

# Three North East Vignettes – 2016

Extract from a story by John Bolland

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## 2 Milonga

This is simple. *Abrazo cerrado*. Though nothing is simple.

His right arm stretches behind her and pulls her towards him; his left, lifting her hand high, steadies her as she over-balances towards him. In a moment the music will begin again and he will move. She is older than he is. Perhaps a decade older. Her teeth are yellow. Her lipstick a little too pale for her complexion. He has seen her at the factory.

At the first note his left foot slips forward and a little left, turning her as he pushes her back across the polished floor of the church hall. He scans ahead, tracking the other couples who shuffle and clump, impeding his glide. Her feet struggle to find the steps as he drives her back but she is one of those who is content to be led. He pushes her around the floor. Turning her. Twisting her.

She packs prawns. That is where he has seen her before. In the packing area, in a white coat, a hair net under her hard hat. Yellow gumboots. Now, in a tight black dress, high heels, she is trying to be serious. She is trying too hard. He turns her sharply to the left. She raises her right foot and, sensing her ambition, he pauses as she attempts a *gancho*, kicking him on the shin. She smiles.

There are stages in the process. The sorting. The shelling. The packing. The shelling is the worst job. The prawns' fragile bodies resist evisceration, but ineffectually, their thorns and spines inflicting tiny lacerations into which the brine seeps. But nothing in their lives accommodates this vast dismembering, the powerful twist that tears the head-part from the tail, rubs off the legs then husks the flesh from its shell. Ten thousand prawns a shift. More on a good day. The bodies on the line sorting, shelling, packing till the catch is cleared and stowed into the lorries parked outside the shed. The lorries bound for Vigo, Barcelona, San Sebastián. Home.

He slips his right foot against her right, pressing against her insole as he slips her foot in a *barrida*, parting her thighs. Her smile seems less apologetic. The smell of fish on his raw fingers. Salt and death.

The music stops. He lets her go. He waits. She bobs her head. Perhaps in gratitude. Perhaps not.

He places his left hand against the palm of his new partner. She is taller than the one before. Bony and angular like a hake. Her breath smells of cigarettes and rum. She smiles just like the rest. His shin still aches. He steps forward.

... see **POTB 14 for the Vignettes 1 and 3**