

Our Collective Hearts · *Michael Krekorian*

JIM SAYS THERE WAS A TIME they were thick—he means the fish, and they were thick off the coast lounging in the sun, the sun-baked waters off the coast, rising to some errant anchovy, surfacing like some slow U-boat rolling under the blue surface, touching the surface with mouth and forked tail, rising in the kelp beds and rocky prominences of this coast. Yes, Jim says they were thick once, and we would wait in some rocky cove or thick kelp bed swinging back and forth, back and forth on the anchor rope, waiting for that first rise or thrashing in the late spring that announced the stirring of these creatures that meant that these fish, the Yellowtail, had arrived, arrived from the south somewhere thrashing and twisting in the azure calm of not so open water fenced by underwater forests of kelp.

There was a time Jim says that the blue-green backs of these fish were up so thick that a soul could get up from the railing or the stern and walk across those lazy fish sunning themselves between the kelp strands, but walk we did not Jim says; it was these blue-green and silver and yellow monsters we were after, and we could throw everything at them—blue and white or green and yellow or just silver jigs, white feathers, green feathers, blue feathers, rubber things that looked like living squid, shiny or dull bits of metal with large hooks that should look like some live excited fish. . . . We came prepared but perplexed; we came with it all—paraphernalia in old redwood boxes, black plastic and chrome reels, rods especially made that were thick at the bottom and light at the top. I can feel the bait swimming faster, faster, Jim says—the whole world down there twitching at the rod tip the sixty or maybe seventy pounder coming up for a wounded bait fish and chasing the little ones under the kelp, and of course Jim would have to say that that wounded bait just happened to be at the end of his reel, rod and line, a thin line so that monster of a Yellowtail would not detect the transparent string drifting from the stern.

Well you know the rest, like any fish story with the music playing, maybe Mozart or Beethoven, and the stern gently rocking and someone asking for a beer or a hamburger in the galley. Then the splash on the stern and someone, maybe the captain maybe me says, “Tail on the corner” but everyone’s quiet as Jim’s reel locks into gear with a click and that fish, that monster Yellowtail, turns with the bait and the reel sings and sings and someone says, “Jim’s on, he’s hooked up and howling again like a wolf.” That monster fish, he turns straight out from the stern like his tail was on fire, out and under and around the branches of those submarine trees of kelp.

And I ask, “Jim can you stop him? How do you stop him?”

Too big Jim says. He is too big—seventy or eighty pounds at least or more; there’s no way to stop that fish. Just hang on Jim, someone says, but that fish

was not a small Yellow, and funny he's stopped by himself and stopped just short of the kelp turning his silvery yellow side to the surface splashing around a bit. . . . Yes, hard to believe but this fish, this Yellowtail, turned right around, headlong right into the stern and even Jim says he's a bit edgy over this and the last thing he sees, Jim says, is that streak under the water . . . that bright yellow stripe, a splash on the surface no more than a few inches from the stern covering Jim and the stern railing with buckets of water, and before old Jim could think "the props," the line parts as they say and that eighty pounder is gone.

Never had this ever happened in the history of our fishing experience, especially to our master fisherman, Jim. We waited, waited for someone to say something. We looked up, we all looked up to the sky but nothing much is up there except a few birds gliding around and dull brownish blue and of course the sun, the stabs of flame twisting, twisted by the wind on the water. Yes, there's more up there, more than meets the eye Jim says, and I listen.

We all peer over the side, down past the stern railing and the rudder and the props, past those stabs of twisted sun that hurt the eyes. . . . It's another world down there someone says. Leaves of kelp stray to and fro, back and forth as if there were some thick wind down there. Someone points out a trunk, like a tree I say but before our other theories can be put to use or play, or before we could all analyze in specific detail the hooking and subsequent loss of the seventy or even eighty pounder someone yells "Boils in the corner!" But nobody's on and we wait and Jim with a sly smile steps back to that bait tank of small fish, fish that are normally pickled and placed onto pizza slices; he grabs one of these anchovies and slips a hook that looks like half a silver ring into the tail and drops it over the side, over the stern. "There look!" someone says and through the hurt in our eyes we could see big lurking Yellowtail almost still in that thin looking water . . . resting down there like big incandescent teardrops with fins.

