

Fishing Fly  
#2

# THREE TRIES

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(with Jeremiah Gumbs)





the story as i remember it:

*Once upon a time in Anguilla there was a little boy named Jeremiah Gumbs. He was the youngest of nine children and they never had enough to eat. One day while little Jeremiah was out fishing with his friends he saw a beautiful rainbow fish. Beautiful, as in, delicious-looking. And big.*

*The rainbow fish wasn't big for no reason. The rainbow fish was wise and had grown large over the years by avoiding the hooks of the people who fished in the cove. The rainbow fish stayed safely beneath the edge of a rock watching. Keeping guard.*

*But little Jeremiah was hungry. And he had a vision. He decided he would catch the rainbow fish and bring it home to his mother to cook for dinner. He prepared his pole and his line and his hook and tempted the rainbow fish with the most delectable bait he could charm from the grown fishermen. When he lowered the bait near the rainbow fish's home rock he just knew he would be victorious.*

*The rainbow fish smelled the bait and got curious. You know, fish get hungry too. The rainbow fish peered out from the edge of the rock, but the sun glinted off the edge of the sharp hook. The rainbow fish quickly swam back under the edge of the rock. No way. Not today.*

*Jeremiah went home hungry. His mother fed him and his brothers and sisters with grease, salt tears,*



*and hard flour rolls left over from what she'd baked for the workers that morning.*

*But Jeremiah was hardworking and patient and he believed that he would prevail. So the next day he went and told the fishermen his story about the sneaky old tricky rainbow fish and how HE would be the first one to catch him. The fishermen laughed and laughter was worth something. So they gave him an even bigger piece of bait.*

*Jeremiah prepared his pole and his line and his hook and lowered down that truly decadent piece of bait. This time the rainbow fish could see **and** smell the bait. So the rainbow fish peered out further, just past the edge of the rock to see what might be for lunch. But the wind quivered the fishing line and the rainbow fish swam home right away. No way. Not today.*

*Jeremiah went home hungry. His mother fed him and his brothers and sisters with grit, salt tears, and sea grapes from her apron pockets.*

*But Jeremiah was determined and unashamed. He went back to the fishermen and told them his story. And how this time he had an idea. The fishermen felt bad for the hungry little boy dressed in the flour sack pants his mother had stitched for him. They began to think their bait might be the most fish he would eat this season. So they gave him another piece.*

*Jeremiah reached into the water and grabbed a flamboyant piece of seaweed. He prepared his*



*pole and his line, but this time he hid the hook and the bait in the seaweed and slowly dangled it right outside the rainbow fish's lair, like so much matted ocean hair.*

*The rainbow fish sniffed. The rainbow fish looked. The rainbow fish needed to see what was in this drift of seaweed. The rainbow fish swam forward. The rainbow fish got hooked. And Jeremiah Gumbs took the fish home to his mother and she cooked a beautiful dinner for all.*

*And the fishermen welcomed Jeremiah into the fold. They told the story of how a fisher must be hardworking and patient, how a fisher must be determined and unashamed, how a fisher must believe and think hard and have a vision. How a fisher must return every day. Yes the fishers talk about Jeremiah with joy. They say, "I remember when he was just a little boy...."*

*And almost every day somewhere over Anguilla if you look, you'll see a rainbow.*



When my grandfather, Jeremiah Gumbs, told me the story of the rainbow fish we were sitting in his small cottage in Anguilla. The small cottage was his public and private space near the entrance to the beach hotel he built at the suggestion of my grandmother, Lydia Gumbs. The story as I wrote it above is not exactly how he told it to me. It



is an artifact of my remembering, I remember the story by telling my nieces who are growing up in London in the light of a pencil drawing of my grandfather with his snorkel mask on. “No way! Not today!” They repeat, laughing over videophone.

