

Fishing Fly

#3

THE
FISHERMAN

Veronica Stigger

Translated by Zoë Perry



He rested against the edge of his fishing boat, leaned over the side, and looked out to sea in search of his reflection. But he couldn't find it. The gentle rolling of the water prevented a clear image from taking shape. His face was distorted by the ocean's sway. His forehead was drawn out to one side, then the other. His eyes grew large and small, opened, and then closed. His nose narrowed then widened, making his nostrils look like the entrances to two caves. His mouth drifted up and down, as if dancing to a song made by the sea itself in conversation with the wind. And his beard? Where was his beard? He didn't see it. He didn't see *himself*, and that gave him the unsettling feeling that he didn't exist. Whose face was that, dissolving into the waves? For a few moments, he believed all he had to do was fix his gaze to better recognize himself, but it wasn't a matter of vision, it was a matter of motion; it was a matter of image: the sea, moving and unstable, refused to create a mirror. He leaned farther toward the water to try to get a better look at himself. The wooden boat, small and fragile, heeled slightly, churning the waters some more. Its name, inscribed in white on the navy blue-painted wood with red edges, gleamed as it tilted toward the early morning sun that was just beginning to rise, as if echoing its meaning: *Aurora*. With the water now choppy from the boat's sudden movement, it was impossible to find any reflection other than the rays of morning light. The reflection of his face, struck by the sun's creeping glow, contorted into endless, unrecognizable parts. He took his hands off the boat's edge and stretched them out to sea, nearly

causing the boat to capsize. He grasped at every part of his face reflected into fragments on the water's ripples, as if that were possible, as if it were not, by its very nature, an intangible image. He wanted to be able to piece them back together and rearrange them, giving them shape, definition, a face. He wanted to see himself again. Then he remembered that trying to collect the contorted reflections of his face in the waves was the game he most liked to play as a child, when his father, no longer able to go hunting due to an injury to his groin (the same injury later inflicted on the son, and that kept him from walking with ease, forcing him to always drag his left leg), would take him fishing. How sad it is to grow old, he thought, knowing it was a cliché: we have a much longer memory than future. The boat almost overturned when he bent further over the edge and kissed the sea. He tasted salt on his mouth and licked his lips. He kissed the water one more time, nearly capsizing again. Suddenly, he sprang his head and torso up, causing the little boat to toss sideways before finding its balance and returning to its starting position. He smiled as he hadn't smiled since he was a boy. Sitting upright on the little bench inside the boat, he fitted together the two sections of his fishing pole, attached the reel, placed the line, and set the assembled rod to the side to select the best bait for the occasion. He opened the hot-pink plastic duffel, which was shaped like a large fish—a very practical bag that he also used as a float when he ventured out into the river that used to flow behind his house to swim downstream—and rummaged around in search of that stylized silver goldfish he'd carved

the week before. On clear days like that, the little fish sparkled like a rare jewel when the sunlight hit it. He had long since replaced live bait with artificial lures: with the long drought, he no longer found worms in his backyard. He attached the lure onto the hook and ran the fishing line through the guide. He wet the line with his tongue to better secure it to the hook. He tied a single knot around the ring—the last knot his father had taught him, winding the line six times over itself and pulling it back toward the hook. This knot is like your fate, his father told him, it never comes undone. When he could feel the knot was nice and tight, he snipped the remainder of the line. He put on his wide-brimmed straw hat, picked up the pole, and cast the line out into the sea. Now, he would have to wait. What he liked most about fishing was never knowing how long he would have to stay there, sitting in the boat, in absolute silence (even his breathing quieted), until a fish grabbed his bait. Since his injury, the fish were not abundant as before; on the contrary, every day they were increasingly scarce. That meant more hours of waiting, more time for reminiscing. But he was in no hurry. Never had been. He could sit there quietly in his boat until dusk, not eating, not drinking, not moving. It was the only place he felt comfortable and protected without wearing his mask. He could even sleep in his boat, sitting up, fishing pole in hand, even if he went away with nothing after all that sacrifice, as has happened so often in recent years. Deep down, he almost yearned for some good reason to keep him there, so he wouldn't have to go home. He still hadn't recovered from the shock the day before when

he'd gone for a walk with his wife.