That anchovy doesn't realize what's down there Jim says. Down it goes hook in tail pulling a thin line. Why, someone asks, why does a smaller fish run right straight into it? But before any of us could answer for as usual we had our own particular theories, there was a flash down there, way down there, silver or maybe that flash of green and yellow flank. Before we could speculate, Jim's reel is humming and the fish story with its own particular music sweeter than Beethoven or Mozart is on again.

The reel hums, controlled by Jim's careful thumb and above the hum, the music of fishing—Jim counts . . .

OneTwoThreeFourFiveSixSevenEightNineTen

And we count along with him.

Now! Jim says.

Now! We all say.

Well you should have seen that pole lift and bend with a weight that made every last one of us go tight and say YES! YES! YES!

Sonofabitch Jim howls, and we all stand by that stern tight-lipped listening to a sound, that special sound of all that equipment, rod reel line going tight under a weight invisible held fast by some line, clear line that disappears past the surface of the water.

It's a sound we can't talk about Jim says.

There we go we all say, and you might know the rest, a fish story with the music playing and men running around excited on the deck, that fish pulling hard down and out from Jim's position on the stern, his and our place for these short hours and minutes; the sweet song of thin line pulling against drag fills our ears and the air—why it even reaches the ears of our tired and half deaf old Captain, red-faced, squinting out of his one good eye (the other aims off at some cockeyed angle). Every time one of us hooked up he would run down from the bridge. . . . Ah good fish, he would say and someone would hoist a bass or tom cod or any old mudfish over the rail. . . . Ah fish sandwich he would say. . . . Clare, Clare cook this one up will you. Fish sandwiches for all he would say, or the fish would still be hot and on the run and that captain would take one glance at the bent rod and tip . . . short jerks, yes that means a bass, or long steady pulses . . . a barracuda, or a sizzling drag . . . yes a bonito . . . but when the ears and one good eye of our slightly red-faced Captain caught wind of this sound and this sight of Jim at the stern hung to this fish he said nothing, yes nothing.

I looked back to the bridge. The Captain bounded down the steps from the bridge only to come up and stand behind, right behind Jim. The black pole was up as it should be, pointed to the sun and the stars and the moon if it were visible and the line was tight and the line peeled off that reel with that sound, that sound made more unearthly by the Captain standing there like that. We, none of us, have ever seen him stand there, right behind a person like that but that fish is peeling off line . . . he got about 100 yards I say. No, it's more someone says, you can estimate the amount of line taken by a fish at any given instant if you only. . . . Quiet the Captain says.

Clare, get down here! the Captain says.

So Clare bounds out of the wheelhouse wrapping herself in a towel covering all that dark skin, those legs like the flank of some smooth fish. What does she do up there? Someone said once. We had discussed it and discussed it over many times—our conclusions were varied of course, but we could all agree that she had our Captain put up a little chrome-plated ladder that leads up to the top of the wheelhouse where the radar and radio antennas were fastened, and she did spend a lot of time up there. She's up there looking for schools of mackerel and tuna someone said. No, she's the real Captain; she's guiding the boat with the radar. No, no she knows where the bait schools are just by the

smell and she's up there so that her gifted nose won't be interfered with by the scents of diesel oil and burning hamburgers. We never did decide what she was doing up there and a few of us have actually dared to venture up that smooth ladder only to be chastised by our Captain who could hear us, or one of us reaching for that first shining rung—Get down from there you no good rapsallion!! he would yell.

So Clare bounds down the steps from the wheelhouse but we're all too busy to look up her legs wrapped in the towel or to see how tight that white towel is wrapped about her body. Clare get down here, this fish, he's sounded. And sure enough that is what we were all busy watching—that first sizzling run slow and then stop; some heads shook as, plain as the day we were in, the line moved deeper and deeper until it was almost under the stern. What's he doing? someone said. He's down there pretty far one of us said. What a world it must be down there, let's see that monster has taken close to 250 yards of line—he's gone and hid in the shelf . . . there's no light down there someone said. No kelp or bait fish or brightly colored lobsters and abalone or sea stars. Well, we all knew what this meant—the drop off of the shelf was adjacent to the shallower, warmer kelp beds. Nothing except for a few mudcats and sand sharks lived down there, nothing at all. . . . Why would any self-respecting fish decide to sound there, in that horrible hole? True, it didn't happen much but we had discussed it many times.

