

## Pam Durban

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### *Island*

Down at the coast when he was a boy, he often went flounder gigging with his father and older brother. Nights before moonrise on the outgoing tide were the best times to look for flounder. At low tide, without moonlight to polish the water to a hard, impenetrable shine, a person could see all the way to the bottom of the tidal creeks where the wide flat fish buried themselves in the mud and lay in wait for smaller fish. On flounder gigging nights, he would stand in the bow of their fishing boat, his three-pronged gig drawn back over one shoulder, and his brother would stand behind him and shine a flashlight down into the shallow water, exposing the shape of a flounder in the mud. When he saw one, he struck, stabbing the fish with one thrust of the gig. That was the rhythm—stab, then toss the fish over his shoulder into the back of the boat and get cocked to stab again. He and his brother took turns in the bow with the light and the gig while their father steered the boat from a seat in the stern and collected the fish and rooted for his boys. Every time a fish got tossed, blood rained down so that by the time the tide turned and the creeks rose and the fish disappeared beneath the deepening water, everyone in the boat was spattered with blood.

One night there were so many flounder one gig could not spear them all, but the boy's father would not allow both his sons to work their gigs at the same time in the small boat, and so he came up with a plan. They'd leave the younger boy on one side of the island, while his brother and father went around and worked the other. He was thirteen that summer. He said, "Why can't he stay and I go with you?"

"Divide and conquer," their father said.

"Worked for Custer," he said. He loved the great battles—Little Big Horn, Gettysburg, Waterloo—where one choice had changed everything, and you could actually see the hinge on which things swung one way or the other.

His father poked the older brother in the shoulder. "Help me remember to come back for him, will you?" he said. He was a big practical joker. In a shop that sold magic tricks, he'd bought a small pink rubber pig with a hole in the belly that a plug fit into, like a salt shaker.

He'd catch a live fly or two and put them into the pig, then set it on the table before a meal. The first time the pig appeared on the table and the younger boy saw it twitch, he couldn't believe it, so he watched until he saw it again. "See that?" he said.

His father felt his forehead. "You don't have a fever, do you?" he said, and the family laughed and he laughed along with them. To be teased a little felt like fun, like a game they were playing together, and it made him feel warm and good and close to his father. The trouble was, his father didn't know when to stop. He'd teased him about the pig until the boy felt like a stranger in a country where everyone but him spoke the language, and he started to believe that he might really be the lost, misguided fool his father seemed to think he was, the runt of the litter—three sisters and a brother—who sat around the table and watched the pig and agreed with their father no, it hadn't twitched, the boy was just seeing things.

THAT NIGHT ON the coast, his father and brother put him off on his side of the island with a gig, a bucket and a light. They shoved the boat back into the surf and his father jumped in, his pants rolled up to his knees, his legs flashing white in the dark. "Go get 'em, Cooch," his father said, as he yanked the rope and started the outboard motor. He'd given nicknames to all his children. Cooch and Bouka and Della, sounds strung together to capture something about each of them before it got away. The boy walked over the dunes and found the tidal creek and sloshed along it in his rubber boots, gig raised, scanning the bottom for fish with the light his father had rigged for him, a kind of miner's lamp on an elastic band strapped around a wide-brimmed canvas hat. That night, it seemed he had come into the flounder's kingdom. He worked so fast he shoveled fish over his shoulder onto the bank of the creek while the blood rained down on his hat and onto the canvas jacket his father had buttoned him into before they'd left him.

When the bucket was full, he went out onto the beach again and squatted on the sand and watched the waves come in and waited for his father and brother to come back for him. He waited for a long time; he listened for their voices, for the sound of the outboard motor, but there was only the swish of the surf, the rattle of palmettoes and overhead, nothing but stars and the long gauzy brightness of the Milky Way.

