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Fish

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FISH

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Author and Visual Artist

...the crying, the screaming on the videos, are embedded in your brain forever. The screams are complete terror... The eyes, they are just like death. There is just no life in those eyes. —Timothy Palchak, child pornography investigator

Water wants to be free. —Masaru Emoto

STORES IN BRAINERD, MINNESOTA sell t-shirts, sweatshirts, and brand new seventy dollar wooden plaques marred to look antique that say “Up North” in blackened cursive. They also have a variety of “at the cabin” themed knickknacks, signs, and pillows—some with bald eagles soaring above white pines, and others with twisting fish flying high above the lake’s gray surface—red and white lures tearing at their lips. Wealthy, urban Minnesotans love the Brainerd area. A two-hour drive north of the Twin Cities, Brainerd is a nostalgic place to escape the city.

Their mammoth second homes have replaced the rustic, turn-of-the-century cabins and shacks that once lined the lakes and backwoods where I lived as a young girl. Brainerd, just east of the lake I lived on when I was four and five, has been built up as if it were a wealthy Minneapolis suburb with five dollar a cup coffee shops replacing the provincial, conservative, run down town it was when I grew up. The town’s original, ramshackle 19th century clapboard houses and brick business districts are still visible beneath the upper scale polish. While the old buildings are a quaint reminder of a simpler time to many, the brick and peeling paint behind the facade casts me into my childhood, when I was prey.

When we lived near Brainerd, my dad had a buddy twenty years his senior named Stan Goernes. Stan was German and proud of it. He taught at a high school, twenty minutes northeast of Brainerd, and also, for a time, owned a bait and gas station in Garrison, twenty minutes southeast of Brainerd. The three towns, Aitkin, Brainerd and Garrison, triangulated the forest and numerous lakes that comprised the topography of that particular expanse of earth, the homeland of some of my ancestors, the Ojibwe, and before the Ojibwe, the Dakota. The first year my parents and I lived on a small, obscure lake at the center of the triangle. Stan, his wife Tammy, and their three children lived in Garrison in the back of the gas station across the road from Mille Lacs Lake, the second largest lake in Minnesota.

As a girl, I was more interested in and connected with animals, nature and old buildings than people. Since I feared and distrusted most adults and spent little

time with other children, they were my touchstones. When we visited Goernes' store I attempted to avoid the house attached to the store, and thereby avoid being abused. I stood in the store looking at all the bobbers, fish hooks, fishing rods, life belts, rear mirror car fresheners, camping equipment, maps, canned food, boxed food, fishing and hunting licenses, matches, minnow buckets, and of course, minnows. Tubs and tubs of fascinating minnows, their small, lithe dark bodies darting in and out of the larger, collective body. Their dark eyes many times too big for their bodies. I liked the minnows same as I liked the Sunnies, splashed like the sun with yellows and oranges that I caught off the dock at home. After catching them, I plopped their thin round bodies, the sharp fins deftly pushed down by my palm as I'd been taught, into a bucket. I squatted on the dock watching them swim around each other until it was dinnertime. Then I dumped them all back in the lake, to sleep tight until the next morning when I got up and did the same thing all over again.

A decade later the city of Garrison installed a fifteen-foot long fiberglass wall-eye across from Goernes' gas station to stake its claim as Walleye Capital of the World. Since, as an adult, I am rarely able to speak about the reality of my childhood, the fiberglass walleye serves the same purpose now as the bait did when I was a girl: a point of connection. The minnows connected me to the physical world, with other living creatures, when I was on the border of being annihilated. The minnows and I had commonalities—trapped, panicked, nowhere to go, we lived a life of waiting to be consumed. The walleye statue, its enormous tail flipping up toward the clouds, mouth open, allows me to tell others where I grew up. It is a point of connection, as most Minnesotans know about the huge walleye, even if they don't know the name of the town, population 200. But that is all I can say: I grew up near Garrison, you know, where that gigantic walleye statue is.

My parents were enamored of the Goernes, but I thought something was wrong with them. Tammy made me want to hide. Her sand colored, drawn-on eyebrows fascinated and repelled me. I stole looks at them because it was so odd to see crayon-like marks in an arch above where the eyebrow should have been. Her crayon eyebrows were emblematic of what really frightened me about Tammy: she was not there. She was a shell. Stan, on the other hand, terrified me. Stan, a ruddy complected, dark-haired, staunch-bellied German with rather beady eyes and a long straight nose that flared at the end, had a certain mannerism about him, an arrogance over all—children and animals—and over my parents and his wife, as well. He was haughty, but only occasionally overtly patronizing. He was part of a particular German American culture that existed in rural Minnesota when I was a child that included pride in being “High German” (versus “Low German”) and, of course, a belief in the superiority of Germans over all other nationalities and races. Four decades later, when I discuss this Minnesota subculture with older social workers, they nod. I know exactly what you are talking about, they say. Then they discuss various German families from their practices, and always mention the amount of sexual violence perpetrated by the fathers, grandfathers, and sons against the daughters and mothers. I listen, in part to verify what I know and in part to collect more information. Then I change the subject. It is still, sometimes, too much.

