A Good Fish

Jerk that bitch, urges my guide,
and I give my shuddering pole
a jerk, hooking the throat
of the first steelhead of my life.
Reel 'em, he mutters and revs the motor.
I horse my pole and reel and horse.
The boat’s mascot whines, her claws
clicking. Let it take some line.
My father, uncle, and cousin
are reeling. First fish! they shout,
and I shout, What a fighter!
A silver spine touches the air.
There, he points, a hen. And guess what?
She’s gonna join the club,
somehow spotting in that glimpse
the smooth place along her back
where a fin had been snipped.
He leans over the gunwale, dips a net,
and scoops her into the boat.
She is thick with a wide band
of fiery scales, slap-
slapping the aluminum bottom.
Welcome to the club, he says,
as he clobbers her once, and again,
and once more before she goes still.
A bleeder, he says, shaking his head
and handing her to me. I curl
a finger through a gill the way
you’re supposed to, determined
not to let her slip and flop
back to the river, a blunder
I’d never live down. A good fist.
Fish, I mean. A good fish.
On Turning One

A rumpled balance of bottom and belly,
my daughter stands—
and squeals as she shakes a sheet of wrapping paper
with one hand and everything she’s got,
the way a father shakes a pen
before he tries again to sign his name.
Earth has hauled its blue
back to the space of her beginning,
and once again, she’s a wobbling show
who sits heavily, teaching gravity
a lesson. She looks up—no,
we are not slipping through her hands
like yesterday’s balloon
dwindling to a little sperm
against the sky. We are

exactly where she keeps us
whirling. One year ago she lay
on a metal scale, in air
empty of body, crying her first cries.
The nurse said it was a good thing, the louder
the better, as I kept my hands from reaching
toward shivering fists, shut eyes, and skin
pale as a mist out of nowhere.

She raises an arm and squawks.
More paper? Ribbons? We add keys
and wallet as she starts to wail. Nothing
till a blur at the edge of sight, a zip
of iridescent pinprick
framed in the window, sipping sugar water.
She follows our gaze, growing quiet.
This we are certain of, this hummingbird
and its need for sweetness. Light
is what makes the red around its throat
shimmer, and we know, too,
the name for this place is gorget,
which sounds like gorgeous.
Near Wild Grasses

An afternoon like a loose grasp, a second skin
of breeze and blue, just right
for a stroll, and a snake sliding along
happens, by chance of scent or heat, to turn
into a yard where a girl is making
her pigtails wiggle, chatting
with the doll in her hands, returning its smile
with hers. She does not notice me
watching from the road
as a lipless mouth and eyes
like insect eggs, glassy fractures,
draw closer. Odds are
this notorious pattern of blotches
will bruise no one. The tail’s golden hive
will not rouse. This rattler
will almost certainly stay
secret, pulling its belly length
by length away through weeds
and wilder grasses. The girl will go on
shaping the sand of her sandbox
into a place where her doll can live.
And I will resume my walk,
struck only by the intimation
of earth’s unruly beauty. But I go
to the door, knock, and say,
Just to let you know,
and the mother asks the favor,
looking to her daughter.
As I hesitate, consider, and reconsider,
over strides her neighbor, Heinz,
an old German, a grandfather
who says, Oh ya, it’s a big one,
takes the shovel the mother brings
and barks, Stand back. The rattler
licks at the air with a tongue
flimsy as a creeper’s tendril.
   Gripping the shovel with both hands,
   he lunges and pins the head,
bearing down, and the rattler writhes
   like boiled water, like leaves
   in a thrashing gust. A crunch
as the blade pushes through, coils
   unwinding, still. The mother
   wants to see it dangling
like a half-filled inner tube
   before he carries it, head
   and body, into the brush.
Thanking me, the mother
   holds her daughter, who stands
   quietly, watching me
walk down their drive to the road
   that takes me past other yards.
   At the house with green doors,
I am home. My daughter squeals
   where she sits on the floor.
   As I bend to lift her into my arms,
she grabs my cheeks and sticks out
   her tongue, wanting to know this man
   who is becoming her father.
Five poems from *Not for Luck* (MSU Press, 2021)

