

Noah Davis

Gills

Corpuscular light dropped from the head of the sky onto the back end of the marsh. Two brothers stood by cattails on soft ground, their grandmother's mobile home behind them near the road. The peeling pink sides clashed with the lime green shutters that arched like vertical eyebrows. Her two-year-old pomeranian yipped at a dragonfly that had landed on the scrap-wood railing, metallic blue eyes watching thunderheads roll west over the Allegheny Front.

The oldest brother, twelve, traced designs in the mud with the toe of his orange tennis shoe, neglecting his line. The younger, ten, stared intently at his white and red bobber, tensed like an English pointer before a covey. The water held mainly bluegill, some smallmouth, and the occasional trout left over from the hatchery that closed more than a decade before. The cars on Sabbath Rest Road began to turn on their lights; the wet pavement could be mistaken for a black river flowing around the marsh's edges, on toward the town five miles away.

Both boys looked up as the whistle of a mallard ruffed the sky. The drake circled once and splashed on the edge of the far bank's cattails. The boys' father used to bring home duck when he was around and sober enough to aim a gun. The majority were woodies he'd marinate, then grill until the center was just warm, still pink with flavor. Their grandmother ate the breasts, but said she'd rather see ducks fly and swim than dangle from her son's left hand, necks broken. This mallard quacked and paddled along the water's edge, seemingly content for the night with the spring-fed pond.

The younger brother was the first to spot the V rippling the water's surface a hundred feet off shore.

The older brother noticed the alertness leave his brother's shoulders and followed his eyes to the far side. Fifteen feet from the duck, a golden dorsal fin broke the water. The mallard realized its predicament too late and began a failed ascent. The bronzed sides, dappled with black and red spots, breached the air, and the grotesquely hooked jaws snatched the mallard—as if it were a mayfly—falling back again into the image of the now purple-pink sunset that settled on the waves, licking the boys' feet.

The older brother was the one to bring it up in school.
“Bullshit,” said Chipmunk Cheeks.

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“What have you been smoking?” Pimples asked. The older brother went back to spreading his instant mashed potatoes on the country-fried steak; resting on the plastic food tray, it looked like a burnt cookie with white icing.

“We both saw it. It could be like those fancy golden carp. The bigger the water the bigger they grow,” the younger brother said.

“The marsh ain’t that big, and sure as hell not deep enough,” Pimples spewed through a mouthful of Jell-O.

“I’m not lying! It was a huge trout!” insisted the older brother.

“You’re actually lucky your dad’s not around. He’d smack you upside the head for saying shit like that,” said Chipmunk Cheeks. “And you shut up,” Chipmunk Cheeks pointed at the younger brother. “Even if there was a fish that big, you’d be too scared to land it. Don’t you remember the first time you saw a horned chub you pissed yourself?”

The younger brother’s cheeks flushed as he glared at his milk.

“I’m surprised you two even learned how to fish without your dad around. Do you both cast like your grandma?” Pimples smiled with a bit of broccoli wedged between his teeth. But the brothers didn’t notice; the older brother’s eyes were stinging and the younger was biting the inside of his cheek to keep from crying.

“Mamaw, Dad’s coming back, right?” The younger brother sat in the kitchen, upset that his brother was still in his room, the door locked.

The grandmother had been scooping ice cream but stopped and braced herself on the sink. “He might be swinging through on his way to Pittsburgh, but I don’t know if he’ll have time.” She scooted the bowl of Neapolitan in front of the boy and went out to the porch to smoke.

His brother hadn’t played sports since their mother died of cancer four years ago. The father was missing the three days before her funeral and showed up in fishing waders just as they lowered her in the ground.

Their father fly-fished, like everyone else in Central PA. The cab of his truck was decorated with huge streamers made of different-colored rabbit fur to imitate baitfish, crayfish, and baby trout. He used these on the bigger rivers, like The Pine or Delaware, but his favorite kind of fishing was for brook trout.

One spring afternoon the father took his sons up a no-name creek that flowed through a forgotten hollow. This was where he escaped when he lost a job or just chose not to show up. It was easy to vanish between the folds of the mountains where not many people went. He carried a 2wt fly rod, with a size 16 royal wulff, and pulled out trout after trout from small riffles and green pools that seemed too

small to hold fish. The youngest had the job of carrying the priested fish, stringing their gills and pushing them down along the Y of a moosewood sapling.

