

The Sturgeon

GEORGE VUKELICH

THEY know now that the sea lampreys entering the Great Lakes from the Atlantic by way of the Saint Lawrence River destroyed the laketrout in Lakes Ontario, Erie, Huron, Michigan and Superior. At the time of The Sturgeon story no one knew this. The commercial fishermen were blamed for overfishing the laketrout and the state of Wisconsin passed legislation requiring that gillnet mesh be enlarged. This meant that many fish which would have been caught in the old gillnets could swim freely through the new mesh and not be hung up by the raky gills. It was against the law to have old-size nets in the waters. Many fishermen working off the Wisconsin shores did not obey this law.

The river full of fish blood and the engine oilings cooking like stew in the mudheat of the sandboils; this water where the fishtugs tied to the pilings like perch in schools; the new creosote hard in the air with the barbsharp stink. One season: the state wardens waiting on the docks wearing guns.

They dumped out the fish boxes and kicked up the cracked ice and the steel barrels of trout guts for the pig farmers. They were looking carefully for undersized fish that season. They were the Wisconsin law on the fishermen's beach, and all through the Two Rivers town the fishermen lifted their illegal nets at night even when the Coast Guard storm signals were out. They brought

in every sturgeon they found in the pot-nets and sent their children to the parish school. That was the time of the snakes from the sea and the Great Lakes trout driven from all the fish grounds—driven west like sheep into the lakehead and into Superior itself: the season of the state guns and the legislature against the commercial fishermen and the lampreys swimming down the St. Lawrence silently from the great Atlantic Ocean.

The state wardens were waiting on the high skinny docks when Germaine swung the *Ione* into the harbor mouth. The old man came back and squeezed into the tight pilot house.

"It makes a man mad to see them waiting," he said finally. Germaine sucked on his pipe and stared out through the flat dirty windows.

"They have guns," he said.

Bebe looked at the men on the pier with the herring gulls rising around them as the *Ione* closed slowly and the barb-sharp stink of river smells came in from the flat water.

"What about the sturgeon?" Bebe said to his father. "Is that why they're waiting for us?"

"I don't think they know anything about the sturgeon," the old man said. "You get up to the bow now and tell Raphael to take the stern. Tell your brothers to just unload as always. We are all right, understand? Don't even think about

the sturgeon." The boy said "yes," and he went down the deck.

The state men didn't move all the while the fish-tug was mooring. None of the fishermen said anything, and after the engine cut and coughed out, the only sounds left in Bebe's ears were the slivery gull screams and the boots of his brothers slopping around the hold and getting into position to take off the fish boxes.

The wardens moved closer together and took out cigarettes and were talking low, and watching the work. They all looked like strangers to Bebe. Germaine and the old man might know them, though, and he looked to the pilot house. It was hard to see because the sun made a mirror out of the wheel-house window, and they didn't come out right away. When they did, Germaine was knocking out his pipe against the heel of his hand and coming over to the boy.

"Come on," he said, sliding the pipe stem—first into his shirt pocket. "We better give those watchdogs something to watch."

Bebe and Germaine carried the fish box from the boat onto the dock and set it down by the river wall of the gear-shack, next to the boxes already unloaded. As they walked back for another box, the state wardens moved forward and stood to one side, smoking.

The old man came up the bleached boards holding the keys to the gear-shack.

Germaine and Bebe hauled the very last fish box into shore, and the state men shifted toward the old man. The big one in the middle turned and spoke. "Le Clair?"

The old man stopped. "Yes?"

"George Le Clair," the warden said. "Is that you?"

"That's me," the old man said.

"We want to see your catch."

"It's all in the fish boxes—packed up in the ice."

The wardens looked down at the wet boxes at their feet. The one who was doing all the talking addressed the old man again. "You wouldn't have any undersized fish packed in the bottoms, would you?"

"No," the old man said. "I wouldn't have any undersized fish."

"That's what they all say," the warden said turning to the others. "It's the same every time." He turned back to the old man.

"All right," he said. "You might as well dump out the boxes."

"I am all legal," the old man said.

"You better be," the warden said. "We want to look at those boxes."

The old man seemed to sag and his sons stood watching him helplessly. "You have the guns," he said softly.

"We don't want to use them," the warden said. He pointed to the boy. "All right; we can save the talking for some other time. Start dumping out those boxes now."

