

Dead Fish · *Daniel Halpern*

The pale arc of line feeds
into the green of the bank
and drops its fly into the shallows
of the stream in shadow
without sound. The line floats down
onto water and the current
takes it on, deeper.
Cast after cast the fly moves
in the afternoon
from one edge of the stream
to the other, snapped into place
as I move downstream, replacing
cast with the imagined weight
of a feeder trout unseen in current.
Shadows wobble the stream.
I see a fish hung
near the bank, gills at rest,
life only in buoyancy,
its resistance against current.
I move close, drop the fly
upstream so it floats back
over the dull eyes of the sleeper
fish. The fly floats past.
It won't move. It won't move
as I move closer. It hangs there
and won't move as I bring down the rock
with terrified force. In the explosion
of water I see the white fungus
it has grown, the sucker-mouth
and its full fish-body not trout.

It is imperfection I hate,
the age, the gamelessness of immobility,
the sudden decision to live.

When it floats to me
later, having fought to free itself
from branches of the stream trees,
I need its dead weight against my leg
to know ambition and its net, how it turns
on the object pursued,
dead now and my prize
as I cast in pale light,
the evening
pulled in on a fly.
and snakeskin failure suddenly peels away,
pulled off like cellophane from a cheap cigar.