Words Going Wild in the Woods

Paul Zarzyski
Words Growing Wild in the Woods

A boy thrilled with his first horse,
I climbed aboard my father hunkering in hip boots
below the graveled road berm, Cominski Crick
funneling to a rusty culvert. Hooking
an arm behind one of my knees, he lifted
with a grunt and laugh, his creel harness creaking,
splitshot clattering in our bait boxes.

I dreamed a Robin Hood-Paladin-Sinbad life
from those shoulders. His jugular pulse rumbled
into the riffle of my pulse, my thin wrists
against his Adam’s apple—a whiskered knuckle
prickly as cucumbers in our garden
where I picked nightcrawlers, wet and moonlit,
glistening between vines across the black soil.

Eye-level with an array of flies, every crayon
color fastened to the silk band
of his tattered fedora, the hat my mother vowed
a thousand times to burn, I learned to love
the sound of words in the woods—Jock Scott,
Silver Doctor, Mickey Finn, Quill Gordon, Gray
Ghost booming in his voice through the spruce.

At five, my life rhymed with first flights
bursting into birdsong. I loved
the piquant smell of fiddleheads and trilliums,
hickory and maple leaf humus, the petite bouquets of arbutus we picked for Mom. I loved the power of my father’s stride thigh-deep against the surge of dark swirls.

Perched offshore on a boulder—safe from wanderlust but not from currents coiling below—
I prayed to the apostles for a ten-pounder to test the steel of my telescopic pole, while Dad, working the water upstream and down, stayed always in earshot—alert and calling to me after each beaver splash between us.

I still go home to relearn my first words echoing through those woods: I caught one!
Dad! I caught one! Dad! Dad!
 skipping like thin flat stones down the crick—and him galloping through popples, splitshot ticking, to find me leaping for a fingerling, my first brookie twirling from a willow like a jewel.