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You Will Know Us By Our Art

by Mary Amato

Humbly-knitted, rough woolen caps
stand in their own glass case
here in the Rijks Museum
among the Rembrandts and Vermeers.
The caps don't lie flat,
as if in a drawer.
They perch upright, rounded out
as if on the heads of their owners,
whalers from the 17th century.

Varied in color, pattern, and shape:
comically tall,
serious and squat,
tipsy and crumpled,
content to be plain,
thrilled with stripes,
turned at the rim,
nibbed at the crown.

Each made by someone—a mother? A wife?
A daughter? The whaler himself?
Crafted to keep the wearer warm
and more—to identify the man.
Bundled from foot to face
against the cold,
these sons and husbands and fathers
were recognized only
by the singularity of their caps.
This is why, in 1980, these works
were found on the white skulls of the skeletons
of these men in their graves.

Yes, they bear the teethmarks of time:

the colors faded, yarn thin here and there.
But these wools, shorn, scoured, spun,
dyed and knitted into these forms,
triumphed over oxygen's appetite,
escaped accidents, indifference, and
acts of malice. These caps
worn each cold dawn of life and
borne into the deep hold of death,
these caps that testified
in the dark all those years,
these caps are here now
and still they proclaim:
You will know us by our art.

Mary Amato is a writer, musician, and teaching artist whose work has appeared in The Washington Post, Mothering, 100 Word Story, Muse, Teacher, Cicada, New Poets Review, and many more. Her published novels include the award-winning Guitar Notes, Open Mic Night at Westminster Cemetery, and Get Happy. She is the winner of many grants and awards including the Keisler Poetry Prize, the Maryland Library Association's Author Award, The Buckeye Book Award, The Rebecca Caudill Award, and more. She has been a featured speaker for The National Book Festival, the American Library Association, The National Council of Teachers of English, and many other national festivals and conferences. Read more about her on www.thrumsociety.com.

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