But sitting in his cottage with the tape recorders he urged me to use on every visit to record his stories and insights, my grandfather told me many tales. He told the me same stories again and again differently, revealing competing truths. For example, one day my grandfather told me a story about how he learned patience early in the morning fishing with his father, Anderson Gumbs. The next day I asked a question about his father, and my grandfather shook his head. “I don’t remember my father,” he said into the same tape recorder. Later I learned a different story from my uncle. My oldest uncle met my great grandfather Anderson once. After staying away for eighteen years, my grandfather brought his pregnant wife and their two oldest children to Anguilla. Once again this was at my grandmother’s insistence. My uncle remembers my grandfather bringing him to the bedside of an old man who was dying of cirrhosis of the liver. Who was that? My uncle asked after they left. “That was my father,” my grandfather said. “Why didn’t mama or Una (my aunt) come with us?” my uncle asked. “Because that man is not fit for the company of decent women,” my grandfather said. And they never spoke of it again. I later learned that my great grandfather Anderson Gumbs never married my great grandmother Augusta Carty. He had seven



children with her, and several with her next-door neighbor whom he did marry. I learned that he was an alcoholic who abused the women and children in his life. And he evidently had a talent for fishing and teaching. My grandfather never spoke about him with me again.

### **My grandfather's father taught him to fish**

Anderson Gumbs had a son named Jeremiah Gumbs. Sometimes, if Jeremiah was very lucky and woke up very early, his father Anderson would take him out fishing. These were special times. A time of learning secrets by watching. A time of silent communion.

All day long, as he played and fished with his friends, he felt the confidence of being Anderson's son, trained in the ways of the sea.

One such day, fishing with his friends, Jeremiah saw a beautiful rainbow fish. How proud would his father be, how grateful would his mother be if he brought home this fish for the family.

But the rainbow fish was smart. The rainbow fish also had parents who taught by example the difference between breakfast and bait, between lunch and a lure, between dinner and being done for. The rainbow fish had survived many years on the wisdom of those cautious rainbow parents.

But Jeremiah Gumbs was the son of Anderson. An outside son maybe, hungry in the house of



his mother, but Anderson's no less than any other kid in the neighborhood. He would prove it. He would catch the fish.

So Jeremiah got some bait from the fishermen who knew him from all his days tagging along behind his father. And he went to the rock where the rainbow fish hid. He prepared his pole and his line and his bait just like his father had taught him and he dangled it down right outside of the rainbow fish's lair.

The rainbow fish smelled the bait and looked out. Soon the rainbow fish rolled the eyes on either side of that beautiful rainbow head. Hadn't mother said *when you see a line of bait don't leave the rock, just watch and wait*. So the rainbow fish stayed put and eventually Jeremiah pulled the line up out of the water and went home.

The next day Jeremiah woke up early to catch the rainbow fish unaware. He snuck a generous piece of bait from among his father's things and went back to the rock where the rainbow fish hid. He prepared his pole and his line and his bait just like his father had taught him and lowered it down right outside of the rainbow fish's lair.

The rainbow fish woke up and looked out and sniffed. That was the smell of breakfast wasn't it? But the rainbow fish remembered what father had said, *early in the morning in the shadows of the sea, be careful of the fisherfolk and keep yourself free*. So the rainbow fish stayed put. When the sun was at the top of the sky, Jeremiah got too hot



and went home.

Dejected and sad and proud and mad Jeremiah walked back and forth. He searched his brain for what he might have been missing. He didn't want to ask his father. He wanted to catch this fish by the undeniable power of his own fisher wits. And then he remembered.

Hadn't he seen his father hide his hook in all manner of sea debris? Maybe the shy rainbow fish wouldn't be afraid of something a fish couldn't see. So Jeremiah went back out to the rock where the rainbow fish hid and he tried once again. This time in addition to the pole and the line and the bait he grabbed a bunch of seaweed and tied it to his hook. And dangled it all in front of the rainbow fish's lair.

The rainbow fish looked out as the tide came in and he saw a cluster, a tangle. He smelled the bait and he saw the seaweed coming in at a natural angle. He slowly moved out from under the rock and peered into the knotted grass and as he opened his mouth in wonder Jeremiah pulled him up into the air just that fast.

Jeremiah, triumphant, ran past his father and showed him his beautiful fish and he took the fish home to his mother who fried it and salted it into a dish that fed everyone well.

And Jeremiah ran around the place with his chest out and his head held high and his father would smile when he saw him and nudge the other men



whispering, “mine.” And you know what they say about Anguilla now. Rainbows upon rainbows any day, all the time.

