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Steelhead

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Steelhead

in memoriam: R.H.

Salt-dazed in fresh water, he eats
nothing but the miles upstream, lame
ladders over dams and the silty back-
waters behind them, slack, brackish, and dull.

Some believe in the hatchery, some
in the river, but each believes in the code
for home. He makes his way shimmering,
all iridescence and muscle, a fog-bound apple

in an uphill world. His convex eye
beholds us, our emissaries of feather and steel,
and he strikes—no reason but the hell
of distance, the cantankerous, tiresome way.

If we are lucky, we love enough
to let him go. Unhooked, lightly held
near the surface of a pool, he'll sway
and pulse, drift and flex.

And in our numb fingers we'll feel him
come alive, the coil and re-coil
of heart and hard flesh, and slick shot snaked
toward oblivion, that pure dream of home.