

## A DAY IN THY COURT

*For a day in thy court is better than a thousand.*

—Psalms 84:10

When the bass struck, it was like nothing else he had ever experienced. He could not count the fish he had caught in his life. But the way it happened with bass had never gotten old. Each time was a beginning. Even now, he could look forward to rising early, walking down to the old boat dock, moving almost soundlessly out across the mirror-smooth lake to the river. If there was a single thing he would remember from this long-dwindling botch men were pleased to call life, it would be this time, those times that were a single time as the Indians had known, a single fish, a single fisherman in the twilight beyond the death of the last day and before the rising of the next. He did not remember her. Nor did he remember not remembering.

He had lapped his fly line into a pocket of shadow so deep that he had only known the popper was placed because he heard it fall clean and saw the merest reflection of the ripples that fanned out from it. He had let it lie, then drawn back a foot or so of the line. It was as if someone had taken a motion picture of the small yellow fly lying twitching on the dark water until the bass hit, and then had edited it, cutting out those frames that showed the fish striking. So that there was only film before and after, but no picture at all of the instant when the fly vanished below the surface in a blur of foamy water.

The line ran a few feet, and he slowed it with the edge of his left hand, not grasping it, only letting the weight of his hand serve as a drag, keeping the fish from going out as rapidly as he might, holding against its downward rush, tiring it, making it spend itself to reach the deep of the river. He watched the line slash the water, away from a patch of hyacinths, then back toward it again. He wants to go for the roots, but he can't find the right place. They're too thick for him. He needs a passage. The fish darted downward, and he towed back on the line, easing it as he felt the pressure slide off to one side and the line move in a broad circle toward the open water.

Once there, it was easy. No gift greater than patience was required. The fish must be a young one. It had gone out into the open water halfway across the river where no maneuvering was possible. It had not headed directly toward the boat in order to slacken the line. Now he could feel the time between surges like the space that measures labor pains. Her first had been her last. Down there, with a small fire in its

mouth, the fish was tiring. She had tired. Then, almost as suddenly as the bait had disappeared, the pull on the line fell off and he drew the slack in as quickly as he could, touching the automatic reel so that line would not pile up on the gunwale or in the bottom of the bateau. Maybe he's older than I thought. Or a fast learner. Here he comes.

The boat still lay in shadow a dozen yards from the shore. But the first rays of sunlight had begun to cut through the thin cover of trees to the east, to play on the thread of the river. So that when the bass broke water twenty yards from the boat, it leapt into a glory of first light. It twisted and shook its large head, the sun glinting and shimmering on the green-gold scales of its back and sides. As it fell back, he heard that sound as of a distant pistol shot, invisible concomitant of a bass leaping, whether at the end of a line or at an insect or small bird almost escaped. He could not remember when he had first heard it. He did not remember the sound of her sobbing, unable to speak. He did not remember that.

As the bass vanished again, he drew the line in quickly, feeling only last tentative darts this way and that, without plan or direction. He saw the long leader break the water then and pulled the line up beside the boat and reached into the water. He caught the bass by the lower part of its large mouth and lifted it carefully into the air. Once he had hold of the lower jaw and bent it down with the fish's weight, it was paralyzed temporarily. Water drained off it, and its dark, beautiful eyes glinted in the sun. He remembered like a gnostic prayer his father's admonition never to touch a bass with dry hands. It would cause a fungus that would kill the fish if you released it afterward. He did not remember the carmine moisture on her lips, dry final coughing. He lay the fly rod down lengthwise in the boat, and began to work the fly loose. It was caught in the muscle and bone in the upper part of the mouth, and the barb had to be backed out the tear through which it had entered. The muscle had been torn by the fight, and it was easy to inch the hook out. When it was clear, he held the bass up against the distant pattern of sun on the river, its life full and rich in his hands. Then, slowly, as if regretting, he lowered it back into the water and released it.

For a moment, the bass lay still, as if it had no memory of the water. Then, almost as quickly as it had taken the fly, it vanished back down there.

He paused and shook a cigarette out of the crumpled *Picayune* pack. He had been smoking for fifty years now. They had become hard to find, even in Louisiana, by the 1960s. He had ordered them since then from a shop on the corner of Royal and Canal in New Orleans. Crashaw swore the Thing had arisen as a result of them. He had paid him no mind. There was another source for that. He had considered time itself, the

anguish of watching the world sloughed away around him. Friends, customs, buildings, institutions lost. Other things. He did not remember the first time he had seen her. The wonder of. The cigarette smoke was burning his eyes, and he stroked the wine-colored water with his paddle, the slight motion carrying smoke away to dissolve in the shadows.

It was almost full light by then, and far down the river, around the bend toward Madisonville, he could hear a motor. At first it stuttered and choked off. Then it caught on, its pitch changing as it did so. He pushed the bateau a few yards on, skirting a fallen log which had been sinking slowly into the river for years. For some reason, he had always associated the fallen tree with Laocoon, caught in the toils and folds of a serpent, perhaps named time. And, in recent years, with himself as well. He could remember when the tree had fallen, when he had had to draw in his line and set the rod aside in order to paddle around it. No, he thought. I go back before that. I remember before it fell. I can remember when it stood on the bank. It was before the war. Lightning. One night, and then it was dead, and it stayed that way for years. He did not remember telling her they called such a tree a widow-maker, her frown and sharply inhaled breath. When I came back from France, it was down. I asked Dexter. He said it was the late summer of 1943 while I was drinking Watneys bitter and waiting for what was coming.