As on every Sunday, they went for a stroll through town, hand in hand. They left in mid-afternoon from the stone house they'd bought many moons ago and followed the dirt path that had once been lined with lush, green bushes, now all dried up. They walked slowly—but without stopping—and in silence. They hardly ever exchanged words. He shuffled along a bit sideways, dragging his left leg behind him and leaving a trail in the dirt, like a small machine smoothing out the surface. She walked with her head held high, shoulders back and spine straight. She stepped on the hard, sandy ground as if her body were weightless, as if she were floating in the air or walking on water. Even after all those decades without attending a dance class, she still had the bearing of a dancer. She looked straight ahead at a point on the horizon: a point that didn't actually exist, but which served as her compass. Ever since he'd been speared in the groin, rendering him as sterile as the earth beneath his feet, he walked with his head down, his shoulders slumped and his back slightly hunched. He gazed at the ground, dragging his bad leg. "You can't count the stars in the sky, or grains of sand on the beach," he said aloud, without meaning to. "Much less drops of water in the sea," she replied, without turning to him. Perhaps he should have chosen *Sidereal* as the name for his boat. But she had decided it would be *Aurora*. The journey on foot from the earthen floor to the cobblestone streets of town would normally take about half an hour, but at his limping pace it could take three times that. Only two of the three dozen houses in

the area remained intact: theirs and the chaplain's. After they were abandoned, the others had turned into ruins, their hardwood doors and windows torn away, their stone walls smashed, roofs caved in, the floors tiled with seafaring designs (the only tiles used in that village) were cracked and covered with sand and dry, old leaves (because the trees there had not had foliage for a long time), cobwebs were everywhere, birds built nests on what was left of the kitchen cabinets, dog, goat, sheep, capybara, mouse, and other small animals' feces that had hardened over time and was scattered throughout the old rooms of the house, scraps of furniture, such as sofas with torn upholstery, scuffed chairs and tables with missing legs, beds with no mattresses and bedsteads missing most of their slats, dressers and wardrobes warped by the harsh sunlight, dirty sinks and toilets with no water, frayed curtains, rusted refrigerators, unusable stoves, books missing pages, headless knickknacks, landscape paintings strewn across the floor, and photographs of the families who had lived there, now overtaken by mold, their faces impossible to make out. The sun and dry air made the walk tiring, but they were used to it. They didn't come across anyone along the way. There was no one to come across. Few birds still flew in those skies. But even so, they stuck to their old habit of wearing a mask, which, on the one hand, made it feel even hotter, and, on the other, moistened the air they breathed. There was no vegetation either. It had been a few years (or decades? centuries?) since the area had succumbed. He glanced ahead and thought he saw a huge fish thrashing about on the dirt, about

100 meters from where he stood. Although it was far away and his eyesight was not the best, he calculated the animal must have been a meter and a half long. It was pale gray and reflected the sun like a silver platter. He let go of his wife's hand and heaved his body forward: he wanted to run and save it before the poor thing fell victim to the dryness. But his bad leg couldn't keep pace with the forward momentum of his body, which drove into the ground like a stake or an anchor, making him keel over. The woman—who up to that moment was still standing primly, looking straight ahead—turned to her husband, sprawled face down on the dirt. Without skipping a beat, she took a white cloth from one of the two pockets in her long blue tunic and dipped it in a clear oil that she took from her other pocket, which also contained a small fish, still fresh, a dried red berry, and a small piece of cooked yam. She rubbed these foods on the oil-soaked cloth, knelt beside her companion, and gently rubbed the cloth over the back of his head, top to bottom, very slowly, nine times. Then she turned him over and repeated the gesture nine more times over the parts of his face not covered by the mask. She grabbed him by the shoulders and pulled him up, making him sit on the ground. Then she got up and, standing behind him, placed her hands in his armpits and pulled him back to his feet. With her help, he got up, braced himself on his good leg, and looked ahead once more, searching for the fish, which was no longer there. "It wasn't a fish," she told him, following his gaze, "it was a dolphin." She took him by the hand and the two continued walking. They reached the center of town as the