The boy looked around at the old man and at Germaine and at his brothers.

"It doesn't seem right to ask him to dump out the boxes," Germaine said, "since he spent the whole morning filling them up."

"You do it then," the warden said.

"You go to hell," Germaine said.

"What's your name?" the warden asked.

"Le Clair," Germaine said. "Germaine Le Clair. L-e-c-l-a-i-r. And I said you can go to hell."

"You gonna dump these boxes or are we?"

"We are all legal," the old man said. "We have no small laketrout.

"That's what all you bastards say. All right—we'll find out." The three wardens bent and upturned every fish box, and the deck exploded under the impact of chunked ice and skittering trout bodies. The pier looked like a slaughter-house floor. The wardens poked among the gutted fish with their toes and measured with their eyes.

Germaine got out his pipe and began to pack it.

"Notice, my friend," he said to the big warden. "The scar holes on the laketrout's bodies. The lamprey eels are killing the trout. Why don't you pass a law against the lamprey eels?"

"We just want you to stick by the law you got." They stood staring down at the fang-like scars in the trout bodies.

"You know where you can stick your law," Germaine said.

The big warden's face rippled a little, like a windshift over a sandbar. "Le Clair," he said. "Germaine Le Clair." He was going to say some more, but instead he stopped and the smile came back. "We're not looking for trouble, Le Clair. We're only doing a job. You commercial fishermen overfished the laketrout. The state of Wisconsin passed a law to protect the laketrout and you bootleg and break that law, and so the state of Wisconsin sends us here to make that law stick." The warden closed his eyes and he looked like a schoolboy reciting from memory. "If you got a grievance, take it to the Legislature. We don't make the

laws, Le Clair. We just make them stick." The warden stopped and slowly opened his eyes. "That's how it stands, fisherman. You brought it on yourselves."

Germaine pulled the pipe from his mouth. "Why don't they outlaw the lamprey eels, as I said, instead of the fishermen? That's what's killing the laketrout."

The warden's voice was very low when he finally spoke. "They say there's a lot of illegal sturgeon taken in nets up here too." He stared at Germaine. "Don't make it hard for yourself, fisherman." Then he turned and led the other state men off the dock and up the rickety bleached steps to the street level.

The Le Clair brothers started to load up the loose fish in all the boxes, and everybody began talking at once.

"We could clean up on them easy," Raphael said. "We could beat the living Jesus out of them."

"That is true," Roger said. "We could show them a little steel sometime. I think they would run from a gill-knife. I think—" Roger stopped in the middle of his sentence because a trout fish caught him full in the chest. He stared at Germaine dumbly.

"When you talk like that," Germaine snapped, "you are not thinking. They could put us all on the beach. Don't you forget it. They could beach the old man."

Raphael spoke then and Bebe got a frightened feeling at the angry voice. "That big warden scared you, Germaine? Did he take the living guts right out of you?"

"All right," Germaine said, sucking out the words, "shut up now!"

"Maybe that young widow woman

has taken the living guts out of him," Raphael said.

"It's not the guts she's taking," Roger said.

"All right," Germaine snapped. "Both of you at once, or each by himself. It makes no difference. Come ahead, Goddammit," he bel-lowed. "Come and show me you are men."

Raphael and Roger stood like stone and looked at each other and then slowly crouched and moved on Germaine.

"Enough!" The word was like a gaff hook. It was the old man, and his great beaten face was white and looked like a trout belly. "Enough! My own flesh and blood fighting like dogfish?" The old man turned away.

Everyone stopped and the old man walked to the door of the gear-shack and stood there. No one did anything until Germaine put out his hand and shook with Raphael and with Roger.

"We can't fight them here," Germaine said. "They are the law and they could break the old man. That's what I meant—only that."

The brothers said they understood, but it was hard to keep from using their hands on somebody. They smiled slowly at each other, and then they all went back to picking up the gutted trout and repacking them in the fish boxes.

"Go by the old man," Germaine said to Bebe, slapping his buttocks. "We're all right here now."

Bebe asked what he should do there.

"Just stand by him," Germaine said, and he smiled. "Let him rub your curly little head."

Bebe always felt like a little girl when the old man did that, but he went and stood by his father.

