

For a Fisherman

Raymond Carver, 1938-1988

We were twice hurt because you left
and didn't tell us you were going.
You had your reasons: a book
to finish, a wish to avoid a series
of sorrowful leave-takings with
nothing else for anyone to say but
We're sorry, we love you, goodbye —
all perfectly understandable,
I guess, as your death is not.

If selfishness is wanting you here,
as a friend of ours believes,
then some of us are selfish.
You shouldn't have lied — however
right for you, it was wrong for us
who must go on living without you,
knowing how completely beyond
such obligation you are now.

This may seem formal,
as our friendship wasn't,
but the occasion demands it.
And I mustn't cheapen it
to fake a life gone on
in that happy way
you would have wished,
were you still here.

There is an absence in your wake.
All the anecdotes we tell
about you or the lines cast
after you can't wind you
back to us; they are life
support for us not you
who must remain distorted
in our thoughts like someone
underwater, the self-made man
remade by us, no longer either
yourself or the way we knew you
when you shambled among us
hugely unpretentious
and hugged us to you.

Now in the harbor the buoy
we've named after you since you
rammed it twice by accident
without sinking, must toll
an absence among us, a warning
to the living of dangers
dead ahead or when we are dead
in the water as you were twice,
once from alcohol and
nine years later out of gas,
your bilges primed with fumes
from a rusted tank,
your boat a floating bomb.
Afterward I gave you
Chapman's *Piloting*.
It couldn't save you from the
crab that clawed your breath.
And if I mix my metaphors
with fact to address you
in this way and give you
presence to replace
what no longer exists
it's to reckon with myself
the cost, as the bell's

voice echoes from the water,
Come back, come back,
to fishermen still lost
at sea, unbuoyed by
wreaths cast yearly
on the tides and returned
as flotsam from the dead.

By heart we reckon you who
spoke so truthfully among
the usual fishermen's lies —
we listened and grew still.

One jewel of water on the tree
across the street catches light
and shimmers in the wind
before it falls.

The light spreading from
one drop must penetrate
the soul and grow there until
the soul itself sheds light —
if you believe it.

I don't know what to believe.
Ever since your death
I've listened for your voice.
I've watched believing
you would signal us
if you could.

But there was nothing
until one night in a dream
you said, *You're not a poet,*
your poetry's nothing!
because I had not written
anything since your death.

I don't know if you were
speaking or if self-contempt
had caught your form and voice

and said the worst it could,
or if it was what I, without
cause, suspected you might have
thought when you were here,
you who gave encouragement
and love and believed that
words can seise us from
our shallow, hurtful selves.
You who wrote what you
had kept from us until
you were gone from us.

One jewel, one light
or the memory of it,
smashed against the brow
like a fist,
and this crude response,
oath in some brawl
of the self,
failing its subject,
as I failed you before,
cursing when you fouled
your line in my propeller,
and ashamed as I saw
the hurt like an oil slick
spread from my impatience.
Good friend, I didn't know
you only had two years to
live, that four short years
would be the years we had
to fish the strait
your gravesite overlooks.

If I were Indian enough
I might believe that the
eagle circling overhead
as your casket lowered
had come to ferry you
to some place where

the souls of spawned-out
 salmon go, released
 from flesh at last to
 stream like consciousness
 down rivers to the sea.
 If I believed in the soul.

The next time you came
 we talked and fished.
 But the fish eluded us,
 They were dream chinooks,
 insubstantial as smoke.
 When you complained,
We didn't catch shit!
 I answered, laughing,
What did you expect,
being dead? Somehow
 I knew this in my dream.
 You laughed then as I
 hoped you would, though
 not loudly as in life.
 It was a dream laugh,
 illusive, a warning
 not to expect too much.
 Then, as if to tease,
 you asked, *What do you*
imagine is the worst
I've ever done or said?
 I waited for your answer
 and was still waiting
 when the alarm clock
 roused me from sleep.

This is all I know of
 the afterlife, an after-
 image like a lightbulb,
 its gray nimbus receding
 when the light winks out.
 And the word's light

still darker, graver
with its idea of light,
and of the soul, and
memory, that deceiver
we hook you with
so we can let you go.