He's down there all right, he is down there deep.

Going down, sounding for some cooler water, cool water rejuvenates.

No, damn it, that fish knows about the boat, its V shape still in the ocean, and he's waiting to come up right on the props.

Shit no, it's too dark down there for a fish to see anything. Dark and cold with no rocks on the bottom to sever a line, no kelp to wrap a line. . . .

But I hear some fish live down there, some fish with lights on them so that they can see. They turn them on and off like street lamps. . . .

Shut up you yammering idiots the Captain says. Come here Clare. Jim's standing there and we all stare at the sinking rod and rod tip. Well the Captain reaches out from behind Jim and puts a crusty hand on the line. He pulls up on the line. Solid he murmurs to himself, solid. Jim's pulling with his back, his arms and his legs and arms are quivering a little. Clare, Clare the Captain says softly and then steps back as she slips in between all of us to stand, one hand around the towel, right where the Captain was, right behind Jim struggling with that still fish at the end of his line a long, long way down.

Well Clare stands right behind Jim and reaches out to put her dark hand around the line. She lifts the line a little, carefully. The towel loosens a little and then she slips in between Jim and the stern so she is face to face with him and then she starts doing something, something that we can't see—a sort of rubbing or maybe she is whispering something in his ear about the fish and

how big he is and. . . Well, whatever, we stand all quiet—all we hear are the pump motors and the breeze whistling through the masts and radar and radio antennas. Well that white towel loosens some more and Clare raises her head and smooth, light hair and looks up, right up into Jim and her mouth opens a little. . . . I will Jim says. That towel in an instant goes tight around her and Clare is out and away and up in quicker than an instant—from stern to steps to the silver ladder before we know what is happening or could ask any questions.

You're soaking him the Captain says.

Look lively the Captain says.

Pull, pull on that fish—get that head pointing in a direction we can deal with.

And sure enough Jim's legs and arms stop shaking and quivering and he relaxes a little like a runner or a high jumper getting ready to make the move, and then straightens out putting both hands around the foregrip of the bent pole—and he pulls.

Jim, pull, Jim, we all say in unison.

So Jim wiggles his fingers a little and straightens his arms and lifts, yes he lifts and the pole moves up . . . just a little.

An inch at a time Jim, we all sing out.

And he gains on that inch reaching over real quick, cranking up loose line.

Pump him! Pump him!

So Jim pumps again, and again the pole lifts a little but not much—we peer over the stern to see thin line descending from the fishing pole tip down to the water surface . . . a strange bend in the line under water. Refraction, yes, that's what it is someone says. Whatever it's called, the line streaks down the dim waters . . . not straight but curved, that is curving down—deeper and deeper until a point, not a firm point but more gradual—it just disappears. We shiver at the thought of it.

I can't! I can't look down there anymore, someone says.

I can't look when there is nothing. . . .

So some of us watch Jim straining an inch at a time on the fish, and some of us, braver of course continue to stare for anything down there above nothing . . . straining our eyes for that glint of magic that first appears 100 feet or maybe 200 feet down, an infantile flash or stab of silver like a minnow at the end of the long descending line . . . but that which appears to be a minnow is the fish, the monster fish, and we all stare into nothing—all wanting to be the first to sing out that special word—Color.

Wait! Look! He's shaking his head, someone says, and sure enough that fishing pole in the hands of Jim starts to shake and oscillate, first slow and then faster, up and down, up and down and Jim uses this instant in time to gain some more line fast as he can— this has gone on too long, and we can all tell

his hands are tired and numb—he has to wiggle them more often but the pole continues to shake—no time to be lost.

Brandy! The Captain yells. Give him some brandy! So one of us runs back from the stern into the galley and runs out again with a small amber bottle.

Open up Jim, here, drink this and sure enough he opens his mouth and one of us pours in the brandy—here, a little more to stop that shaking and sure enough Jim’s arms stop shaking after a minute or two and we all say . . . Yes! Very good, very good.

Mudbass! Mudbass! The Captain yells, Fry him up a mudbass.

