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Anadromous

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I saw the man through the years and watched how he grew older. He had small eyes and a large nose and a large mouth and, when I first knew him, black hair, slightly gray at the temples. It was autumn and he brought me an autumn fish he had caught, and he offered to clean and prepare it. Not knowing the man, I declined. Every year, he returned like a fish returning to a gravel bed, and the gravel bed was my home. Always he offered me the fish and always I said, No, thank you.

When I was married he came to my wedding reception and wore a black felt suit, worn white at the elbows and knees. His tie was poorly tied and stuck out from the collar at the back of his neck. He was beginning to stoop with age and his hair was worn like his suit, but the fish hung from his hand, and I politely reminded him that fish was not on the menu but told him I was glad he came—that he should come in and enjoy the dance. I believe he did come in and dance—what he did with the fish I don’t know—but being preoccupied, I quickly forgot about the old man and returned to dancing with my wife.
And the next year he returned and he was older, and the next year, older. And when my daughter was born the next year he returned again and I sensed some urgency in his posture as he offered to clean and cut the fish for me, and for my wife. He told me how he would prepare and cook and garnish it, and he looked into my eyes as if trying to prove his honesty. I knew my wife did not like the man coming around year after year—we never had an explanation for why he came—and I finally told him, Thank you, no. We don’t need any fish right now, but you should prepare and eat it yourself if you’d like. I half expected him to argue, but he did not—only turned, disappointed, and left.

When my daughter was to be married, I was not a young man myself, but the old man with the fish was like a little relic and the suit hung from his body like a beaten flag and the hand that held the fish was a pockmarked claw. His eyes were dim and watery, but they conveyed something like desperation. I saw myself in the mirror as he walked into the reception hall and I knew what to do—had known for some time, actually—and I directed him to a platter on a table which had been specially prepared for his fish. His face registered neither surprise nor excitement, but he earnestly drew his fileting knife and set the fish on the table. Many of the guests stopped to watch this unusual scene, but my daughter was dancing with her husband and most of the crowd was watching them with smiles and murmurs of, Do you remember, and, Ah how the years fly.

His hand worked inevitably around the fins, the spine, the gills, and he worked with his arms and his frowning mouth, and as the man worked, his joints loosened and his bones loosened like
shrunken spokes in a wagon wheel, and the man began to dissolve. The fish was cut and the man cooked it and the man’s body was like a whisper, issuing up from his feet in waves, and he garnished the fish and was not a man anymore but an idea. When the guests finally smelled the cooked fish and began to eat it, the man was a memory, and we ate until we were satisfied, and the memory was the color of autumn. We bit into the years and chewed them slowly and swallowed them until we were warm enough to let a few tears fall and full enough to laugh, and when we had done these things, there was music, and my daughter’s husband took her up to dance.