She Gathers Rocks

wherever she goes,  
make that sticks—no,  
leaves—which is to say

heads of flowers and hips.  
More river than daughter,  
her arms fill with treasures

of every trail. Hold this,  
she says, to make us  
her buckets, her pockets

already clack-and-bristle  
full. It goes fast, they say,  
and it was going as they

said it, for it’s gone  
into us counting to five  
five times a day, saying,

“Time for bed!” “Time to wake!” “Time to leave!”  
And it’s gone into her

quickening eyes and stride  
that have left us  
among all the things

she once believed  
she couldn’t leave behind.
What Will Keep Us

_for Katie and Kelsea on the Save Our Coast Hike_

_The coast is never saved. It’s always being saved._
_—Peter Douglas_

Every pack-heavied step over sand hoppers
and weed-slicked rocks, through driftwood scatters
and the chill of tidewaters, over wooded headlands
as wildfires blaze north, south, east—every step says
stay. “I know mermaids aren’t real,” Kelsea says, “but Daddy,
look,” holding a whip of bull kelp whose lightbulb face
is a brown-green eye under ribbons of translucent hair.
We trudge our miles, stepping over oscillating
anemones in sunlit pools to pause at Hole-in-the-Wall
and let their tentacles tongue our dipped fingers.
And what’s this holographic sheen? Not the oil
we would keep from this shore, and not plastic,
we see, just a rainbow’s iridescence beaming
from a plant. Over teeth of barnacled rocks poking
from pools of sand crabs and sculpin, through foamy
maroons, emeralds, violets—tangles of surfgrass
and lettuce cushioning our steps—we hike, flies parting
briefly for our ankles as we take in the gleaming curve
of the otter’s tail as she rises and dives into clear
shallows, a pliable needle threading us and them, water,
land, and rippled sky where the numberless legs
of sandpipers twiddle their skittery flocks always
just ahead. For even the reek-slap of rot from a carcass
too far gone for ravens or gulls we hike, for our own
place among the eaters and the eaten pricking at us
as we see how wide the jawbone, how long and curved
the fangs. For the piping stutter of a crow-mobbed eagle
landing on a shaggy bough, for the lightest touches
of day mist on our skin and our headlamps
in the night lighting the tracks of slugs silvering up
every spruce trunk’s loom. We hike for what will keep us
    if we keep it. On a bare stretch of sand ahead, a boulder
splits into two bear cubs whose dark heads swivel our way
    before they turn as one toward the woods and lope
out of sight, to go on in the multitudinous dream we need
to be beyond our reach. Out past the breaking lines
of waves we can just glimpse through binoculars,
    where the rounded humps of humpbacks slope one way
and gray whales the other, sixty-some otters floating
    on their backs have knit themselves into a living net—
weft, warp, leg, paw—kelp blades fixed by holdfasts
to the deepest rocks. What is it they catch
in their drift of sleep amid mists and rolling webs
    of stars? Far enough where, if we fail, the drills
will rise. And what now as they ride day’s swells in
    and out of sight in the rhythm of our own breathing?
Our hike ends at the beginning of what the map calls
    Wedding Rocks, where people of the Makah long ago
carved the round faces of sun and moon among fishers
    and fish, a whale, an orca. What feelings
spilled through them as they knelt in these same
    unceasing sounds of waves, chip after chip falling away?
We trace the grooves with our fingers, five centuries
    of wind laced with the wet snorts and hunger cries
of passing animals. Kelsea kneels over some new swirl
    of shell and exclaims. Katie says not a word, drawing
with her stick something in the sand we can’t yet see.
C-3PO

The coop’s door swings open
and where we reach our hands
not eggs but a sun-colored, unmoving bulk
of chicken. She’s asleep or mid-lay
the way she looks with her shut eye
and tucked neck, but is to our pokes
stiff as molded plastic.

A year ago we’d learned the right heat
to keep the five balls of fluff and cheep,
and as they grew beyond our palms,
what they could and couldn’t eat.
Now one daughter cries, turns away,
and the other keeps petting dead feathers.

They can be drained by a single bite,
said a neighbor, but no sign of weasels,
and I say nothing of such teeth. Just as
last winter when I swept fresh snow over spatters
of blood then helped my girls hang flyers
until we agreed our cat had found a new home.