Tammy and my mom often shopped in Aitkin, a small, former logging and riverboat town. Butler's Department store in Aitkin fascinated me, a two-story brick building built in 1903. Butler's claim to fame is two-fold. First, the store asserts it was the first mall ever in the U.S. In the early 1900s Butler's housed an opera, bank, buggy and wagon shop, general merchandise store, seed and feed

store, hardware store, bath house, and barber. The loggers and residents could get all their needs met under one roof. Second, Butler's opera house was the starting point for a Hollywood star. Francis Gumm, aka Judy Garland, from Grand Rapids, Minnesota, performed at the opera hall in a family vaudeville act when she was three-years-old. A picture of Francis from that time depicts a young girl in a frilly white dress with dark, shoulder-length hair, her right leg slightly in front of her left leg, and her left arm lifted up at chest level as her hand drapes downward. Her smile is flat. A straight line. Over a decade later, after starring in the *Wizard of Oz*, Garland returned to Minnesota and made a point to visit Butler's again.

When I was a girl, I knew nothing of the building's history or Francis's appearance on the second story opera stage. Yet it was as if I could feel the history of the place, as if the "oldness" of the building rooted me, made me not alone. I was enamored of the store—its large, loud cash register when shoppers first entered the store, my uncertainty about the lady who ran it. I always sized up adults in attempts to determine which ones were mean—with her I could never tell. The store had enormous bins of clothes—ten feet long and three feet high containing bolts of cloth, underwear, t-shirts, jeans, and shorts of all sizes folded on top of one another in neat stacks. Around the bins above my head hung racks of nicer, button down shirts, and behind them hung clothes from posts mounted on the walls. Large plate glass windows overlooking two streets comprised the two walls that faced the cross streets. It's easy to imagine, a mere fifty years earlier, a child standing in Butler's, perhaps in the similar circumstance I was in, watching horses pull wagons out those same windows. Was she caught, as I was? Did she wish to escape, as I did? Did she too wonder if she would be alive tomorrow, as I did?

Sometimes my mother and I would venture into the basement. Going down the wide worn-smooth wooden staircase plastered with historical pictures of the founding of Aitkin deposited us in the dark limestone basement—no windows, only overhead fluorescent lights shining down on more enormous bins of nylons and underwear and socks. Two wooden doors on an interior wall ostensibly led to a storage area. They were never open. We went back upstairs as quickly as possible. The basement frightened us. My mother's fear was as familiar to me as was my breathing. I knew it well and followed her lead back up the stairs. Four decades later I visited Butler's for the first time as an adult. The same nylons in those bins from my childhood were for sale in the downstairs bins with photographs of models in 60s hairstyles, mini-skirts with peach colored scarves flung around their necks. It was as if time stood still at Butler's.

The Goernes often visited our four hundred square foot white, one-story house on the lake, which was, in reality, not much larger than a pond. Sometimes Stan and Tammy came together. The women chatted inside and the men stood in the front yard drinking beer. The five of us ate dinner and after dishes were done the adults played cards, popped corn on the stove, and talked. I stood to the side of the kitchen table where they dealt cards, watching, listening, eating one piece of bumpy popcorn at time, making myself as small and invisible as possible in their presence. I needed to "know," so I could tell on them one day, almost as if I were spying on them. If they noticed I was there, they would send me to bed.

Other times Stan came to our house alone. He and my dad built things, fixed things, hunted things, fished, put the dock out, pulled the dock in, put the fish house on the lake, pulled the fish house off the lake before the ice melted. Always, they drank beer together. It's difficult to find a picture of them without a six-pack or without one of them holding up a can of Hamm's for the camera. Many of the

pictures I have of the two of them from that time when we lived “up north” are some combination of a string of fish laying on the sidewalk or the garage floor, cans of beer, and the two smiling men, my dad often in a faded salmon colored sweatshirt with the sleeves cut off at his rounded biceps. It must have been his “fishing shirt.”

