

JOHN S. BRINKERHOFF

Terra Nova (1912): Kathleen Scott Sails to Meet the Captain

In 1912 Robert Falcon Scott, a former captain in the British Navy, and two other members of an expedition to the South Pole were found frozen to death in a tent on the Antarctic ice cap.

The world changes.
England is changing, Kathleen.
Lanes that led to love
have begun to run backwards.
The billowing, stonewalled meadows
are falling to bleakness and rubble.
The maternal whispers of summer leaves
are becoming somber as the chants of monks.
And the birds
are learning the psalms.

The world changes.
Kathleen, the sea is changing
beneath you, as you slide southward
in its broad, strong palm.
It is becoming gray and mean,
and will claw at the black home rock,
a thief of seasons, an ogre god
whose spell gives the men who sail it
youth
and his smile.

We change.
You are changing, Kathleen.
The girls and women you were
are hurrying ahead to meet you.
The blaze of coming mornings
is arcing behind you.
At the dock, a man who cannot look up
will hand you vastness and struggle.
And your eyes will seek out
the children who are lonely.

We change.
Kathleen, you are changing
into an apparition, a dream.
And he, as dream, is coming to life.
Far away, in the manger of the wind,
your heart drums in a slush of sleep and waking,
in a vague stench of fouled breath,
heat's last feeble promise,
as days glide like mimes
from the lantern.

Everything changes.
Times are changing, Kathleen.
You will see that he covered his ears and grieved
when they killed the ponies for meat,
and understand
as well as you understand your journey.
He will not have decided this end;
but isn't the choosing of honor, in itself, the same?
As futures glide like mimes
from your cabin lamp.

Eyes to ice.
Bone to stone.
Pliant flesh becomes the mountain face.
The change is made in guttering
lantern afternoon light on English lawns,
at tables in cool grottoes of shade
where they toast his achievement, and he smiles
and lifts his wine to you, and the afternoon light,
deep, warm light,
such grand light
for ponies and men . . .