"They take it out on each other," the old man said, "but it is my fault. They would fight the guns like that."

He stood by the old man a long time and finally thought his father didn't even know he was there any more. The old man was just looking out over the lake where there was nothing to be seen. No smoke on the horizon marking an ore boat, downbound from the lake-head. No shifting clouds of scavenger gulls marking dead fish or garbage. There was nothing that the boy could see at all.

"What are you looking at, Papa?" he asked finally. The old man didn't answer right away, and Bebe asked him again, just to let him know that he was still there. It was a strange feeling to be watching his father and not having the old man know he was there.

"Bebe," the old man said softly, "I am looking at the greatest sturgeon in all this water. In all this world."

Bebe thought about the big armored fish in their pot-net and he shivered. "Is that the greatest sturgeon fish ever?"

The old man looked down at him for the first time. "The greatest one, Bebe," and then he smiled and rubbed Bebe's head. "The greatest one ever."

Then the old man touched him on the arm as he always did when Bebe was to leave him, and Bebe went back to where his brothers were working and got down on his knees and began picking up fish. They watched the old man walk slowly

into the gear-shack.

"There is not much time left for the old man," Roger said. "It's like watching the strong nets rotting."

Germaine looked up at Bebe. "What did the old man say to you?"

"He was talking about the sturgeon," Bebe said.

Germaine was silent for a time, and then nodded his head. "He knows." No one said anything, and it didn't make sense to Bebe that his brothers didn't say anything more to Germaine's words.

"He knows what?" he asked. "That this is the greatest sturgeon fish ever?"

"Even so," Germaine said. "That's what he knows."

"Have you ever seen a greater fish?" Bebe asked.

"No," Germaine said. "This is the greatest of them all."

Germaine never took Bebe along in the dory when they went out to the nets at night to lift an illegal sturgeon, and now a tingling chill moved over his back as he thought of this greatest of all sturgeon fish locked and trapped in the sunken pot-net on the fish grounds.

"Can I go when you take him out — when you go for the sturgeon?"

"It's a man's work, Bebe," Roger said.

"It is three men's work," Raphael said. "This sturgeon is no perch-fish, Bebe."

"Please, Germaine," he said. "I can help you."

"No."

"Please, Germaine. Please."

"No, Bebe. Do not beg."

"I can help you."

"No."

"Please, Germaine."

"Your turn will come."

"Please, Germaine."

"Dammit," Germaine bellowed.

"No, Bebe. Now enough!"

Slowly Germaine bent to his work with the brothers, and suddenly Bebe wanted to swear at them all and hit them—and see them hurt and bleeding. He picked up a laketrout and flung it like a rock into Germaine's face. It slopped loosely in his slickered lap.

"Goddamn you," he screamed.

"Goddamn you! I'm not a baby!"

And then he shook and cried and closed his eyes as tightly as he could. He wanted Germaine to hit him as hard as he could, and then before he died he would forgive Germaine everything and feel Germaine's beard against his face. When Bebe opened his eyes Germaine was not even looking at him.

"He goes," Germaine said. "Bebe goes."

"In place of who?" Roger asked.

"In place of no one," Germaine said. "The three of us and Bebe. We make room for him."

Bebe crouched like a puppy and felt the tears on his face.

"What of the old man?" Raphael asked.

"He is not to know," Germaine said. "Until perhaps later. Bebe," he continued, looking at the boy directly for the first time, "you will come with us after the sturgeon, but you will not tell a word to the old man at all. Do you understand? Not a word to Mamma either!"

Bebe nodded slowly. The chill began on his back again, and though

he tried to control it his whole body shook a little bit, even though the sun was like hot water on his back.

"Now," Germaine said, "don't think about that any more."

Bebe almost shouted out the words as he asked his brothers the most important question of all. "Are we going after the sturgeon *tonight*?"

"Tonight," Germaine said, and then from his lap he picked up the trout thrown at him and gently lobbed it into the fish box. "Now think of something else, Bebe. And say for the old man's great fish a few Hail Marys."

"They never say that in school . . . to pray for a fish," he said. "A fish is not like people."

"Why not?" Roger said. "People are like fish."

Bebe didn't understand but Roger didn't laugh, and so he prayed to the Blessed Virgin for the great sturgeon.

"And what shall I pray for," Bebe said in a moment. "I mean, should I pray for something special for this fish?"

