, while she stares blankly down the length of the boat. Two big men haul on ropes attached to a pulley, their raw power propelling a heavy basket up the wall. Hands reaching out from the quayside above to grasp the wicker while the men below pause to wipe their brows. One in a stained waistcoat calls out. "Move on now. We've less than an hour tae get back out on this tide."

A head pops up from the hatch. A blonde girl in her late teens, her hair pulled back tightly from her face revealing pretty features smeared with dirt. "C'mon Belle. A'm dying down here."

"Coming", Belle hears herself say. She starts to move but finds her limbs sore and heavy. It takes great effort to swing her legs over the hatch and ease herself down the greasy stairs back into the darkness. Below decks, the boat is partitioned into square sections, faced with boards held in metal slots. Stinking and cramped, the whole cavern is thinly lit by three oil lamps. Behind the boards, lie innumerable dead herring. In one of the sections, a lad of about fifteen stands amongst the fish, raking them into baskets using a crude metal scoop. The blonde girl taps Belle's arm and points to a half-filled section. "Do 'starboard five' just now or Jim'll be yelling at us tae keep the boat trim."

"Mare baskets, Annie", calls the lad in the adjoining section. Annie duly delivers a small stack of filthy wicker baskets, before dragging a full one down a central gangway towards the stern where another hatch spills welcome sunlight into the centre of the boat. Two ropes are dangling with a rough metal hook on each. Annie deftly clips the hooks onto the full basket and stands back as it disappears in a flash, a few herring falling in its wake.

Belle pushes her aching body to work. Mechanically, relentlessly, basket after basket. Slowly the level of fish around her goes down. Eddie, the lad beside her, finishes his section and starts on another. Around them, gradually emptied of her burden, the boat creaks.

A while later, Jim's face peers down from the hatch. "Whit's left?"

"Ten cran", says Annie, dragging another basket down the gangway.

"Nearer fourteen", Eddie contradicts.

"That'll do", says Jim. "We've eighty-five on the quayside. Build up the boards. We're goin' back to sea." His head disappears and they hear him calling out orders on the deck. Belle sees Annie glance at her. Eddie has already stepped out of his section and swoops up behind them, grabbing them both by their waists. "Hell of a payday."

Annie's weary eyes fall towards the deck. "I dunno, Eddie. I'm dead beat already." She looks up at him. "I'm not sure I can do all this again today."

Belle feels his grip tighten. "Course you can. It's Friday, remember. We get tomorrow off."

Annie doesn't seem convinced. "How much you reckon is still in the water?"

Eddie looks up at one of the lanterns swinging from the roof. "We've got in near two-thirds o' the nets. The first twa were blank though. We might catch the same again."

Annie sinks wearily to her knees, close to tears.

"You go on", Belle says. "We'll finish up down here."

She kneels for a minute, holding Annie's hand until she recovers. Then she gives it a gentle tug. "Aw, don't let them see you like this. I've let the side down once already. We need to stand up for the girls."

Annie looks up and smiles, her fish stained cheeks streaked with clean pink skin. "Aye, aye, skipper."

As the boat begins to move, they work together, lifting the heavy boards and rebuilding the fish pens until they are waist high. Feeling better, Annie chatters about how she had never seen the pens so full as the last haul. As the fish had flowed from the nets above, down the wooden chutes, they had built up the pens board by board until they could hold no more. They feel a sudden lurch and hear a barrage of swearing from the deck above. Eddie's head drops into sight. "The skipper just beat 'Gentle Bow' to the cut mouth. Come an' see."

Annie is first to scramble up the ladder and as Belle follows her, she is dazzled as she emerges into full daylight. It takes a few seconds for her eyes to adjust and comprehend the incredible industry around her. The boat is now shaded under a partially raised sail. The men have used oars to propel her across the shallowing harbour, in the way a gondolier would use a pole to guide his craft. Behind them, another large herring boat is not so fortunate. The skipper of 'Gentle Bow' has miscalculated and she is stuck fast by the retreating sea. No amount of pushing by her crew will move her now until the tide comes back. In a few moments, Belle's boat is clear of the inner harbour and making its way through the outer harbour towards the sea. All around her, boats are making ready to sail, or are washing down. She tries to count, but once she gets past 50 she loses track. The inner harbour is hidden from here, but a forest of masts suggest another large fleet. The quaysides in every direction, liberally stained with silver, stand laden with boxes. Horses and carts form long queues, working relentlessly to ferry the catch up to the gutting sheds.

"S'cuse us, ladies." Two fresh-faced men, squeeze past them, down into the hold below.

"Off for a lie down", chides Annie as they pass.

"Only if you're commin' with me", says one. The other lad slaps his friend's arm and gives a sharp nod towards Jim.

"Archie, John! Bread an' tea. And be quick about it", Jim barks from the high tiller at the stern of the boat.