As the log fell away behind, he thought of Judge Robert Edward L. Blakely, and his last trial. –Fish or cut bait, boys, the old man told them when they paused too long between questions. –You know what I got in here isn't going to wait on you. Anyhow, it's getting on to fishing time, and I be damned if I'm going to be here when the heat breaks. Call your next witness, counselor.

He blew smoke up into the cool air as the bateau drifted into shadow again. So many courtrooms, so many trials. So many compromises. He checked the long plastic leader of his line. It was still clear of nicks and solidly embedded in the main line. There was a good stretch of water ahead. He had caught many fish there over the years. The river did not curve, but it had cut deeply into the bank, stranding cypresses, which stood alone in the shallow water, providing places for the fish to nest or feed. But the wide lagoon-like place had to be fished carefully. He had to cast long, staying well away from the bank because the water was no more than two or three feet deep across the whole area, and he had learned as a youngster that a boat moving closer than the drop into deep water would clear the place of bass in a moment. It was a challenge to fish it well.

He remembered that they would gather in the judge's office at noon, the lawyers who had practiced with him and before him over half a century. They would bring their lunches and eat with him, some who

had not carried a brown paper bag since they were children with a sack or a round tobacco can full of cold fried chicken and stale biscuits. They had simply begun to drop in one day, unplanned, undiscussed among one another. To pass the time.

Because the word had gotten out from Dr. Ishmael at the parish hospital. Terminal. Inoperable. Painful. Weeks. At the most, a few months. And their coming to lunch was more than tribute. It was that they wanted to be with him for as long as they could, and being lawyers, doubting all, out of an abundance of caution, they reckoned on no more time than each day provided. They would eat and laugh and drink illegal whiskey, sometimes the very evidence of a moonshiner's recent trial. It would be poured ceremoniously out of mason jars into water tumblers, while someone noted the incredible rate at which cases for the making of illegal whiskey tended to be dismissed in Judge Blakely's court. For lack of evidence.

—Well, Ed, the judge would say, —we got to enforce the law. But sometimes we need to retard it a little. If anybody on this sorry wheezing globe should know you can have too much damned law, we should.

They would laugh and tell stories on one another, implying every sin, recalling feverishly the old times, times the young lawyers would never see the like of: when the Old Regulars ran New Orleans as if it were a great lottery set up for their benefit, when Huey was governor, when he threatened to expropriate Standard Oil—which they knew and he knew he could not do, and yet . . . And when the courthouse clock struck one, they would rise without being bidden. The old man would rise last among them, and lift his tumbler filled to the brim for the third time in an hour. He would hold it aloft and say softly,

—Gentlemen, I give you Robert E. Lee.

—To Lee, the others would respond, and then, downing the balance of their drinks, file out into the cool, dark halls of the courthouse.

He could see them all now, the old and the young, standing in the musty chambers against the backdrop of buckram-bound lawbooks: *St. Martins Reports*, the *Louisiana Annual*, the *Southern Reporter*, *Orleans Appeals*, the *Annotated Civil Code*, copies of *Planiol* and the *Code Napoléon*, of *Pothier* and *Laurent*, and all the other written instruments by which they lived together. He could see them in his mind's eye, thirty-eight years gone now, the old long dead, the young old, standing as if in one of the engravings of the *Mermaid Tavern*, the *Signing of the Declaration*, or the *Solvay Conference of 1913*. His friends and brothers, the root and branch of his life. Yet not the flower because he would not see her, head thrown back, laughing, rain falling through sun, scintillating against the windowpane in that shotgun cottage where.

He had heaved up the motor and was paddling with his left hand, sometimes cross-paddling to hold the bateau close enough but not too close. Now he was casting the line in long graceful whorls that arched across the sky from the thread of the river behind into the lagoon ahead, barely missing the outstretched branches of the cypresses, falling soundlessly in the water, placing the yellow bug with its white rubber legs little more than six or eight inches from his target fifty or sixty feet away.

The sun was high now, almost midway above the river. The windless surface of the river was scattered with darts of light. Even so, there were shadowed places, bunched groves of cypress, oak, and gum growing in the water or thickly clustered along the bank, where the water ran dark even at noon. By now, the big fish had gone down, but there was always that odd one who swam his own way, kept his own hours. Ordinarily, fishermen went in about now, ate and lounged and waited for the heat to break, for the fish to rise and feed again.

I don't have that kind of time, he thought. What with the Thing working around the clock. Anyhow, I never *did* go in. I never did want that statistical fish. I wanted my own fish, and that crazy bastard just might sleep all night, get up at noon, work until three, and go down again. That's the one I wanted to see.

He smiled, thinking that he had probably put almost as many fish back into this river as he had taken from it. He took only what he could eat. He never gave fish away, and he never stored them in a freezer. When he ate them, they were caught to order. He did not remember her, arms wet with cooking oil, yellow with cornmeal, saying.

The end of the lagoon lay ahead, where the bank came back out, and the shallows measured no more than three or four yards. He had really not expected anything of it today. The sun was too high, and the water was too shallow. But sometimes, the younger bass, less affected by the heat, would move in there to feed, safe from jackfish and gar. They would hit the bait like giants. He loved to see them shake and twist, dancing on the sunny water. It occurred to him that these green-golden fishes had meant as much to his life as the course of the law. But even as he thought it, he laughed aloud. Because bass were as much a part of the law as he was, as were the courts in which he had passed his life, the attorneys with whom he had lived it out. The law is *lex*. The bass is *logos*. She was. He remembered a passage from one of the old Greeks, something about how deep lies the logos, so deep that no dive could reach it. You could not, deep-diving, find the depth of the soul, though you traveled the whole way down, so profound is its logos. That was it. And I'll know soon enough about that. There's so little way left to go now.