## **Or, my Grandfather didn't remember his father**

Once upon a time, long ago, in small place with a long memory, there was a little boy named Jeremiah Gumbs. Youngest child of Augusta Carty. If you go to the building with the records and look up his birth certificate, under “Name of Father” you see nothing but a curved black line across the space. Call it a wave.

Little Jeremiah loved the ocean. And the ocean loved him. Every day he would salt his skin in the waves with his friends, some of whom may have been brothers. But not by his mother. Anyway. One day, out fishing with his friends and kin, Jeremiah saw a big beautiful rainbow fish swim under a rock in the cove. That was a fish he had to have, he told everyone. That is a fish to take home.

So he went to the fishermen in the village who he thought of as something like a collective father, a father chorus, a source of scraps and bits. And they gave him a tiny piece of bait to go try and catch a real fish.

Meanwhile the fish, swimming in his cave, felt free. He felt free because no one could reach him. He felt beautiful when he was alone. He felt safe from the dangerous refraction.



Little Jeremiah with his pole and his line and his bait on his hook waited patiently all day. But the rainbow fish didn't so much as splash his way. He started to wonder if the rainbow fish was real or just a trick of his eyes and the water and the sun. He didn't cry. Not much. He went home.

Little Jeremiah went to sleep on the pallet of flour sacks his mother gathered for him and among the whistling snores of his many older siblings he dreamed. In the dream there was a voice telling him something. It sounded like thunder or maybe blasts underwater. He couldn't make out any words.

When he woke up he knew he needed to go back to the rainbow fish.

So he used his little bait to catch a little fish to make a bigger bait for the big rainbow fish. He didn't wonder about how easy it was to catch the small fish, how vulnerable they were really, or how they were also free because no one wanted to anything from them, until it was time to show and prove. He didn't think of himself as a small fry or a sprat.

He prepared his pole, his line, his hook, hooked through the small fish and dangled it down right outside the place where the rainbow fish hung out. And he waited, holding his silence. In his mind he heard a song that a drunk man had sung loudly in the streets some night before, but he didn't open his mouth to sing for fear of scaring the rainbow fish away. He waited and he waited



but in his heart he knew that the big fish had no reason to come check for the small fish.

After hours and hours he gave up. He pulled the small fish out of the water and placed it in his small hand. Poor impaled little fish, sacrificed for nothing. Jeremiah felt the small fish deserved some attention. Even now. A proper burial after everything. So as the tide started to come in, Jeremiah gathered seaweed garlands. He chose them carefully and braided them tenderly around the little fish who had been so easy to catch, to hurt and kill. He cried over the little fish, but nobody knew, or would ever know, not even the fish, dead and covered as he already was in the salt of the universe.

Jeremiah carried the tiny fish in his seaweed shroud to the edge of the rock and let the whole thing go and the braided boat of seaweed floated and began to sink. Or was something pulling it? The tangle went down but then the large rainbow fish leaped up and swallowed the whole thing. Jeremiah, astonished, mouth open wide, caught the rainbow fish in his arms and ran home. And as the rainbow fish gasped those last breaths from his gills, Jeremiah gasped and sobbed too. At home he presented the fish to his mother. This was the very first time he had provided a meal that could feed his whole family. And Jeremiah never forgot that moment. The day he became a big man.



**And my grandfather's father was an abusive alcoholic. One day, my grandfather returned to Anguilla to watch him die.**

Jeremiah did not get very much sleep. The house was small and when his father was there he stumbled wherever anyone was lying down. He shouted, he hit mama. He hit anyone who got in his way. But Jeremiah had reached the age where he could say what he meant. So he had said it one night to his father. *Don't hit my mother.* His father had laughed. Or was he crying? Coughing? He slurred his words when he answered Augusta's last child *There's nothing you can do about it.*

Jeremiah, therefore, had something to prove. His friends could feel the edge of it on him all day while they were playing, swimming, fishing. But for the exact same reason they didn't say anything about it. Jeremiah was not someone you wanted to playfight. Sometimes they thought he was not playing at all. So the boys knew that Jeremiah was serious when he said he was going to catch the rainbow fish.

Everyone knew about the rainbow fish who hid under the rock in the cove. And no one had been able to catch him. But Jeremiah had something to prove. He would be the first.