About two miles in, they made a fire. The father filleted the pink flesh, and melted butter in a small cast-iron skillet, sprinkling the flanks with salt. He fried them until the sides began to curl and the red of their bellies faded. The three of them ate with their fingers, drunk on the sweet flavor, and smiling.

The pomeranian scratched at the grandmother's exposed belly where she sat in her chair, having fallen asleep to the eleven o'clock news. She picked up the dog by its pink collar and tossed it toward the back door while she went to get her lighter. There was no reason to put the dog on the chain for the three minutes it took the Pall Mall to burn down. The dog sniffed the grass and started toward the marsh as the grandmother turned to look at a moth fluttering against the porch light.

The dog started to bark, but only gave a half yip before stopping. By the time the grandmother looked back and called for the dog, it was gone.

"Duchess, Duchess, come in now. You're done." She wrapped her white nightgown tight and tottered across the wet lawn, her pink slippers soaked by the heavy dew.

The next Saturday the three of them piled into the Buick and drove the five minutes to the diner on the other side of the marsh for breakfast. The brothers ordered the same meal each time: four scrambled eggs, bacon, toast, a doughnut, and milk.

The grandmother had friends at the diner, three old women with blue hair who smoked and spit and gutted deer faster than their husbands. While the brothers chewed on their bacon, the grandmother told the blue-haired women about her dog.

"It had to be a bear, or something big, that took my Duchess. I just don't see any other way . . ."

"It was an otter come in from the marsh," said No Eyebrows.

"Must have been a goddamned big otter then!" said Dentures.

"It was a fish," Black Lipstick muttered. Both boys choked on powdered sugar and took deep gulps of milk.

"Some monster bluegill grab that pooch?" teased No Eyebrows.

"No, it was a trout, a giant brown."

The brothers stopped chewing and strained to listen to the now hushed voices of the old women.

"When my Jim was alive, he worked at the hatchery that sat in the middle of that damn marsh," Black Lipstick explained as she took

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a drag on her cigarette. “He said he fed some monsters that were at least ten pounds. They were putting too many hormones in the pellets. That’s why Fish and Boat shut them down.”

“You curled your hair too tight this morning!” Dentures scolded. “It was a bear. No doubt in my mind. My son has that koi pond, and he was losing some so he set up one of them trail cameras that take the pictures through lasers. Well, he got this big bear dragging those suckers out! The Game Commission brought in a big trap, but they didn’t catch him, so he’s still out there. No damned giant fish. *We have bears!*”

Dentures wiped her mouth, No Eyebrows scratched a hair on her chin, and Black Lipstick stared off into space.

That afternoon the brothers lay on the floor by the window and let the late October sun bake them. The heat, mixed with full stomachs, made them groggy, conjuring a limbo of consciousness.

“Do you think Dad knows that I learned how to tie a surgeon’s knot?” the older brother asked the carpet.

“I don’t think he knows I play football,” the younger brother said to the ceiling-fan. The older brother propped himself on his side and noticed that his brother’s blond hair was white with the sun.

“What do you think Dad’s biggest fish was?”

The younger brother thought for a moment, staring at his brother’s eyes as they changed from green to blue with the shifting light.

“I think it was that twenty-sixer he pulled out of the Pig Hole.” The older brother remembered seeing a faded photograph of his father in a knit cap, the fly rod balanced across his shoulders, holding the glistening, burnt orange colors of fall by the tail.

“Well, that fish in the marsh is a lot bigger than that one. If we caught it, Dad might want to see it because it’s probably the biggest fish he’s ever heard of.” They stopped for a moment to watch the dust float with their breath.

The brothers’ grandparents had gone to Florida for their honeymoon some fifty years ago. In the back corner of the basement sat a surfcasting rod that had landed two red drum over their five days on the beach. Their grandfather, who they never met, had intended to return to the sea, but died within ten years of his marriage. The rod would cast and bend; that was all they needed. The reel was still in working order, but the line was frayed and weak and would need to be replaced.