One in particular stands out. A stringer of medium and small sized perch along with a darker skinned, spiky finned walleye lay on the garage floor. The fishes’ eyes are wide open, glossy, their big dark pupils staring at the nothingness of the ceiling. Stan is to the right in the picture. He is set back on his haunches, receding into the background. A smile widens his face and horizontal white lines crack from each eye and across the tops of his raised ruddy cheeks. His normally small eyes are even smaller because his cheeks push upward. He is in his mid-forties.

On the left side of the photograph, my father leans forward on his haunches, thrusting into the foreground. His face is close to the camera. It smiles. His teeth show. My dad is gleeful, his wide grinning face thrust like the beer toward the camera. He is in his mid-twenties. Beneath his chin is his hand, fingers splayed down and out, the way he used to carry his hand when he was imitating a “retarded” person, mincing about the dining room in the suburban house we would move into when we left the lake. It is his eyes in those pictures that carry forward that sense of glee, of unadulterated thrill that still makes me want to vomit. I know that look well. It meant someone, or something, was being degraded.

Missing among the pictures of my dad and Stan in their drunken fishing glory and the other pictures in our old brown vinyl album are the ones that could be for sale on the Internet today, child pornography from the 70s. These missing pictures could be filed away under the categories of “Minnesota,” “Up North,” and “Fish” in some pornographer’s collection. Sometimes when Stan visited, they did other things. Sometimes, Stan and my dad made pornography of me.

Chris, come in here. The garage. *C’mon.* Ruddy smiles. A reluctant entrance. A frozen girl. *Lie down.* Patting the sheet laid over the oily cement. The big camera. Set up on its legs. The one that whizzes. *Brrr...brrr...* like an insect. A big bug. A fly’s eye. Like the insects above and around, clinging to the pinkish gray scales on the pine trees that tower over everything around the lake. Little bugs. Big bugs. Big cameras. *What will they do* crosses the thoughts, the crisscross thoughts running zig zag. *They will do bad.*

The mind breaks apart. Dissolves. Dad steps away from the camera, trained on the girl, me, the girl down on the cold garage floor. It’s cold. It’s always cold. When the camera is out. *Take off your clothes.* Dad says. Stan lines it up. Trains it. A little girl with pigtails stands in a garage. *Off.* Fingers snap. *Now.* The girl removes her clothes. She feels awful. More awful than her ribcage can curve around. More awful than her heart, her chest, her belly can hold. She doesn’t have words yet for it, those feelings. But they are bad, worse than bad, and I help her now, help her to find language, as if I am the mother she never had helping her pull on her rubber boots—something normal, something childish. It’s raining outside. The girl needs boots.

But it's not normal. It's not childish, this thing I help her to do. She feels shame. Very bad shame. She feels exposed and cold and terrified. *Lie down.* She lies down. *Spread.* She freezes. *Spread.* Sharper. A command, the way Stan commands his bulldogs, the German Shepherd he once had. A little more. Dad pulls apart. Legs. *Smile.* No smile. *Smile!* She knows the way the word snaps that now she must smile. She tries a half smile that shows up later in all her elementary school photos. That odd half smile. One side smiles, the other side is straight, tips into a frown at the very end, so that she smiles and frowns at the same time. Why? Everyone asked throughout elementary school. Why that strange smile? This is why. Stupids. Because of the camera and the missing mom and the commands and the bad, bad German men with their rock words.

Smile. She tries again. A bad smile. A sad smile. A barely there smile. She is small. Her mind works overtime to save her. Stan looks through the big eye glass. *Set,* he says. *Get it.* He is German. My father is German. German words come out their mouth. *Null. Eins. Zwei. Drei.* Never can she hear that language. That hideous, loathsome language that as an adult will still make her want to curl into a ball on the floor. That even, as an adult, will make her concentrate hard to not let her eyes roll back when she hears those words that feel like teeth breaking.

Randy, the other one, the younger one, both with black hair, dark headed Germans, Randy, the dad, he moves to the side. The girl watches, spread, dissolving, preparing to leave this scene and Randy, the dad, he goes to the corner where it lies on a spread out newspaper and pulls it, heavy, like a large elongated breast up off the floor. First the enormous head and then the fat fleshy middle of the greenish body and finally the tail lifts off and swings. Stan leans on one leg waiting for him and the girl. She lifts off, not her body but her mind and Randy, her dad, smiles. Now I help her, the one I am now, so she doesn't leave again like she does when she sees the vacant fish staring with its eyes, frozen dark windows of death, in the meat section at the grocery.