And before I know Clare bounds down her silver ladder, that towel tied around her with a hunk of fish line. She hits the lower deck and before you know it she’s jumped in the bait tank, standing right in that cool water neck-deep, the short gaff between her legs. Here, here she says. Got him she says and lifts out a fat mudbass at the end of the gaff all squirming and wiggling.

You, fry him up, she says.

Me?

You honey, fry this mudbass up.

Me?

Let’s kill him first she says and hops out of the bait tank, that white towel all wet and clinging to the right places. Well she hops out and hands me the short gaff with the mudbass at the end of it and then takes the gaff away and before you know it she runs that fish into the deck with a hard smack bouncing once . . . lying in tight little wiggles.

Now fry him honey, and she looks at me with those eyes that look a cross between a cat and a shark and I try to think of a quick word or two to say or even think but my heart is stopped and nothing comes out except maybe something like a moan or a stutter. . . .

There, he’s dead. Fry him honey, and Clare bounds up the deck to her silver ladder and is gone.

I pick up the mudbass from the deck and hurry into the galley to fry this fish up so that I don’t miss any of the action outside. Fileted and frying in some butter—I start to wonder what I am missing out there, out on the stern with Jim. Somehow I don’t feel all there or all here.

Well I don’t know quite how to say it but I guess I am wondering about that thing, that idea that comes into all of our heads—well, just what in the hell are we, all of us, doing out here in the first place. . . . Ah, yes, the quick answer is to catch fish and be brave and maybe make a little sense out of it out here—you know, nature and the ocean and the sky and the sun and why fish bite at certain times and why some of us catch big fish while others of us catch nothing. That’s why we’re out here really in this ocean but I can’t help thinking as the sweet smell of fried mudbass in butter sweeps around me like the west wind, I can’t help but think—why, really.

I mean that here we all are on this ocean and one of us, Jim, is hooked onto a big fish but what about the rest of us. There have been no fish for the rest of us and for all we know that big fish of Jim's will pop off and we will come back with . . . there's that word again—nothing. Or that monster fish that should be a Yellowtail is really just a big fat mudshark that's run down into the deep and will never come up or if it is a fish he might be down in some big dark briney cave sawing away at Jim's line with a convenient sharp rock. So we come out here and it should mean something—it has to mean something . . . a fat fish to take home to our wives, some new stories about subduing fish—but then when there is only one fish and that fish can be lost in a second; well, you know what I am saying—what is left then? Ten grown men, our Captain and a woman have come out to a kelp bed or a cove or somewhere on the expanse of the Pacific . . . and they come out to the sea ready for anything she might have to offer and with all the answers and tricks for locating the big fish . . . and with all this we still can end up with nothing. . . .

We have talked about this among ourselves and it was not pleasant and some of us still have faith in our devices and some are still trying to map it all out like a complicated navigation chart that is always right, and once, just once, when we made a long trip similar to this one and came back with nothing but a mudfish or two—why we even aimed our eyes heavenward and cast up a prayer or two—to, you know, Him.

Well, the mudbass is done, and I run out there to the stern. When I get there everyone is standing on a circle around Jim and cheering and passing the brandy. Fools, the Captain yells, Quiet! Save that brandy where it is needed! And all of a sudden everyone is quiet and just staring down the stern. I come up right next to Jim and say, Jim, mudbass is on. He looks up from concentrating on the rod-tip and nods his head up and down, up and down. The *L.A. Times* is wrapped around the mudbass filet like the petals of a giant flower, and I hold it up so Jim can take bites out of the fish. He takes a couple of bites and then the captain yells, Brandy! Brandy! and someone hands up the bottle and pours a little down Jim's throat—and wouldn't you know, like the fried mudbass and brandy are important somehow, that monster fish, that Yellowtail or maybe a Yellowfin Tuna or a Big Eye Tuna or (though hopefully not) mudshark starts coming up, yes coming up, breaking the sound, breaking the fast where nothing moves in the deep, breaking the wait once and for all concerned.