“The strongest line we have is only twenty-five pounds,” the older brother said as they laid their equipment on the living room floor.

“I read one time that they caught a grouper on ten pound test. You just need to know how to fight them.”

“Well, if we can get it close enough, remember the most sensitive part of the fish is its gills. You got to grab the big ones there, or you’ll never get them in.”

“I already learned that on *Shark Week*,” the younger brother said as he walked to the garage.

It was six by the time the sun was setting. This was their grandmother’s bridge night, and they knew they had until three the next morning to prospect the pond. The fishing magazines they read at the grocery store said for big browns you had to fish through the night. They stocked up on chips, Slim Jims, Mountain Dew, and Little Debbie snack cakes to keep them awake, and screwed hooded sweatshirts down over their necks, strapping on headlamps to reject the cold and the dark.

The younger brother’s football coach owned beagles. Every Sunday you’d hear them in the privet patch across the road running rabbits. He usually ended the four-month season with around seventy-five cottontails and never hesitated to give a few away. At the last game, the coach gave the boys one from that morning’s hunt, body still warm through the plastic and the gray fur smeared with blood.

The younger brother remembered this as he threaded the first hook up through the rabbit’s stomach so the point came out the back. The second hook went through the skull between the ears, this way they doubled the chances for the fish to stay on.

“It’s going to look good coming through the water,” the younger brother said.

“It’s going to be heavy,” replied the older.

The moon shone through the haze as the brothers thought of a way to cast the enormous rod. While both were big for their ages, they were still only children. They ended up alternating hands on the handle with the line and the rabbit lying on the ground behind them. As they brought the rod forward the younger brother jammed the butt of the rod into the mud and let the drag go free. The rabbit launched above their heads, arched across the water, and landed in the cattails seventy-five feet away.

They took turns reeling the rabbit in, their shoulders and backs aching after every cast. The fur of the rabbit swayed and came alive in the water, pulsating like a million tiny jellyfish. The occasional car drove past with the window down so the boys could hear music, or a couple talking. The trains’ whistles helped them tell time, 10:16, 11:07, 12:33.

“You think Dad will come and see it?” asked the older brother.

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“It was your idea. What do you think?”

“I don’t know. It will take a while for the picture to get into *Field & Stream*.”

“He’ll hear about it before that.”

“But what if we don’t catch it?”

“It’s in here. We’re going to catch it.”

“But if we don’t, what’s going to bring him? I’ve never been in the paper.”

It was past one and the Mountain Dew was gone. The younger brother was peeing in the bushes when the older thought he’d snagged a log. He pulled hard twice. It didn’t budge.

“Come help me pull this snag loose.”

“Aren’t you afraid we’ll snap it and lose the rabbit?”

“It’s almost two. Mamaw will be back in an hour. If it breaks, we’re done.” Both brothers grabbed the rod and began to walk toward the trailer, tip bending to its breaking point.

Because it was dark they didn’t see the boil; instead they heard the water part. Line began to scream from the reel as the boys braced themselves, creating slides in the wet ground. The trout jumped and the spray hit their faces as they tried to keep hold of the rod. The brown ran for the opposite cattails, but the heavy drag slowed it, and the brothers were able to regain some ground. For more than thirty minutes the great fish ran and slowed, allowing itself to give just a few feet of line, then ran again. Its massive headshakes were felt in the brothers’ backs. Both boys felt nauseated from the vibrations, their arms and shoulders burning from the constant flexing.

The clouds were beginning to clear and move to the west. Two cars passed on Sabbath Rest Road and their headlights lit the backyard like a stage: the brothers straining against the rod and the line disappearing into the liquid dark. The brothers could see the fish now. Its dorsal fin cut the surface and the cream belly rolled over and over, mimicking the moon that was full in the sky. Its runs were shorter and the head thrashing was barely perceptible, yet the boys could not pull it any closer.

“We have to go in for it,” said the older brother.

“Like they do for tarpon,” said the younger, thinking of teeth and what the boys at the cafeteria table would say. “I’ll do it.”

“You sure?”

“Yeah.”

“Okay. I’ll start walking toward the road and try to bring it closer.”