The insects were mostly in now. Mosquito hawks, june bugs—all the mites that drew the fishes upward toward the light. They vanished under leaves, even into cracks in the bark of trees as the sun reached its height. They waited for that strong light to break and then, at dusk, they would begin to sound and feed and flit across the water once more in that cycle that bracketed late March to November.

At the end of the lagoon there was a space where raw soil had broken into the water, rootless, without grass or weeds. When there was a heavy rain, the wash-off flowed there. Then the bass would stand off a little to strike at the food carried to them by the flood. At any other time, there were no fish there, and so he drew in his line in order to move past, back into a clump of trees and marsh grass where frogs bred and the bass stalked like tigers. But the pain hit him then. As if someone had opened a door or raised a window shade, and agony looked in. It was not such a pain as to make a man moan. Rather to make him scream. Except that it had come so often lately that he only bent double in the boat, making it slosh from side to side in the water.

—Ahhh, he sobbed, holding to the gunwales. It was a sob because he knew always that the door, the shade was there, knew what lay behind it. He was accustomed to it. He was not used to it. You do not get used to pain that drives directly to what you had once taken for the center of your being and resonates there, thick with death, bright, awful chord steeped in the timbre of ageless loss. Each time it comes, it must unman you. Or take you away. As she lay dying, he had held.

He came to himself and raised up from the bottom of the boat. He took a bottle from his worn denim jacket. He threw down three of the small yellow tablets inside, washing them down with a handful of river water. The plastic bottle had a paper label curled up inside. It said, "For Pain. One Tablet Every Four Hours." But even Howard had admitted the absurdity of that. They had sat one evening in his office.

—Nothing, Dr. Howard Crashaw had told him. —Not a goddamned thing to be done. Oat-cell carcinoma. God couldn't cure it . . . No, that's wrong. That's a stupid medical technician's claim. We can't do anything. It's too fast. By the time there's enough to biopsy, it's off and running. Maybe it's the cost of what we do, what we are.

—All right, he remembered saying. —How do we handle it? This is the age of dope, isn't it? Should I just take some kind of consciousness-expanding thing and go out till it happens . . . ?

Howard had been astonished by the question. As if he had not been supposed to know about such things. Howard was a good doctor, and he shrank from what he did not know. He understood Howard's feelings. He was going to die, and soon. But Howard would live after. And what was now a mystery would, one day before long, become elementary. And

Howard would think of him, and the vast parade of others who had gone before because he, Howard, could not then grasp what any intern could explain now.

He sat back in the boat smiling. The drug took effect almost at once. When he took three of them together, they did very well. You tended to wonder what trivial pain might be dealt with by one of them. There was a peculiar side effect he had hated at first that was still the prime reason he did not simply keep enough of the stuff in his system to stave off the pain altogether. It seemed to him that when he had taken enough of the pills, he could feel the Thing in him, working, moving from cell to cell, breaking loose in bits and flowing in the pressured stream of his blood to some new location to commence working again. Under the spell of the narcotic, it seemed he had an occupant rather than a disease, something dredging, probing inside him, seeking some sort of truth, which it could not find because he would not remember, destroying, rejecting the rest.

It was absurd, and he had come to look at the whole thing as a metaphysical conceit fostered by the drug. Still, to sense the Thing working eased nothing. He closed his eyes and breathed deeply then. He smelled the rich deepness of the water, amalgam of decay and generation, death and birth, fallen leaves and rotten logs. He picked up his rod and pulled in the rest of his line and paddled a little further, past the bald place on the bank.

As he did so, he touched the monofilament leader again, running his finger along it. If there were as much as a tiny nick in the line, it would part under pressure at far less than its test weight. You could not see the nicks the line picked up from rubbing over a sunken log or a slight projection of rock or riprap. Sight was useless. You had to touch, to test with your hands. As they had touched. The line was sound, and he let it trail over the side as he stroked farther on.

Past the wash-off, the bank hooked in again. Only here the water was deep because this place was at the bottom of a long slow curve in the river, and took the force of the current when the water was high. The current would try to flow straight, would burrow into this cul-de-sac, and then straighten out and move on down toward the town, farther on toward Lake Pontchartrain. The place was a grove of tall trees that had once been on the bank before the erosion had taken it away and pushed it back. Most of the oaks and gums had died. The willows had retreated to the bank to wave softly above palmettos and scrub. But the cypresses still stood, closed in together, their branches forming a canopy over the whole area. There were even a few quaking, oozy little islands supported by intricate tangles of roots, composed of a little earth, decades' deposits of rotten leaves and water plants. But,

except for shafts of sunlight, which pierced through where the trees were more widely spaced, the whole grove lay in perpetual shadow. Even at high noon, the fish could be seen swirling, striking toward the back where the darkness faded into the bank itself.