We bury the chicken beside the garden,
each offering a sprinkle of pine shavings
before the shovels of dirt eclipse
her bright feathers. We close our eyes
and bow our heads and say we loved her,
and as we look up, we see the others
sprinting toward us in their funny,
wobbling way. They want to say goodbye,
we say, Darth, Leia, Chewy, and Rey
tilting their heads toward us and back
to the ground, making their tentative crows
and lingering coos. As one they begin stepping forward
to scratch back the loose soil over their fellow,
aiming repeated pecks by swivels
of their meticulous, oil-drop eyes.

Let this be goodbye
to the chicken. But let these daughters stay
in their belief she loved us, too, a little longer,
and not notice the machinery
of those clock-hand necks.
The Seconds

Last patches of snow all but gone and first
wildflowers flecking the lawn, I walked out
to the shed and pulled open the door
with a woody squeak, and there, rising from the dirt floor,
surrounded by a dusty clutter of tools,

a little mountain, the kind of thing my daughters
might have scooped together in the fall and left
for the faeries if it weren’t a perfectly conical accretion
of turds. What to make of such a thing,
holding the door, and beholding it in the spill

of the first light—and then I knew
the droppings. Here she was, my old dog,
that golden shuffle of paling wheat fields who’d retrieved
and licked clean how many rocks thrown from this hand?
What was left of her, here. What creature

had carried each dried nub from the yard’s
far corners to form this strange cairn? There,
under the nail-hung weed whacker, my grease rag
on the floor pressed flat: a little bed I kneeled to touch.
Something had curled here in the gasolined nights

all winter as snow and more snow made a world
of white mounds. I walked around back,
searching for a gap, and stopped mid-step—
a big, squirrel-like bulk on my scrap wood,
the black, unblinking shine of a left eye

tilted toward mine. No glimmer of flight in that orb,
no twitch of scurry, only the deepest calm
as if the ages of the earth were taking my measure.
I felt like a pane of glass even as I took all I could
of it, its weight and whiskers and wide, rounded ears,
a long bottlebrush tail stretched out over my pile
of sawed lengths of lumber and plywood,
and later I would look for it in a book among my stacks.
That night, after I turned out the lights,
and my daughters asked for another story,

I told them of its midden while I sat on their floor,
becoming another dark shape among the heaps
of their clothes and stuffed animals; at first, “Eww!”
and then only the sounds of breathing as they remembered
their old dog, those restless slopes that passed

through their arms, the river sounds she made
licking those rocks to death. Let us not let go
ever, is what I took from your cave-wall stare,
wood rat, who would grab every bloody tooth
my girls have tucked under their pillows, pack rat,

who would make hill after hill of all the years
of their homework, vestigial historian, who’d cleave
to the locks of do-it-yourself haircuts and clutch
every tremor of their changing voices, their first words,
every shape and shade of their widening gazes,

and all the hard shit, too, the nights of no sleep,
the wet beds and fits and screams, slammed doors
and shaken fists (how long have you been with us?
how many iterations of you and them and me?),
even as you turned at last toward the woods

behind our house and slowly, one careful step
at a time, slipped away as if you’d already
snatched all the rain-colored seconds
from all the clocks that ever were or will be.
Her Present

(beginning with a line from Dennis Held)

Implacable, impeccably bereft of even the trace
of wrap and ribbon, Icicle Creek
glitters in the sun. In our swimsuits,
my daughter and I stand on a gray slope

of bankside granite as she counts—three,
two—until we leap as one, feeling our skin
warm through this June day's air
before the slap of snowmelt zero

sends us thrashing and gasping up
to hug ourselves half out of water,
the bare cold down to our core.
Fifty, I think, and might keep thinking

and shaking myself but for her glance
toward a cottonwood snag on the opposite bank
where, under a blue, cloud-hung sky,
an osprey perches by its talons clenched

on a dead branch, calmly watching us shiver.
When those first strange breaths filled her,
I saw the gangling animal she was, wonder
lighting her tilted face. Now, a drop

sparks from her earlobe as it falls to
the slow shatter of passing water
and our shapes swirl into the other.