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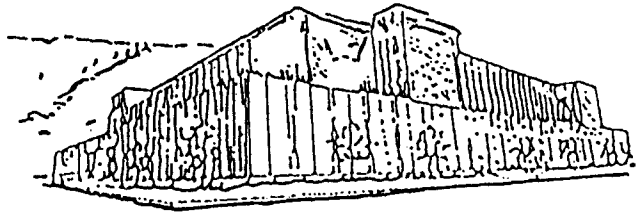
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BANE

by

James Hart

B.A. Lewis-Clark State College, 1995

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

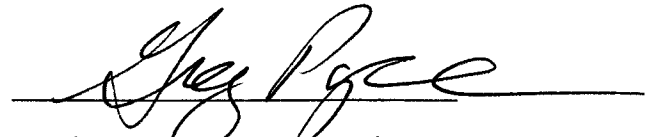
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CONTENTS

At The Moment, Doing What We Can	1
NATURAL SCIENCE	
Signs	2
Hush	4
Darwin's Childhood	5
Resurrection	6
Another Word For It	8
Bane	9
Moonstruck	11
Looking For Thoreau	13
Big Bucks	14
Listening to Coyote	15
Natural Science	16
LOOKING DOWN	
The Study of Collapse	18
Dining At The Space Needle, Seattle, WA, 1995, Missing Jerry Garcia	19
At The Institute	20
Salvation	21
Trust	23
Looking Down	24
At The Power Plant	26
The Volunteer	27
Meaning Well	28
The Function Of Shock	29
Lucky	30

WHAT SINS MATTER

Lessons	31
The Hunting Trip	32
Walking The Dark	33
Ode To Four A.M.	35
Taking It	37
What Sins Matter	38
Plain Speech	40
The Slaughterhouse	42
Catch & Release	44

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Poetry Northwest:

"The Slaughterhouse," "Walking the Dark," "The Volunteer,"
"The Function of Shock," and "What Sins Matter"

Talking River Review:

"Listening to Coyote"

"Ode to Four A.M." is indebted to Edward Hirsch's poem

"Four A.M." (*Earthly Measures*, Knopf, 1994)

I would like to thank my teachers, past and present,
and my wife and son, who lived through it all.

AT THE MOMENT, DOING WHAT WE CAN

I'm astonished: no moons
of such color fall to sea where I come from,

no flocks of ungulate birds
circle out in dense, unnamed patterns,

grieving for love around here.
Recall this sad intoxicant's last words

before he learns his lesson (even now
the air around him, a delicate ash,

a grandiosity of waxwings burst from alder,
terrified, lightning-induced).

Take a stand against resolve of such magnitude,
let your fist of hearts collapse.

See the destitute honeybees drift above us,
consequent, faceless as stars.

NATURAL SCIENCE

SIGNS

For all we know it's serious:
outside in a thunderstorm, fighting like this,
lightning headed our way,

a squall of cold rain and hail pelting us
already, the air electric
along the back of our necks,

blood charged with the question
of who's arguing again, neither one of us
willing to say.

And when, after chasing each other
respectively around the yard,
the silence is long enough, we see

we are standing in the bog
of last year's garden, barefoot, breathing hard,
shirts soaked. That we should go inside

is obvious, yet neither of us moves.
That lightning strikes the top of an old pine
behind our neighbor's house,

that he and his pale wife rush out,
see us wrestling in the mud. For all they know
this could mean trouble: the tree,

the powerline, the lunatics next door,
at it again, one on top of the other, lips close,
at this point not saying a word.

HUSH

Magpies still in field grass,
hushed, listening. Juncos stare at themselves
in the watering pool. Waxwings shun

the ungilded flickers, the yard flutters to silence-
I cannot believe this calm. I've watched
these birds for hours in this picture window,

now bats come, the tom cat coils at the fence,
soft and gray, like this spring's weather.
I don't know much about birds, why none listens

to the stellar jay alarm. Perhaps
I only imagine them still. The cat parts
the long grass at the property line, the pure

animal grace of intent. Magpies light
the split rails, whiskers tremble,
Juncos stare at themselves in the watering pool.

DARWIN'S CHILDHOOD

At twelve, he likes to watch,
hidden among the trees.

Perhaps the birds know why
he comes here

better than he does,
but why is not important to them.