He called this place Venus's arbor. He could not. Did not remember. Why? Because this was the hardest place to work on the river. It required great patience. It required knowledge of the water. Because if you moved too quickly, or without knowledge, you might go aground. To get off again, you would have to make noise, and the sound would carry all through the grove. The swirls and strikes would vanish at once, as if nothing had ever been there. She had. With. Him. He had to stifle a laugh of exultation. He did not remember why. The pain was down for a little while, and this was the good place. Where they had come. Away from. Down in the bottom of the boat was a bottle. He picked it up. It was wet from the tiny leakage that covered the bottom of the bateau with perhaps a half-inch of water. A famous first, he thought, studying the dripping label. Old Overholt. Good solid rye whiskey. The best. Never mind the young lawyers with their light Scotch, their Black Jack and Wild Turkey. No, this was of old. He remembered how they had customarily gone over to the little restaurant across from the Gretna Courthouse after a trial, the winner buying the loser as much whiskey as he could drink, then paying for the cab home, or taking him there yourself. Takes nothing from winning, Judge Blakely had used to say, and makes a man consider losing as no worse than second place. They always drank rye, chasing it with Jax beer. During one bone-wracking murder trial, a terrible case that stretched out over the better part of a month, he and an assistant district attorney, despising the trial and everything related to it, preempted the usual custom and spent one long afternoon recess drinking together, handicapping the jury, betting on who would be foreman. Afterward, they had gone back to court plain drunk, spared lasting ignominy only by the fact that Judge Blakely had come looking for them to discuss a motion, and had stayed to have a few himself.

—Counsel will approach the bench, Judge Blakely had directed when they had gotten back into court, weaving, hardly able to find counsel's table.

The judge had leaned forward, waving away the reporter. —Boys, I'd entertain a motion for recess until tomorrow, he said without a trace of expression. —I don't know about you, but I can't count the damned jury.

—What jury? the assistant district attorney asked, squinting.

Then the three of them—bone-tired, sick of the trial, seeing no possibility of justice in it where killer and victim had together, over the



years, constructed the bloody denouement—had gone back and drunk some more. And she had. Waiting afterward. So tired, but.

Now he was looking at the bottle again, paused beside a huge cypress. He had never taken a drink of hard liquor before when he was fishing. A little beer, perhaps. But not whiskey. No one who knew what he was about drank out on the water. The river was as beautiful as anything God had placed on the earth. But its logos was hard. It allowed no errors. A hand in the wrong place meant a cottonmouth bite. To reach up into a tree for a snagged bait without parting the branches first meant a hornet's nest would empty itself on you. Men died on the river every season because they were foolish or headstrong. Or because they drank. Drinking cost you the edge, and nobody could afford to lose the edge. Because no one knew the river. They only guessed. They surmised. Once he had run full tilt into a massive floating log and ripped out the bottom of his boat where no log had been ten minutes before. They knew this much: a barometer below thirty, an east wind, a recent bad rain, and there would be no luck. Most especially the east wind. God knew why. But why the Thing? God knows.

He opened the quart of whiskey, thinking: the first time in fifty years that he had ever so much as carried a bottle in his boat. His father had been death on it. He himself had lost an uncle to it. The river has rules, like the rules of court. Only more rigorous. And the people who live in such a water-riven state all know the rules. His housekeeper had looked at him strangely this morning when he put the bottle into the tackle box. —Well, what about that, Mr. Sentell? I never seen you . . . If she was here . . .

He could not remember the rest of that sentence, and he opened the bottle quickly and drank deep. At this age it was good to break the rules. Because the rules were for the young. To preserve them for something else. He was beyond that. Time makes poets of us all. He grinned broadly. Now he could write his name in water. Or good rye whiskey. Deep-diving into time itself. Half a century is enough to hold to the rules. Most of his friends who had held to the rules until the last day were nonetheless dead. He thought, if I had a billion dollars, I couldn't reconstruct that scene, that picture with us all drinking in Judge Blakely's chambers. Lord, he thought, we're all commorientes. Every dying is contemporaneous with every other. Tulane Law. Class of 1929. How many were left? He could see them all, strong, arrogant, assured, with an old city, a state awaiting their coming to the bar. But wait, he remembered thinking even then, his father and mother smiling, proud, blessing him for realizing in his own success the continuation of their hopes.

But wait. What about twenty, thirty, fifty years on? Her eyes sparkling, her kiss. Which he did not. Remember?

He took another drink and turned the boat ever so slightly so that it would point into the grove. Then he quickly back-paddled. No, he thought. Not now. I don't feel like it. There was a dry place, a place raised at the back of the grove, and there they had promised. No, I'll come back here later. When the sun is down. That's the best.

He moved on toward the mouth of a cut that led to the country club marina. It was wide and deep, cut back into the bank on a perpendicular. There was little growth down at the edge of the water, but there was a myriad of broken stumps and half-sunken logs. The fish there were mostly small, but the feed was good, and sometimes the large bass would move in there, eating small bream and goggle-eye. He knew of a corner where the white bass tended to swim and feed. They were no good for a fight, but they made better eating than anything besides the bream.

He felt the Thing rising again, that feeling of probing, as if pain were a conscious entity looking for a place to break through, to reduce him to a moaning cringing body full of tubes on a hospital bed. Howard had said: -When it gets bad enough, you'll have to give in. Nobody can take the last of it. We can make you comfortable. We can goddamned sure do that . . .

Howard had turned away, and he had thought there were tears in his eyes. He was touched. He had not thought that the young doctor had liked him so much. Come on, Howard, you know better than that. I've been an uncomfortable man all my life. I'll just keep coming back for more and more dope, and you'll give it to me, pusher for superannuated lawyers.

They had laughed and had some drinks. And when they had drunk enough, Howard told him he should find another doctor, that he was no good. Howard said that he had tried, but he was no damned good because he couldn't even master the very first thing about being a physician, which is to see your patients as problems to be solved, equations to be rebalanced. Howard had cried outright then, saying that he had never lost a patient without losing some of himself, that the worst was children, but that it was all terrible, and that he was going to give it up and take what money he had and buy a fishing camp somewhere or go back to divinity school and become an Episcopalian minister. Then, drunk as a barroom cricket, Howard had mentioned another patient. They both had known. He had spoken of her with love, had said how. Her last.

