

THE NIMROD LITERARY AWARDS
The Katherine Anne Porter Prize for Fiction



FIRST PRIZE
CHAD B. ANDERSON

Maidencane

Nowadays, the memory starts like this: there's a rush in the red dirt, and you and your brother snatch up the tackle box and run from the girl. She flings her fishing pole at you and yells that her daddy will just buy her another tackle box. And another, and another. The girl's echoes follow you along the riverbank.

The river is green and appears desolate—no motorboats, no fishermen, no teenagers cannonballing, no herons stretching, no feral cats pawing the muck for crayfish, frogs, or mice—which only sharpens the sounds: the orchestra of insects, the whistles of birds, the girl's fading echoes, your steady breath. Your and your brother's white t-shirts are smeared with mud, and he has a cassette tape in the back pocket of his jean shorts. You wish you could remember the songs he liked. There's only this Saturday left, and you two are only a day from losing each other.

You remember the red riverbank and the sagging dock jutting into the water and how later that afternoon a dirty fishing hook snagged your thumb, and you imagine how the girl would've laughed because you stole it from her and the snag was deep and bloody.

You remember that you both caught fish and brought them home. Your mother spread newspaper over the kitchen table and began to clean the fish while your father sat outside on the porch, chopping potatoes. You and your brother sat next to your mother at the table, but every few minutes he jumped from his chair to rewind a cassette tape to the start of the song he liked most. He had borrowed the tape from a school friend. You didn't really understand the song, but you admired so much how easily your brother had learned it, how he mouthed it aggressively, as if he could will the people around him, the whole house, to match the song's exuberance.

Your mother chopped off the heads of both fish and then started to cut one open along its belly but suddenly stopped and

just stared at the mess she'd made soaking into the newspaper. Your daddy came in from the porch with a plastic bowl filled with the chunks of potatoes and stared at her. She asked him to help her, and he said he didn't know how to clean fish. Your mother started to cry, and your father just stood there, hunched over, as if he might fall over any minute, and only now do you get that they felt guilty because this was your last supper together and they couldn't even get this right. The song playing on the stereo descended into a garbled moan as the cassette player began to eat the tape, and your brother sprung from his seat, but your father was quicker. He yanked out the cassette, its tape snapping and trailing from it like spilled entrails, and he flung the cassette onto the table where it slid into the fish heads. All fell quiet, even your mother. To break the silence, you lifted your snagged thumb for them both to see. It had started to sting sharply, and your flesh was red and angry.

Your parents bickered about what to do with you, complaining because they feared you'd get tetanus and they couldn't really afford the shot. That's not who you were back then, a person who could afford tetanus shots willy-nilly. In the end you piled into your father's truck and they all took you to get the shot. It was only later, back at home, while your daddy wrapped up the mess of a fish and took it away, that your mother explained to you and your brother what was happening as she uselessly rewound the tape back into the cassette with a pencil. She and your brother were taking a long trip, but you were staying with your daddy. After, your mother disappeared to her bedroom and your daddy to the front porch while your brother microwaved canned pasta for you both to eat for dinner. That night, you and your brother made plans to run away, but your father stayed awake all night, watching loud war movies on the television, only falling into his usual snore at 7:00 a.m. when your mother awoke, as if they had anticipated your plans and coordinated a watch schedule. A few hours later, your brother and mother boarded a westbound Greyhound bus, leaving Florida for good.

The details of those twenty-four hours stick with you like bread caked to the roof of your mouth, like fat in your arteries, like dirt under your fingernails. You are the trees that day, deep green and drooping with humidity. You are your brother's sneakers in

the red dirt and the rubber band he used to tie his dreadlocks back. You are the girl on the dock and the snagged hook in your finger. You are the pencil your mother used to wind up the cassette. And you are the scar your daddy got the next day from slamming the metal screen door on his ankle after they left. The ankle of a man who only knew how to love one person at a time. Your mother chose you for him and took herself and your brother out of the equation to make it easier.

All of this and what you'll think about most is the girl on the dock, from the scab on her elbow to the purple galoshes that her sister passed down to her.

* * *

Of course, that is the past. You don't know your brother anymore, and the girl on the dock is dead. You live in Baltimore now. You've got two dogs and a sleeve of tattoos on your left arm. You're contemplating one on your right. Your boyfriend wishes you wouldn't do it, but your girlfriend is encouraging. The girlfriend knows about the boyfriend, but he doesn't know about her.

