

# KATHERYN HOLT

*Blue*, 2018  
Mixed media on canvas, 40 x 60 in



COURTESY DESTA GALLERY

# JULIO MONTEIRO MARTINS

## At Sea

—Translated from the Italian by  
Donald Stang and Helen Wickes

I am drowning among  
totally unskilled sailors  
and drunks.

I chose  
this improbable ship,  
with its unseemly bunch  
who laughed at the rigging:  
instead of a crew,  
a party.

I was homeless  
when I arrived at the wharf,  
my cardboard suitcase  
falling apart.  
Each of my possessions  
craved a drawer,  
a shelf on which  
to rest.  
Nevertheless,  
my eyes  
searched for  
a necklace of lights,  
and I found it.

I had been told  
that the cleverest  
learn everything about water  
so as never to feel it  
creeping into their shoes.  
They, however, my companions  
in misfortune,  
had failed to learn.  
And I, worst of all.

Now,  
thanks to our actions,  
in the midst of our chatter  
we are going to the bottom.  
It took only  
a trivial storm,  
a ripple, and we are thrown  
into disarray.

The boiler exploded,  
and in the darkness  
this final bonfire  
warmed our hands.  
Someone brought wine,  
another a drum,  
and the crew of madmen  
sang, laughed,  
with the water at our waists.

We knew we were near  
to knowing  
what sailors  
are not allowed to know:  
the depths of the sea,  
the corals,  
the ancient wrecks.

Watching their faces—  
euphoric,  
inflamed,  
in the darkness of night—  
I finally understood  
(I had little time to do so)  
that all of them

had prepared themselves  
for a life  
of navigation in the vertical,  
pretending  
not to be the best  
sailors.  
In this way they also amused  
themselves  
disguising courage  
as incompetence.

I understood also  
that I had instinctively chosen  
the right ship:  
At the port I had been alone,  
standing on the pavement,  
watching those people.  
And then  
I followed  
the most agile strides  
that I saw,

the most joyful ones,  
the only ones  
that seemed to dance.

This poem is from the final poetry collection of **Julio Monteiro Martins**, *La grazia di casa mia*, published in 2013 by Rediviva Edizioni (Milan). Martins (1955–2014) was born in Niterói, Brazil, but lived for many years in Italy. In Italy he was director of the online journal *Sagarana*. Almost none of his work has been published in English.

**Donald Stang** is a longtime student of Italian. His translations of Italian poetry have appeared or are forthcoming in *Carrying the Branch* (Glass Lyre Press), *Silk Road*, and elsewhere.

**Helen Wickes**'s work has appeared or is forthcoming in *AGNI*, *Atlanta Review*, and *Boulevard*, among many others. She has published four books of her poetry and contributes Italian translations to [thedreamingmachine.com](http://thedreamingmachine.com).