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Catching a Ray

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Catching a Ray
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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
gased 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.