The fishermen felt bad for Anderson's son. They all knew how the man gallivanted around the island, drunk and loud. Disgracing his wife with this woman and that woman and his own neighbor Augusta, mother of seven of his children, Jeremiah



the last. So they would give him bait when he asked. *Shame on Anderson. He don't even feed those kids.*

Jeremiah went to the ledge. He knew that the rainbow fish was wise. And what wise person didn't love questions? Jeremiah was not playing. He was very serious. So as he prepared his pole and his line and his bait and his hook he looked for the question of his heart.

*Why doesn't father love us?* And he sat and added salt to the ocean until the ocean felt big and his question felt small and the rainbow fish never budged from his lair at all. Must have been the wrong question.

So Jeremiah went home. He looked at his mother and his siblings and even his father's wife and kids next door and he thought they were all completely lovable. What was there not to love? In each of them he found a piece of himself and he was grateful.

Jeremiah went back to the ledge. As he prepared his pole and his line and his bait and his hook he looked into his heart for a new question. *Why doesn't father love himself?* Yes. That's it. He felt hopelessness heave in his heart. And he sat and added salt to the ocean until the ocean felt big and his question felt small and the rainbow fish never budged from his lair at all. Must have been the wrong question.

So Jeremiah went home. And he looked. He



stayed out of his father's line of sight and he watched him. How his hands shook. How his eyes watered. How he bit the side of his own mouth. He watched him and he did not look away.

The next day Jeremiah looked sadder than he had ever looked in his life. The boys didn't even ask him if he wanted to play. *Must be sad because he knows he can't catch that too-smart rainbow fish.* The boys said.

Jeremiah walked along the shoreline, dragging his pole behind him. As he walked, he dragged his feet. He picked up the long pieces of seaweed that stuck to his legs. When he got to the ledge he was exhausted and his arms were full. But he would not give up on the rainbow fish and he had another question.

*What am I afraid to love about myself?* He asked. And for a while he waited silently and added salt to the sea. But then he began to throw the seaweed in. *How much I want to fight sometimes.* He said, dropping one rope of seaweed from his arms. *How much I want to see the world beyond this island.* He said, dropping another. *My fear of rejection,* he said. And dropped a third. *My own greatness.* He whispered dropping another seaweed strand. And another and another and another until his arms were empty.

Jeremiah stood with his empty arms and looked at his reflection in the water. The water was never still enough for him to see his own eyes. But as he looked he saw color and lights and he started to



laugh at all the different parts of himself that the ocean was ready to give back to him. He laughed loud and long until his lungs felt big and free. And then the legendary rainbow fish jumped out of the water laughing with him. Gasping and flailing on the edge of the ancient rock. Until the rainbow fish was still and Jeremiah was ready.

He brought the rainbow fish home and presented it to his mother. He didn't know that the boys had seen him walk by and run off to tell the fishermen that he had done it. He only saw his mother's smile and felt the fullness in the house when everyone had eaten and gone to bed. And when Jeremiah went to sleep he had a dream of color and laughter. And at last he rested well. A rainbow.



My grandfather's father was not the only variable person in this story. My grandfather's mother Augusta Carty was also a different person depending on who you asked. Granddaughter of shipwrecked Irish people, she was born and raised in Anguilla, but her Irish family rejected her when she started her journey to become a mother of nine Black children, seven by Anderson, the two oldest by another Black Anguillian man. My grandfather was her youngest son. He says she was a saint. His older brother, my great uncle John felt the opposite way. He felt she was a fool and blamed her for the poverty and violence in their lives because she continued to



see their father. Uncle John seemed to hold this judgement against all women. *Education is wasted on women*, he told me when I, a PhD student at the time, came to interview him in the shed he lived in behind his son's house. Pop-pop proudly told me the story of how he bought his mother a house. He displayed a portrait of the two of them where I saw it all my life. He is a young man with a moustache. Her eyes are determined, the lines of age and sun are roads to the edge of her face in every direction.

### **My grandfather's mother was a saint**

Augusta's son adored her. He would wake up early in the morning when all of the other children were asleep and help her as she lit the fire in the rock oven in the yard and rolled flour in her hands to make rolls for the workers who would pass by on their way. It was from Augusta that he learned hard work. He loved those quiet mornings with his mother. But even he knew she salted the rolls with her own tears. Life was not easy.

