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Swimming in a Foreign Language

You might want to know, the late tomatoes still ripen—
breathless in the pale light. Brandywine seeds
ported from England, learning to speak Berkeley.

We are all immigrants here, learning a twist of
a tongue, the song of a baseball in full flight.
The lexicon of the housecat, seeing in the night.

They say more people pass when the moon is full.
These words presume dying is leaving.
Presume tidal blood ebbs without return.

Still so many fugitive words. The one for possum feet
that weave a warp to furred vines' woof. The particular
green bite the animal takes from every fruit.

The phrase you might have said each morning
to the father you never knew
had he shaken you from sleep.

He stood once behind the schoolyard fence,
one foot on the running board of the green Hudson. Out of earshot.
You watched from the corner of your eye as you pitched.

The day you died, the grunion made their last run.
Heaved their silver tsunami—thousands of tiny fins—onto shore and danced
on the end of their tails. I wish the fish word for “farewell.”

The shock of the last breath. We never know it is—
until the next one isn't. What is the word for that silence,
fathomless as the deepest sea trench?

Next morning, the beach is strewn
with metallic fish. Unmoving.
Spawn safe in the warming sand.

The lives you fed bend over your silvering body,
slip the ring you wore for sixty years over your wide knuckle,
stroke your forehead and close a door. Wordless.

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