

What Every Islander Knows

Every islander has seen a trail of sparks
leaving by the door. Every man who has pulled
on a cigarette has sat and watched the smoke
being drawn away into some invisible vent.
Every islander has scraped the dirt from beneath
his nails, and at least once found enough
to plant a grain of mustard under it.
And every man who has stripped apart an engine
knows that all the smears cannot be washed away
and that sometimes oil will get under the skin.

And everyone knows you can't wash under the skin.
And that a man gathering limpets shall be judged
by his swiftness rather than his strength.
And though a feast marks the end of a harvest
there may still be some tidying up to do.
And that the trail of sparks does not disappear
into the night, but keeps on going, just as
the bearer of sparks must keep on going.
And who knows what trouble it may cause?

And all of us have some idea of where the sparks
are going and of why the oil does not disappear
with the layers of skin that are slowly unpeeling.
And every islander knows that nothing
ever really disappears, for it is under your nails
or inside a mouth you've previously ignored
that seems to be breathing your exhaled smoke
at the other end of the corridor.

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