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Catching a Ray

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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.
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.