sun was beginning to set. The streets were empty and silent. A thick layer of sand from the beach, blown there by the wind, had accumulated on the cobblestones and sandstone slab sidewalks that still retained dinosaur footprints. All that sand made getting around even more difficult.

Dragging his left leg, he pushed along a small mound of dirt, forming a large furrow wherever he passed. There was also no one in the town center. The low-rise buildings—all white with a blue trim on the door frames and certain details on their facades—seemed to have been hastily evacuated. Doors and windows were left open, and you could see that sand had also accumulated inside those rooms, decorated with heavy, dark wood furniture. Even the town hall had been left pell-mell. In the middle of the large entrance hall, atop the blue mosaic depicting a gigantic sunfish, stood two seagulls, facing each other, seemingly plotting purely by exchanging glances, not making a sound. Anyone who saw them would think they were two statues. The man and woman walked along the main avenue down the middle of the street, their feet sinking into the sand that had gathered on the road. In some places, the sand was so deep that their legs might sink all the way down to their knees. They were not simply going for a walk; they were braving the town's streets like pioneers. One week without going there and it felt like nine centuries had passed. He was out of breath from the exertion, and she still held herself high, looking straight ahead. After passing by the town hall, they walked around the main square, turned down the shopping street, toward the courthouse, next to the town's old barbershop and restaurant, walked

along the fishermen's club road, past the school, the public swimming pool, the natural history museum, the planetarium, the gun shop, the park, what was left of the kindergarten, the fish road, where they crossed the stone bridge, below which was only gravel, and went to the base of the hill where the Church of the Good Mother was located. They stopped, as they always did, and looked up at the illuminated temple. They liked to spend a good few minutes gazing up at it. It was beautiful, portentous, and glowing. The staircase that led up to it was on the other side of the hill, beside the old port. They didn't usually go up to the church: only on holy days. Suddenly, there was a strong gust of wind, and fine sand sprayed over them, covering them from head to toe. He hated when that happened. He remembered when he was a boy and could feel the sand piercing his little legs—then healthy—like needles. And at that moment, he cursed himself for having forgotten his straw hat and sunglasses, which would have given him a little more protection. His long, graying hair tangled in the wind, though it wasn't fine like her hair (and therefore more prone to it) but thick. She automatically cocked her head to one side, leaning it against his shoulder to shield her eyes. When the wind calmed down, the sun had already set, and it was time to head back. They retraced the same exact path and arrived home in the dark. As usual, after washing their hands thoroughly with the soap she prepared from fish fat, they took off their masks and hung them on a rack behind the door. He looked at his companion and she smiled at him, as she always did. But whose face was that smiling back at him?

It was no longer that of the woman who had walked out with him through that very door hours and hours ago. There was something different, unrecognizable, but he wasn't sure what, since her nose, eyes, and mouth remained the same. She leaned over to kiss him and he, in an involuntary gesture of bewilderment, horror even, turned away. Not even her scent was the same. She shrugged and headed to the kitchen to prepare dinner.

