



Amy Brakeman Livezey  
 Gate Lock, 12" x 12"  
 mixed media on panel

## Ugly Fish

Memory is a swallowed hook. You live uncomfortably with it. Eventually it rips you open. Any moment lived too many times has that power, no matter how sweet or sad or bruised. Follow the line through your throat and out of your mouth. It leads to the truth. Me, Camphor, Duke. We were

kids together. Then we were nearly beyond language. In a blink, there was only a pulse. Then Duke

was together. Then we were nearly beyond language. In a blink, there was only a pulse. Then Duke overdosed, leading Camphor and I to drive an old road, ready to do some fishing. We needed bait.

We hadn't spoken much since I'd gotten in the truck. Hadn't officially discussed where we'd be going. I'd dropped a handful of soil on Duke's casket and then gravitated towards Camphor's truck. She'd slid into the driver's seat and nodded for me to get in. She twisted the cap off a fifth of rye, brushed her hand through her oversized bangs and reapplied the dark purple lipstick she'd chosen for the occasion. She levered the seat forward until her feet touched the clutch and scratched at something on her jeans. She was still pale under her black hair, but the dusting of freckles across her nose and temples seemed less childish now and more exotic. She'd become striking, alluring. Intimidated, I lugged my useless leg into the cab. Camphor set into the first of many verses of "Mrs. Murphy's Chowder," hooking her thumb at the fishing gear, pole and creel, in the truck bed, slamming the clutch into the floor when she shifted, accentuating each kick because she knew that I was out of breath and that even short walks tested my physical limitations.

She knew this because she'd once fired a bullet into my right leg. It had torn through my quadriceps and exploded my femur, fragmenting itself and all that bone through the muscles in the rear of my leg before halting like arrows shot into water. The bone matter and lead had scattered, hiding in the muscle and veins. Nerve damage was instantaneous, the poisoning took time. I'd had fifteen surgeries, one a year since the day she'd pulled the trigger, and it was difficult for me to get into the large truck that her real estate ventures had afforded her.

We'd settled comfortably into a knowing silence while I thumbed the head of a plastic dinosaur. She'd reached over and taken it from me, placing it next to her on the seat.

"Balor, I was moved by your words for Duke," Camphor said. "I know Leugene appreciated you doing that, saying a few words." She swigged off the rye.

I had not said farewell to Leugene, Duke's mother. I didn't expect I'd see her again, and that thought made me as sad as I'd been all day. Then it passed. We needed bait.

On top of the Continental Divide, just past the tailing ponds, Camphor pulled into the Bernice Company Store on the shores of the Boulder River. Spring waters had crept up the boat launch and threatened the parking lot. The pilings winnowed under the small burn that spanned the water. The bridge path led up the mountain into the Merry Widow Health Mine.

"Get some beer," Camphor said. She handed me a ten.

The cowbell on the door clanged but Old Man Thompson didn't get out of his chair. He hardly even lifted his head when I shuffled through his door. I nodded, supposed that the man wouldn't remember me, so I didn't ask. Fishing lures hung in uneven rows from four-inch pegs above the tackle: spinners, bobbers, lures, Snells, reels, rods. I just wanted nightcrawlers. They aren't fancy, because fishing doesn't need to be. The mini-fridge in the corner stood askew, empty and unplugged. I placed the Hamm's on the counter and asked for a can of chew.

"Got worms?" I asked.

Thompson wheezed like an asthmatic grizzly. It was how he laughed. "I'd need a vet if I did," he said, finally standing. "Balor Reachtail? How you been?"

My scalp prickled at the sound of my name. The fact it had been recalled.

"Fine Mr Thompson How are you?"

“Hi, Mr. Thompson. How are you?”

“Been just fine. You going to a dance?”

I still had my tuxedo on. The pall bearers wore Mickey Mouse vests.

“No. Funeral. Duke Cloctrom passed away. Buried him this morning. He used to go to dances in these vests.”

Thompson coughed, nodded, looked away in a single motion. “How’s the leg?”

