

Nothing but Water

CHRIS BAILEY



My father picks me up at the Charlottetown airport. I'm underneath the weather from a hang-over caused by the end of a relationship and the start of a partly ongoing bender. I've returned from Hamilton after trying and failing to get a job since graduating from my M.F.A. program in October. Luckily, there is always a job in the stern come spring, and Dad needs the help. If I say I applied for five hundred jobs between October and April, I'm low. If I say I heard back from ten, jobs that fell through or jobs I was told I wasn't suitable for, I'm high. On the hour-and-a-half drive east to Elmira Road, my father points out sites of accidents, murders, suicides.

"This is where so-and-so done themselves in."

"This is where young MacPhee went and Tom was the first on scene."

"This is your old stomping ground."

The windows are up. It's plus ten and raining, freezing rain no longer freezing as snow melts in ditches and fields, and Dad has the heat cranked.

He's been fishing since his teens. He'll be sixty-five this fall and got his own fleet in the 1980s. Not as tall as he once was, moustached and greying, he sometimes walks in a way that betrays his bad back, his new knees.

Things need doing before lobsterring. I missed taking out traps, fathoming rope into trawls and buoy lines, fetching and pairing buoys. I'm there to clean the boat sitting on blocks in the yard

though. My older brother Tom also fishes with my father and will likely take over the fleet (the boat and the lobster gear) when Dad steps out. Tom's a big man, tall and strong as hell, and someone I don't have much in common with save a job, a last name, some geography. He's wiring deck lights, washing windows, and trying to get an electric clutch to turn while I scrub a floor covered in red dirt and pine needles. Tom blames the tarp our older brother lent Dad for the winter instead of the trees and potato fields surrounding us. "It's dirtier than an old hooker," he says. He thinks it's funny, and I think I'll use that in a poem. Tom wouldn't like to be called such, but he's a sensitive man. He won't say anything emotional but feels nonetheless. There are more like this fishing than a person knows. I get the floor cleaned and Tom gets the electric clutch to turn after much cursing and grunting.

My parents' house was built in 1975 to replace the trailer they lived in. The wind made the walls breathe, pushed chairs across the floor. Dad got into fishing after failing to go pick nickel in Thompson, Manitoba, and to "keep us out of the welfare line," which is where he stood when building the house. The weathered grey house needs new siding, new corner casings. The roof is steel. There are four buildings west of the house with evergreen trees behind them. Three connected buildings: the north, where the boat used to sleep for winter; the middle that was a hen house; and the old south building, where we once built traps and worked on cars. There's a new-to-us south building alongside that, where traps are built and bait is cut.

The boat hauler backs from the road down the few-hundred-foot-long lane to the boat south of the

south building. As he does this, Dad sledgehammers the blocking propping up the bow. There's a conversation Dad and the hauler have, though I can't quite hear over the winch's whine. What I hear the boat hauler say is, "All the young fellas have around here is crushed dreams." I think of my literary and academic aspirations. The glacial pace the literary world creeps at despite thriving on deadlines. The hurry-up-and-wait of something you want to be part of but doesn't seem to want you. The woman in Ontario I would give anything to be with who doesn't want anything to do with me. How I'm returning to a job I've known most of my life and never enjoyed.

The boat goes afloat. We go for a sail, fuel up. Fire up the sounder (for depth and bottom) and the plotter (to keep track of trawls as sometimes landmarks aren't enough). Another cleaning. We cut and bag the bait. Mackerel caught last summer and frozen in forty-pound blocks in a freezer in Souris. We go through fifteen boxes this time, using a band-saw with the guide set to three and a quarter inches, cutting six by four.

We bait the traps on the wharf as we load the boat. There are 120 traps in the first load. Bagged mackerel goes on the rope end, and two herring, belly up, on the back end. When the boat's loaded, we drag the rest of the traps in their stacked rows forward. This is done to bait the remaining 180 traps and to have them closer to the wharf for Setting Day, when the traps hit the water. Setting is the most dangerous day of the season with all that rope attached to traps each weighing 120 to 130 pounds dry going over.

It's a cold, foggy Setting Day. My father has me sit atop the load since he hired two men (my little

brother and a friend) to throw traps off and because the alternative would be to have my nephew do it, but he talks too quietly. I hate it, sitting above the cabin as the boat rocks with the nor'east roll and trying to relay orders and calls back and forth and everything said is monosyllabic and sounds the same: WHOA, GO, NO, and the odd time, REVERSE.

Everything goes well. No snares. No injuries. On the wharf, my little brother asks our nephew about the porno mag left in my brother's room.

"That's not mine," my nephew says, saying it's his older brother's.

