

Exhumation at Sea

Every few seconds, the lighthouse's beacon sweeps across the ocean, and the calm waters shimmer under its eye. For a brief moment, everything on my boat is cast in black and white shadows, before the beacon sweeps away to inspect some other patch of sea.

I cast out the line and my hook sinks to the depths in an instant. My father always told me that if I was having trouble catching fish, I only needed to look deeper. Go out past the sand bar and offer a worm.

My father had told me many things, but this one I believed.

I feel the hook hit the seabed, and I begin to gently tug at the rod. Drag the hook through the sand and dredge something up. I move slowly. The sea is vast but I know I will find the bite eventually. Patience is the key to fishing, which is why the best fishermen are old men. Kind old men, whose salt-parched lips spread to smile with crooked yellow teeth. Fish trust the kind old men.

Some realise their mistake when they bite down on the hook. Some realise when they are dragged to the surface. But many, trusting as they are, only realise when they feel teeth against their skin.

My hook comes clear of the seabed, and I reel it back in only to toss it back out into the depths, further and deeper than my father ever took me. As far as he went before he died.

My father was an expert fisherman. He baited the hooks with the juiciest and sweetest worms. He could often tell a fish's taste by the look in its eye, and when it came time to keep a fish, he never hesitated to kill it. But he wasn't patient. Every time he lowered his hook, he expected a fish, and he was angry if he caught nothing.

By these metrics, I am a poor fisher.

I feel the sinker hit the sand again, and begin my slow drag along the seafloor. For a moment it catches on something, and I wonder if the fish has taken a bite, but I pull free. Just a piece of seafloor debris.

I reel my line back up and the process repeats, long and slow. It's not surprising that it comes up empty.

I rub the salt and sand off the hook and cast it back down, unbaited. I don't offer a worm - only a hook to willing fish.

This process repeats. I am not concerned. The fish will bite, I tell myself, as though merely affirming the fact is enough to make it true. The lighthouse's beacon sweeps across the ocean again, and the choppy swell glints where it catches the light. The glare hurts my eyes as it engulfs me, but then it sweeps past and everything is black and then grey again. I take the spool in my right hand and begin to slowly drag the line along the seabed. I will catch it soon, I tell myself. I will catch it soon enough.

The rod shudders with a bite - a real one this time. I lean back and heave with the motion of the boat, bracing the rod against my stomach as I pull, keeping the line taut with my right hand. The fish is small and weak and an easy catch. It cannot fight back. Soon enough, I can feel the fish tire as it grows closer to the surface. I pull it up with one final heaving motion. It breaks the surface and I take one hand off the rod and grab the fish from the water, as my father taught me. My father didn't like nets - wanted to handle the fish himself.

For a moment it writhes in my hand, and I feel its scales thrash against my coarse skin. And then, choking on a hook and suffocating in the cold morning air, its movements slow.

I stare at the fish - a sickly and frail whiting - and it stares back with brown, bloodshot eyes. It feels sick when it looks at me, or maybe anxious, unsure. It doesn't know why it bit

down on the hook. I wonder what my father would say. "Bitter," he says. "Far too bitter." And then he tastes it and tosses it back.

I do not need to taste it to know its fear.

I take the hook out with a pair of pliers and place it back into the water. It's not what I wanted. Not what I'm looking for. After a moment, it twitches back to life and dissolves into the ocean.

I take my seat at the stern of the boat again. No need to rush. Rushing is antithetical to the art of fishing. It will bite eventually. The ocean will be here tomorrow, if it does not bite tonight.

Still, I find myself frustrated. To wait for a bite from a fish that's not worth keeping is a disappointment. But I don't want to be like my father. Patience is a virtue, and there is a reason the best fishermen are patient old men who can cast out their rod and wait for a decade or more and who can convince a fish it wants to bite down on a hook.

I cast my line again and the lighthouse sweeps across me and catches the line's gossamer arc in the air for the briefest moment before I'm plunged back into darkness and my hook sinks to the seabed.

When my father first took me fishing, there was no lighthouse. They built it when I was thirteen, just after I'd tasted my first fish.

I remembered that night well. We went out on the bay just after midnight. My father's boat was large but he herded us into the starboard corner, near the stern. He took a worm from the paper bag beside us and inspected it.

"Fat," he rasped. "See the saddle?" He pointed to the squirming bulge. "That's the juiciest part."

