

2015

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Recommended Citation

Munro, Peter (2015) "A Fisheries Scientist Suffers the Flood to Come," *Birmingham Poetry Review*: Vol. 42, Article 66.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.library.uab.edu/bpr/vol42/iss2015/66>

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Peter Munro

A Fisheries Scientist Suffers the Flood to Come

1

Twice each day a revival of salt, the sea
rising tidewise under a layer of fresh water,
replenishing every name in the bestiary
that is Katlian River, recharging
the estuary as the stream splays
across its marsh, nursery to dog and coho smolt,
out-migrants riding down from tributary
and feeder creek, leaving behind tiny ribbons of silver
screened from sight, hidden under the glimmer
that series blades of sword ferns, a green light
slipping through the shifting levels of leaves
pavilioned by devil's club, those broadly
disheveled tiers tapped slow, struck staccato
under drizzle, a mist endlessly gill-netted
by spruce needles and lichen hanging in veils,
the caught water beading into crystal, the droplets
knocking among huckleberry bushes rooted to nurse logs,
their dark fruit sprayed up from carcasses of trees
cleaving to the forest floor, dorsals shaggy with growth,
massive as leviathans surfacing to blow emerald
where aqua stains the murk, where mushrooms breach,
where Swainson's thrushes ring out in full-throated fury,
where ruby crowned kinglets bolt and glint and blur,
winging through luminous shallows of hemlock, where,
shimmering up from some nameless deep, a silence
molts as thorn and moss and rain and then runs off
to beget wealth upon the marsh, detritus
washed down to marry into those fecund grounds

that serve only briefly as nursery
to smolts of humpback salmon, brief
because humpies never tarry anywhere,
darting through such short lives,
those migrants that survive.

2

A boy skiffs to this estuary all summer.
He casts across tideflats summer after summer.
He quarries prism-clear water for dolly varden trout.
At the close of season he preys on cohos, working
just below the higher margins of the salt marsh,
pushing so far upstream he nearly reaches
huckleberries where they salt themselves darkly
through the dark columned among Sitka spruce.
He feels an inbound tide ferry salt,
the sea rifting apart pea-gravel
from the lighter fresh water sliding over, the layers
parsed by a meniscus that skins between domains.

3

The surface current eases. Eddies pulse more gently.
Flow spreads and thins and diverts.
As if threading capillaries, Katlian River
slowly runnels into cut-channels, isolating tuffets
islanded all through the expanse of marsh grass.
Buried under silence, the river hisses,
kissing higher up the bank by increment
as the tide sounds the shore.

4

Shifting on the gravel bar
where he'd grounded her on the ebb,
the skiff slews, lifts, and swings,
carried downstream on a catenary of mooring line.

The boy gathers his tackle and scurries to her cleat,
a yellow cedar beached on its side, its roots
like Kraken tentacles reaching in a flurry that looms
three times his height, wooden statuary
of some secret, deep-sea beast frozen in its dying.
He hurries. He throws off half-hitches as if worried
that his own roots might be undereaten by the river,
a hundred centuries of cedar blown down in one storm.

5

Following slack at lower low water,
autumn dogs return to spawn.
But the boy is off to college. His estuary
doesn't even know he's gone, his feathered
attractors dried and stowed and stilled. Yet
amphipods creep along cut-channels in flood,
their chelae deftly sifting particulates,
separating quick from bereft
adrift in the brackish sloughs as if the child
waded among them as before.
And, yet, isopods sort through
the jade-dark carcasses of humpies,
gleaning proteins from ruins, picking
at the spawned-out where they'd washed up
watermarked and fungus-raddled, a ghost tribe
plucked of eye socket, ratted of caudal fin,
their unclean lips tattered ragged by a corruption
spoken as if the lost son wandered the courses
of their rivulets as before. And yet,
dogs run, the last wave of salmon pushing upcurrent
ahead of the hard setting of winter in this sanctuary
carved from snow-melt and ice-clear rain, taut roe
spilled and milted-over in redd after gravel redd,
embers igniting to glow orange and gestate
toward open ocean just as though the boy
had deployed his hooks as before,
offering fiery bright streamers

to burn tooth and mouth, his barbs
arcing to sweep the noses of buck and hen,
spawners finning toward an end is the beginning
they will never know.