Your brother lives in Wisconsin. From time to time, you call the number your mother sent you, but the phone just rings and rings, and there is no voicemail. If he calls you, you don't know—he's never left a message. You're one of those people who doesn't own a cell phone—just a landline—which your boyfriend finds endearing and your girlfriend is on the fence about. Your boss has threatened to fire you if you don't get a cell phone, but you always show up when you say you will, and if he calls any one of the bars or restaurants that he owns and you manage, he'll find you there or you'll return his call in fifteen. You spend your day with the type of people your mother would hate: people who chose the service industry willingly, not out of necessity. Since you are a manager you feel it isn't quite the same and you haven't disappointed her. You wear a wooden rosary she once sent you around your right wrist. The small cross clicks against tumblers of whiskey and glass bowls filled with fresh herbs as you craft drinks. Sometimes restaurants that do not belong to your boss invite you to create their new seasonal cocktail menus and you say sure, but you keep it under the table. You don't have a do-not-compete clause, but still.

Your father once said that black people in red cars only attract bad attention and you should never buy one. You never bought a car at all, sticking to a motorcycle. Once a year you have to remind yourself that your father is still alive, and you call him. The conversations are pleasant and last a few hours—you cover politics and recipes and your boyfriend and your girlfriend, about which he casts no judgment—but there is no need at the end of these talks to pretend that you'll speak any sooner than a year or so from that moment, give or take a month. All the plates in your house are from your father's mother. He gave them to you wrapped in newspaper, and they are pale green and very sturdy.

Your mother sends you a long letter once or twice a year, usually nonsensical but beautiful, drifting between English and Spanish, including long descriptions of your birth, or the glacier she saw on a recent trip to Alaska, or the invasive species of grass in her garden, or the brief affair she had with her distant cousin when she was seventeen. Her handwriting is always exquisite. Her ink is always blue. Once it was red, and she apologized for it. You've framed some of her letters, creating in your living room a gallery wall of smooth, intricate streams tracing across white or yellow stationery. Like maps with no cities, just rivers. Her address is in New Orleans, but you do not think about her when you visit that city, which is at least twice a year because your girlfriend and boyfriend both have best friends who live there, coincidentally. When you write her back, it's always brief, and you include a blurry snapshot of your face.

You are svelte and well shorn. You can be bright and kind but it took a long time for you to realize that those traits wouldn't make anyone actually like you more or less. Of all the bars you manage, you like the one by the harbor the best, despite all the tourists it attracts. You work the late shifts, and when it's closed and the crew is mostly gone, you stare at the water. It is here where your mind becomes its most acrobatic, its most macabre and fantastical. You imagine the bodies of the dead in the bottom muck; you imagine sunken boats and cars and guns rusting, breaking down; you imagine sick, rugged, bruised fish, no-nonsense and one-eyed. You imagine walking among the fish, joining them, just stepping off the edge and plunging into the water, and the fish swarming you, using the hooks of failed fishermen to snag your

skin and drag you down to live in the metallic post-apocalyptic landscape they've created among the skeletons of people and machinery. They will eat you, bit by bit, and it won't hurt at all, and you'll be just a few little pieces, feather-light and scattered across the waters of the harbor and the Patapsco and the Chesapeake and the Atlantic. And one day, you'll rise, evaporate into a cloud, and rain down on anyone who ever said they loved you, cling to their hair and drip into their ears, explore the thickets and tunnels of their minds for every thought they've ever had of you. You think about this all the time, enough that you'd alarm people if they knew it. You like alarming people because it's so unlike you.

At the harbor, over the groan of water taxis and the soft night traffic of Baltimore, you also think of the girl on the dock, so many years ago and hundreds of miles down the coast in northern Florida. Some nights you think: Rush me back to the red riverbank and let me tell the girl on the dock that she can't let us steal her tackle box. Let her know that if she lets us take it, she'll let anyone take anything from her.

You don't know this, but that's what happened two decades later when she had just turned thirty and was living in a house in coastal South Carolina with a yoga instructor, a chemistry teacher, and a hairdresser. She let them take her food, her money, her car, her dog, her clothes. After a year of it, she finally confronted them, and they all admitted, yes, they ate her asparagus, and yes, while she was in class at the culinary school, they borrowed her car to go to the beach and didn't invite her. And yes, they took her Labradoodle with them. It was a bright March day and lovely. Her roommates told her they left the beach when the storm clouds rumbled in off the water and the cold front hit the shore. This conversation shamed her because it meant they weren't even frightened enough to lie to her, and she ran outside into the hail and slipped on the slick wooden porch and banged her head against the edge of the step. It wouldn't have been a fatal blow if it had struck just a little lower or just a little higher, or to the right or to the left. It was just perfect.