His head's come up, yes, the head is up—the surface it will be. Jim's pumping and pumping on that fish and each time the pole dips, why more line and more line is gained until we all start thinking . . . he's worn out now. It won't be long now . . . the mouth of the monster held open by the pressure of hook and line, the mouth open, gills not working. We all think that, and the fish, our fish, if it all works out, is drowning slowly and losing his strength.

He's coming up, he's coming up, we all whisper and everyone peers out over the stern and down into the deep to see the thin line curving from refraction and the sun daggers dancing on the surface obscuring, blinding our eyes and beyond that, down in the darkest reaches of the deep, we see the light carefully, gradually going dim; we see silver fluttering, twisting at the end of the thin line, Jim's thin line. Color! we all yell out in unison.

Well time is almost gone. I know what I have to do now so I run about the deck and finally find the rack next to the bait-tank where the gaffs are housed, all shapes and sizes of gaffs—long ones with small hooks to short ones with large hooks. I grab a long one, the longest with the largest hook and then pick up the short one, just in case. Clear the way! Clear the way, I say and move back to the stern—that bit of silver rising, rising until everyone is yelling and clamoring all at once and pointing. I get in one of the corners next to Jim, right next to Jim and the clamoring continues and I make ready my gaff, wrapping the leather thong at my end around my wrist, and I can see that fish, the monster coming up and I can see his head and his eyes and his gills flaring and the sleek yellow and silver form twisting around and around in a tight spiral and I brace myself and grip the pole of the gaff tight and send the hook quickly over the stern and just touch it to the water surface then swing it back out of sight from the water so as to not spook this dying monster so close to the surface—four maybe three feet down and everybody's quiet, very quiet because this fish, yes it's a Yellowtail—big, very big, sixty, seventy, eighty pounds and I feel something, someone wet right behind me slipping my hand real quick off the gaff, moving me behind. . . . Step back honey. I'll take care of this honey, and she has a grip on the gaff and slides in next to Jim and before I could say "It's my job," I hear a splash and look down to see the monster on the surface right on the surface, making a circle on the surface, his last circle—the gaff hits the water in front of this circle and the fish sees it but the circle continues and the gaff point hits the surface with a splash and a ripping sound—point touches flank and the motion continues smoothly hoisting the monster fish out, out above the surface in an arc that drops Jim's Yellowtail, our Yellowtail, right on the right side of the stern railing.

And all I hear is the slap slap of the windwaves on the hull and the auxiliary motor working the generator as the Yellowtail, seventy or eighty pounds of him, is still as blood runs from his flank and mixes with the water on the deck, mixes with the red-orange that covers his green and yellow flanks and tail and the deck changing the bright sun daggers into one large sheen of orange over the Pacific, our Pacific.

And shortly, everyone, every one of us and even the Captain is shaking Jim's hand and patting him on the back and looking down at the now quivering Yellowtail—Jim says he couldn't have done it without everyone helping like that—and Clare tightens up her towel now splattered with streaks of the blood of our monster fish, steps up on the top of the bait tank and jumps in.

Jim, I'm ready honey, she says as she gets out of the tank and quicker than we all turn around she is gone and up that silver ladder of hers.

He's eighty or ninety or ninety-five pounds we all say to Jim and shake his hand once more in the deep red of the sounding sun. We give him what's left of the brandy. He puts the bottle in his back pocket, and the rest of us sit down in the stern to look and contemplate this Yellowtail that fought like no Yellowtail on earth. . . .

We talked and talked in low voices around that fish; we had wrestled this fish in the water, we had this fish aboard. The fish lies still—its death quivers long since ended. One of us and then one more and then one more noticed that it was dark, but dark and so wonderfully clear that we could see for miles and miles in any direction we chose.

There is one thing, and for an instant it shoots a pang of fear into our collective hearts: land, the coastline is nowhere in sight. Gone are the familiar landmarks of the near shore kelp bed; gone is the arching the twisting coastline; gone is the sight of the off-shore islands lying in wait off this California coast. What had happened? The Yellowtail, that monster fish, must have actually towed our craft and towed it a considerable distance. . . . That was one of the explanations we came up with. What does it matter anyway; we all feel calm and relaxed—the fish is on our stern. The fish is dead, and Jim, he's up there on the navigation bridge, Clare's station, both of them working and guiding our craft from a dot in the expanse of the ocean back to the center of things again.