Randy brings it toward her. She is terrified. Frozen. Her eyes are as vacant as the fish, yet she sees. They record. He lays it across her body, starting at a leg. She feels the skin and the weight of the enormous fish across her leg and the smell and the rough skin. The camera whirring like the bugs outside on the trees where there is life, where things are as they should be, not in this man-made garage where life is upside down and inside out and the mom is mostly absent and Tammy, the lady with the crayon eyebrows, is always absent, whether her body is there or not. The men allow their jeans to sag without a belt and drink beer and fix certain things and break other things, like the girl. They break her, they train her, they have already trained her so that she does as they say. What else is she to do? She is four. She is five. There is nothing else for her to do, if she wants to live, and she does.

Her sadness swells the great shallow lake twenty minutes to the south, the one cut out from the skin of the earth by a glacier many thousands of years ago, the one that nips at the shore where the gas station is now, fuel pumping up through the great heavy hoses, rubbery, so like dark fish bodies. It is a meteorological mystery, the growth of the lake, the men on TV say. But it is not. It is her sadness. It is not extra rain. It is not fast-flowing streams. It is not rising water tables. It is not great climatic change. It is her sadness. This little girl's sadness. It had to go somewhere.

Her sadness is great and the miniscule insects, they mourn for her and the trees with their sharp needles, they hold her and do not hurt her. The men in

their sickness, in their wrongness, they film this girl, this young child, with Indian ancestry thousands of years in the land and trees and insects, her ancestors' bodies transformed into dirt and grass and trees and bugs and flowers and bees. The men from another land film her, they make a movie of the father putting a dead fish, its heavy yet supple body on top of her, and the dead head with its great somber eyes pushes against her cheek and she is there but not there. She is a girl but not a girl. She is a monster more and more. And she is utterly terrified and repulsed and the lake stink is bad and the men talk in voices she doesn't know in a language that she does not know that does not belong on this land. She can't understand. Nothing is understandable. She wants tires on the driveway. She wants this to end. This naked humiliation. This annihilation. This stink. This fish flesh on girl flesh. Who would believe?

Maybe it's just for them, for their private collection. Maybe they will sell it. For sure, they will save it—they never throw these pictures out, so that one day she will be old (if she's lucky). Her life, her fate—file it under "Minnesota. File it under "Fish." File it under "Up North."

And the dad will take the fish head and press on its mouth and pretend it kisses the girl. And he will have that gleam in his eyes. He will put it right up to her face and lips so fish lips are on girl lips and someone for sure will cum to that because it is so twisted. A naked girl. A fish. Bizarre. Out of this world, man. Their shaggy 70's hair and long sideburns. Their filthy minds that the girl and the other girls take in so that the girls live their lives feeling they are the filth. They are the dirt. Something is wrong with them. As the men grow older, times change, hair becomes short, cameras become as thin as a piece of hair. But, like the Germans in World War II, they film their crimes, and those who are filmed, murdered, starved, raped carry the humiliation like buckets of dirt over their backs. Day after day. They will never be free of it.

Randy, the father, smiles but does not laugh because they are careful to not put their faces or their voices on the film, he and Stan are very careful, methodical, really. The way Germans are. The way the Germans who murdered millions, including, this girl would not know this until she is an adult, one branch of her family, in Austria. One branch of her father's mother's family murdered in the Shoah. Disappeared. The language her family heard upon their deaths is equal to the annihilation this girl experiences on another land, three decades later. Maybe that is why the language grates her mind. Or maybe it is because of what they did when they spoke it. Or maybe it is because it is an ugly, ugly language that pierces this girl's mind when she hears it, that makes this girl as an adult want to curl in a ball on the floor when she hears it, anywhere.

He squeezes the fish mouth so it opens wider and his grin is longer, his whole face like that picture in the album in the house. He gets hard and his glee soaks the girl, technically his daughter, so that his glee and her degradation are one and the same and she is soaked, like it is kerosene and any little thing the rest of her life can set her shame on fire and make her feel everyone has seen those pictures, everyone knows she is a monster, not a human. A human does not have this happen to her. She is dirt, filth. It is all her fault. She is blamed by all, including, she wonders, the women, the nice women shopping at the first mall ever in the United States, their meanness just under the surface. She looks for it. She sees it. She fears it. She does not trust.

The camera not in her head, the camera in Stan's hands, records it all too but not the father's face. Never his face or Stan's face. Even for their own collection,

they never get a full on shot of the face. They are too careful. They are paranoid. What if someone in the Mossad did chase them down one day? What if they found the cache of pictures? They could not prove anything, from the pictures. And the men who make the pictures know no one will believe it if one of the girl escapes and tells. And if anyone did believe, no one would do anything.

