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Journey of the Swim, or Cannery: A Parable of Reproduction

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Journey of the Swim, or
Cannery: A Parable of Reproduction

May we be blessed by
the spirits of these fish

-- from (sardine factory, Belfast)
by Gary Lawless

Such things only happen in the summer up here. They'd closed it up for good some time ago. But that just opened it for a different kind of commerce. He was up from down south, kept making his way north, farther and farther, a drifter, a musician who went by the name of Brother Adam, but who wasn't really a musician, only told people that, more of a drifter with a harmonica to fit the image.

With a snap, a pry and a squeeze, he was in. Stale air layered above the forever linger of fish. He didn't mind. Never did, you go on and live with it. Tell you one thing, he ain't gonna change much. He settled in. As much as ever. The air seemed to pass through his hollowed mind, not an easy feat, but he'd done it through roads and time. He hid it all in his big, bushy white beard, and after enough years, beard absorbed it, took him in and left him there with pleasant eyes of a pale shade.

He moved around. This took a few weeks. His portly form, recognized around town, got called "Gandalf" a few times by some punk kids, fine, let them laugh, "Fat Gandalf." Indeed, harrumph. Whatever.

He came home at night, careful not to shine lights too obvious in the fishery windows. Took to eating sardines with fingers, in honor of his surroundings, an offering to the fishery gods of past, bit of a sacrifice at first, then he grew to like them. And of course, those little fishies cheap, yeah. Got them at the dollar store where everything except sardines is more than a dollar, seventy-five cents, as they should be. They used to say, we were

packed liked sardines, i.e. small, cheap, tightly-packed. He was not a sardine in the fishery, no, one measly fat gray sardine in a large hollow tin, dark and full of echoes.

One night, he heard a noise among the noises, a singular clank among the many tiny mouse/rat jangles. Ignore it, must be nothing, making it up, hearing things. Imagining. Stars. Make that sound. He sang to himself and it went away. Didn't hear it again. Only the dripping of time.

He went back out and out into the days of the week as he'd always done, against the onslaught of the wonderful story that wasn't, against death and everybody, and the perpetual unanswerable question: where you from? Something was always lost.

He muttered this to himself, smiled, ducked and pried his way into the fishery, downed the light, and walked as if through the salt cod black sea--

A falling shoosh and suddenly he was surrounded by something like shantung, first word that came to his mind, don't know why, but whatever the fabric, it draped on him with a stultifying gauze weight, couldn't move and when he tried, he only made it worse.

He bellowed.

"You sound like a sea cow. Relax." A woman's voice. She stepped out. "I caught ya, didn't I? Netted ya just like they used to in the old days out there on the high seas."

He grunted.

"Didn't I, didn't I..." She tittered and paced, did a little gotcha-shuffle and her rag of robes spun around her in a twirling fanfare. "Yes I did."

The hours revealed her to be Anty, or maybe Aunty, she didn't spell it. Another drifter, but with a bit of a...weird streak. He didn't know. She had as much gray hair on her head as he did on his face; together, they'd be a full head face ball of gray.

“You’re such a catch,” she said like he was a young doctor who she’d lassoed into marriage.

After some time, his blood pressure came back down, he could think again, talk.

“Water...” he croaked. “Water...”

“Oh you big baby, I’m not going to starve you. I ain’t gonna let you waste away.”

And she didn’t. She fed him nice. Hot coffee from somewhere, tasty little victuals for the setting, chips, cured meat. But she also didn’t let him go. She stayed chatty. In time everything changes, and although they were still strangers with an element of danger, they became something else.

Anty told him her story, the glossed-over version that hid the deep and terrible lows -- they weren’t that close yet -- but spun them into an honest, vulnerable pitch with a pinch of sass, you know what I mean.

Brother Adam began to talk too beneath the net. It was like he was talking through a darkened web, because he was, but for some reason, surprising to him, this was comforting, and indeed even inspired a certain loquacity that hadn’t peeked out of him in years and years of the downtrodden. Captivity, in fact, seemed to suite him, giving way to a fishery domesticity that eventually forced them to confront each other.

“What are we doing?!”

“Why did you trap me?”

“Why didn’t you put up more of a fight?”

“Are you crazy?”

“Are you crazy?”

Indeed, love, or one of its derivatives, had taken root. And speaking of root, she got under the net there with him. In other words, they fucked like old people, which is to say

they knew what they were doing, which is to say they also didn't want to hurt themselves. The fishery took on another fishy smell. They complimented each other.

Time passed in little crunk components. Little fits and starts. Dissolved, bubbled back up to float, pool, eddy, rage forward with a king tide, and pull way back to the ocean's edge.

Spring came and they didn't hate each other. Then, strangest of strangest, she began to show.

“What's that?”

“My bump.”

“Your bump. You bump like that? You been swallowing whole bowling balls?”

“I think I'm bumping a baby.”

“Thought you mega-paused and all that.”

“Me too. Guess not.”

“Huh. Don't know what I think about that.”

“Me neither.”

And so they did their best not to think about it at all. But, as babies do, that belly interjected itself into about everything. It had its way. Emergent. Like everybody's already been born and I want to do it too.

“Will I have a gray-haired baby?” she thought, “an old soul? As they say...” She prepared. She didn't know who “they” were, but knew they did indeed say it.

He thought about the old days, thought back as far as he could, but couldn't get back to babydom, that misty memory field fallow as any blackness. What would they do?

The problem was that time ate itself, and before either of them had a bead on perpetuity, it came out in a rush of water. The baby. The boy. A whole lot of loving to keep

my baby happy, true true, and they called him Sardine, because of his silvery skin, puckered mouth and he was so darn small, compact. How it takes a whole lot of kissing and hugging. A whole lot of decision-making.

And they decided, or it was decided for them because the weather was getting warmer, earlier, and it became harder to be themselves with their squatting frugality in a swelling town of tourists, and so they decided to set their baby free, because all babies, as everybody knows, want to be free and so they set Sardine into the ocean to be free, feed everybody with his flesh, ubiquitous, breed and make merry. Throw your young body against the waves and come up clean, son, once uncountable volumes, come back, quicksilver, torn by the spirits swimming through our world. In a word: hope.