

Pier Fishing Off Alligator Point

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The nephew cranks up his first set of wheels and heads the red open-bed Toyota truck west across the Panacea Bridge toward the far end of Alligator Point, squinting against the sunrise, talking his Tallahassee high school track exploits and my growing up in Erie, Pennsylvania. Now he is the penultimate, down-home fisherman and I the professorial, tag-a-long, far-away Oklahoma uncle who at twelve used to fish the State Street docks until two in the morning in the shadow of street lights protecting the Battleship Niagara until the cops called Dad. But today fishing isn't really the point. It is a convenience to be play-acted for the dialogue. So he does his thing and I do his thing with him.

Early morning in the Florida panhandle is beat-up roads and soft-talking locals in damp shadows, picking up Krispy Kreme doughnuts and carrying minnow buckets and worm cans - real fishing people in faded jeans and football jerseys, laughing, greeting each other, gliding through the scene, a minds-eye vintage movie concoction of moss-dripped live oaks, faded beach houses, and gray on white bait shops. We become like moviemakers, a movie within a movie, cameramen and actors, shooting film with our eyes through truck cab windows, inside and out, improvising discourse and gesture, the nephew smiling, affirming the life he lives, then talking with fire about the amusement park going up in the middle of his sanctuary, me nodding, passively agreeing, fixing meditatively on the blues and whites of passing cloudsapes reflected in the mirror smooth rolling surf.

We pull under a stand of loblolly pines bordering a small cove, and work the shoreline for baitfish and shrimp, the nephew mechanically casting and selecting the struggling baits from the net. He picks up on my sensitivity to them in contrast to his own cold professionalism. Word play is scant,

choppy, tinged with humor. They are as good as dead and I feel something for them - sympathy, empathy, some kind of sadness, maybe a tinge of terror. But I go along, wondering if somehow we are violating the order of things here. In their water they mean to themselves. In our water, the same water, they are baits, seditious streetwalkers pimped to the fishermen. I didn't think so much about baits in the old days.

Then we reach the pier with our bucket of seduction and perform the final atrocity - cutting them up live into hook-sized pieces and dividing the mixed-up mess of shivering flesh between us. I conjure surreal close-ups of the bait cutting and the eyes of both actors and the baits to capture the differences in perspective of the two characters and the objects of their attention. At least now there is no chance that the baits will know their own treachery. Then we fish, casting hooked heads, tails, and middles into the other world. What can it look like to those citizens? More surrealism. I become a fish focusing on tantalizing body parts dancing down from heaven. But the trout aren't buying streetwalker charms this day - so we talk a lot

about fishing and life after high school while we try to put a wiggle in the baits at the bottom of the bay.

As we leave, I pan the horizon, the nephew's monologue pleasantly mingling with the calls of cruising seagulls, and I close on waves slapping the shore, on water dripping from a small rocky ledge, on the wide-open eyes of a mullet head gently nudging the ridges of sand at water's edge, then, my eyes tearing a bit, fix on a green buoy rolling with the motion of the graying waves, the Battleship Niagara far behind me over my left shoulder. Images of now and then transpose and fade to a birds-eye shot of the red Toyota making its way back down the coast road, voices over, the nephew gleefully talking about picking the uncle up around midnight for coon hunting.