

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Bill Ratner: Three Poems

Bill Ratner · Thursday, August 5th, 2021

Fear of Fish

The old rowboat full of splinters and moss
floats across the pond in a silent crawl.
My brother, my father, and a stranger
in the stern swear fishermen's oaths,
pinch and hook worms,
laughing and hoping for the big one.
On my side of the boat the water rips.
A strike. The boat dips, an underwater flutter
explodes in brute green. *Reel it in!* my dad shouts.
Got her, the stranger cries like he's opening
a crate containing a mail-order bride.
The hooked fish slaps the water in an arcing panic,
the line yanks it toward us.
I think of fish as friends, their fins
silkscreened on my bedspread.
In Miss Dewey's music class we sing
about fish like they are godly things,
signs of Christ, the blooming of life.
Our Christmas tree glows with fish,
rising against the sun, the equal of man.
A hook in its mouth and a hurl up,
the wriggling beast flies into the boat
slamming itself onto the gunnels
in the throes of death, a finned gladiator.
The stranger pounds it with a hammer.
I scream, tears thrumming in my throat,
not sure if I feel for the fish or for me
cringing at this convulsing creature smashing
itself at me, assuming I am the fisher.
Shut up! screams the stranger. *No!* I shout back.
Life leaks from the scaly thing.
It withers on the ribs of the boat.
My brother Pete grabs it like a hunk of limpa bread

and shakes it at me. *Squeeze it. Its shit comes out!*
 He holds it like an executioner wielding an axe.
 Liquid pencil lead drips from its hole.
 There is no further talk.
 The boat docks with a hollow thump.
 My father does not intervene.
 It is me versus the stranger,
 the stranger versus the fish,
 my brother versus its corpse.
 No one wins.

*

Grief

after Matthew Dickman

When you see it up ahead in the road standing there, looking right at you—a wild buffalo dead ahead—floor it, pedal to the metal. But in the opposite lane a semi's coming at you, so about your only hope is speed/swerve/evade.

You careen toward the shoulder, and that buffalo, all wooly, wiry, mournful, and huge, with hooves that could crush you to oatmeal, blocks your path. So brake. Hard. Pull over. Stop already.

That creature in front of you is a survivor. Remember Buffalo Bill Cody and the Wild West Show? Bill personally skinned more of those poor old beasts than crows grow tailfeathers. And now she's looking right at you.

Even with your car doors locked and your windows rolled up, you can hear her labored breath. This is better than a unicorn. Certainly bigger.

Get out of the car, go over and pet her. Don't stand behind her. She'll do what a bronco does—kick your ass from here to Kalamazoo. Give her a little scratch behind the ears. She's a mammal. She'll like that.

Talk to her. Say something, like, *Wow, I've never seen one of you up close like this*, or, *Hey, as a kid you were on my cowboy-themed wallpaper. You were always there*.

Now if she up and shits or moseys back onto the prairie, consider it a visitation. Call after her, *Good to finally meet you*, or, *Stay in touch?*

This might never happen. She's been through a lot. They stripped all those hides and left her kind to die.

But take a drive. You've been on a treasure hunt before. Maybe you'll get lucky.

*

Mannequin

My Aunties took me to the Rose Garden, a tattered, sandy spot of paths and rusted signs which once identified bushes and shrubs that now overgrow the edges of the place. My mother's sisters smelled of coffee and drugstore cologne. They had fuzz on their upper lips, *lady-staches* my Aunt Collie called them.

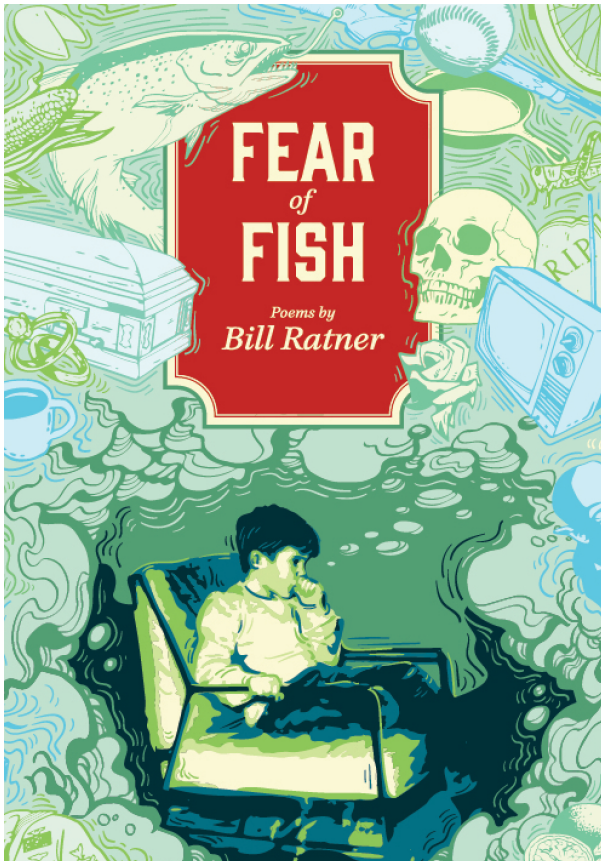
Though my aunties were blood and comforted me when I was with them they felt as far away as billboards on a hill—gathered cotton skirts, old purses, their manner of speaking in low cigarette tones, small felt hats with folded veils and pearl hatpins, *this'll put a man's eye out*, my Aunt Collie said, feigning a lunge.

After a slow turn around the Garden my aunties drove me back to their rambling shingle house. *Oh, your mother*, they said with a sad downturn of voice. *Oh, your brother, what a handsome boy, how could he go like that?*

In the den my aunties kept a dress mannequin moldable in shape and size made from wire hexagons ringed together, its pubis naked, untended. It lived in a closet with house dresses and an ironing board. At the hips it was bolted to a walnut stand with wheels.

I pulled it out and turned its shoulders to me. She was headless, armless, legless, but seemed proud of purpose, fitted with blouses, ensembles, pinned and stretched. Now naked, poised.

To soften the chafe and scratch I placed a tissue in the hole below her stomach and entered her. It was fast and complete. The stained tissue fell at my feet. I rolled her back into the closet and gently closed the door. She belonged to my aunties.



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Front cover of Fear of Fish, poetry collection by
Bill Ratner

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