Why fish? Someone from the Mossad might ask, as the grainy film flicked across the dim office wall, the Mossad agent is puzzled but not surprised because the Mossad agent knows Nazis, having traveled to this land to track down the Germans and their filthy ways. If this girl grows up one day, if she doesn't die or end up homeless or crazy she could tell the Mossad agent, if the agent could find her, that fish are handy. There's plenty more where it came from. It's cheap. Nearly free. It's disgusting when placed across a human body, its lips pressed to imitate life, a smile, a fish kiss.

But she has not grown up, not yet, has she? Now she smells like fish. It is in her skin. A scale nicked her skin. Fish seeps into her bloodstream. Becomes one with her. Maybe she is a fish. Maybe the girl is a fish. And no one from the Mossad or otherwise is there to save her. To punish them. To be on her side. So she must do what she must do. She can't get rid of the smell. Not even up in the pines. Listening to the bugs. Liking their sounds. Likening their sounds to the camera in Stan's hand. Click. Click. Click. Herself, also recording. Tick. Tick. Tick. Her mind is a camera, such that as an adult she will see these things over and over. Such that, as an adult, it will take her twenty years to control the pictures. Such that, as an adult, she will communicate with herself in pictures. For this girl, she is angry. Despite what the adults say and do, she knows they are wrong. A part of her holds that knowledge: they are wrong. And her anger mounts. It becomes righteous rage and she records because one day, she will tell. That is also why she must "know." Because one day, she will tell.

Now, the men, they get a good idea. They rub the fish flab over the girl's genitals. It feels rough, bits of sharp. Like the carpet at Grandma's on her knees and the palms of her hands, where she crawls like a normal girl, a real girl, not a monster. Grandma's house. *Grandma*, her mind cries out. The girl is now dying. The fish rubbed across "Down There." Her privates. But nothing is private, for a girl, in this world. She is four. She is dying. It's not the first time she's died. She's died many times already. She will die many more times. She will die an infinite number of times, such that her eyes will become endless like the sky, deep and liquid like the lake.

They laugh. Tell her to smile. To arch her back. That is a new one they are working on with her. They place the palms of their hands on the small of her back, push up. *Arch* they say, showing her, teaching her, their palms on her back, as if they are gymnastic coaches. But they are not. They are pornographers. They are sadists. They are teachers of children in the world outside the garage. They drive to school in the early mornings. They make lesson plans. They get paper checks from the state twice a month. *Arch*, a new vocabulary word. What grade does Arch belong to? Certainly not kindergarten, where she pretends to sleep on a red mat. Nonetheless, it is a word that will become her body, embedded in the muscles and tendons and fascia, and oh the pain she will have there as an adult, for years. Terrible, throbbing pain. Some days she will not be able to stand straight. She will ache and ache, day after dreary day. *Arch* will become a word she does not want to speak, a movement she does not want to do, not when she is doing exercises to strengthen her abdominal muscles, not when she is on the

dance floor, not when she makes love. Never. Will she want to arch. Never. Will she want to hear the word.

But even though she hears them say *Arch*, that word with roots in Vulgar Latin, first used in the 14th century in another land, she's not there. She is above them, above the garage roof. In a tree branch. She hears it but she is not there. He rubs the fish, the fish scratches her. It doesn't mean to. It is dead. Nonetheless, it tears, gives the girl abrasions that sting, sand and scales on human flesh. The voices recede. Their German tongues. She is where they cannot get her. She leaves through sleep. The whirring camera, the bugs. The giant ancient pines and the sunlight shooting through in ephemeral chunks, shadowing the rust colored pine needles on the floor, the forest floor. The beautiful forest floor.

This used to be a forest. The yard. The garage. The roads. They all used to be a forest. Not clear cut grass brought from Europe. Not rock mixed with water and Portland cement. And that thing used to be a fish, breathing water. And that other thing used to be a girl, breathing air. Someone grafted fish to her. Now she grows red gills that flare searching for the water that carries the oxygen. Now she has gills like she had in the womb, at the beginning, she has returned to the beginning. There is no end. Not really. She has red flaring gills and a glistening olive green body, spiky fins, large alert eyes. With them she escapes the men and the women and the terrible world they make.

Now, in her new body, transformed, she has become the fish creature she was in the watery womb. She lifts off, as the father lifts off the dead heavy body, as Stan pushes the red button, folds the legs under, packs the camera, she yearns for the water, to breathe liquid air, to lurk in the depths, gliding, hunting, hiding, searching, and then, to thrash, air bound, her gorgeous new muscled body twisting above the glassy-eyed surface, twirling, for a moment, eclipsing all, her body screaming to be free.

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