The worm writhed between his fingers helplessly as my father wove its body onto the hook like a stitch onto fabric. It didn't stop moving as he cast out into the water and it sank below the waves.

And for a moment we sat, huddled in our boat on the rocky swell. In the darkness of a new moon, we were almost indistinguishable. Inseparable.

A bite. Something big and fierce waking up from the seabed. The tip of the rod plunged into the waves and almost broke free from my grasp before my father's hands clamped down over mine.

"Pull!" he managed to rasp in between laboured breaths. He wrenched the rod up towards him and pinned me to his chest in the process. The tip reached back up into the sky.

"The reel!" I floundered for the handle. I couldn't get a good grip but I managed to pull the line taut. Pressed to the plastic of his waterproof jacket with his hot breath in my ear, I pinched my eyes shut and focused only on the reel. On its jerky motions under my father's hand and the fish who suffered on the other end.

Then my father shifted, and in a single lurching move, reached down into the water and produced a fish, squirming under his fingers.

And for a moment, silhouetted by starlight, he stood over me, staring at the great flathead that he had caught.

"Perfect," he croaked. "Sweet and juicy and perfect!"

He stared down at me, but I couldn't bring myself to look back at him. Instead, I gazed back into the soft brown eyes of the flathead, which stared longingly, as though begging for me to speak up, or perhaps only for me to grant it mercy.

"It's your fish," he croaked. "You deserve the first taste."

He offered the fish, slick scales gleaming in the moonlight.

I refused, but he made it clear. I didn't have a choice. One may as well beg the moon not to bring the high tides, or the clouds not to rain.

And so I took the fish, writhing in protest, and bit down.

Salt, then scales. I feel every bone in its back break at once and its eye rupture on my canine and then I can taste iron and bone marrow and fear. Even now I can taste the fear when I swallow. She was so afraid. I wish I could change it stop it give it back anything at all but I took it and I'm sorry oh god she was so afraid

my hands find the edge of the boat and I give it back. The bone. The blood. The bile. Everything I took from her. I puke into the churning waters until I have nothing left to give, and then I collapse into the bottom of the small boat, retching and gasping for air. The waves beat against the tiny vessel as though the ocean itself is dissatisfied with my gift. The spray strikes my face and I am reminded, again and again, of my own failure. I can still feel my father's pride. That awful, sickening pride.

I lie like this for some time, huddled in the corner of the boat as the lighthouse passes over me. She was long dead, I knew. What little I gave her came too late and my mistakes could not be undone. But I could make things right. Just the way my father had taught me, all those years ago.

I sit up, and pick up the rod. If I wanted to catch a fish all I needed to do was look deeper. Go out past the sandbar. I take the hook between my thumb and forefinger.

Offer a worm.

I drive the hook into the back of my left hand. First the pain, then the heat. Drag it down towards my wrist. Warm blood mixes into the seawater and drips from my elbow. Twist the hook. Tear it out. I feel the hook slide against bone and the sea salt sting clean the wound.

For a moment I stare at it. My mangled hand and the stillborn worm, juicy and sweet, I had retrieved from it. The perfect bait for my final, most triumphant catch.

I toss the line out to the depths. Feel the sinker hit the seafloor and drag it through the sand.

Soon enough I feel the bite. Something large. Something desperately hungry. Something impatient.

I lean back on the rod and heave. Drag upwards with all the strength I had and, knowing what had bitten down, something more still.

I keep my good right hand on the reel to hold the line taut. It would wear out and I would outlast it, so long as I don't give it an inch. The line won't snap; this sick thing doesn't have the strength to break the line.

A shadow moves under the surface. I can see it now. Almost two metres long. Something larger than anything I had ever caught before; larger than anything my father had caught.

With one final effort, I pull back and he breaches the surface. With my uninjured hand, I reach out, take him by the neck and hoist him into the air.

The lighthouse's gaze freezes on the two of us. He is well preserved. His flesh is so foul that not even the bottom feeders will sully themselves with it. His milky, waterlogged eyes stare back at me with fear and fury in equal parts. His bloodless, saline corpse writhes in protest, as though burning in the lighthouse's unmoving beacon.

I tell him that he should be proud of me. That I am everything he wanted me to be and more. That this was the inevitable conclusion he should have recognised years and years ago. He does not understand. But he will, in time. Patience is key to fishing, after all.

I bite down, and relish the taste of brine and father's flesh, immortalised in the lighthouse's stare.