Sometimes he wondered what his mother saw in his father. A loud man who broke all her quiet. Sometimes he wondered how his Irish aunts and uncles and grandparents could reject his beautiful mother. Red Gussie. The kindest person he knew.

Jeremiah didn't know all the details, but he felt in his spirit that had his mother not forgiven his father too many times, he himself might not have existed. And her white people. They might have



accepted her if not for the same thing, his own existence and the existence of his siblings. There must be something he could do to say thank you and I'm sorry. Something like a gift.

One day when he was fishing with his friends, young Jeremiah saw a beautiful rainbow fish. Every color and translucent fins. He had never seen anything so beautiful, except maybe his mother's rare and warming smile. He decided that he would catch that fish and give it to his mother.

Word got around, which was funny to Jeremiah, because he didn't even remember speaking his mission out loud, but when he walked past the fishermen they gave him some bait and a smile. They too knew the kindness of Red Gussie. They saw her resourcefulness raising those children alone. The clothes they wore, the bed pallets they slept on, all made by Gussie's hand out of the same flour sacks she used to feed the whole community every morning.

Jeremiah went to the rock where the rainbow fish lived. And sat with his pole and his line and his bait and his hook all day. And he listened. Though the rainbow fish never showed her face, he knew she was there. If he could have translated what she said it would have been something like

*I have made many children. Every color. I breathed them out into the sea. And now they are gone. I hope they survive. I hope they haven't forgotten me.*



Jeremiah went home with no fish, but everyone saw the thoughtful look on his face. Even Gussie looked sideways at him as he rushed to fluff everyone's pallets and sweep the yard. But she didn't say anything. She had so much to do.

The next day Jeremiah went back to the old coral ledge emerged from sea. He wondered if it had been part of the same old coral reef that had broken the bottom of the boat of his mother's ancestors. She didn't seem to like to tell the story. Jeremiah wondered how long the rainbow fish had been in this solid crevice of coral ancestry. What the rainbow fish had witnessed. What she knew.

And Jeremiah sat with his pole and his line and his bait and his hook. He heard a story without words. *Once upon a time there was heat and more heat deep underwater where the world collides. Once upon a time the broken edges of the earth met each other and there was nothing to do but go up. And the friction and the core rose up hot and so open. And the volcano breathed its own story about earth becoming earth. And the coral heard. And the particular coral who first came to the mouth of open earth knew they would stay. Knew there was something igneous and inherently fertile about opening. Yes coral learned to stay in a volatile place still becoming. And coral did what coral does, build generations on top of its own bones. And it was a long time later when the volcano breached higher than the ocean and the coral became mountain breathing hard in the salted air. And the top of the coral became*



*island and home and a story. And the rainbow fish waited to tell the story again.*

Jeremiah walked home with no fish. As he walked by his friends they looked in his eyes to see where he was looking. It was like he couldn't hear them. He was looking through time. Even Gussie wondered what was going on with him. She noticed he went to the pump again and kept putting water next to her. But she didn't say anything. She just drank the water. The day was so hot.

The next day Jeremiah went back to the coral edge with his arms full. His pole, his line, his hook, his bait, but also a tangle of seaweed. And as he sat at the edge he braided the seaweed into a beautiful wreath. He said quietly. *For those too busy feeding us to grieve. For the thirst left behind by your tears. For the years turned to dust at the corners of your eyes. For the bruises under long sleeves. For the curses you didn't say. For the poisons you didn't administer when you could have. For the love you had to make yourself and then give most of it away. For your severed line. For your lowered head. For your stitching hand. For your daily bread. I say thank you.*

And he dropped the wreath into the sea. And through it he thought he could see the core of the earth, swirling like a piece of everything, like his mother's pot. He got so dizzy he thought he would fall into the ocean, had he already fallen? Hit his head on sharp coral? He started to wonder did the seaweed bulbs have enough air to hold his



weight. He started to forget, he started to forgive, was that his voice singing? He blinked and he was standing on the ledge. Suddenly the rainbow fish jumped through the wreath of seaweed, wearing the seaweed like a garland or a crown. Jeremiah knelt. He realized the bait in his hands was just an offering. He let it go into the mouth of the rainbow fish queen. He lifted the wreath, fish and all and wore it on his head. The village wondered about this sudden silliness from the most serious boy they knew, but Jeremiah didn't answer any questions. He walked straight to his mother's door.