He could not remember that. He took another pull on the bottle and remembered his freshman year in law school. He had done the Civil

Law, but that year he had been reading poetry. Oh my God, I haven't thought of poetry in forty years. There had been a girl, he could not. Remember her name? He had written a poem for. Someone. The silliest possible thing. Writing. A poem. Suddenly he could even remember the name of one. He had written. Someone. Several poems. One had been *Viajera*. Voyager. That same time, he had worked on a law review article. "The Civilian Law of Lease." Not poetry at all.

He found himself almost past the cut then and had to paddle backward to keep the current from driving him so far that he might have to lower the motor to get back. He could no longer paddle against the current in the river. That had bemused him. He could remember paddling six or seven miles against the current years ago. It had been easy. But not now.

With a few good strokes he left the river and entered the smooth water of the cut, past the roots and dead branches that lined the entrance. Perhaps twenty yards in, another cut went to the left. The cuts made a box, one branch, the one he was on, running back to the country-club docks, the other, the one to the left, turning back upon itself. In the middle was a raised section of land with a ten-foot levee around it. In there was a sludge pool which served as a giant septic tank for the tract of houses around the country club. Without plan, fish eggs had gotten into the ten-or twelve-acre pond, and the catfish especially had grown immense on the influx of human waste. None of the inhabitants, mostly Yankees, would fish there. Local people, unconcerned about the fishes' diet, came frequently to catch enormous catfish, fat and tasty.

He leaned back against the canvas seat he had bought. It was the first support he had ever had. A compromise with the Thing. The boat rode now, tideless, almost unmoving, its only momentum that of his last thrust with the paddle. He sipped some rye and studied the place. The sun had just barely started down, and the air, warm before, had almost imperceptibly begun to cool. He had forgotten his watch, but it must be close to two. Things hurried in November. They had met. In November, the warmth faded, and twilight was brief. But it didn't matter. The whiskey provided all the warmth he could need. The pain was still seeking a way up, but it had not found it, not yet. In a little while, he would take some more pills.

-Now be careful. This is a morphine counterfeit, Howard had told him. -Only it's at least a factor of five more potent. I mean, this stuff is terrific. No matter how bad . . . it gets, no more than two every two hours. Even that's dangerous. And nothing to drink. I mean, *nothing*. You could . . .

–Die? he had finished the sentence. –Hell, that would be a loss. Cut off in his prime . . . Shit, Howard . . .

Now he had to choose. Up ahead, along the way to the docks and slips, there was good fishing on both sides. Once, during a light spring shower, he had had seventeen strikes in twenty casts and had boated fifteen bass and bream just right for frying. It happened like that sometimes. But that was the straight way. It was where the smart fisherman went when things were right. To the left, the cut was narrower, closer, with willows and even a few cedars growing out over the water, and the better part of thirty years' rubble accumulated along the banks and in the water. It was very nearly impossible to use a fly rod in there because there was no back room, no space in which to let the line arch before you sent it forward toward its target. Almost no one fished that cut. It wasn't worth the trouble. The few who tried it always used a spinning rig. He let the bateau coast for an instant more. Then, with an almost demonic thrust, he dragged it into the left cut.

Things were even more quiet there. The slight wind that had cooled him during high sun died, deflected by the shield of trees that rose suddenly and solidly along the bank there. And he remembered the poem.

Voyager, we have caught a maze of  
dainty starlings spearing sun  
from out eyes' corners as we marched  
heads down and hearts askew.

And voyager, we have marked each feathered  
renascence, bold matter skipping mad  
through quaint informal jays, secret  
journeys deadly swift performed by  
marble hawks.

No wonder, earthbound, each of us must  
fret and string the long hot silent  
busy afternoon into fluttering dusk,  
a hope for music.

Our souls have made  
poor matches; we are  
darkling,  
and the hollow of our  
bones is filled with  
dust.

Shall the shape of morning, voyager, be  
that of delectable sparrows spangling  
your ears, dancing crystal figures  
in the shrill delightful air,

or will you hasten with us into profitable day,  
and limp by noon?

His eyes were closed as he remembered. Jesus Christ. Did I do that? Did I really? I guess I. Saw the love. When she had finished. Reading the shoreline; he began to reel out a short length of line. If you could handle a fly rod properly, you could do without the back space. All you needed was room enough to roll the line. You laid out a length, and kept your rod low, forcing the line into a circle, so that as it moved, the end would land almost as accurately as if you had cast in the ordinary manner.

Then he saw on the bank, among cypress, willow, and gum, a single camphor tree. He gave the bateau a push and let it come into the bank. He reached up and drew down a handful of the leaves and pulled them off, crushing them in his hand as he did so. He closed his eyes and breathed deep, the pungent sharp odor of camphor filling his nostrils, almost a call back to the world. He felt tears spring up in his eyes. Nothing to do with anything. What? The hidden unconscious anguish of the body about to be parted from those things that moved it. Yes, only that. What he had wanted to say in the poem almost forty years ago. To Someone. That there was a part of him not bound to the law, or a child of rules and procedure. A part bound only by the bright sky and the deep water, the spring grass and the acrid odor of leaves burning in the fall. What she had found and loved as much as. He hated the interruption, but the pain had found its way through, patiently, with a wealth of time in which to search. He shrugged, reached for the plastic bottle of pills, threw down another three—or was it four—and then washed them down with a shot of rye.