“Oh, it’s still attached.”

“I’m surprised to see that. I had a hell of a time washing the blood off my stoop there. I’d thought you’d die right there, waiting for that ambulance. The back of your leg swollen up like an eggplant and all that. Gee-zus Christ, man.”

I snickered. I’d thought I was going to die, too. “Yeah, that was ugly,” I said. “Heading to the Boulder for old time’s sake. Do you have nightcrawlers?”

“Don’t sell them no more. Bunch of dry flies down that aisle there, lures, but no worms. Big fly-fishing up here these days. Them worms were rotting in the cooler. Then, I guess, we had maggots for a while, but they’re out too.” Thompson handed me change for the beer and tobacco. “You want a receipt?”

He didn’t wait for an answer. He took a seat and resumed his long gaze out the window. Winnebagoes crowded Thompson’s lot. Their extension cords and sewer tubes strewn about like something half-gutted. Thompson slowly shook his head at the mountain where a few of the older folks who frequented the health mine lumbered along switchbacks to the mouth of the mineshaft. The Merry Widow had once been a uranium mine but now the ailing and the elderly came to bathe and drink water from the springs trickling out of the vein. In that dark place the radiation softly emanated nurturing vibrations that could burn off a little of their pain.

Extending laterally from the timber above the shaft a rotting steel cable about a quarter-mile long with seven-foot orange letters had been draped across the ravine, across the river and over the highway. It read: MERRY WIDOW, but the Y in MERRY spun gracefully askew on its last tether, in obvious peril, alone, sprawled like a man falling from the sky.

“Signs going to come down and crush somebody,” Thompson said. “We can’t get to it, though, and I can’t pay for it. Nothing to do but let it fall off there, I guess.” He went into a coughing fit, shaking his head while the hack rattled his torso.

“I guess,” I said, imaging the freefalling figure crashing headlong onto the highway, knapping a spark out of the asphalt before settling onto the shoulder.

“You sell cans of corn?” I asked.

“I do.”

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Camphor hadn't moved from the driver's seat.

She blinked slowly and asked, "Crawlers?"

"Nope." I popped the door closed, out of breath again.

"Lures it is."

She put the truck in gear and pointed to a fly-fisherman who'd strung up his line in the willows. The leader blew around in the canyon wind, the loose line tumbling over itself into a great knot while the fisherman tugged on the rod trying in earnest and without success to coax it all free.

"Been watching this fellow go at it since you went inside," Camphor said. "Going to have to be a damned good one to cast on that stretch."

"Duke probably could have."

"Yes, sir. You ever take up fly fishing?"

"Me? My outdoor activities have been somewhat limited over the last decade or so." Camphor didn't react to my jab, so I skipped over it. "I tied a fly to the end of my line, once. At Seymour Lake. On a reel set up with a sinker and a bobber. I just cast and let it sit. Worked all right. Caught about fifteen up there. Can't really call that fly fishing."

"I guess not."

"No."

"Those mountain lakes, though? You liked them. Going to have to get you back there one of these days." Camphor, her cheeks red, her gaze softened from the rye, grabbed my leg and gave it a rough squeeze. The pressure kneaded numbly into the stiffness and scar tissue of the wounded leg. Surprised and then angry, I shoved her hand away. It was the first time another human had touched my leg in years. Seemed fitting it would be hers. The corner of her mouth twitched into a guilty smile. We recovered and moved on.

"But the water's probably moving too fast for it here," I said. "Might work on top."

"Yeah, water's moving all right."

"Should be slow enough up top, though. You want to tie on a fly?"

"No." Camphor took the can of dip off the dashboard. "I don't give a shit about a fly." She stuffed a wad in her lip and swallowed. "Fuck a fly." She pondered the passing trees a short while and she grinned and then she looked at me. "Just had my old man on the phone. He said to be careful up here."

Camphor's father was the county sheriff. When Camphor shot me, he decided it was an accident and that was that. "Afraid you'll catch a cold?" I said.

