



"Fish Spine" by Santiago Nazarian

Hau turned the faucet on with careful fingers. He would have to turn it off after washing his hands. They smelled like fish, fresh fish, like something rotting. Always. Scales on his fingers. He didn't want to contaminate the faucet. He would have to turn it off again, with clean hands. He washed them.

He bent over the sink and felt his back ache. He bent over the sink and felt his spine. He placed his hands on his back; he straightened up before the mirror. He looked into his eyes. He saw himself. No scales. No spine. No reflection of fish in his slanted eyes, in his adolescent face. Hau remained the same, despite his hands.

He took a hand off his back and turned off the faucet. He brought his fingers to his nose. He smelled. Still there. His spine hurt. The fish screamed. His slanted eyes squeezed even tighter before of the mirror.

The whole day. Every morning. He helped his parents at their market stall. Knife on spine, fish on ice, lowered eyes, like his voice, though he spoke Portuguese better than they. He wrapped. Newspaper. Black ink. Stained fingers, sinking in the water. Frozen fingers, wrapping the fish, packing the scraps, the end of his adolescence.

Hau spent the whole morning waiting for his reflection in the mirror. His fingers under his nose. Soap, vanilla, to remove a daily life that wasn't his. Only a job. Only

family. It wouldn't contaminate his poetry. In his fingers, it wouldn't contaminate his paper. He wrapped. He packed. He folded origami in his free time.

For her. When she passed. She lowered her eyes. She lowered her head. He hoped she didn't see, even if she felt. Even if she felt the smell of the stall miles away. She always passed by in a hurry. She never looked at him. Or maybe it was he who lowered his eyes. And she couldn't perceive him.

They met each other later. In the evening. When she asked him what he did. Or what was he going to do? Philosophy. Together in class, waiting for the entrance exam. Together at the bus stop, waiting for the bus to arrive. And goodnight. Tomorrow I wake up early to help my father.

They didn't go much further. They didn't give each other kisses or caresses, but they said hello. They shook hands and their fingers touched. He hoped his fingers didn't denounce him. The smell of fish. Everything in its place at the end of the day. Until dawn again, when the fish awaited him.

Brushing his teeth, he heard the first birdsongs; he looked at his own reflection in the mirror, foaming at the mouth. He spit. He brought his fingers to his mouth. He no longer felt his spine. At least the pain and smell didn't build up day after day; they disappeared after work without leaving long-term effects. One day his past would

erase itself forever. And not even he would remember what fish smelled like.

Perfume. On a Friday night, to see his friends, to see her, until the morning. At a bar, over beers, they would celebrate a birthday. It wasn't his. It wasn't hers. But they would be together, and that was what mattered. He would be on the left, with the boys. Laughing, drinking, distilled, fermented. She would be there in front, with the women, beckoning, perfuming the atmosphere with colorful cocktails. Sitting on the edge of the street, in the gutter, where the market stalls would go up later.

The alcohol opened up his appetite, and the menu opened up his spine, with fish, dried cod, cod cakes, one piece per couple. A piece of provolone. Pies. Ketchup. Mayonnaise. Napkins to clean your fingers.

She pulled off a feat. She only used one. One napkin and she wiped her lipstick. Only one napkin and she handled. The mayonnaise. Ketchup. Provolone, pies, and fish spines, cod cakes. He accompanied the boys; he gathered a mountain of paper. Their napkins with ketchup, mayonnaise. He looked at her and swallowed. He looked at her and everything sweetened. He cleaned his hands on a stack of napkins.

Such women are needed, to make boys behave. Women are needed, so that boys use napkins. To drink a little more, to smile and hide, to hide the fish spines in their teeth. To hide the scales between their fingers. He looked at her and hid behind the paper. A piece, folded, origami.

She was there through it all on the right side of the table. Beside her friends, smiling with composure. The boys mocking. He, working. His fingers for her. His fingers shaking. His fingers working. His sweetened fingers, on paper, transforming into poetry all that he felt.

What did he feel? The gutter calling him. His friends calling for a drink. Beer, fermented, going down the wolves' mouths, fish spines. Hours later he would be there, his fingers frozen. With his fingers in the fish, on that same street, wrapping the women's dinners in paper, the dinners of the mothers, the mothers of their girls.

And poetry would just be black ink. The news would be mayonnaise, stained, on newsprint, on fish spines. He would just be another one. Squinting at the market. Eyes lowered like his voice, quiet. He would work for the fish, fresh, dead, the true interest of all the women who approached him. They wouldn't sense the perfume on his neck. They wouldn't sense the pain in his spine.

With his fingers working quickly he concluded, though drunk, a job well done. Fish spine. Bar napkin. Origami. Perfect. Figures and poems for her, on a stainless piece of paper. A paper fish. "To dive with you."

She took the fish in her hands, with a smile on her lips. It was lovely. Origami. Her smile. It made the whole market sink beneath the sea and the marine life prevail. She brought it to her mouth, to her lipstick, and kissed it. "Oh, how funny, it even smells like fish." ■