Augusta stopped what she was doing. And smiled.

### **My grandfather's mother was a fool**

Jeremiah's voice had an edge to it today. His friends said he was scaring away all the fish, but they themselves were a little bit scared of what was brewing in Jeremiah.

What was brewing in Jeremiah? His older brother John was getting to him. *You*. John had said every day for the last month. *You are evidence that our mother is a fool*. John had been repeating it like mantra ever since the last bad beating. *You*. John had whispered from their pallet on the floor. As their father left and their mother cried at the table. *You are evidence that our mother is a FOOL*. With that last word, "fool," Jeremiah always felt like John was spitting in his face. *Who but a fool fool woman would let him back in the door?* John muttered to himself as soon as he got out of



Mama Augusta's earshot. But Jeremiah could hear him.

*You boys!* Augusta shouted from the rock oven, every time she saw them rolling on the ground fighting at the edge of the yard. *Stand up!* she admonished and kept on with what she was doing. Jeremiah spit the dirt out of his mouth. He was standing up for Mama. He thought to himself. Why couldn't she see that?

*Earth to world. Hey Jerry!* Jeremiah's friends said to him in the borrowed boat they had gotten to play at fishing. *Where are you?*

*What?* Jeremiah said. Remembering where he was. *Oh. I'm here. I was just looking at that fish.*

*What fish?* They asked. *That big beautiful rainbow fish.* He said. *You don't see it?*

*Okay Jerry.* They said, rolling their eyes.

*I'll show you.* Jeremiah said. *I'm going to catch that fish.* Why did he say that?

When Jeremiah went home he ignored his brother. John had shortened his mantra anyway. Just looking in Jeremiah's direction and muttering *fool* whenever he could. Tonight, Jeremiah wasn't thinking about John or how sad he looked when he didn't know Jeremiah was watching. Tonight all Jeremiah could think about what how he was going to catch a fish that didn't exist.



The next day Jeremiah grabbed his pole and his line and his hook. Judge, his father's son by his actual wife, even threw him a piece of bait. *Go catch your imaginary rainbow fish.* Judge laughed. Not with malice, but just because he liked to stir the energy. All the other boys laughed too. But they didn't make eye contact with Jeremiah. Jeremiah caught the bait in his hand. *Just because among you can't see it, don't mean that it's not there.* He said. And walked to the edge of the coral as if he knew what he was doing.

All day he sat there with his hook in the water looking intently below the surface. He knew the boys were watching him in the distance, so he did his best to look focused. He tested his pole. He re-tied his line. He even caught his hook on the edge of the coral one time and stood up as if he was about to pull in a fish. He gave the boys a little bit of a show.

At the end of the day he walked home. *You didn't catch your rainbow fish yet?* Judge asked what everyone was thinking. *No man.* Jeremiah said. *That fish is messing with me. But you'll see. I'll catch it yet.*

The next day Jeremiah returned to the ledge with all of his equipment. But this time the children had gotten braver. They ventured closer. The smallest among them sat right next to Jeremiah and asked him questions.

*How big is the rainbow fish? Bigger than your heart.*



*How old is the rainbow fish? Back since before slave times.*

*How long has the rainbow fish been hiding here? Since the shipwreck cracked the coral.*

*How come the rainbow fish almost never comes out? Because the world is mean. It hurts you.*

Jeremiah didn't think about what he was saying. He just opened his mouth every time someone asked him a question and he accepted what came out.

At the end of the day Jeremiah walked home. The little boys still surrounded him with questions. As they walked past his age-mates the chorus of youngsters said, *Wow that rainbow fish is so old and smart. But Jerry gon' catch it. He know everything about it.*

Jeremiah didn't say anything. But he noticed that John was standing there next to Judge. As Jeremiah walked past, John rolled his eyes.