Not carp kissing the surface,
the glimmering twin koi

someone left here, the lovers
in pond grass, whispering.

They watch the stray cats
at the waterline now, pretending

to fish, the seed on the bank
where a boy was.

RESSURECTION

I see your garden's come back,
after weeks of tender worry,

calling camas to bay by the split rails,
coaxing a bed of blue columbine

to walk, the trellis and glass
making photographs of you

in my picture window. Your hair's
gone south in wind and soil,

the rake you hold a claw
of antlers cut from a small buck

shot out of season,
long before those flowers grew

to bend in waves to any wind,
when whitetails breached the yard

you wrapped in razor wire.

I watched its blades cut hide and fail,

your garden go to graze,
hurt bucks hide in moon shadows

licking new wounds,
until dawn, when you saw me

through the broken glass
of your kitchen window, holding columbine

I found scattered on your garden walk,
in skeins.

ANOTHER WORD FOR IT

I wrote *kissing spreads disease*
across the chalkboard, two-hundred times,
in cursive. I pounded erasers,
coughing, covered in chalk dust.
She called my mother, too.
Shame. Water to Jesus perhaps.
A step I didn't anticipate. No.
I am still unconfessed.
I asked a question. She leaned over me.
Her breast, my shoulder, ponderous,
astonishing. Even now
I see wheat fields thinking of her.
Bolts of soft white silk.
Miss Hoffman, sixth grade, 1973,
Victory Christian School.
Our cheeks brushed. I couldn't help myself.
The others were merciless.

BANE

They waited in hedgerows, behind cars,
next to the garbage cans: the Morton's Weimaraner,
Ray, the Pettijohn's twin, intractable Chows,
Buster and Porkchop. Good dogs, really, they said,
until I'd ride by with the news,
my two-speed, kick-back Schwinn, listing,
blistered with rust. I'd roll one-hundred
and twenty-three *Times Chronicles* tight as they'd go,
net a penny apiece tossing them onto porches,
and they welcomed me: backs bristled,
front legs stiff, lit with whatever hate
some dogs have for paperboys; their eyes glowed,
and spit flecked the edge of their mouths.
Even when Mr. Pettijohn whistled, only their ears
turned away from me. What they knew about fear
they could smell on my skin. I complained,
refused to deliver, but no one listened.
For weeks I thought about baseball bats, bricks
or river stones. I imagined beating the air
from their lungs. O the dogs I have loved
would be haunting me now, had I hurt them so,
and could I look in the eyes of the old shepherd
stretched on the rug in front of me, big as a goat,
a dog I've known ten years?

It was the Weimaraner I counted on,
and he came, shamelessly, took the biscuit
into his mouth. The Chows circled,
licking their chops, unsure of their noses,
wanting what the Weimaraner had,
what they had coming, too.

MOONSTRUCK

Don't write *moon*, you say.

One of my favorites, a kiss I give myself
just saying it: *moon*. Disingenuous campfires,

critical mass in the waterworks
of thinking like that.

The moon lingers over people like you,

tilted with regret.

Can't say *moon*, anymore. Not that I'd want to.

If I said the honeymoon is over,

that the glorious trollycars of enemy planets
have united against us
and I think we should be alarmed,

moon might seem diminished then, a planetesimal,
an asteroid in the universe of suns.

A disc, an orb, a desolation, a crescent of cheese.

A luminous God watching over us. A promise,
a threat. The metal silver, once,
in the lost jargon of alchemy. Drink moonshine

over a moon of days. Make your face into a moon,
taken by loss. Catch moonfish in a pond.

See moonflowers blossom in its opalescent light.

Plant moonseed, harvest moonwart for a curse,
harvest moon. Moon over the heart's tundra,
the lunacy of moon-madness, all of us, affected by tides.

LOOKING FOR THOREAU

Somewhere, a forest perhaps,
the wood in which you were lost once

as a child, your mother calling,
no answer, sky dark

over the mountains, and you—
no coat, soaked with creek water,

perched on a burnt stump
in a cedar grove on nobody's map,

feeling air rush into your lungs,
your heart beat, something

in the trees, your mother and father,
shouting, far off, frightened

out of their wits, not knowing
you're alive, that you're listening.

BIG BUCKS

I killed one, once.
My uncle wanted to make them,
and he tried everyday
I can remember to do that.