He closed his eyes and tried to remember the look on his father's face, the feel of the man's fingers, pulling the button through the top

hole of the jacket, squaring the jacket on his shoulders, but instead he remembered the pink rubber pig on the white tablecloth on the Sunday dinner table and the way his father had laughed when the boy insisted it had twitched, because he thought it was funny to tease people until they doubted their own senses. But leaving your son alone on an island at night was different from teasing him about a pink rubber pig on the Sunday dinner table. Sometimes, though, his father didn't seem to know the difference, and that frightened him.

Then the thought of himself as a person a father could abandon frightened him more, and he felt himself shrink and tighten into a small, cold knot. When he finally heard their voices and knew the boat was coming, he ran off the beach and squatted in the dunes, hugging his knees. He heard the prow of the boat rasp across the sand. "Cooch?" his father called. The boy didn't answer. "COOCH." His father's voice was sharper this time, a command, not a question, and it almost drew him out since not to come now was disobedience, but he kept himself quiet by making himself small and cold again. The flashlight beam swept the beach, paused at the bucket of fish, moved on. "Godamnit, Cooch, where are you?" He let the ocean answer and the silence of the stars. He waited and he listened while his father called his name. He did not know what he was listening for, but when he heard in his father's voice the same emptiness he'd felt, he stood up and walked out of the dunes and said "Here I am," and saw, reflected on his father's face, his own happiness, at being found.

LATER, HE FOUGHT in the South Pacific. New Guinea, the Phillipines, right up to the brink of Japan. While he was in the war he would often feel as he'd felt that night on the beach, before his father came back, and when the war was over, the feeling still returned, in life and in dreams. In one, it was bright day. He walked across a white sand beach and into a line of tall coconut palms behind the beach, and on through the palms and into a clearing, where he saw a new grave with a white wooden cross driven into the fresh-turned earth. He moved toward the grave, thinking to read the name of the man who had been buried there, but when he got close he saw that the cross was blank, and no matter how many times he dreamed that dream, the man in the grave had no name. In another, it was night, and he was dozing in a foxhole in the rain. The rain pattered on his helmet and dripped from it and slid down his neck and the old desolation returned. Then someone tapped him on the

shoulder, and he looked up into the tired face of another soldier, and the rain dripped from that man's helmet, too. "Got a hot meal for you, Captain," he said. He reached up to take the plate that was offered, and it was there that the dream always stopped.

MUCH LATER, WHEN his wife was dying, he told himself that when she was gone he would be alone on the earth. When he said those words to himself, he felt small and abandoned again, as though something else had been promised. Late one night in the last week of her life, a sudden thunderstorm blew in. The wind rose and lightening struck continuously and the thunder rolled like boulders over the house. Finally, the power went out, and he got up then and groped his way across the room to the closet and found his battery-powered lantern. He switched on the light and crossed the room and stood beside his wife's bed so that if she woke she wouldn't be alone in the dark. His oldest daughter was there that night, too; she'd come home to be with her mother at the end. She got out of bed, found the air so thick and heavy, it seemed that the storm had come into the house, and she pushed through it on the way to her mother's room. Only the dying woman slept through the storm.

In the morning, the daughter brought her mother a cup of water and the day's first dose of morphine. The man got up, as he'd done every morning since his wife had been moved to the hospital bed, and went and stood where his wife could see him. This was the moment he dreaded most. She would look at him and look at him, and then she would remember, though every day it seemed to take longer for her to know him. But on the morning after the storm, her eyes were as bright and sly as the eyes of a child with a secret. "Who were you two fighting last night?" she whispered. "You were really fighting them." Then she drifted off to sleep again, still smiling.

His heart jumped, and her words flooded through his veins like warm oil. It was true that he'd been fighting. Standing beside her bed with his lantern, he'd been back in the war again; its sound, its promise had been all around him. His daughter remembered how she'd pushed through the heavy air to get to her mother's bed. Deep in her drugged sleep, his wife had been there, too. They had dreamed of night, of violence, abandonment and fear, but because they had dreamed it together, while the dream lasted, they were not alone.