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## Feather River

David Starkey

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## *Feather River*

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In late May we'd drive north  
for the shad run, launch  
the john boat at Oroville  
and sit for hours, anchored,  
letting our red and white  
leaded flies drift with the current,  
jerking our rod tips occasionally.  
The gauze of cottonwood trees  
floated through the air,  
landing on the river's vicious  
swirls: "If you fall in, you'll drown  
instantly," my father said.  
I was eight or nine,  
wore a cowboy, hat and an orange  
life preserver, nestled  
my blue-jeaned butt  
on the hot aluminum seat in the bow.

Taking me fishing was meant to be  
an act of love, I knew that  
even then, but my father  
was always exasperated in a way  
I've only lately come to recognize.  
He had no patience for my inevitable  
birdnest of monofilament,  
my dreamy gaze toward the bank.  
And now, when my daughters  
accidentally knock their cereal  
from the table and the bowl  
goes somersaulting  
to the floor, or when they wreck  
their bikes, again,  
I sympathize with his lack  
of sympathy. I'm furious  
at childhood gracelessness,  
more aggravated by broken spokes  
than compassionate for bloody knees.

So, is it some genetic character defect,  
this lack of charity?  
I feel guilty, as my father must have,  
but helpless, too. I lie awake  
while my wife keeps time  
with her soft snoring, and pray  
to the God I don't believe in  
to scour my septic heart,  
to make it bright as a shad  
exploding with a silver  
shimmer before it vanishes,  
with a splash, into the cold green river.

*by David Starkey*