

Fish

by Richard Hague

My first was a nightcat, mud-yellow, spined,
hauled from the basement of the river
in Steubenville. It stabbed my palm,
marked me with a warning
punctuation.

Then a bass, fingerling, from a strip-mine pond,
slender and bright as a case knife's blade,
its juttied lower jaw
ripped by the hook.

How it lingered a moment
when I tossed it back,
as if cursing me
as it caught its breath
and mine.

And the one in the mind, forever
uncaught, vivid and immortal
before the altar of my myth:
a lunker shovelhead, snagged
just above some old wicket dam upriver,
wild country on either shore,
no houses for miles,
me in a leaking boat near dawn,
fog closing in—
and the sweet singing of the reel
as it runs my line
quick in that dying night.