He was so engrossed in his memories of the day before that it took him a while to realize something was pulling on his line, bending the rod. A fish had taken the bait, and from how strongly it was pulling, it must be big. He pulled back on the rod and reeled in the line until he reached the fish. It was, in fact, quite big. It was nearly a meter long. It was hard to hold on to it and even harder to remove the hook from its mouth. He tossed it into the boat. The fish thrashed around on the wooden floor. He threw himself on top of it and immobilized it as if immobilizing an opposing judoka on the mat, until there was no life left to fight for. Once it went still, he let go of the fish and watched. A new horror washed over him: he saw in that fish's head what had been lost from his wife's face. He looked at the fish again to make sure he wasn't delirious; after all, the sun was now high and as strong and bright as ever. He blinked several times, rubbed his eyes, and the fish still looked like his wife. What the hell was that fish? He had never seen that species there. In fact, he had never seen that species anywhere. He took it in his arms and clutched it against his chest and stroked its scales

from head to tail. He felt like the fish was staring at him. He brought his face closer to the animal's and made sure it was no longer breathing. He kissed its mouth right above the wound made by the hook. He gave the fish what he had denied his wife the day before (or whoever that woman was who now lived with him). He laid its dead body on the boat's other wooden bench, right in front of him, and looked inside his hot-pink duffel for the black cooler bag where he kept the fish he caught. The fish was so big it didn't fit inside the bag. Then he quickly took apart his fishing gear and put it all in the duffel. He needed to chill the fish as soon as possible so he wouldn't lose it, so he wouldn't kill it a second time. He started the boat's motor and drove to the shore at full speed. On the beach, he tied the small boat to a stake, put the hot-pink bag on his back, and tucked the fish under his arm. He hurried home, hobbling along as he'd never hobbled before. Though he feared he might fall like he did the day before, he didn't slow down. It was his equivalent of running. Panting, he rang the bell. It didn't take long for the woman to open the door for him. "My little cripple, my peg-legged pirate, my fisher king," she said, kissing his forehead, as she always did, when she greeted him after a day's fishing. Without waiting for her to take the fish as usual, and whip it away to clean and prepare, he clung even tighter to the animal's corpse and limped toward the kitchen. When he got there, he took the sharpest knife he had, not too big, not too small, but the size best suited to remove the fish's head without damaging it. It would have to be surgical—he'd learned that from his father. He steadied the head with his left hand,

and, with his right, he made a precise incision behind the gills, slicing deeper until it came free from the body. He placed the head inside a plastic jar, which he immediately put in the cooler with ice he'd kept in the basement since winter. He removed the scales, cleaned out the guts, and sliced what was left of the body into pieces. He put more dry branches on the grill, rubbed two twigs together, making a fire, and finally put the pieces of fish on the grill over the coals. The woman, following his every move from a distance, put aside the yams she had cooked earlier and cut them into slices. It was the only side dish they had. Nothing else they planted produced. They had dinner and she went to bed. When he was sure she was sleeping soundly, he fetched the fish head from the ice and the sharp knife from the kitchen, and sat down at the living room table, where the lamplight was better. With the tip of the knife, and extreme patience, he gradually separated the skin from the flesh until it had completely peeled away. He removed the eyes and the brain and, with a small spatula he'd fashioned for delicate work like this, he removed the rest, leaving only the skin. He got up and went to the little shed at the back of the yard, where he kept his work materials. He took the antiseptic, the formaldehyde, some clean cotton cloths, and a small, soft brush. He wet one of the cloths with the antiseptic and rubbed it, very lightly, along the inside of the skin. He stayed up all night engrossed in the handling of the casing he'd taken from the fish head, because he wanted everything done carefully, so as not to bungle it. He could make no mistakes. It had been a long time since he'd engaged in this activity, but