He smiled as some passed
under the oaks we hid among
and I drew my bow.
He had bought the land we hunted

to build a shopping mall,
another clutter of tract homes.
In two weeks crews would level
the place. He loved to hunt them.

He said we should take some
before they bulldoze the trees.
I remember thinking *I can't miss.*
I could hear them breathe.

LISTENING TO COYOTE

Night-bane, chaser of breath,
walker of rim rock

and vacant lot, child of no god
fool enough to claim you,

wound-maker, licker of bone,
target of starlight and hard reports,

perpetual jester with one good joke
on the food chain,

seeker of stench, harasser of cow,
priest of stubble and dumb mistake,

defacto landlord of the canyon,
tongue-thief, stranger to mercy,

marvelous half-breed of pure contempt,
throat peeled to moons,

breaker of all rules but one,
you shimmer in the blood.

NATURAL SCIENCE

1.

Late night,
Lochsa fog flooding the highway,

driving east, home,
slowly, the Bitterroots.

In my lights
the larch look frosted,

eyes glitter, glow, disappear,
road signs indecipherable.

2.

I drift asleep somewhere past Apgar,
awaken miles up river

without remembering the road.
The gas guage offers assurances.

The clock ticks down in the dash.
No music, the engine hums

its own dull tune. The wheel turns
numb in my hands.

3.

At Shotgun Creek,
fog thins over the highway.

I stop, shut off the engine,
the lights,

walk to the edge of the woods.
The stump steams,

hisses, soaking it in. I look,
listen: wind, breathing,

rustling in the trees, my heartbeat,
the clatter of stars.

LOOKING DOWN

THE STUDY OF COLLAPSE

"So late at night,
so late in the twentieth century."
—Andrei Codrescu

It's the Hindenburg, again, drifting past Trenton,
silent as a moon. Some point, some go about
their business. Some are already starting to run.

But what will become of those holding the gang ropes
when the fire starts? Will they stagger
in the absence of language, shout *run* when they mean *jump*,

never get out of the way? If we are not awake
for the accident, if we sleep past the death of the age,
forgive us. We are still compelled

by the qualities of fire, the announcer's inability
to articulate his grief over the radio.

For now let loss of speech signify great pain,

the loss of imperatives. The sight of dark shapes
we know are humans leaping to their deaths
will not stop us from looting the debris.

DINING AT THE SPACE NEEDLE, SEATTLE, WA, MAY 1995,
MISSING JERRY GARCIA

It's not you, Jerry Garcia, I pray for,
not the people stalled along sixth avenue,
looking for tickets, not those

who've come anyway: acid-freaks
in their Joseph's coats, pseudo-rastafarian
small-town girls leading tiny, heat-stunned dogs

down the sidewalk, unconcerned
with the heavily-armed policemen poking for dope
tossed behind garbage cans,

the young suspects stiff and tilted
against the concrete wall, listening to *Jesus*
spew from the mouth of a street preacher

bent on saving them from you.

And even now the concert's started,
the crowd below my window rushes the stage,

and I can see you, Jerry Garcia,
from ten stories high, playing music
I never listen to at home, where the lawns

are clipped, geometric, streets swept weekly
by machines, and no one lets a new dance
enter their bones.

AT THE INSTITUTE

A long time ago I taught two men
how to play basketball. Larry was fat
42, shaken with palsy. Brian came missing
both hands, a terrible accident.
He was the comic. I was 19, sent by my church
to minister to the retarded.
That's what I called them then.
Even though I knew little about basketball
I thought I could teach them jump shots,
lay-ins, a little defense.
Nothing difficult, strictly volunteer.
But Larry couldn't shoot, and his head shook
all the time, from side to side,
as if he'd seen something once so horrible
he couldn't stop saying no to it.
Brian told bad jokes, used both arms to dribble,
couldn't go left if he'd wanted to.
Why did the chicken cross the road?
Not to see a man cry after making a hook shot
with no hands, and his friend join him,
how they held each other, shouting at first,
how their ecstasy became like grief,
and they couldn't go on. I sat down on the ball,
watched them cry until the attendants came.
It was the difference between us.

SALVATION

Here is my sister, Jane, 45 today, on the phone from California. We haven't talked like this for a couple of years, a decade perhaps.