He held the bottle in his right hand and paddled with his left. He moved quickly into the overcast of the cut and began rolling his line. Almost immediately, he felt a touch on the yellow bait he could barely see in the shadows. He drew back and cast again. Nothing. And again. This time, the initial tug sustained itself, and he drew the rod upward, dodging the overhanging branches, pulling in line with his left, touching the automatic reel with the small finger of his right hand as he did so. The bottle was getting in his way. He was about to gather rod and line into his left hand in order to cap the bottle when the pressure on the line suddenly faded.

A goggle-eye, he thought. That's the way they always act. You get a solid hit, a short run. Then they fall off. They've got no fight in them. There was no reason to worry about the bottle. He could handle the goggle-eye still holding the bottle in his hand. You simply had to reel them in quickly, because if they managed to get some slack on the line, they might slip away. As he drew the line short, he saw the fish. Perhaps ten or twelve inches long, fat. A goggle-eye. He boated the fish which hardly struggled as he freed it from the hook. Then he pushed off with his paddle, and began to coast slowly down the slip again. He rolled the line up under the low-hanging branches. Suddenly, up ahead, in the thread of the stream, there was a roiling in the water. Perhaps fifty or sixty yards away. He smiled as he saw the shovel-head of an alligator moving toward the far bank. Even as his boat moved toward it, it paid him no mind. When it had reached the shore, it crawled from the water slowly, moving up the bank foot by foot. He watched it move. Water streamed down its sides. From where he sat, he could see the alligator's head in profile. The corner of its mouth seemed curled upward, as if it were grinning. As if to recall old mortality and the long dying fall of those who, long ago, had crawled up onto the shore never to return.

It was then that the pain surprised him, breaking through without the least warning. For the smallest portion of a second, he lost himself and thought. Of her. He concentrated on the pain, the richness, the texture of it as it moved across his chest, into his abdomen. Metastasis. Movement. The Thing was like a concerto within him, moving, surging, finding its own path from one place to another. He could not stand its rhythm, strumming across his wasted ribs, up into his throat. Almost remembering. Something more powerful, more awful than the pain threatened to break through. Dark hair, dark eyes. Dark water splashed as he shivered in the boat. He took two more pills, wondering if, on account of them, he might pass out. He had learned, to his surprise, that he had an incredible resistance to narcotics. Even Howard had admitted it one day when they had gone out for a few drinks. He had taken six pills in an hour. While he drank.

—An ordinary man would be . . . out. I mean, what the hell is with you, Bob?

He had smiled, leaned across the table, one eyebrow raised. —You are not dealing with an ordinary man, doctor. You are dealing with . . . Cancer Man. . . .

The words had hardly been out before he realized that they were wrong. He did not need to see Howard's stricken face. He knew. There are things you cannot play with, even if they belong to you. He and Howard had never gone drinking again. It seemed ironic to discover

when you are nearly seventy years old that you have not yet learned all the rules.

He cast again quickly, and another goggle-eye took the bait. He brought the fish in slowly, detached it from the hook, and stored it with the other in the bait well. He was casting rapidly now, hardly concerned where the bait might fall. That night. In Houston back from Austin, where they had spent their first night. Together with the descending sun, there was a rising breeze. Now he began to feel that it was deep autumn. The bug lighted beside a great sodden stump. He could not remember how long the stump had been there. He thought perhaps before his time. Because the broken tree that had once stood above it had surely vanished before he could remember. The memory of man runneth not to the contrary. Then, almost as quickly as the bug hit the water, it vanished. For a second, he wondered if possibly it had broken off the line. But then he felt a sudden and powerful downward tug and jerked back on the line quickly to set the hook. This could be the one. Every time he had walked into the courtroom and set down his briefcase he had thought, *this could be the one*. But none had been. That Great Case had never materialized. There had been many that brought him wealth. There had been some that had even become benchmarks in jurisprudence. But not that one, the one that carried to the horizon, that changed what was to what would be. No, in his life, only she.

He frowned and held the line close. Not tight. Close. The distinction was elementary. It was the difference between a trust that something large and worthwhile was on the line, and the certainty that a small fish had hit that was worth no more time than might be required to draw him up and free him from the hook. Almost any fish might punch the line in that initial burst. Especially goggle-eye. They would hit hard and run well, and then suddenly collapse. But if the pressure of that first surge should continue, even grow stronger, what then? If you had not taken the first drive seriously, most often you lost the fish that pushed onward. Because the hook was not set. Because you had doubted, had assumed wrongly. But if you held closely at the first, you could manage things. To hold tightly was to lose the line to that fish that you had doubted.

The line cut sharply out from his left, from under the trees across the bow of the boat. He had to lean forward quickly with his body to make up for the slowness of his response with the line and the rod, to keep the line from fouling under the boat. This isn't a goggle-eye. It isn't a small bass, he thought. This is something else like. Their first kiss. The Cotton Bowl. Oh dearest, I think I'm in love with. You come to sense the extraordinary when your hands and mind have spent enough time at a craft. He remembered that time. It boiled down to the final

argument to the jury. His plaintiff crippled horribly. A cruel defense. The assumption of risk. Ladies and gentlemen. You are Art Clifford. And this is what you did. Did you assume that risk? Given that life, that experience, did you suppose things would go that way? Because if Art assumed the risk, we all do. Is this one of those risks we assume? It was dark and late. He was utterly alone in his victory, opposing counsel youthful, angry at his loss, refusing to go for drinks. He had had a few by himself. She had come, her face expectant. Yes, my love. One of the Great Days. Oh, sweetheart, let's go and try. Try to think about this moment. This fish. Love? You can't mean it.