“Okay.”

“Watch out for the tail, it could knock you under.”

“Okay.”

“And the bottom’s slick. Make sure you have good footing.”

“Okay. Shut up and start walking!”

The older brother shouldered the rod and began to walk away.

It was getting late in the year, but the water was still warmer than the air. The younger brother stripped down to his underwear and goosebumps peppered his flesh as he turned his headlamp on. The fish was about thirteen feet out and coming closer, seemingly unaware of the naked boy.

He slipped on the clay bottom and grabbed the taut line to steady himself. The fish awoke and churned the water. His brother was yelling from the shore, but he paid no attention. With the light of his headlamp, the younger brother stretched out and grabbed the great fish’s tail. The brown easily slipped through the boy’s grasp and turned on its huge side, knocking him into the water.

Sputtering and gasping, he broke the air and readied himself as the fish carved the water and angled toward him.

You grab a big fish by its gills, that’s how you do it.

He clinched his fist.

The trout opened its toothed maw—the rabbit had disappeared down the gullet, the hooks set deep inside, doing their work.

He was pretty sure he saw a pink collar at the back of the brown’s throat as he thrust his arm between the fish’s red gills.

The trout flailed on the ground as the older brother ran back to the water’s edge. Dark blades of grass tattooed its massive sides as the air began to congeal the protective layer of shine into a thick, blue mucus.

“You going to kill it?” asked the older brother.

“It’ll be dead soon,” said the younger. The paddle of its tail beat frantically as the golf-ball-sized-eye darted about the yard. Blood began to drip from the slits of its gills and disappeared in the shadow of its belly.

“I think we should get it over with,” the older said, moving towards the small stand of trees at the edge of the property. The younger brother’s feet sank into the mud as he watched the fish’s movements become less vigorous. His teeth began to chatter and cold water from his hair began to drip down his back.

“I found one,” the older brother said returning with a short, thick branch. Without looking at his brother, the older boy began to beat the trout’s skull. The muscle of the fish’s neck made it difficult to reach where the backbone meets the brain, and with every blow the fish attempted to flop away, back toward the safety of water. As the older brother moved after the trout and the dull sound of wood connecting

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with flesh faded down the shore, the younger stood in a puddle that had collected at his feet and stared at the indentation the fish had left in the forgiving ground.

They decided to hang the trout from the ceiling in the garage, thinking the backdrop of old equipment and deer antlers would enhance the *Field & Stream* photo. Both brothers guessed the fish was around twenty-five pounds, and when they lifted it to hook the gill plate, the weight of its body against the pull of the hook tore two inches of flesh away from the head.

The skin was beginning to wrinkle and shrink from dehydration, and the golden color of its sides, which only an hour before had burnt like the October sun, was now a jaundice tone. Even the blood, which ran vertically down the length of the fish and scabbed on its tail, had become a thin, sickly pink.

When their grandmother opened the garage door, she sat in the car with the headlights on, looking at the boys and the gigantic fish that slowly turned in the illuminated air, suspended by a grey chain.

“We caught it, Mamaw!” the older brother yelled out to her. “It was in there and it took forever but we caught it!” Their grandmother turned off the ignition and stepped out of the car.

“Don’t tell anyone, Mamaw,” the younger brother said. The grandmother walked hesitantly into the garage, staring at the stiff body. “We want the papers and magazines to be the first to know.”

The grandmother’s eyes traced the lateral line of the fish from behind the gill plate to the cement floor where the slime, water, and blood comingled with the weightless bodies of dead flies.

“That’s the biggest fish I’ve ever seen,” she said as she stepped towards the door leading into the house.

“I’ve never had my picture in the paper,” said the older brother.

“I think Dad will want to come and see the fish,” said the younger. “He likes big fish.”

Their grandmother opened the door and took one step inside, shaking her head.

“He does like big fish,” she said, her hand resting on the doorknob. “But your dad mostly talked about how much he loved pretty trout. That fish sure ain’t pretty anymore.”

The brothers stood in the weak light after she closed the door, the smell of marsh leaking between their teeth and resting on their tongues. The trout’s white belly hung at the back of the garage like the last sliver of a waning moon, preparing to disappear.