"No. He said some crazy asshole came here last week with his chainsaw and cut the head off a Rottweiler." Camphor, successful real estate agent, mother of three, chewer of snus and champion

curser kept right on shifting gears through my shock "Is what he said. Said some family goes

could keep right on hitting gears through my shock. Is what he said. Said some family goes camping. They hear somebody off sawing in the woods and don't think nothing of it. Dog runs off. It yaps. No big deal. Then it stops, you know, no whine or nothing, it just stops, and an hour or so later some guy comes around the corner and tosses the head out of the window of his rig, right in the middle of the campsite. Right in front of the kids and everything. Thok. Right on the ground. Dog head."

"Jesus. I don't want to hear that, Camphor. That's horrible."

"Yeah. The dude was in the Stockman's over in Clancy, I guess, when the old man collared him. He was drinking a beer, telling some old lady about the horrible night he'd been having with some hippie tourists. Thing was, the family, the dog owners, they aren't tourists at all. Not that it would have been right if they were, but you know what I mean? Anyway, they live up in Clancy, too. Were almost neighbors with this guy. Had been for years."

The way she told it, it was almost a joke. It was too serious to be altogether funny but not altogether surprising, as common to the area as, say, addict suicides, gunshot survivors, the Rocky Mountains. It was too much and it was absurd and it was commonplace. My anxiety spiked. For a split second I wished I were back in Minot. Then just as quickly I realized that it didn't matter where I was. I'd grown up here, and all these poisoned things were inside of me. I couldn't help but understand Duke's addiction, his suicide. I understood the dog killer and why the family had not pressed charges. I could never run away. I'd feel the same wherever I was in the world, just lonelier without the people who could almost laugh, but who chose not to.

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We continued up the Boulder River road. Patches of fresh bear grass fought through the poisoned duff along the shoulders of the road. Above us granite crags loomed, their peaks darkened and rounded by the years of smelter fall from the refining of copper. Most of the pines in this section of the Beaverhead had been dead my whole life. They'd been in years of my dreams and there they were in grayed bark, the ghost trees in their ghost forest, a whole front range of red and gray boughs stretching out stiff and feathered with orange needles from a century of corrupted bark. Coated in ash and arsenic, the by-products of burned copper, the trees are flame retardant. They'll never burn down. They can't. Their bark just slakes off into little piles around the base of their trunks. Not able to burn, too heavy for the runoff to carry away, sheltered from the wind, the trees will stand a thousand years, and their inevitable fate is simply that they'll be buried in the mounting piles of their own bark.

Camphor turned onto the dirt road that followed the Boulder River into the Deerlodge National Forest. All around us, the red needles sloughed from the trees and onto the hood of the truck. A pine beetle landed on the dashboard. Its long antennae moved in small circles. I cradled the bug in my palm, thought about crushing it and saving the forest in that small way. But then I thought that any small thing that helped this place to its demise was a blessing, and I threw it out the window.

"You know that the pine beetle is an escort of death," Camphor said. "They're bad luck to kill."

"Why didn't you say so?"

"I am saying so."

"Not until I let it go."

not with her it go.

“Thought I’d see what kind of man you’ve become, Balor Reachtail.”

It’s amazing how easily we misunderstand each other.

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There were times, fifteen years before, when I felt, when I knew, that Camphor was the only thing that mattered. It was puppy love. A crush. We had never been more than friends since kindergarten. Then one night, when we’d both been drinking at a camping party, when liquid courage was at a premium, I’d told her how I’d felt in a tent illuminated romantically by the campfire. I remembered her kiss and how she’d cried, holding me, before we fell asleep.

The next day I’d woken up giddy, confused, and alone. I’d looked at my watch. It was past noon. I’d arranged my fishing gear and taken a drive up the mine road to pick Camphor a bouquet and string a few trout. I needed to clear my head and think about how best to proceed now that she knew how I felt about her. Try to figure out what had transpired. You can imagine my surprise when, coming around a corner, I saw her Prelude tucked into the road rut behind Duke’s truck, a .22 leaning on the bumper.

