

GARETH HOPKINS

The Fishing Trip

It was a long walk from the car to the beach, bulldozing through the sand dunes and coarse grasses towards the sound of the sea. The Boy followed in the wake of his father, scrambling like a newly hatched turtle towards the breaking waves, the blue tackle box ahead of him like a moulded plastic moon. Grass gave way to crumbling sand dunes and the beach. A five o'clock shadow of shells, seaweed and dead crabs marked the high water, the sea itself impassively coloured and restless some way off.

The Boy stood still and regarded the water in the distance. His father had already broken through the crust of seaweed and shells, drawn to the water's edge with his determined short stepped walk, shouldering the fishing tackle in an adjustment from left, to right. The boy remained rooted to the beach unable to move forward or step back onto the crumbling dunes, transfixed by the brine and curling waves, their white tops crashing into the beach and pebbles, sighing as the water receded from their headlong dash then exhaling slowly, trying to remain calm, but doomed to launch another frenzied assault upon the land.

The father stopped, turned slowly and beckoned the boy forward to join him, his fishing rod in its red case, tucked under his arm like a swagger stick, the tackle box giving him the look of an oversized hermit crab. The boy broke into a run and sprinted forwards, hindered by his heavy coat, hat, scarf and boots; terminal velocity hard to attain against the wind and sand underfoot he slammed head first into his father's torso, throwing his arms around, laughing loudly as his father placed one hand on his head and patted his back reassuringly. Time stood still as the boy understood for the first time that one day all this would end. He would die, his father would be dead but the sea would endure indifferent and impassive.

That was the moment the boy fell in love, bonded to the oceans in an instant so profound he would refer to it throughout his life as his 'epiphany'. Wives, three in total, came and went in later life, unable to compete with his nautical obsessions, children grew around him to become disappointments as they failed to embrace his enduring love of the sea, preferring to ride bikes, play football, paint pictures or move away from the coast when they got older, never to return. But, for now, in this moment, all this was to come to be and a secret to be kept from him as he held onto his father, laughing joyfully, filled with the overwhelming love he felt.

The boy had been beguiled, chosen by the sea, the sea which had waited in anticipation, small cold eyes peeking through the waves, waiting to be seen by one who could see, sense, smell the eons old fears of condensed life held in the shifting colours of the waters. Every dead whale, drowned sailor, thwarted Persian or Viking, every albatross at the end of a baited hook. All, simply all of everything distilled and made fluid, sharp, odorous in the churn, endless vortex, mindless, yet alive. Chosen, not by accident, but by design. Fear and dread had rooted him to that spot on the beach, below the crumbling dunes

and unforgiving grass and predestination, karmic, dependable and decided long before the beach or dunes existed, would now show its hand, freed in the body of a young boy to briefly flourish, a wave heading to shore, crashing into the future only to whisper the monsters sad exhalation at the end.

Upon the headland the boy and his father stood impassively looking out to sea, one eye on the fishing rods luminous yellow tip, one eye on the ships laying at anchor in the channel waiting for the tide to turn. Gulls wheeled and called loudly above, the braver ones coming to rest on nearby rocks edging ever closer to the small silver baitfish and rag worms loosely wrapped in newspaper nearby. The slightest movement resulted in them gently rising off their feet into the air and coming to rest a short distance back then scurrying forward to resume their doleful patience. The boy stared at the birds, unfamiliar in their natural surroundings, larger without the diminishing perspectives of the city. Cleaner, their white plumage reflective instead of tarnished, their voices more resonant and swagger more self-confident than self-protective. The father ignored them, refusing to make eye contact, only interested in the view ahead, occasionally tugging at the line where it left the spool of the reel and went through the first round eyelet of the long rod, pinching the line between his forefinger and thumb, tugging two or three times gently before deciding to reel in the line, re-bait the hooks and recast.

The boy surveyed the land, a small point of rock jutting into the sea ahead, a broader expanse either side of them. Behind, rocks giving away to sand dunes and beach. Low tide had exposed the rocks they now stood on fully, dressing them in a sad green grass skirt of weed, bedraggled and sodden against the barnacled boulders. The exposed expanses of sand either side of the rocks were contorted into the shape of bleach water soaked earthworms, writhing, aimless and painful where the retreating tide had stripped away the dignity of the sand and rocks alike, post party guilt written upon the faces of the gulls, their knowing looks confirming the tides regular infidelity with the land. The boy was complicit now, worldly beyond his tender years, surveying the scene carefully, memorizing, remembering, and absorbing the smells and sounds of betrayal.