She is a Christian now, again, after the Lord's long absence from her life, more than a decade of gin and tonic, amphetamine, marriage to a man she came to recognize as someone she didn't know. She talks about her demons, becoming a minister. She says God

has given her the gift of knowledge, the power to exorcise, all the right words. *I don't want you to go to Hell, she says, you're my brother.*

I say *Well, I don't think I will*, but I don't say why. We are almost identical, ten years apart, impatient, quick to anger, prone to depression.

We are both slow to forgive. She might argue this, or admit it. She might point to our differences. We both have demons, but her's have names,

voices, presence, they are tangible as a shadow
in the hall. They are out to get her, but
they don't care about me, she says,

without saying why. As she describes her demons
I think about my own. What do I call them?
Depression, mania, a fear of resolve?

The need to fill a page?

These are symptoms, she claims. Possession.
Another story about loss, redemption,

I think, but I don't say this.

I am not as certain of Heaven anymore,
but I don't want to upset her.

We are much the same, my sister and I.

One of us believes in the Word. One of us thinks
that's all there is.

TRUST

When she dropped me off in Denver
I thanked her, warned against picking up
strangers on the road. She smiled,
drove north toward her parents' home

in Boulder, where they were waiting,
she'd said. In Nevada she'd asked me to drive,
climbed in the back seat, went to sleep there.
She was my age, maybe twenty,

pretty enough to think about, steering
her Volkswagon all night through Colorado.
When I pulled into a rest stop
outside Parachute hours later, the shifting

startled her. She gasped, sat upright,
our eyes met for a moment in the mirror.
Inside the restroom I wondered if she'd wait,
how far we had to go.

LOOKING DOWN

The first time was in Oregon.
AB Frame-Tec. We were stacking
fifteen-foot laminated beams
on a third-floor apartment house
along the Willamette River.
Joel was hard that day; he'd worked
without saying anything more
than *goddamn* or *christ-almighty*
jesus when beams didn't set right.

Often, he'd talk about some long
past, unavoidable heartbreak
he suffered in the seventies,
her body just so, but not that
afternoon. We had lunch up there,
watching the river, looking down
at other men fighting the mud.
We weren't lucky-- fifty feet
is enough to kill anyone.

They knew. The wood was rain-slick
and Joel slipped, cursed, recovered,
cursed again, losing his balance—

even now I can see his face:
a man who knows what's happening
to him, and has no word for it.

AT THE POWER PLANT

Next to me, arms and shoulders pumping
a ten pound mallet up and down
in the light of the Pettibone lift,
Dave worked while I hung by
in the manbasket with extra she-bolts
and timbers, my tenth night on the job
at the power plant. For once
it was not me the foreman raged at,
checking his second hand.
For once I was chosen to stay high
and true forms with a come-a-long
and did not work the pour that night.
When the crane boom failed
I heard a sound like an old door opening,
saw the men below look up at the dark.
They didn't know which way to run.

THE VOLUNTEER

Shouted out of the arc welder's pit
you ride the crane ball casually upward,
over the unfinished walls of the power plant,
past arc-lit faces of workers,
into the storm of grinding and fine dust
from the finishing crew. At the 2200 level
you're ten stories over the turbine pit,
among carpenters, laborers and masons,
not one of whom will climb in pitch black
like you, walk the outside wall
under the parapets, there to rope off
and repair a crumbling rock pocket before it cracks
and tumbles two-hundred feet to the water.
Now illuminated by landing lights,
tungsten-beamed sonsabitches, your sweat drips
like sweat always drips, no sweeter at all
at a journeyman's wages, each drop riding the light
as you look down unhindered for once
by the vertigo you denied.
You're tied to a steel beam by a safety line,
not thinking tensile strength,
or time, gravity and distance, but how easy
and for a moment how wonderful it would be,
over the dam pool, out of the light, unfastened.

MEANING WELL

Once, in Arkansas, paused at a stop sign,
an intersection of back roads behind a chicken plant,

I saw a woman and a boy on brand new scooters,
coming my way. I could have turned left

in plenty of time, but the woman seemed unsteady,
so I waited, switched my headlight on to be safe.

When she saw me, waiting there, her mouth dropped,
she let go of the handlebars, slammed face down

on the pavement in front of me.

I heard the air burst out of her lungs.

