

NAN CUBA

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*In My Brother's Hands*

Sam stood in the creek, where the two of us and our brothers had enjoyed summer swims, and stared down into the darkness. His breaths were shallow, hardly raising his chest. Only his eyes moved, slowly, following some creature below him as it passed in a straight line, then jerked further out and back again. The two middle fingers on his left hand twitched. Then nothing. I watched my brother, and he watched the thing in the water. Cicadas rattled their tambourines, the stream pattered across rocks, and mosquitoes circled.

Sam's hands pierced the surface and fell deep, the water covering his elbows. I raced toward the edge, and the toes of my tennis shoes sank into silt. He lurched backward and tossed a tunnel of water forward; then sprays followed, drops fanning out around his head and thumping like pellets as they splashed.

Almost a foot long, the fish flopped and slithered in the muddy shallow. When I reached Sam, he held the fish while its mouth yawned then closed, and the tail curled like a tongue this way and that. The body was all muscle as it jerked and flipped back and forth in my brother's hands. He studied the markings and stroked its back. I thought of the moth I had once cupped between my palms and how it had tickled as it tried to squeeze free. Then I imagined this bass, with its green back, black side-stripes, and orange circles around popping eyes, pitching between my fingers, hating me and longing for its cool home.

Crouching on the bank, Sam reached into his pocket, withdrew a knife, and pulled out its blade with his teeth. He

glanced at me, demanding my attention, then knelt as he slid the steel in at the bottom of the white belly and sliced forward through crackling ribs. The gills still puffed like wings as he cut through them on either side. He lay the knife next to his knee and pulled back on the head, cracking bones, then yanked it off. He set the head next to his knife, and the orange haloed eye stared toward the clouds.

He didn't look at me after that. It was as though he assumed I would be watching, admiring his power and knowledge, his relish of both the grace and gruesomeness in his act. He had chosen me to be a witness, because he loved me and wanted to show me what he was unable to explain. I coughed and felt a liquid burning in my throat. My hands and feet tingled.

Sam stuck his hand inside the fish and tugged at the gullet casing. I heard a snapping as he ripped the intestine-like sack loose. He dropped the fish, holding its insides in the air, the torn end that had once connected to the head pointing at the ground. The thing was the size of Daddy's index finger, but it was pear-shaped and gray with threads of red membrane and muscle. The sack tapered into something like a tail.

Pinching what had been the bottom of the gullet, Sam squeezed, raking his fingers down the casing in jerks. A larval insect with a crowd of legs popped out, landed on the ground, and thrashed its whip-shaped body back and forth, its head sprouting pincers that seemed to search for a target. Then the sack spit out pill bugs and algae, snails and small clam-like animals.

Squatting like an Indian medicine man, my brother inspected his booty, displaying his ritual gifts for me, his sister, his apprentice. He seemed to be saying, "Little one, look at the world." I didn't dare speak.

He pressed again on the sack, and shells and plants oozed forth until something larger neared the opening. It was brown and had a miniature curled hand. Sam punched

at the casing, and the dark mass fell next to the wiggling grub, which darted forward on dancing legs, its nippers waving. This creature had a face and white eyelids, exquisite in their minute perfection. Hair covered its body, and the feet, with eyelash-size claws, touched one another, while the head curved toward the tail as if to kiss it. Now I could tell it was a tiny mouse, and I wanted to rub the fuzz around its ears. When a green liquid squirted from the sack onto the pile of creatures and plants, it must have been a signal to Sam. He tossed the limp casing to the side.

"Know what this is?" he asked as he picked up the writhing insect and allowed it to creep across his palm, fingers, and back of his hand. But he didn't wait for me to answer. It seemed like he was talking to someone else.

"Hellgrammite. Turns into a fly with a giant claw, and it only flies at night," he whispered as he studied it.

He rested the flat of his hand on the dirt, and the thing scurried into the grass. He flipped open one of the clam-like shells. A soft animal lay cupped inside.

"Can you eat those?" I said. He didn't answer; he just poked at the pile of small animals and debris. His hands were child-size but muscled, and his fingers worked with the precision of a surgeon's, probing for evidence.

"I was hoping to find a young bass. They're cannibals, you know." His eyes commanded an answer, so I shook my head, no.

"Help me pick this stuff up," he said. He wiped his knife on his thigh, popped it closed, slid it into his pocket, and gathered bass parts in those powerful hands.

I scooped up the fish's head and reached for the mouse. The orange-circled eye glared from one palm, and the sleeping baby curled in the other. I held them side-by-side and loved them. They were carnal fragments, beautiful and blessed.

I followed Sam along the creek's bank a few yards, and we left the animal pieces for raccoons he had once found

feeding there. During our walk back across the farm, he was quiet at first, and he carried me for a while, my arms hugging his neck as if his nearness were an honor, his breath puffing in my ear. But by the time we reached the front gate, he was whooping it up again. He even pitched a few rocks at an armadillo that peeked at us from the bushes.