He could not tell yet what he had on the line. Maybe he had foul-hooked a good two-pound bass. A fish hooked in the gills or along the back as it plunged at the bait seemed much larger than one fairhooked. He let the line run through his fingers as slowly as he might. Every pound of resistance tired the fish a little more. You resist as much as you can. Once a federal judge had thrown a pencil at him in anger. He had been very young, uncertain of what he was about. Oh Lord, instruct thy servant. The line ran through his fingers, and he began to feel the friction. Oh, my dearest, it doesn't end. It is always there like an anthem. Did Beethoven do a tenth symphony, *Ode to Pain*? The weight on the line became greater and greater. It pulled on his matchstick arms and began to pull the bow of the bateau slowly back in the direction from which it had come. He let line run, heard it stripping from the fly reel. The line was twenty-pound test. It should hold.

The slow turning of the boat, the whiskey and the drugs made him dizzy. He stroked the water with his sawed-off paddle, holding for a moment rod and line in one hand. It was a risky maneuver, but at the stern of the boat was a nest of roots and broken branches. If the boat became snagged there, the fish could use the weight of the boat to break away. The boat broke clear, and he dropped the paddle into the bottom of the boat, quickly reaching for the loose line with his freed hand. Even as he did so, he could feel the strength of the fish down there. Then, in an instant, the line went dead. Not simply limp, losing its tautness. Dead. He dragged it in with his left hand and the automatic reel pulled it in even more quickly than he could reel, but no matter how much line he could draw in, there was no feeling in it. Dead.

He leaned back in the boat, his back against the canvas seat. Gone. It had to be a good one. Gone. What the hell. That's what it means to come out here, he thought. Then, even as he relaxed, the line went taut again, and more than that, almost burned his hand as it ran out.

Christ, it's still on, he thought. It's fixing to come up now. It's a monster. It might even be a gar. Too much for a bass. It had never been his house, it was what she had wanted. Uptown. He had wanted a place



on water. Where he could keep in mind the movements of the moon, the pulling of the tide. He had watched her instead.

Then almost fifty yards out, nearly on the other side of the cut, the fish broke water. It did not spring into the air like the two-and three-pounders. It was much too large. Rather it rolled, tossing its enormous head to rid itself of the tiny fly hook which had become embedded in its jaw. It was dark green above, and as it rolled out beyond the shadowy trees, he could see the off-white glint of its belly. It had to weigh over fifteen pounds. He had seen ten and twelve-pound bass over the years, though he had never caught one even that size. This one was bigger. It rushed at the shore like a torpedo. It actually leaves a wake, he thought. My God, what a fish.

It struck the bank blindly, twisted almost back upon itself, and went down again, headed this time up the cut toward the dogleg to the right, which led to a dead end clogged with brush, fallen logs, and dead branches. The fish couldn't know about that rubble. It was almost a quarter of a mile away, he thought. Then he thought again. Unless it lives in there, under the rubbish. They like that kind of cover. Especially the big ones, the old ones who have lived forever.

The boat moved slowly as the fish dragged against the line. I never knew a fish to fight like this. He's moving an eighty-pound boat with a two-hundred-pound--no, a hundred-and-thirty-pound man in it. His eyes clouded, and the pain burned up and through like a tiny sun in nova. He almost dropped the rod, but habit made him grip it and the line in one hand. He reached once more for the pills and washed two down with whiskey. Then he sat waiting for the Thing to be pressed down again, the flame of pain quenched for a little while.

Now the bateau was at rest. He was tired. His head was swimming a little from the drugs and liquor. For the smallest fraction of a moment he wondered if he should try to horse the fish in. Or cut the line. He was very tired. But that was no way to leave things. Her lips had been. Rich and warm, the sun was settling toward the horizon. There would be no more than another hour of light. Probably a good deal less. He would catch the fish. There was no reason now to preserve his strength. He looked down at his wasted arms where the sleeves of the jacket had been pulled back as he worked the rod. He could see the outline of his thigh bones sharp against the cloth of his work pants.

Then the line rose and the boat began to move again, taking his mind off what was happening to him. The boat had almost reached the dogleg by now, and he tried to draw in a little line. A cloud passed across the sun, and he noticed for the first time that rain clouds were moving in from the north.

Now maybe I really should cut the line, he thought. As he pulled on the line, there was an answering opposite tug from below. War with a submarine. And maybe the fish was stronger now. He could feel the trembling in his arms and legs, in his hands. But the pain had subsided and he was all right now. There was plenty of whiskey left, and he possessed a wilderness of pills.

As the boat turned into the right angle at the dogleg, he heard the first drops of rain begin to fall on the water. It sounded as if someone were dropping kernels of rice onto paper. Rice in her hair, the veil. He raised the canvas seat a little and pulled out his poncho. He pulled it over his head before the rain reached his boat. Down the length of the cut, he could see the pile of broken timber, limbs, branches, and brush that marked the end of the water. If you left your boat and walked overland perhaps ten yards, you found yourself close to the boat docks and slips at the head of the main cut.

The fish did not relax its pressure, and he knew that if it was headed for the brush pile, and if it could reach it, there would be no chance of landing it. It was time to do some horsing. He shook a cigarette out of the crumpled pack, and struck a kitchen match against the side of the boat. He took a long pull on it and began putting more pressure on the line. He was surprised to feel the boat slow. Another pull, and some of the line came in. He touched the automatic retrieve and wound in the excess line before it could get tangled in the boat. The trembling in his arms had stopped, and he leaned forward. The rain was falling softly, regularly, and the clouds had all but effaced the sun. It was going to be dark soon now.

