

## Bob, or Man on Boat

In a boat, on a river, lived a man.

Bob.

Bob fished.

It's what Bob did.

All of the time.

Fish. And fish.

Sometimes, Bob ate the fish. But most of the time, what Bob did with the fish was, Bob sold the fish.

It's how Bob lived.

A boat. A river.

Fish.

A man.

Bob.

Look at Bob's hands. His knuckles are rivers. The skin on Bob's hands, fish scale covered, they look like they've been dipped in stars.

\*

Sometimes, at night, when the fish are slow to bite, Bob looks up from the river and looks up into the sky for stars.

Some nights, Bob sees how many stars in the sky he can count.

One night, Bob counted up to two-hundred and twenty-two.

That was a bad night for fishing.

That was a good night for counting stars.

Most nights, the fish start biting before Bob can count up to ten.

On a good night of fishing, on a bad night for counting stars, Bob can fill up his boat with more fish than there are stars up in the sky.

Nights like this, Bob's boat is no longer just a boat.

It is a constellation of fish.

\*

Sometimes, when I watch Bob fish, I can't help but believe that Bob is older than the river is.

That Bob is older than the moon is.

That Bob made the moon so that at night he could better see the river.

So that Bob could better see the fish.

\*

This is what a fish looks like to Bob when Bob looks down inside the river to see a fish.

A fish is a flash of silvery light.

A fish is a sliver of milky moonlight.

A fish is a shooting star.

Bob, make a wish.

Get in the boat, fish, Bob says to the fish.

In the boat, Bob whispers to the river.

Like this, Bob wishes.

Bob's boat, when Bob makes his wishes, his boat fills up.

With stars.

With moon.

With light.

\*

At night there are other lights that light up the river.

There is the light from the lighthouse light.

There are lights from the houses with the people who live inside them.

There are lights from factories along the river that haven't yet shut down.

Nights when the moon is full, it is so lit up on the river that Bob in his boat looks like he is glowing from inside him.

As if Bob is made out of light.

\*

But no.

Bob is a man made out of flesh.

Once, when I shook Bob's hand, there was bone there for me to shake.

I'm Bob, I said, and I stuck out my hand for Bob to take it.

It's true that Bob hesitated at first, Bob looked at my hand, but then he took it, my hand, the way that a fish might look at a rusty hook before taking it into its mouth.

\*

I'll take two fish, I said to Bob.

One for me.

One for my father.

Bob gave me a look.

It wasn't a mean look.

It wasn't the kind of look that makes you want to turn and run away.

But it was a look that says let's get this over with.

Bob handed me two fish.

I took them both into one hand.

I stuck out my other hand and waited for Bob to take it.

When Bob took his hand away, I watched Bob turn and walk away, back to the river.

It was like losing a fish right at the side of the boat.

It was like watching a fish spit out the hook and then disappear back into the river.

The big ones, they say, always get away.

Unless you're Bob.

\*

Bob lives, in his boat, on the river, in a part of our town that is known in our town as Mud Bay.

Some people call it the Black Lagoon.

This is where the river is at its muddiest.

The banks along the river here are muddy too.

There is a dirt road that runs its way down to the river, down to where Bob lives on his boat.

This road is most of the time muddy.

This is a road that, in the mud, cars get stuck in.

Because of this, most people do not use it.

What would they use it for?

To visit Bob?

Bob doesn't want to see you.

If there was a sign posted somewhere along this road, this sign would say, Keep Out.

Don't go any further.

This is my river.

Signed, in mud,

Bob.

\*

When Bob needs to go into town, to sell his fish, to get gas for his boat, to get whatever else he can't get from the river—a new pair of boots, maybe, or new laces for his old pair of boots, or maybe to get himself something other than water to drink—

Bob walks.

Up from the river.

Up the muddy road.

Into town.

You can always tell when Bob comes in to town.

You can always tell where Bob has walked when Bob comes walking into town.

It's the mud that gives Bob away.

It's that trail of muddy boot tracks that begins at the river's edge and ends in the middle of where town is.

Or else these muddy tracks begin in the middle of where town is and end at the river's edge.

Down where Bob's boat is.

It all depends on how you look.

\*

The Bob who walks into town, to sell off his fish, to get gas for his boat, to get whatever else he can't get from the river—a new pair of boots, et cetera, et cetera:

This Bob is a fish out of water.

\*

There are some river-folks who know Bob who say about Bob that what Bob is looking for is a stone that floats.

A fish that doesn't exist.

Or maybe what Bob is looking for is this:

A fish that walks on water.

\*

What I say to this, what I say about Bob, is this:

Bob is Bob, I say.

I also say this: that in Bob's eyes, in Bob's heart, there is a fish that is more than *just* a fish.

\*

There is no such fish that is *just* a fish.

Every fish is a beautiful fish.

Every thing that is beautiful in this world is a fish.

The moon is a fish.

The river is a fish.

The stars in the sky.

The stones in the river.

The mud on the river's bank.

Fish.

Fish.

Fish.