

ASHLEIGH A. ALLEN

PORTRAIT OF A SALMON THAT DIDN'T MAKE IT PAST THIS WATERFALL

The surprise of a dying thing in the throes of its own struggle. We know its future. Hush it to the rocks. Take the hook from the roof of its mouth. Gills reaching out like Jesus' body hanging in his death sentence. I imagine the soft armpits along the shank beneath pectoral fins. Ticklish but tied now. The feet folded over top of each other. A tail fin politesse. A final whip of effort. Don't look it in the eye and don't take the calm moment for surrender. (Not yet.)

Life falls through formlessness and combs through the day as wind cuts up the avenues. It's hours spent at the window. It's shoes with torn laces. It's a horse mid-trot or anything that lifts itself up with courage. Your mother in the next room kneads a crossword and your spirit. She requests the spelling of words. Her colonized mind refuses certain omissions. Her English includes those u's, those m's. Her pronunciations taut around immigrant tongue. Lassoed to the government's project. Her body a fracas of books fresh water sharp hooks. She says "oggi," but you hear "oh, me" and think "oh, god." She calls herself stupid in a dialect unbound to a dictionary. You witness her movements. Watch her weather shift. You see her in Jesus and Jesus in this spitting fish. We all go home. We all go even if we've never been. (Now.) Your mother is half salmon. The rest is underbelly song slap up the riverbank that stretches to ping-ponged goddamns. Your mother hears you and has since she was born. In water. Again and again. Listen.