A fish was landed carefully; the hook jutting through near the bright eye. The father tugged at the hook grimly, but could not free it from the delicately pointed head. The glistening eye become displaced, popping out of the fishes head as the boy looked on impassively. The father handed the fish to the boy, it writhed in agony in the boys hands gasping for air. The boy looked down at its grey and silver stripes smeared in blood and felt kinship. He kissed the fish, first on its gills, then on its now empty eye socket. He gently eased the hook out of the fish's head and laid it carefully on its side upon the rocks, where it jiggled, tailfin flicking gently. He then took the long thin filleting knife and thrust it through the spot where the head met the backbone and looked up at his father who was busy re-baiting the line. His father nodded gently and smiled, the boy forced a closed mouth smile in return before removing the fishes head and splitting the belly of the now dead fish, inserting fingers into the body cavity to remove the guts, which flopped out slowly, the liver deep red, the intestines grey and slime covered. He sliced through the membranes and gathered the offal in two hands, and dropped the shapeless mass over the

side of the rocks onto the sand to the delight of the ever-watchful gulls.

More fish followed. None died without a struggle, the hook sometimes being kind but mostly awkwardly lodging in flesh and bone, punching through the shimmering faces to emerge like a miniature scimitar. The boy understood his part in the unfolding story and noted how reluctantly the sea was offering up its inhabitants, fighting against the instincts to both feed and survive. Finally the fish stopped biting as the tide turned and reclaimed the rocks around the father and the boy, who fell back slowly in short backward steps, moving the fishing rod and tackle back in the face of each incoming swell, until they found themselves at the high water mark at the foot of the dunes, where they sat silently and rinsed the body cavities they had emptied at the edge of the incoming swell, bending between waves as they held their catch.

Their work done the boy and the father sat upon the blue tackle box. A thermos flask of coffee was opened and they both watched as steam drifted slowly up from their cupped hands towards their faces. The fish were bagged and stored away with ice blocks brought from the home freezer, the solid blue rectangular blocks of frozen liquid looking more manmade than they had earlier, amongst the shimmering silver and grey of the fish.

The boy had kept the stomachs of each dead fish, as he had been told to. His father reached into his coat and pulled out a small penknife and proceeded to make a small cut in the side of each of the walnut like appendages then passed each one to the boy, who squeezed the stomach contents onto the sand at their feet. Half digested small crabs, sand eels and pieces of bait fish lay at his feet, the father poking the reliquaries with a long thin stick he had found washed up on the waterline, the ever present gulls looking on and shrilly anticipating their departure. But for now, they were denied, the sea pushing foamy fingers out towards the fishes last supper, trying to reclaim what was rightfully its. Reaching out to the boy, caressing his toes through rubber boots, re-assuring, affirming, grooming with each gentle caress.

The father felt its cold love somewhere deep in the recesses of his mind. He reached out to his son and pulled him into his side, as his father had done many years before when he had been conscripted to fight in a war nobody understood or wanted. Here was history. The folly of mankind, still timeless. Samaritans, Incas, peasants, Kings and poets endlessly repeating through the ages the departure of innocence and the pointless fight to attain permanence in the face of grinding time and certainty. The father knew he was losing his son, as he had lost his humanity years previously. He wanted more for his boy, a chance to live free and happy, but he knew his son was hooked as helplessly as the fish he had pulled from the solemn ocean. He kicked out at the mess at his feet, startling the boy. The boy squeezed his father.

“It’s okay dad”, he said “it’s okay.”

The boy smiled at his father and continued smiling as he looked out to sea. His smile was noticed by ancient small cold eyes hidden amongst the waves, the same eyes that had seen his father years before losing his humanity as countless millions had done before.

The walk back to the car was hurried and humourless. Rough grass fought with the boy and father for every step forward. The parking area rippled as loose sand blew over it, filling in the gaps between each small individual paving stone. Gulls had followed them from the beach, wheeling overhead noisily, swooping speculatively for a last minute handout. The father obliged, tipping the remaining small baitfish onto the floor before placing the blue fishing tackle bag and red fishing rod case into the trunk of the car. They drove off slowly, the gravelled surface of the car park gently buffeting the boy and his father through their car seats. Behind them the gulls fought over the discarded baitfish in a swirl of white and grey. The father reached over and clasped the boy's knee, squeezing it gently as he looked ahead at the road through the sand dusted windshield. The boy smiled the smile of one who is in love, but the father knew it was not him with whom his son was enthralled.

***Gareth Hopkins** was originally from Neath, via Aberystwyth, and now lives in the Fairwater area of Cardiff with his wife, Charlotte and two children. He has no formal literary training or experience prior to entering this competition apart from the urge to write, which has been with him all his life, and at the age of 45 he decided it was time to gather the confidence to share his work publically.*