The boy screamed *mother* and let go, too, just behind.
I did what I could. Someone came and I shouted

for an ambulance. A man stopped, directed traffic,
set flares. I tossed a blanket over the woman,

got the boy to sit down. A siren rose in the distance.
I lifted my motorcycle out of the dirt

where I'd dropped it. A man asked if I was involved.
I looked at the woman bleeding in the road. I lied.

THE FUNCTION OF SHOCK

Often it's some other memory, the past
rising wet from a road, and the glass glitters
like diamonds: the pavement
strewn with ornamental parts, the cold shoulder
after the long flight through, what do I say
about those moments I can't account?
Do I remark how it seemed slow motion
but really was *snap*, like this?
I never thought time depended on so much,
how in the car's half-twist and roll
over roll I felt nothing, saw nothing
but shattered light, heard a familiar voice
screaming *God* falsetto.
Later, after minutes or hours
in the calm the injured assume,
I traced my trajectory back to the wreck.
Beyond the upturned Chevy, in that quiet
before the ambulance arrived,
I remembered my grandmother seizing her chest.
I listened to the car steam,
my sister call out from the ruins, a thin wail
under the wheels.

LUCKY

At twenty-one I thought nothing
of racing my motorbike
down Skyline Road above Berkeley,
sixty, sixty-five, drunk, no helmet
One of those memories I guess I'm lucky
to shudder at later, in the middle
of the night. They come from nowhere
and more frequently these days,
these recollections, now that I'm a father,
married ten years. What was I thinking?
And why does the memory of highsiding
my last motorcycle haunt me now,
after all this time? Perhaps
the body knows, but it's not saying.
Between joy and terror is a small boy
standing in the road.

WHAT SINS MATTER

LESSONS

Watching the rod arc over the waterfall,
his hands fumble the line
into an array of possible answers, fish on,
too close to the edge, I'm fighting the impulse
to unfasten myself from the rocks
I'm rooted to, take his rod in one hand,
pull him on shore with the other,
like my father did when I was ten
on the American. I move upstream to the waterfall,
in the plunge pool, chest-deep below him.
He won't let go. Like me,
he'd rather leap into the river still reeling.
He doesn't know what I'm wading for.

THE HUNTING TRIP

After I fell off the truck ramp
and broke my hand
in three places, I felt no pain
at all that day.

The nurse was quite taken with me:
her sympathy
extended to a kiss. My father
said *no, stay here*
while the men loaded our truck
with Lucky
and scotch from the garage,
cases of courage.

She put her lips to my forehead.

I had no regrets.

In the woods that night he had one
after another
with the other men. He allowed
me to have one,
too, and bellowed to the hunters
there's no stouter
boy alive, a true he-man
among he-men,
only twelve, already tough,
tested by love.

WALKING THE DARK

Remember those nights I walked the dark
hallways, feeling my way to the john, arms out,
fingers brushing the walls
like cat's whiskers? I'd stand by the door
and listen to your voice murmuring
plans for a better boat, a better town,
less rage and bad weather.
This one will work out, you said, smoking
your tenth last cigarette, mother
mumbling her dim approval,
half-asleep. Remember Salinas, Monterey,
that rotted gingerbread north coast
house, the mouth of the Klamath River,
the cabin on the edge of the woods?
That was before you took sick,
before you sold the boat for the bills,
traded the nets for that fifty-three Chevy,
the sea for those don't-answer-the-phone-tonight
rooms we cluttered with boxes and fear.
Father, no one but you knew
that old Chevy could fly over the road
like a gull's shadow, drunk on velocity and pain,
asking roadsigns for mercy,
tracing a terminal map to the coast.
I don't blame you for giving in
to what's in the blood: I remember
passing your door on the way to my room,

the hall half-lit by the flick of a match,
your eyes caught mine for a moment,
the way my own son's do now
as he stumbles the dark hallway to the john,
sees the light of my smoke, stands there,
silent, half-asleep, watching my face
rising and falling, the cigarette like a lighthouse
sweeping a wreck.

ODE TO FOUR A.M.

Again, the unholy hour,
time of apostasy,
least resolution,
when the night turns
dark enough
abyss seems accurate to say.
When the clock
ticks like footsteps,
when fools rush in.
No trains yet, no
garbage truck in the alley
banging garbage cans.
Even the dogs are calm now,
after all night
barking at vagrants,
and the vagrants, too,
asleep among the trees.
The luminous, stark hands
of my wristwatch
can't say anything
more than now all over again.
Hour I live through
every night these days,
you are absolute, intoxicant,
almost bearable.

