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## Catching a Ray

Charles Hartman

Connecticut College, [cohar@conncoll.edu](mailto:cohar@conncoll.edu)

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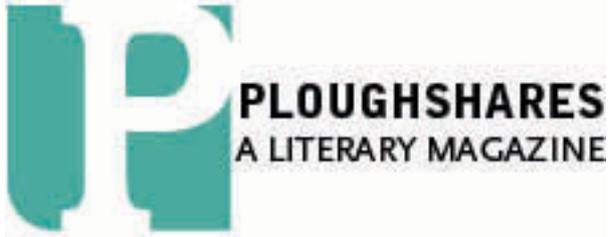
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*Charles O. Hartman*

## Catching A Ray

### I

Where the gray beast of the water  
 cornered itself into harbor,  
 that mouth amid whiteness  
 gasped on the raw deck  
 a secret thrust from beneath  
 the brittle hide of the sea

— This

surfaces again as I lurch  
 awake speechless and wet  
 in the gray dawn, caught  
 in the webbed sheets:

the ordinary

lead scales of the flounder  
 spilled out of the net  
 around my landsman's shoes;  
 that lividness spilled out  
 shocking among them; and how  
 nothing speaks but the air  
 is full of petitions, laments  
 a routine catastrophe, grinding  
 of gears gone wrong  
 down in the waves' heavy  
 housing. It wasn't this  
 I came out here to see.

## II

Suddenly no one wants to be  
 where he is. We are all  
 (the fisherman and I, the ray,  
 these dumb flustered flounder)  
 embarrassed, some of us ready  
 to die of embarrassment;  
 none of us prepared for the moment  
 to say what might have been  
 said to correct a day gone bad,  
 writhing on the dark boards.  
 We who can breathe breathe  
 in the shallows of the sky,  
 gaping. This one on the deck —  
 eyeless, like a half-  
 remembered face, refusing  
 to finish itself

(whose flight  
 has been a kind of glimmering  
 supple vocabulary, the right  
 phrase even now caught on the tip  
 of a wing that flexes in a last  
 eloquence, the mouth trying  
 in silence as a throat tries  
 to croak waking words  
 to tell what has been  
 dreamed)

— in the end  
 leaves in the undiluted air  
 a leather corpse and, when I turn  
 my eyes away, an image  
 seared against the sky.

III

Are these things meant to come  
lurching out of the nowhere  
that is the sea, to break  
the surface tension guarding  
world from world, to bring  
everything right out on deck  
where the gunnels, that saved us  
from the sea, have locked us in  
to look at it, just as it is?  
You say, Why should I carry  
such a thing around?

Lying back, you know  
the possible corrections:  
to throw the witness back  
into the sea, or yourself,  
to sink back into sleep,  
saying, It's early yet.

Somehow the white belly,  
the black boards of the deck  
and gunnels, the seaweed-green  
slick boots of the fisherman,  
and even the slowly silvering  
scales of dying flounder  
catching an unpromised fire  
between the gray dawns  
of sky and the closed sea:  
these colors fasten me  
where I am; and the deck that bears  
everything it can bear  
rides a little closer to the waves.