

Mother Carey's Hen

There are days I don't think about the sea;
 weeks wash by, in fact,
then a shearwater—or some such—flutters by
on the salt flats fanning out in my mind's eye,
reflected there, a shimmering reverie,
 recalling the pact

I once made (and renew today) to hold
 to a higher altitude.
But note the difference between this bird
and me: a slight disruption or harsh word
and I crash, folded seaward, letting cold
 life intrude;

whereas the petrel, mindless of such height,
 scales each watery hill
that rises up, adapting to the shape
of each impediment, each low escape
instinct in it, the scope of its flight
 fitted to its will.

The Call

The call comes and you're out. When you retrieve
the message and return the call, you learn
that someone you knew distantly has died.
His bereaved partner takes you through the news.

She wants to tell you personally how
he fought and, then, how suddenly he went.
She's stunned, and you feel horrible for her,
though somewhat dazed, since he was not a friend,

just someone you saw once or twice a year,
and who, in truth, always produced a shudder:
you confess that you never liked him much,
not to her, of course, but silently to yourself.

You feel ashamed, or rather think the word
ashamed, and hurry off the line. That's when
the image of him appears more vividly,
with nicotine-stained fingertips and hair

like desert weeds fetched up on chicken wire,
the rapacious way he always buttonholed
you at a launch, his breath blowsy with wine.
Well, that will never ever happen again:

one less acquaintance who stops to say hello,
apparently happy at the sight of you.
So why then this surprising queasiness,
not of repulsion but of something like remorse,

that comes on you without your guessing it,
till the thing that nagged you most—his laugh, perhaps—
becomes the very music that you miss,
or think you do, or want to, now he's gone.