Soon, shadows will pass
my window on the way
to the railyard,
and I will be chastened
by regrets.

With daylight trains
will come,
the lumbering freights
from Minnesota,
the non-stop,
passenger express from
nowhere particular,
empty, a matter of time.

TAKING IT

When I went back I staggered inside.
The boy who stalked me
liked to lock and unlock his Buck knife
behind my back.
He waited after school,
chased me until my lungs burned
and my legs collapsed.
That Fall, my father lay dying,
alone in our living room,
and I rode the bus all over Sacramento,
wanting not to be anywhere.
The week after
I went back to school. He caught me
in the hall between classes.
This time I stood there,
fists against my chest, taking it.
I could have fought him,
at least protected myself.
I heard voices shouting *fight back*
and hit him. After awhile
he stopped punching, put his hands down.
He knew I could have run
if I had wanted to.

WHAT SINS MATTER

Ordering the death of my son's cat,
the gray, lanky orphan we saved from the pound

for six bucks and a promise to fix,
I remember my father in a hospital bed,

hands folded over his chest, as though
his life is the life now leaving.

I could have touched him. I could have whispered
his name. I could have held

the hands stained from cigarettes, kissed
the torn, blunt fingers worn years

keeping us one more month in the house.
Instead, I waited next to the elevator,

turned at the words, *it's over*, went home
and watched TV. After five years of watching him die

it seemed useless to grieve. I could say
the burden lifted for all of us,

that it was, as my mother said, *for the best*.
Why my throat locks for a cat

and not for my father— why this absolute attendance
to breathing? I touch him until the eyes close,

all trembling stops, and the assistant tells me *it's over*.
Had I known what sins matter, I would have gone

to my father's room. I would have touched him.

I would have whispered something clearly impossible.

PLAIN SPEECH

The last time I saw my father
I cursed him for dying on me.
Screamed *fuck you*, over and over.

I meant it. At fifteen I confused death
with abandonment, suffering with loss.
There was nothing I could do.

At 49 he was paralyzed, bloated with edema,
speechless. He couldn't say anything,
if he had wanted to. He stared,

pathetic, helpless in his hospital bed,
in the living room of our apartment
in California. No one told me

he would die soon. No one said *Be kind
to your father, you might not see him again.*
For years I blamed my mother

for not telling me what would happen.
I used to think it would've been different
if she had. Afterward, I hitchhiked

all over America feeling sorry for myself.
Self-pity, regret. I screamed
until the words ran together in my mouth,

and my legs collapsed: *Fuck You.*

What the head says when the heart is speechless,
what hearts endure.

THE SLAUGHTERHOUSE

Sometimes in the vacant lot
behind the slaughterhouse, my father
tied a wooly worm with a broken shank
to a tippet as thin as hair.
I'd watch his fingers weave fine knots
as though he were fishing
the American River instead of a field
of broken bottles and dry grass
lacing the ribs of dead animals. I believed
there were ghosts in the slaughterhouse.
Once, I held my father's sledge,
tried to lift it above my head as he watched me,
silent. He showed me how to hold it,
use the weight of it, learn the rhythm of his work.
I was ten, still years away from the killing
floor, the loose stance over the stun pit,
the passing heads of cows. He said *the hammer's
a mercy we grant to the dumb*. One night
we went to the field with the bamboo rod
he cherished, the parting gift of his father,
and he stood there, staring
at the dim light of the slaughterhouse,
the rod trembling in his hand as he smoked.
Though I waited for him to cast,
he held it out to me, as he would a tool,
threw his cigarette into the field
where the cherry shattered, bright as stars

among the bones and glass. I remember
how he kneeled, arms around my shoulders,
heart beating against my back,
and we began to cast together, the thin line
floating out toward the slaughterhouse,
both of us feeling the weight of it,
the dark, pure, hovering weight.

CATCH & RELEASE

At dusk I walked back to the waterfall,
watched the sun slip
from the cedars along the river,
and the river darken.
Earlier, I'd taken a cutthroat there,
in the deep water beyond the falls.
Walking back I regretted it:
I never eat fish, and wild trout
are rare these days.
When my line went slack and it flashed
into the sun, I knew.
It rested in my hand, breathing the river.
I am still afraid of dying too soon.