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Owen's Shark

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Owen's Shark

I

When young Harold caught it, reeling it in,
raucous, incredulous laughter soon ceasing
as his father helped him land the shark,
then beat its head in, hammering, hammering
until the great grey length of it lay still,

no one could imagine that later, unable
to resist another peek at triumph
before bedtime, he'd find the shark
standing upright on its tail, alive
and menacing as he ran to Wilfred,

begging him come see it, which soon
he did, the boys later convincing their father
to let the fish go, take it back to the bay
where for weeks they saw it swimming
in the cold swift waters of the Irish Sea.

II

"It is a great life," Wilfred later wrote,
oblivious to "the ghostly glimmering of guns,
the hollow crashing of the shells," the front
feeling like "neither France nor England,
but a kind of paddock where the beasts
are kept a few days before the shambles,"

as he was, dying a week before war's end,
leading his platoon across a muddy canal
they'd captured, then lost, then captured again
without him, who had reminded his mother,
"There is no danger, or if any, it will be
well over before you read these lines."

III

And so the shark swam off the bow
of the *Astraea*, Greek goddess of justice,
launched on the day of Wilfred's birth,
but cruising now off the coast of Africa,
the armistice signed, while Harold was sure

the man who sat in his cabin before him
was indeed Wilfred, silent and smiling,
his eyes "alive with the familiar look
of trying to make me understand,"
though what it was he didn't know

in the warm waters north of Alexandria,
where legend has it that a shark
escorting any ship is thought a sign
of a good day's catch, harbor nets teeming
with the pale, bruised bodies of the livid dead.