The next day all the little girls and boys sat with Jeremiah at the ledge. All day long Jeremiah told stories about the rainbow fish. About the time the rainbow fish had fed all her babies with just one piece of seaweed. About how smart the rainbow fish was to hide in the sharpest outcropping of old coral remnant. About how far the rainbow fish's grandfishparents had traveled from home. About the songs that the rainbow fish sang. And how the scars from all the times fishermen had tried to catch the rainbow fish grew bright and iridescent.



How once they healed the scars were the rainbow itself. The stories kept coming.

Then one little girl said, "I see her! I see the rainbow fish!" Jeremiah almost laughed. Then a little boy said, "oh yes, I see her! Look at her long trailing fins!" Then another child said, "I saw her, her eyes were bright like jewels!" Jeremiah stopped laughing. He started to look where they were looking. Was that a fish?

"Here she comes!" Said the first little girl. Jeremiah felt something tugging his line and he almost dropped his pole. "You did it Jeremiah!!!" Sang the children, and one child grabbed onto his back and they each grabbed onto the other until they were all pulling the biggest fish they had ever seen out of the water onto the land. The fish gasped. Or was that the sound Jeremiah made when the fish looked him directly in the eye?

Swept up in the sea of children. Jeremiah and the fish moved toward home. The skeptical boys his age helped them carry the fish toward crocus hill. Judge ran through the village announcing. *Jerry caught the big fish! Everybody go eat!* John looked completely shocked.

When they got to Augusta's door, she was ready. She was laughing. And the oven was hot. The whole village ate the feast of the rainbow fish. And the stories and the singing and the dancing and carrying on lasted three more days. And Jeremiah smiled and shook his head.



**My grandfather's mother was an Irish Anguillian mother of many, rejected by her family of origin for loving the family she created.**

Jeremiah used to wonder how his mother was born. In his mind he saw her like the mermaid at the front of a boat, cresting out of the sea, surrounded by the brightness of coral. But when he asked her, she said she was born right here in Anguilla like everyone else.

Since Jeremiah was the youngest, he hadn't seen anyone born except goats. Unlike his brothers and sisters he hadn't been shooed out of the house to run around back and look through the window. He hadn't seen the wet the red or heard the screaming force that got him here. So he held on to his fantasy.

Everyone called Jeremiah's mother "Red Gussie." They meant red like she was Irish and had red hair. Or red like she was light-skinned but not exactly white. Anymore. Jeremiah knew there were people who the other kids told him were ghost cousins and ghost aunts and ghost uncles and ghost grandparents. They weren't dead. They just acted like they couldn't see Jeremiah or his brothers and sisters or even his mother anymore.

But Augusta didn't talk about them. As far as Jeremiah could tell, his mother's whole world was brown. The only white, the flour on her hands early in the morning. That was why the first time he saw the rainbow fish he thought that it was



brown.

“I’m going to catch that big brown fish and bring it home to my brown mother,” Jeremiah said to his little friends. And they laughed and ran to tell the other people. “Jeremiah go catch the brown fish the brown fish the brown fish Jeremiah go catch the brown fish for his brown and browning mama!”

Jeremiah paid them no mind. He just sat and he watched and he looked all day under the jut of coral where the fish was hiding. Brown like mama. Like the dirt yard swept. Like the pigeon peas kept. Like the gully leapt. Like mama. All day Jeremiah sat there thinking about what it was to be brown. But when the fish peeked out of her good good hiding place she looked red.

Jeremiah was so shock he ran home.

But by the next morning he knew what to do. “I’m going to catch that big red fish and bring it home to my red mother,” Jeremiah said to his little friends. And they laughed and ran to tell the other people. “Jeremiah go catch the red fish the red fish the red fish Jeremiah go catch the red fish for his red and redding mama!”

Jeremiah paid them no mind. He just sat and he watched and he looked all day under the jut of coral where the fish was hiding. Red like mama. Like eyes after crying. Like hands raw from work. Like a face slapped and welting. Like mama. All day Jeremiah sat there thinking about what it was



to be red. But when the fish peeked out of her good good hiding place she looked blue.

Jeremiah was so shock he ran home.

