## NEAR THE NORTH SEA

(in honor of Mathias J. Alten, 1871-1938)

They are hauling a ruined boat out of the sea,
at low tide—
four men, two in yellow slickers,
one barefoot—and three shaggy worn-out
horses, a white one
on the right head down, mane salt-soaked,
exhausted but neck straining,
leading the way.

Out beyond this group, five other schooners flare their sails
on a purple sea—
though both water and sky look boiled,
not finished with storms—
and the nearest ship's rigging
hangs tattered, spars and mast, a rag-shop of the heart,
its crew limping it into shore after a night
when wind never silenced.

The artist comes down to water as to an open place
in the mind—
the town abandoned behind him.
Here color, drama, and tide enchant his brush—
now men at work picking clams, a horse and cart
silhouetted in a skim of water that mirrors the cart's
wooden wheels clamped by sand,
the men's bent backs.

How can I know any shore or city of another century
if not by art
of the painter, photographer, the writer's pen?
I hear the yoke of wood creaking, a man slapping
the horse's flank,
a boy's soft words urging her on—over splash of waves, hooves—
Come on, pull now, Dolly, Dolly—
you can do it, girl, hup, hup,
and then they're in.