I stopped and got out, thinking something might be wrong with one of their cars. Duke was my best friend. He knew how I felt about Camphor. There couldn’t be anything going on. I came around the automobiles and found them sitting in the dirt hugging awkwardly. She was sprawled on her side. It looked like she had thrown herself from a seated position onto him, and her arms clung around his neck like if she let go she would fall from some great height. Duke sat straight up. His jaw clenched and unclenched, and he stared straight at the tree line. I thought I was being cheated on. I think I yelled, maybe moaned. They jumped, then saw that it was me, the friend they were betraying.

Camphor asked, “What are you doing here?”

I was shocked by her disdain. Embarrassed. Duke was angry.

“You need to leave, Balor,” Duke said.

“Go! Get out of here!” Camphor shouted, running to the road.

Duke and I stood in the ditch, near the rotted pole fixed in the hillside. We used the marker to tell one mile of back road from the next. It told us to stop. Duke’s eyebrows arched in an angry sort of surprise. I tried not to cry. Every inch of me shook in frustrated wrath.

“She wants to kill herself,” Duke said. Then a bullet tore through my thigh.

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Fifteen years later, Camphor pulled into the same ditch with the rotted fence pole. We had always parked at the pole and walked down to the river from it, and we’d do the same that day. The rye extinguished Camphor and I drank a few beers without saving anything. The moment and place

Camphor and I drank a few beers without saying anything. The moment and place proved too pregnant with memory. Here, the attack was too close, too real, and after a minute I couldn't stand the silence. I got out and tied lures on the fishing poles. I gave Camphor an orange Z-ray and put a yellow Panther Martin, black-spotted, on mine. I've heard the colors don't mean anything to the fish. Then again, I've heard they matter a great deal. I guess it's more about how the look of the lure makes you feel as a fisherman. How much you believe in it. I stooped to show Camphor when she slid out of the cab. She didn't pay any attention. Camphor always claimed that she couldn't learn the knot. I never cared if she did, so I finished while she drank. Before long we had our lures hooked into the foam handles of the poles and were picking our way lazily through the willows, headed downstream. The river slowed at a braid of islands, cream-topped with willow buds.

A quarter mile off the road, Camphor pointed to a shale slide that had broken from the pinnacle and slid about three-hundred feet down a steep embankment nearly damming the river. Four rainbow trout, each at a good twenty inches, sat in the eddy swirling against the granite. We settled on the bank and cast for an hour without a word or a bite, the Hamm's cans forming a small pyramid between us while the water gurgled by. Tired of waiting, I took the can of corn out of my pocket.

"Cheater," Camphor said. She wasn't being coquettish. She sipped her beer with an ample amount of disdain and a cocked eyebrow.

She was right, of course. Baiting a hole isn't the most honest way to fish, but I didn't know when I'd be back there. I figured correctly that I never would be. I wanted to catch something. I wanted to fill in the void somehow. I wanted to have something other than the funeral to talk about, or my leg. Something other than the silence in the truck. I opened Duke's tackle box to look in the hull for a knife. The knife was there, beneath five orange prescription cylinders of OxyContin. They belonged, formally, to a Riordan, Ellis. I held one of the off-orange vials to the sun. A few floaters banged around in the cylinder. I wanted to throw the vials in the river. Wanted to throw the whole tackle box. Instead, I replaced each container with something close to reverie, removed the knife, and closed the box.

I jammed the blade of Duke's knife into the can of corn, worked it back and forth around the rim until it opened. The river shimmered with kernels before the bright bits swirled into the eddy at the dam. The fish surfaced to eat.

"There they are," Camphor said. "Look at them go."

I slurped the extra corn off my hand and chewed it into a cud. I threaded a few kernels onto each of the three prongs of my lure and cast long toward the base of the dam. I cast and reeled evenly, the tare ticking the line in without a bite.