he never forgot what his father taught him about perfectly embalming the heads of the animals he hunted, back when it was still possible to hunt there. Toward morning, before the woman woke up, he fetched the last thing he needed to prepare: a kind of homemade glue his father had invented, used to stick organic tissue together. With his little, soft-bristled brush, he applied a thin layer of the glue on the inside of the fish skin, where the flesh used to be. All of it had to be covered with glue. Once that was done, he carefully placed it on a silver tray, glue side up, and set it aside, while he returned to the shed to put away all the supplies he'd used. Back in the kitchen, he took a washcloth from a drawer in one of the cupboards and tied it around his left foot. He didn't want to make any noise as he moved through the house toward the bedroom, holding the tray with the fish skin. Silently dragging his leg behind him, he approached the double bed and, kneeling on the floor, he affixed the skin to the woman's face. "Head, head, fine head," he said as he smoothed the skin over her face: eye over eye, cheek over cheek, mouth over mouth. "I give you this head, this head you shall be." He pressed the skin over the woman's face for three minutes to ensure it was secure. When he lifted his hands, the sun was just beginning to come up. Her face glistened with the first rays that streamed through the open window. He pressed against the edge of the bed to stand, and she woke up. When she saw him beside her, she smiled and hugged him around the neck, bringing his face closer to hers. "My little cripple, my peg-legged pirate, my fisher king," she said, kissing his forehead, as she always did, when

she greeted him in the morning. “My little dolphin,” he replied, kissing her back, on her new fish mouth. Her kiss tasted like the sea. He held her by the nape of her neck, stroking her silver hair. She returned the gesture, caressing him behind the ear. He had the impression his penis was getting hard after months (years? centuries?) of impotence. As he couldn’t remember the last time he’d been aroused, he found the sensation strange. The more he kissed that fish mouth, however, the more he felt that muscle he thought was dead flex. “My little dolphin,” he repeated in the woman’s ear. “My little cripple, my peg-legged pirate, my fisher king,” she replied. She leaped to her feet and reached out her hand to him. He accepted her assistance, and got up, too. “We need to fish,” she told him, “before it’s too late”. Standing, he felt the uncontrollable semen running down the length of his bad leg. He’d definitely had an erection. They gathered their fishing tackle, the hot-pink duffel, and, without even pausing for breakfast, they left. He only noticed that neither of them was wearing a mask when they were already sitting in the boat on the high seas. How long had they been there? Where was the sun? What had become of the stars? The skin from the fish head had clung to her face like a magnet to metal. She was pregnant and radiant. Her breasts, even fuller than usual. Time passed and the fish weren’t biting. Two seagulls—the same ones they’d spotted in the town hall on Sunday—flew over the boat and landed on the wooden bench beside the woman, like two sentries. Before the man could shoo them away, each of them pecked at her full breasts, piercing

them. A torrent of fresh water gushed from each one, cascading over the sea without ever mixing with the salt water, like a floating oil stain, to the river that was behind their house, filling it, and taking the fisherman's boat with it. It docked, as in the old days, behind the house. He then collected the fishing gear, his newborn son, and the blue robe she had been wearing and which he now wore. He walked to the shed and picked up the package his father had left him when he died that he had never opened. He returned to the boat, started the motor, and headed for the old port, where he got off with the package in his arms. He walked up the 150 meters that led to the church. He no longer limped. Arriving at the temple, he paused for a few minutes admiring the central nave, where ex-votos of ships that were saved from storms and shipwrecks hung along the entire length of the ceiling at different heights. On the walls, next to the religious images, were several paintings depicting the storms weathered by the faithful fishermen, in addition to marble plaques thanking the Good Mother for her protection. It was the only place in the village that the sand hadn't reached. He then made his way to an alcove along the back wall of the altar, where he laid the package on the floor and opened it. As if he already knew what he would find there, he took out a baby dolphin carved in wood and placed it in the tall cloche intended for it, between the miniature seaplane and the replica of the fisher king's boat.



Fishing Fly #3: The Fisherman

Editor: María Montero Sierra

Text: Veronica Stigger

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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.

Veronica Stigger (Porto Alegre, 1973) lives and works in São Paulo. She is a writer, art critic, independent curator, and university professor. Stigger is author of twelve books of fiction including *Opisanie świata* (2013), *Sul* (2016), and *Sombrio ermo turvo* (2019). She has received the most important literary prizes in Brazil. *Opisanie świata*, *Massamorda*, and *Sul* have been translated into Spanish and several of her stories have been translated into Catalan, Spanish, French, Swedish, English, Italian, German, and Indonesian.