But by the next morning he knew what to do. "I'm going to catch that big blue fish and bring it home to my blue mother," Jeremiah said to his little friends. And they laughed and ran to tell the other people. "Jeremiah go catch the blue fish the blue fish the blue fish Jeremiah go catch the blue fish for his blue and bluing mama!"

Jeremiah paid them no mind. He just sat and he watched and he looked all day under the jut of coral where the fish was hiding. Blue like mama. Like the smallest newborn goat. Like the early morning sky. Like the endless salt of sea. Like mama. All day Jeremiah sat there thinking about what it was to be blue. But he left before the fish could peek out and be green or be yellow or be purple.

He ran home and gave his mother a hug.

And every day after that Jeremiah went fishing, not for the elusive big fish, but for whichever fish wanted to be caught and he brought them home to his rainbow mother to make her smile.



## ***Starvation Genetics***

Studies show that starvation remembers itself across generations. People who survive starvation conditions pass on a genetic adaptation that helps not them, nor their children, but their grandchildren live longer. This is what the studies say. My study of my grandfather's story about fishing leaves me wondering about generations and adaptation. With each adaptation of the story I learned something I didn't know. By finding another way to say it I learned lessons from ancestors I have never met. But I was already learning.

For me, this story has been a story about starvation. My grandfather was starved for basic resources. He literally starved for food while his mother struggled to keep her children whole and his father offered abuse and neglect different ways on different days and his mother's racist extended family cut her off from love and respect. As an adult, my grandfather would become a hardworking person whose children never wanted for food or anything else, except for his time. My grandfather was determined that his children would not relive the hunger he remembered. His children, my father and aunt and uncles, felt that their father loved work more than he loved them. They were never starved for food. But they felt starved for time. And what about me, the granddaughter, how I am starving? I am writing this during a global pandemic as a diasporic daughter with oceans between me and most of my family of origin. I am starved for their touch.



The pandemic has kept me away from Anguilla, the scene of this story, for longer than I have ever been away in my life. I am starved for the land. But what am I actually hungry for? What rainbow? Maybe the key to the story is in the question of hiding. My grandfather tried to hide the grief he felt about his father from me. He tried to present his mother as an saint. And in the story itself he taught me the value of hiding. The rainbow fish was only safe in hiding. Jeremiah could only catch the fish if he successfully hid the bait. Where am I hiding? What am I hiding? How am I hiding my power? What are the areas where I am afraid to come out from under the rock, that if I open my mouth I will get hooked? When do I feel like the small fish used as bait? What is the seaweed I need to drop? What is the salt I add to the sea? What is the story I need to tell really?

My rainbow is forever returning. My rainbow is listening deeper. My meal, my gift, my challenge is coming back again. What's your story? What's your fish? What's your rainbow?



## Fishing Fly #2: three tries

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*Fishing Fly* is a serial publication of short fiction that animates vernacular and futuristic conceptions of marine life and human relationships. In the midst of shuffling the widespread disconnection with the ocean, the gathered fiction stories reconcile care, respect, and consciousness of possible more-than-human relationships. The state of the ocean and the marine life are also a reflection of human behavior that has often tended to extractivist, abusive, profitable, speediness, and selfish approaches discarding precious situated knowledge including fishing and cooking craft and the powerful rituals of storytelling. This series of short fiction infuses into the actions transmitted through generations to connect us with the salty waters and its many lives.

This series is conceived and edited by María Montero Sierra and published by TBA21–Academy that has also generously supported the eponymous ongoing research of marine and human relationships through the prism of eating.



**Alexis Pauline Gumbs, PhD** is a queer Black feminist love evangelist, a community cherished writer and scholar and an aspirational cousin to all beings. The Anguilla Literary Festival has referred to Alexis as “the pride of Anguilla.” Alexis is the oldest granddaughter of Jeremiah and Lydia Gumbs, two leaders of the Anguillian revolution. Alexis is the author of several books, most recently *Dub: Finding Ceremony* and *Undrowned: Black Feminist Lessons from Marine Mammals*. Alexis is literary advisor to the Ntozake Shange Trust and Creative Writing Editor for *Feminist Studies*. Alexis lives on land traditionally stewarded by the Occonechee Band of the Saponi Nation and is co-founder of Mobile Homecoming Trust, a living library amplifying generations of Black LGBTQ brilliance.