I cast again, and the fish showed. The fight was quick. Bowed rod and screeching reel. I lifted the fish by the gill. Caught and calm it dangled down from my finger, long as my forearm and translucent, like watered down cream over berries or dirty snow covering trash. Dull slashes ran along the lower jaw and gills, the usual markings of a Cutthroat trout, but the markings had faded, like they'd been absorbed below the scales. The fish flapped, thick and strong, healthy, but milky, as in filled with milk, its darker plumbing visible through the pearly skin that the inner workings pushed against. Its heart beat. I watched it beating. I put my knee on the fish's head to pry the hook out of its lip but could not. The fish had swallowed it. Through the skin, blood clouded in its gut.

"You see this?"



“Damn straight I do,” Camphor said. “That is an ugly fish.”

“Kind of pretty.”

“I guess. You could say curses are always kind of pretty.”

“Curses?”

“That’s a white trout there, isn’t it?”

“I think it must be grayling.”

“You’re shitting me. It looks like a bleached Cutthroat.”

She was right. The fish was sickly.

“You think it’s got the whirling disease?”

“No,” Camphor said, “I think you caught yourself a curse.”

“It’s spots with whirling disease, right? Blue spots, and they get bent sideways?”

“You aren’t listening, Balor.”

“Biggest fish I ever caught, though.” I looked upstream trying to figure where the closest tailings pond might be. I thought that there might be a leak getting in the river, poisoning everything. I couldn’t think of any that high in the mountains.

“It’s really the ugliest,” Camphor says.

“Yes, it is.”

“Well, I wouldn’t eat it.”

“It’s not really white.”

“Damn close.”

“You think it’s a curse?”

“Yes,” Camphor said. She sat up and looked me directly in the eye, then leaned back like she wasn’t going to tell me.

“You going to tell me why?”

“Can I tell you a story?”

“Yes.”

She sat up again, turned serious. I had to look away.

“My granny used to talk about a murder in County Cork back in Ireland. This man was murdered



My granny used to talk about a murder in County Cork, back in Ireland. This man was murdered in a dispute over a sheep. Killed just days before his wedding, his distraught love, overwhelmed by his death, walked into the local lake and was never seen again. However, a white trout showed up in that same lake shortly after.” Camphor skipped a stone out over the slow-moving water to the other side of the bank. Rings and circles rippled after the stone’s delicate tap. “The townspeople never found the girl. They just assumed faeries had turned her into the fish. So they don’t catch the fish, even though they see it all the time. They take care of it, knowing its sorrow.

“One day, two soldiers arrive and mock the story they hear about the white trout in the local inn. They catch the fish, bring it back to the inn and try to fry it. The fish screams in human agony when it hits the hot pan and its flesh won’t cook. One of the soldiers stabs the fish. It is then that the fish transforms into a beautiful woman, her arm trickling blood where the soldier has stuck her with his knife.”

Camphor stopped to spin around with her arms out until she fell over. She was out of breath, her back on the cool grass, face toward the dulling sky and her eyes closed. “She thoroughly chastises the poor behavior of these men and demands that they put her back in the cool water to perform her duty and await her true love. They do. The water runs the color of blood. The fish and all its offspring are permanently scarred about the gills. The men go on to live admirable lives.”

She stilled then, her breath becoming rhythmic and shallow until I thought she had passed out. I had the fish in my hands. It was nearly dead from lack of oxygen and loss of blood but I pulled out the hook and rubbed what blood I could from around its gills with my thumb. I held the trout firm in the river and waited for it to rock energy back into its body. Its gills pulsed, then it curved a scar of silt in the shallows and the mud clouded the water. I expected the fish to dart back to where the water turned dark, below the rocks where the water is coldest and a thing could heal. But the fish surfaced and glided an erratic arc close to the shore before drifting belly up and ceasing to move. It swirled in the eddy. The simplicity of its surrender moved me, and unsettled by Camphor’s demonstration I stood to shake the stiffness out of my leg.