"Well, you knew about it."

The season is a blur of dark grey water and skies, low temperatures, wind not strong enough to keep us tied but strong enough to make for rough days called "arse-chafers" and "face-washers." Waking up at 3:45 A.M. to sail out the mouth of the night-dark run by 4:15. On the water, the wind is sharp. Sunrise doesn't bring warmth, but more wind off frigid water. Air so cold it hurts. So cold that when you remove your gloves to piss, your hands steam. So cold it snows more than once.

We have decent fishing, but there's so much rope a lot of time's spent hauling rope. I measure the lobster (keepers are canners and markets, markets being the money fish worth a dollar to a dollar fifty more per pound than canners this spring), band markets, and pick the six-trap trawls. Picking involves taking lobster out of the trap—spawn lobster go over, as do females bigger than a certain size, others to the measuring pan—changing bait, and removing anything that isn't a lobster, such as kelp, rock eels, crab, perch, or sea urchins.

Catches are spotty around the Island, though a few ports do very well. Some boats will run one thousand pounds most days, and everyone fishes for a price they don't know at the start, a price subject to change through the season. Others, if they get a pound to the trap, will consider that big. Some won't get half that.

Our conversations on the boat are limited. What're the fish doing. What bait is going on, coming off. Who's that going with a jag of gear. Look at that fella gone this far east. The biggest excitement is a man who has a lot of gear cut, possibly the full fleet. Rumours drift, though nothing's known. A meeting is called over the VHF radio, channel 65, in front of the harbour authority's building. Things will be settled on the wharf.

My understanding is "settling things on the wharf" means to fight. This doesn't happen. The men who called the meeting talk around the subject. A man in sunglasses and a Harley Davidson jacket accused of doing dirt out at sea drinks coffee and smokes with tense shoulders. Someone says this kind of thing gives the harbour a bad name and we need to cut this shit out. He wants a donation for the man who lost his gear, which has since been replaced, \$100 from each captain. The accused ashes his cigarette out under a boot heel.

"Let's fucking get to it," he says. "I didn't cut your gear, you cocksucker." Speaking directly to his accuser, "Stop laying accusations. I didn't fucking do it."

Nothing is solved.

Afterwards, he says, "I got a word for how I feel about that man. It's somewhere between *shit* and *sypphilis* in the dictionary."

The season goes on. We get maybe five nice days. Gloves get worked through, and come each Wednesday my hands are pins and needles. My poem-a-day routine stops due to a pervasive sameness I find difficult to produce around. The Saturday evening and Sunday off I get aren't enough for more than cultivating ideas for things. To let me know I have a longing to write and to prove a buddy in Hamilton wrong. When he found out I was considering staying on P.E.I., he told me his regret about not going to big cities stateside to really pursue acting in his youth.

"What's there to write about there? Nothing. You need a fucking city."

This pissed me off. I thought, *I'll show you*. I'd show him and my ex I'm more than a heartworn fisherman. But that dried up. I try to forecast my future, things yet to happen worth writing about. Landing Day. Putting traps away. How Dad plans to replace the bathroom floor.

Around mid-June, the catches drop. This gives me the chance to have my head up. Clear days you can see not only the windmills looming over trees and sandstone cliffs along the eastern edge of the Island, but the ones down the Northside Road looking like playthings. South of East Point lighthouse, the craggy ghost of Cape Breton across the Northumberland Strait. The eastern end of the Island is so low to the water Cape Breton sees us as nothing but water.

Through the season as I prepare for readings (I was asked to do a poetry panel with Richard Harrison, to be a featured reader at the Writers' Guild Open Mic in June, and to read in Fredericton in July) and try to write and prepare for an interview with P.E.I.'s *Guardian* newspaper, I get told how to do these by people who don't care about my writing outside of how it reflects them. It's an isolating thing, writing here. Not many friends read or are interested. Same for family. None of the family understood what it meant to attend Banff for poetry, to get into the M.F.A. program at Guelph, to have a forthcoming book. But when they hear about the book, they say they're excited. When they learn they're in its DNA, that they've had an impact on me, my life, then they know how to write and what to write about. How to read and carry yourself. At the open mic, none of them show.

When it comes to life and work, Dad says we're just trying to scrape by. "We aren't going to change the world doing this." He says this in the yard near his buildings, leaning on behemoth lobster traps that refused to fish. "And we needn't think we are or will. It don't amount to much. And when we die, who gives a fuck? Your family does and some say they do, but wait a couple days. You're forgotten like you were never here." It's one of the better days of the season. Sun warm, sky clear. A cool breeze from the east that keeps the mosquitoes away. B