She rests in a grave overlooking the river near her family's home. The dock is rotted and buried at the bottom of the river. Even the red dirt is covered by maidencane and trees of heaven, as the girl's parents lost interest in going to the river and neglected

the dock once their children grew and left them. Now they simply prefer to look at the water from the comfort of their balcony. The girl's sister, who gave her the purple galoshes, grew up to sit in large rooms with large windows and contemplate the skyline and say, this is what the city is now and this is the way it should be, and then parks and hospitals and schools and roads are built, and she nods and checks a list and frowns and bites her nails and says, "More." She married a man from New Jersey with the same last name as you. All of this you don't know.

On any given day, you think more about that girl on that rickety dock than about your own family, who seem more like characters in a favorite book you lent out but never got back than people you're supposed to know. Sometimes you think of her as your sister even though she was pale and red-haired and the furthest thing from you. You only talk to your boyfriend about her, about the day your family halved like an orange. You tell him everything you remember—the old dock, your brother's cassette tape, the hook in your thumb—because he is the most patient person you know. You tell him, in so many clumsy words, that in your child's mind, losing your brother and your mother was a punishment for having stolen the girl's tackle box. The child-you believed this and locked it inside your brain, and your adult mind grew up around that idea like a tree that grows next to a barbed wire fence, its trunk expanding year by year, ring by ring, burying the barbed wire deeper in its bark. It's a silly notion, you say, and your boyfriend says people have believed sillier things. Sometimes you think that you'd like to go see the dock. Maybe figure out how to track down the girl, apologize for snatching that tackle box from her. Because even if she did just get another tackle box and everything turned out fine for her, it was still one thing she could never get back, a cherished thing, a piece of time and a piece of her that was just gone.

Your boyfriend is supportive, but then you talk yourself out of it, because is the dock still there? Who is there? Your father moved on, remaining in Florida but going farther south where he married another Cuban woman who is not your mother. And you don't remember the name of the girl on the dock and you're not in touch with anyone from those days who might know her. And if you could remember how to get to her house and climb those blue-

painted steps and cross beneath the hanging ferns to her family's front door, which you've never seen but only imagined, what would you say? What would you find? Once or twice, you've dreamed about that front door: you're standing in front of it, mosquitoes buzzing around your neck, the air smelling of rain and smoke, and you tremble as that door eases open to furniture and stair bannisters and light fixtures all coated thick with dust. A shadow plods towards you, but before it reaches the door, you wake up.

Your boyfriend nods and kisses your hand. You shake your head, signaling the end of this conversation, and ask him what he's doing for the day. He says he's going to wash his car. He washes his car a lot, and if he's not doing that, he's reading, and if he's not reading, he's planning lessons. He teaches middle school history. You admire the way he refuses to talk shit about his students, even the ones who deserve it. He is tall and plays soccer with his brother and cousins on weekends because they are all very close and remained in Baltimore.

While your boyfriend washes his car, you call your girlfriend and then take the dogs for a run in Druid Hill Park. Since you're not in a hurry, you let them splash in the lake. Soon your girlfriend arrives on her bicycle, and you sit, knees touching, while you get her opinion on your new cocktail ideas for a few bars around the city. Your girlfriend lives in an apartment that is beach-themed because she grew up in Iowa and always dreamed of the sea, and her salt and pepper shakers are mermaids she named Daphne and Adelaide. She writes computer software and runs social media campaigns, and she is quick to tell people that they are two very different skill sets. She fixed your boyfriend's laptop once, and you told him it was a coworker who's good with computers.

She tells you now that she's just learned that her parents, after seven years of being divorced, are getting remarried in a few months, and the rest of her family seems happy about it, but for her it seems like they all must suddenly dig up the skeletons and the garbage they'd only just finished burying. You scratch her back and say you get it, and you do, because how disorienting, how messy, how exhausting it can be to drag from the depths what should remain settled at the bottom. You offer to go with her to the wedding, and she says she'll think about it, but maybe, probably, yes.

The dogs finish their play and shake the water from their necks, and you imagine drops flung from a taut line, and you

wonder where the girl on the dock is now and if she ever got more hooks and lures and how many fish she caught. You and your girlfriend stand and brush the grass off, and she asks if you've thought any more about a new tattoo. You say you don't know, but you'd like to take her fishing sometime. She lowers her sunglasses over her eyes, straddles her bike, and shrugs, but you know this idea pleases her.

The girl from the dock did get more hooks and caught plenty of fish. Some she froze for later, and her roommates stole them. Others she prepared immediately, gutting and stuffing them with fresh rosemary, lemon, and onions, never thinking of you.

* * *

It's your birthday, and you've arranged to spend the day with your boyfriend and the night with your girlfriend. He is making mimosas for you both when your brother calls and by chance you finally answer.

