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Feather River

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Feather River

In late May we'd drive north
for the shad run, launch
the john boat at Oroville
and sit for hours, anchored,
letting our red and white
leaded flies drift with the current,
jerking our rod tips occasionally.
The gauze of cottonwood trees
floated through the air,
landing on the river's vicious
swirls: "If you fall in, you'll drown
instantly," my father said.
I was eight or nine,
wore a cowboy, hat and an orange
life preserver, nestled
my blue-jeaned butt
on the hot aluminum seat in the bow.

Taking me fishing was meant to be
an act of love, I knew that
even then, but my father
was always exasperated in a way
I've only lately come to recognize.
He had no patience for my inevitable
birdnest of monofilament,
my dreamy gaze toward the bank.
And now, when my daughters
accidentally knock their cereal
from the table and the bowl
goes somersaulting
to the floor, or when they wreck
their bikes, again,
I sympathize with his lack
of sympathy. I'm furious
at childhood gracelessness,
more aggravated by broken spokes
than compassionate for bloody knees.

So, is it some genetic character defect,
this lack of charity?
I feel guilty, as my father must have,
but helpless, too. I lie awake
while my wife keeps time
with her soft snoring, and pray
to the God I don't believe in
to scour my septic heart,
to make it bright as a shad
exploding with a silver
shimmer before it vanishes,
with a splash, into the cold green river.

by David Starkey