

## A FISHERIES SCIENTIST LOSES A PILE PERCH

### I

No wind. Pilings creak, quietly  
bearing their load  
of timber and decay.  
Predators flower, tubeworms and anemones  
distending pale tentacles.  
Year by year, silvery runs of chinook and coho  
failed and this cannery dwindled.  
Creosote smudges into timber-grey.  
Rain drifts down, slowly  
burnishing everything silver.

A man punctures his hook-point through the thicker  
ring of an earthworm till its flesh bulges  
then pulls closed, clasping the shank  
in the wake of the barb.  
Through the worm twice more,  
a spasm knotted over on itself,  
firm on its hook.

(stanza break)

A boy looks down,  
past the man's head, the man kneeling to his labor,  
each knee sodden with rain water wicked from planks,  
his head lower than the waist of the boy,  
the bait in the man's hand, the man doing it right.  
A silver flash, vague in the clear dark: a pile perch flutters  
on the hook, barb backed against bones  
of its mouth like a question  
lodged in a throat.

## II

The man lifts a pectoral fin,  
gentles the blade in line with fin ray and gill plate.  
Once through the skin it seems easy, pale meat  
parts almost eagerly. But vertebrae pinch  
the jack-knife in midmotion. Dull.  
Dull rain taps the man's neck, exposed to sky.  
Sawing. A crunch. The head of the perch tumbles,  
glinting through dark water.

The boy lifts the knife,  
settles its edge at the base of another pectoral flare.  
He grapples the fish and begins to butcher  
but the entire perch squirts from his grip,  
spurting into the salt-chuck when scales  
clogged his blade and the edge  
slipped along skin toughened with slime.  
The man jerks the knife away,  
guts the rest of the catch, opening bellies,  
every slice ripping slightly, rubbery intestine  
hockled in sprawls, deep red heart-meats revealed,  
aortas translucent and void of blood.