

~ First Place NMW 25 Poetry Prize ~

Harry Bauld

Alaska

Before I caught the salmon he caught my eye
in a Kenai stream, a nothing little trickle across the toe
of trail where long grass rustled on my run. I began to sing—
to alert the bear, *Human here*, as if notes could form a name
to protect me from the savage lip,
as if menace were something to shake like a hand.

But there was no bear, only my shaking hand
left over from the bear that stalks the mind's eye.
The rushes still quivered like an actor's lip
and I crept to the trail edge on tip toe
to find like Adam any new creature I could name
in the wilderness, any moving thing whose praise I might sing.

Of harms and this salmon I sing—
a sockeye with a dorsal fin big as my hand
flapping in six inches of puddle no map would bother to name
and wriggling toward home, his enigmatic eye
alight with breed's burden. I could touch it with my toe
and did, saw the fleshy bellows of its hooked lip

open and close in crossbite, a lip
like a kris, like a bow, like an instrument to sing
an aria of longing and return to help me toe
what little line I have been given. I raised my hand,
like a dutiful student or a voter signaling aye.
Then like an animal I forgot my own name,

knelt streamside not in prayer but in the name
of what made him come home. Don't give me any lip
about rainbows, regression, catch and release, an eye for an eye.
I bent close enough to hear what rivers and rushes sing
to a salmon, ear to those changes, my hand
given like a weed to the water, each refracted finger fat as a toe.

Then the ancient current like an undertow
pulled me down into the desire that has no civilized name;
with a bear's trick I scooped him with one hand
and wrestled him to the bank, dug two fingers in his lip
like a hook and heard him soughing what the dead sing,
clubbed him until he went sheet-blank in the eye.

I pushed a stick through his lip and carried him home to sing
to my people of the hunter's eye, to hang him like mistletoe,
our secret names written in the river in my trembling hand.