

CutBank

Volume 1
Issue 46 *CutBank* 46

Article 7

Summer 1996

The Owls of '23

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Recommended Citation

Galvin, Brendan (1996) "The Owls of '23," *CutBank*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 46 , Article 7.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/cutbank/vol1/iss46/7>

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BRENDAN GALVIN

THE OWLS OF '23

Sepias of an old winter: a man standing
full height under a berg like a grotto
deposited on the beach, behind him
the marshes a frieze of no color,
spiky with terrors, a northeast wind
you can almost feel in the photo.
Months of snows off the polar cap,
with spook flights floating down
to cut in and fuel yellow eyes
on the backs of rabbits opened and left.
All night the houses complained
around stoves, the cold beaking entry,
and the stories were of a coastguardsman
stumbling along his beach route upon
an owl untying the mysteries of a cod,
of fish sealed in the river like sequinned
slippers, as if the world's integument
had turned inside out
and warmblooded life went on down there.
A white owl in November means weather
you'll remember, a saw new-minted that year,
when, watched by snow, a man learned
to look about him for a pair of gold eyes,
and looked beyond mud season for something
like a stump leaning sideways as if
hanging on in a gale,
and beyond the sepia crew of the Hannah Rich

caught waving on deck as though relieved
of mortal duty, a joyride of breaking ice
that kept them and left for the horizon.