Old brother, he thought as he continued to draw in the line, you don't want to be drawn into the element above, no matter that you're heavy with years and feeling the change of water temperature more all the time. I'm hooked, too. They're fishing for me. I have to go. We all do. We can't stay in our element. We're not meant to stay here. They draw us up.

The line eased still more, and he found that he was pulling it in almost as fast as the retrieve could handle it. He felt a tentative probe from the pain, but it was only a distant landscape, uninteresting; present, but of no moment. Then he saw the fish.

At first he thought it was dead. For a bass it was immense. He had never seen one so large. As he drew it toward the bateau, loglike, twisting and twisting, he wondered if he could pull it aboard even if there was no fight left in it. When he got it alongside, he could tell that it was still alive. The eyes were dark, beautiful and dark as the water. The eyes of a dead bass turn quickly to a bright incongruous gold. It was at least six or eight inches across the back and as he peered down on it,

he saw its gills moving slowly, fanlike, sweeping the dark water. It wasn't dead. It was simply tired. The bass was very old and had fought itself out. Against great odds. For a long time. In the room with her. Wasted and tired. An old woman now, and. He came to himself still staring at the fish. He could not get his net around it. It looked to weigh close to thirty pounds. But bass don't reach thirty pounds. He did not remember those last hours. She.

He reached down into the water with both hands and caught the big fish by the lower jaw. In a single motion, he lifted it into the air. He held it sparkling aloft, the dying light making of it a great shadow-fish against the darkening clouds. Then, of a sudden, its weight was oppressive and his arms too weak to support it longer.

He lowered the fish back into the water. Quickly, he leaned over the side of the boat and worked the bait loose. It was easy to do, and he enjoyed the quickness and clarity of his work. You can still do something right, you heap of old diseased rubble, he thought.

Now he fumbled for the rye whiskey without looking for it and took a long drink. Down in the water, the bass lay unmoving. Oh darling let me go. Let me. I only hate to leave. You. Could see the fish revive. Its tail moved suddenly, and it dived deep, its bulk vanishing from his sight in the broken surface of the water where the rain fell.

Then it was dark, and when he came out of the cut, he felt the full force of the wind that always blew along the river, whatever the season. He edged the bateau against the shore at the mouth of the cut, in the cover of a magnolia tree so tall and full that the rain did not penetrate it. Among the leaves at its base, he found some twigs and brush and branches still dry. He piled them up and made a fire. Then he cleaned the goggle-eyes and cooked them in a skillet with cornmeal and grease he had brought.

When he was done, the rain had stopped, the clouds broken, and the sky was clear. The moon was beginning to rise, and it had never looked so large and yellow. He had trouble balancing when he stood up. Hours in the boat makes you lose a sense of the land, he thought. For a little while its very solidity is alien, and the perpetual movement of the water is in your veins. He was very tired now, and the pain had begun to come back, waves against a collapsing shore. Still, when he had cleaned up, he stood awkwardly and pissed into the fire, watching with boyish pleasure as the flames died under his water.

He took up what was left of the fifth of rye and studied it against the rising moon. Then he took a few more of the pills and drank down the rest of the whiskey. The bottle of rye was empty. So was the bottle of pills. Things had come out even. He tossed the bottle toward the sky, watching childlike as it arched across the stars and fell with a soft sound

into the river. For a moment, as he climbed back into the boat, he felt young and strong again. He left his rod and tackle and the rest of his equipment behind, taking only his paddle. The boat moved out onto the broad plane of the river.

Then he was looking for that certain place again, the grove where he had not fished this afternoon. Where he had not fished for almost nine years. He did not. Would not. Remember why? He saw the inlet canopied by tall cypresses out there ahead of him. Above, the Milky Way arched over him, a path of stars that seemed to plunge to earth within the grove ahead. It was a place where. He paddled slowly, paying no attention to the darkness, seeing Venus glowing in the sky, constant, asking him to remember.

Now the grove arose from the darkness, separated itself from the undifferentiated bulk of the shore's darkness, a configuration of trees and floating plants like no other. At the back, far back from the open water, there was a place. Where the land rose inexplicably and became solid, more than a mass of roots and rotting leaves. Where even on a dark night, the air crisp and chill, one could find. Her eyes had been closed—I know, she told him, setting sun touching her uncovered breast, —why this is your favorite place.

He could feel the tears coursing down his cheeks. —The fishing is good, he said aloud, hearing his words flow in the darkness like the river.

—I know, he heard her laugh from beyond the shadows.

He remembered then, and the weight of loss was nothing compared to the memories.

Crushing out the anguish of losing her had distorted everything else. He felt tears on his cheeks, mourning not so much the losing as the time wasted not remembering.

In the chill night he stood up as the boat left the current and drifted into the utter darkness of the grove. Mist was rising there, whirling across the shattered stumps, skipping between the tranced and silent trees. He was amazed to find that the moon's light penetrated even there and made the still water glisten like a ballroom floor. He stretched out his arms and she was in them, his arms strong and full once more. Out there above the moon, he could see the plane of the galaxy itself, path of heaven, as the boat skewed and turned slowly to the music of night birds and crickets. The Pleiades, a starry court, snared his eyes, whirling, turning, and she, judges, advocates, all the suppliants found at last their *logos* and their meaning.

So that when the boat struck a cypress knee there in the quiet pool, he could not quite judge the motion of the distant stars or the touch of the autumn night from that of the dancing tree-crowns, that of the cool

beloved water that sustained his fall, summation of yearning and pain.  
A court adjourned, another opening.

# **The Southern Reporter**

*John William Corrington*

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