"Mind you put on plenty of butter", Annie calls to the heels of the disappearing men. Then she lies down on the deck, covers her eyes with an arm and goes straight to sleep.

Belle glances around the boat. Some eighty feet long, she is completely open, the gunnel just inches above the deck. Below lies the cavernous hold in which she toiled with Annie. At the stern, Eddie and another lad sit at Jim's feet. They look dazed, beyond exhausted and after a few minutes Jim chases them away so they too can find a place to lay their heads. Five older men relax on the deck, working the sail with gentle efficiency. If they want to sleep, they don't show it. Instead, they talk quietly while they work their ropes and smoke strong cigarettes, one after another.

The boat is leaving the harbour behind now, pushed along by the softest of winds through a smooth sea on a course towards the May Isle. Belle has rarely seen the Forth so still. Dotted around, a few herring boats are still working on their catch, nets hanging over the sides like silver cables, each craft shrouded in gulls. Occasionally they pass a bobbing float marked with the name and number of a boat as Jim searches for their own mark. Belle's stomach lurches as she realises how much physical effort will soon be required of her.

A cry from the bow alerts the crew their marker had been seen, the boat shifting as they tack towards it. To keep the nets taut in the water, they will need to haul from the East, pulling the weight of the boat against the ebbing tide. When Jim barks, the weary crew assemble again. All have eaten, some have slept. Their disposition is like survivors on a battlefield, getting ready to face another onslaught. And when it comes, it is like a battle. The men spread out across the deck, working together to drag the heavy boat, inch by inch, towards some far away anchor stone, spreading the net between them, shaking and flicking until the air seems full of fish. Annie and Belle work like devils, using brooms to sweep the fish towards the chutes. Below them, Eddie is either singing or swearing as he battles with the torrent of fish. And the gulls! They appear from nowhere but become like a swarm, grabbing fish that fall back in the water, snatching fish that fly through the air, swooping among their legs to take fish from the deck. The younger man who had propositioned Annie grasps one of the birds by its feet and flings it down the hatch. They hear Eddie explode in fury, the bird emerging moments later, its wings beating hard as a herring disappears down its gullet, even as it lifts away from the boat.

A little to the north of them, another boat is waging a similar war against a tide of fish. Gradually, the paths of the two boats are converging.

"Don't recognize her", says Archie, nodding in the direction of the black hulk beside them, sitting low in the water under her burden of fish.

"Look at her number. An Arbroath boat", grunts John against the weight of the line.

"Thought they'd shot over us", says Jim. "But it looks like we'll be okay."

On and on they work, for two long hours, until finally, the tail of the last net drops into the boat. Everyone lies gasping on the deck. From below, Eddie reports they have eighty cran on board, one hundred and sixty-five for the night.

Belle sits numb with tiredness, a single fish lying across the palm of her hand. Most of the fish were dead, drowned during the long night as the net held them in a silent stranglehold. But this one lies gulping in her hand, its eyeballs flicking left and right, the creamy golden spew of its eggs, smearing across her hands. Belle does a calculation. 165 cran, 1200 fish to a cran, and this just one boat from hundreds fishing half the nights of the year. It's a wonder the herring don't die out.

A shout from the skipper brings her back into focus. "All hands". The anchor stone is stuck fast, locked tight against a skerry while they towed the boat back towards it. Exhausted, the crew line up on the rope, with Belle at the back. Then they begin to haul. The work is methodical, retrieving the remaining slack on the rope until the boat stands above the anchor stone. The trick, explains Jim, is to pull the rope fast enough, giving the boat enough momentum against the tide, so that when she reaches the point where she is above the stone, the motion will carry her past the obstacle so it springs free. If that doesn't work, they'll have to cut the rope, go to the beach and find another big stone.

"She's comin' lads", Jim encourages them. He doesn't want to spend his precious weekend looking for another suitable stone.

"Hang on". He's peering over the side now. Either side of the boat, a column of churning silver is rising out of the water. "Ach, damnit. It's the Arbroath man's nets", he calls. "Let it go. We're gonna have to wait while he hauls past us."

If Belle hadn't been so tired; if her brain had not been ringing in her skull from her fall, she'd have been ready for what happens next. The rest of the crew stand back from the rope, dropping it to the deck so that it barrels back into the water as if shot from a cannon. If she'd known, she'd not have stood among the coils, feeling them tighten to her ankles, throwing her on her back and dragging her towards the low gunnel. Only Annie seems to realise what is happening and reaches out urgent fingers as she screams for help. The blow to Belle's

head as she passes over the gunnel is painful and at first, the cold water is a relief. She doesn't feel panic. Not straight away. But then she looks up and sees the silhouette of the boat, diminishing, growing fainter. The stone must have hit the bottom because now she stops. She looks about her and wonders what she should do. Apart from the dimly lit bodies of a few dozen dead herring flowing past her in the tide, everything is still.