In my clumsiness I kicked over the tackle box. From a side compartment a tally sheet, no, the tally sheet, wrapped in a sandwich bag and greased for waterproofing, fell onto the grass. I unfolded the document, giddy and almost afraid. The tally sheet was a shared history. Duke and I used it to keep track of who caught the biggest and who caught the most trout over the course of our summers together. Entered onto this makeshift ledger, starting in seventh grade and ending abruptly the summer that Camphor had shot me, was every single fish we’d caught in each other’s presence. And every river: The Jeff, the Big Hole, Wolf Creek, Upper Seymour Lake, the Missouri, the Clark Fork, the Big Blackfoot. We’d put in miles. Last on the list and underlined, Phyllis Lake had no tallies, no weights or lengths of fish beneath it. It was the last hike I ever went on. It was the night of the party when I’d confessed my love, and just her name, CAMPHOR!!!, was scrawled there in my poor script, and it was like I had been shot again.

I ran my fingertips over the letters, thumbed the graphite that shaped her name, and with each pass over the paper a current seemed to burn me fingertip to knuckle. The graphite smeared onto my finger. Fire on a tent wall. Her name faded. Firelight and fear in Camphor’s eyes. Her name smudged. Fire in her tears. Her name almost disappeared. My cold blue hand over her mouth. But it couldn’t, and this small paper was proof of my long denial. My laughter drowning out her fear and her panic.

“That the tally?” Camphor asked.

“Yeah.”

“Who was winning?”

“Duke was winning.”

“The man could fish.” Camphor raised a beer in salute.

I put the tally in my pocket. The fish bobbed in the river before me, swirling, swirling.

“Camphor,” I said. “Why did you —” and what would I have done if I hadn’t said something then? “I know why you shot me.”

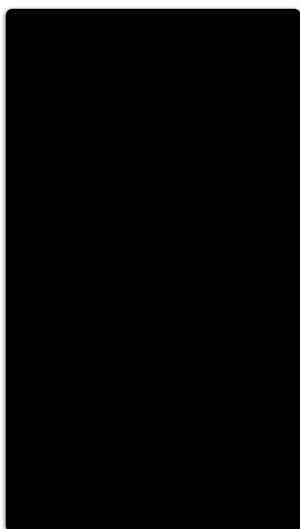
The last syllable left my mouth and Camphor walked to the river. She retrieved the fish from where it spun belly up in the eddy. She simply reached into the river. Simply thread a finger through a gill and simply lifted the dying, gruesome creature from its cold but comfortable home. The fish was nearly, but not completely, dead. Nerves still fired. They fired to protect the fish. But its fight had gone, and the flop and flail it mustered were pathetic. She offered me the fish, but I didn’t want it. Its slowly pulsing mouth and bleeding gills, a sight that had never bothered me before, disgusted me to my core. I refused to touch the fish, to show it mercy.

“I’m sorry, Camphor,” I said, because it was all that I had to offer. “I’m so sorry.”

She turned the fish in her hands and stared into its wet eyes. For a moment it hung limply from a hand that hung limply from an arm dropped to her side. With a burst of dexterity and speed, she crashed the trout’s head off a rock fixed in the bank of that slow river. The trout spasmed in her hands. She brought the skull to the rock. She brought the skull to the rock until the head lost shape. She brought the flesh down until the vibrations calmed to a slight tremble and all that remained was a travesty and a sound. She calmly, intently bit into that flesh and chewed, scales all upon her lips. Nodding, she wiped her mouth with the back of her wrist.

“Balor,” Camphor said. “The fish speaks for me.”

For the final time she raised the horror. For one final time she offered to share the ugliest of fish.



Born and raised in Southwest Montana, Danilo John Thomas is the author of the chapbooks *The Hand Implements* and *Murk*. Recently, his writing has won the Ryan R Gibbs Flash Fiction Award from *New Delta Review* and the Matchbook 5 contest from *Small Fires Press*. Other works have recently appeared or are forthcoming in *Tampa Review* and *Fugue*. He earned his PhD in Creative Writing from Florida State University and his MFA from the University of Alabama. He manages Baobab Press in Reno, Nevada.





