

What the Fish of the River Tell Us to Do

In our room, at night, in the dark, us brothers, we do not sleep. What we do, at night, in our room, in the dark, is we stare out our bedroom's window. Through our bedroom's window, us brothers, we can see out back into the back of our backyard. Out back in the back of our backyard, us brothers, we can see our fish. We can see the fish, we can see those fishes' heads, fish heads that are hammered and nailed, with rusty, bent-back nails, into our back of the yard telephone pole. This back of the yard telephone pole, it is studded with the chopped off heads of fish. These fish heads used to be fish with fish bodies living in the dirty river that runs its way through this dirty river town. Our town, it is a dirty river town with a dirty river running through it. Those fishes' heads, they stare back at us brothers, open-eyed, open-mouthed, and it's like they're singing to us brothers. When these fish sing like this to us, us brothers, we listen to what these fish say. What the fish say to us brothers, when they sing like this to us, they say, *Brothers, don't leave*. It was our father's voice, it was our father who came home from work that day and told us we were leaving. When our father told us we were leaving, our father, he meant it, we were leaving for good: this dirty river, this dirty river town. Us brothers, we did not want to leave. We did not not want to leave behind this dirty river town or this dirty river where us brothers always liked to run down to it to fish. We did not want to leave behind the fish-headed telephone pole out back in the back of our backyard. There were exactly one hundred and fifty fish heads hammered and nailed and singing out to us brothers from the split black wood of that backyard telephone pole. We gave each of these fish each a name. Not one was called Jimmy or John. Jimmy and John was my and my brother's name. We called each other Brother. Brother, I liked to say. Brother, I said, the night our father told us we were leaving. Give me your hand. Let's show those fish how we're going to keep ourselves from going away. Stay, I said, to Brother. Stand right here is what I said to him then, and then I walked with Brother out back into the back of our yard. Out back in the back of our backyard, that backyard telephone pole, it was sticking up, it was standing up, like the backbone of some stuck in the mud fish. When I said to Brother, Give me your hand, Brother did like I told. He gave me his hand. I held Brother's held-out hand back up against the wood of this fish-headed backyard telephone pole. In my other hand, I was holding onto our father's hammer. In my mouth, I was holding with my teeth a couple

of our father's rusty, bent-back nails. This might sting, I said to Brother. And then I raised back with that hammer. I drove that nail right through Brother's hand. Brother didn't flinch, or wince with his body, or make with his mouth the sound of a brother crying out. Good, Brother, I said. I was hammering in another nail into Brother's other hand when our father stepped out into the back of the backyard. Boys, our father called out to us brothers. Us brothers, we turned with our boy heads back toward the sound of our father. We waited to hear what it was that our father was going to say to us brothers next. It was a long few seconds. The sky above the river where the steel mill stood shipwrecked in the river's mud, it was dark and silent. Somewhere, I was sure, the sun was shining. You boys be sure to clean up before you come back in, our father said to us then. Our father turned back his back. Us brothers, we turned back to face back each other. I raised back the hammer. I lined up that rusted nail.