Two decades drop away. The past and the present spring together like a clap. Your brother's voice is clear and high, so unlike you imagined it would be. It's like a long, airy, nervous laugh. He wishes you a happy birthday and says he's tried to reach you before but never felt right just leaving a message out of the blue. You say you understand. You ask him who he is now. He's a music teacher, he says. You tell him that your boyfriend is a teacher, too. This prompts your boyfriend to step from the kitchen with his ceramic mug of mimosa and sit across the room from you on the couch, smiling encouragingly. He wears boxers and one of your sweatshirts.

You and your brother talk about your parents and all the things you don't know, and you give him your father's phone number, and he offers your mother's information but you say you have it. You ask him what he remembers about that day, that last day. He says, "You first," which is something he always did when you were young and he wanted to see you try something before he dared to. So you tell him about your mother crying over the poor, mutilated fish and your dad throwing the broken cassette and your infected thumb and the SpaghettiOs and your mother slowly explaining the plan.

"Well, that's kind of how it happened," he says. He tells you that, yes, you'd each caught a fish and brought them home, but it

was you two who cleaned them on the kitchen table. No newspaper or towels down. Neither of you had ever cleaned fish before, but that didn't stop you. The two of you did a terrible job, hacked them up, covered the table in guts. He laughs. "Then Daddy and Mama came home from wherever they'd been, fighting and making their plans, and it was Mama that pulled the tape from the stereo and she threw it into the mess on the table. Daddy blamed me, mostly. He was like, 'You butchered a perfectly good fish,' and then pointed at you and said, 'And you butchered a perfectly good thumb.' We all got in the truck and took you to the doctor to get a shot, and after that they bought us McDonalds, and Mama told us what was what while she cleaned the table with the windows wide open to let out the stink of fish. Daddy sat in the corner, like he was pouting. I don't remember us trying to run away, but it would make sense. Maybe we should've."

He laughs, and so do you. You're a little disappointed that his memory isn't the mirror image of yours, but that's how memory works, you realize, and you're just glad the basics are right, and you can share this with him, and you feel close to him suddenly. You throw a grin at your boyfriend, and he winks supportively. There's a comfortable silence, you think, between you and your brother, and then in a rush you ask him if he remembers the girl in the purple galoshes on the dock. You stole her tackle box, and it was covered in mud that got all over you both. He laughs and says no, he doesn't remember much more about those days at all, mostly just the sun, the constant sun. You tell him in the most sardonic voice you can manage that you used to think that your parents' split and your separation from him were karma for stealing her tackle box. You explain this to your brother, and he just says, "Our parents were two weeds strangling each other out."

You describe the girl more, almost breathlessly: how she lived down the river from you, in a big blue house, and she was in your class, actually, and on the last day before summer break, she drew an octopus and you told her you liked it, and she said thanks and asked if you wanted to come fish with her, and you said yes, but he—your brother—said no, let's just take her stuff and go somewhere else to fish and bring home a catch for Mama and Daddy so maybe they'd be less angry about everything. You never saw the girl after that. When school started again in the fall, someone told you her parents sent her to a private school or something.

He still doesn't remember, and you ask him, "Where did we get the fishing gear, then?"

"Who knows?" he asks. "We were always scavenging junk from one place or another."

You persist, saying it was the girl.

"It was a long time ago," he says, and you imagine him rolling his eyes or flicking his hand dismissively, the way your father did when you were growing up. You feel embarrassed, as if you've foolishly believed something for a long time and suddenly your brother has revealed to you what maybe, just maybe, everyone else has known all along: the girl on the dock does not exist and your brother never thought much of you and you are more broken than you ever understood.

"Never mind," you tell your brother. Across the room, your boyfriend looks at you with such pity, as if he, too, has always known during all of your stories and memories and confessions that you were misguided, silly, a fool. That look of pity, which you've never seen on his face before, at least not for you, feels brutal, like a betrayal, like a hook snagged in flesh. You want to hurt him.

"Sorry," your brother says. "If that's how you remember it, I'm sure that's how it was."

"Never mind," you say again. You feel now that there is nothing left to talk about. You think that most likely you'll never talk to him again until one of your parents dies.

He asks if you would like to Skype sometime. You say you don't know much about it—you're a bit of a technophobe—but your girlfriend could probably help you out. Your brother is puzzled now, and your boyfriend slurps from his mug with a violent smirk and pats one of the dogs come to sniff his bare feet. You repeat yourself, and your brother asks you to explain it—having a boyfriend and a girlfriend both—and you say that it's a tale for another time, a cliffhanger, so he'll have to call again to hear the rest of the story. You hang up the phone and say your boyfriend's name. He continues to pat the dog, and when you say his name again, he speaks with the same calm, flat voice he uses when disciplining a student. He has an idea for a tattoo for your right arm, if you still insist on getting one: a cassette with the tape unraveled and a fish tangled in it, gasping for breath.