"Just pray that he has a happy death," Germaine said. "That's all a great fish can want."

Bebe still did not understand completely, but his brothers all fell silent, and so he was silent too, although his lips moved as they always did in school when he said his prayers to himself—half whispering and seeing the Blessed Virgin Mary wearing her blue robe and smiling like his mother in the pictures of her when she was young.

Germaine watched Bebe carefully and slowly wiped the fishwet of the laketrout from his face.

At the supper table, the talk was all of the big sturgeon in the pot-net nearly a mile out in the lake. The brothers spoke carefully of getting the fish out, and Bebe nearly burst with the excitement of listening and knowing he would be helping them, yet not being able to talk about it in front of the old man. The booming of the surf outside sharpened his senses like barbed hooks, and he could see the great six-foot body of the sturgeon rolling like some animal fenced in by the cable-like nets. He went to the kitchen window and stared out over the darkening lake. The old man rubbed his head as he went by to the living room for the pipe and tobacco.

Then Bebe was aware of his mother and the laundry starch smell of her as she held him by the shoulders. He just stood there waiting for her to let him go.

"This is not a life for an honest man, Bebe." She was speaking as if to herself. "To sneak like a thief for the illegal sturgeon fish and always the deep waters waiting. You must not bring a woman into this life, Bebe." Then she released him quickly and he followed her back to the table.

"There is a heavy swell running," his mother said loudly. "It is going to storm. I do not think that you can lift tonight."

"We can lift tonight, all right," Roger said, moving his cup for more coffee. "Or any night of the blessed week for that matter."

"Can you not wait for a quiet night?"

"What's to wait, Mamma?" Raphael said. "The state wardens are like mosquitoes on quiet nights. A

little wind and a little sea running will hold them to the beach like flies."

"Yes? And what of this excitement for your father? You all know what the doctor said."

Bebe did not know anything about a doctor at all.

"What did the doctor say, Mamma?" he asked.

"Mamma," Germaine said quickly, "you are making the excitement. We must get the fish out of there tonight or he tears up the nets and the whole rig comes out for repair."

His mother started to interrupt.

"Now, enough," Germaine said, raising his hand. "That fish is in our pot-net and he comes out tonight."

"What about the doctor?" Bebe repeated loudly, and no one answered because at the moment the old man came into the kitchen, lighting his pipe. He walked slowly to the head of the table and seated himself. After he got the pipe going strong and there were blue clouds of smoke around his head, he leaned back and folded his arms.

"Now then, Bebe," he said. "What about what doctor?"

Bebe said that he didn't know anything about a doctor at all.

"That is a true statement of fact," the old man said. "You do not know about the doctor because no one here thinks that you are a man. If they thought you were a man, then you would know about the doctor." He pulled the pipe from his mouth and stared at the bowl. "Are you a man, Bebe?"

He did not know what the old man was talking about but it made his mother mad. "What foolishment are you filling the boy with?" she

snapped. "What good will it do for him to know?"

"Every good in the world. Even a minnow learns from the big fish, Mamma. This will do him every good in the world." At his words she turned her head sharply to one side and that was a sure sign that she was very angry.

"Bebe," the old man began, "I believe you are a man, or perhaps I say this only to be the first to say it. A man must see things always as they are, and not be pretending things are not that way."

Bebe didn't know what to say and then the old man started talking again. "Everything in this world, Bebe. Everything that is living, must one day die. That is the way things are."

Bebe got a very cold feeling inside, and he remembered when his class at school had to go to the little girl's funeral who had fallen into the river and drowned by the bridge.

"No one knows when he is going to die, Bebe. I cannot tell you and you cannot tell me. Some people do not like to think about dying at all, but that is pretending. Anyway, no one can tell for sure when you will die. Except perhaps a person like a doctor, Bebe."

"Did the doctor say when you were going to die, Papa?"

"Yes, Bebe. That is what the doctor said."

Bebe did not know what to say. "When?" he asked loudly.

The old man looked at him and smiled.

"My very own word," he said. "My very first word. Tell me, Bebe, do you feel a little bigger now? Do you feel like a man at all?"

Bebe was so confused he did not know what to say. His brothers were smoking their cigarettes and staring down at their coffee cups. The old man seemed to be the only happy person there. He beckoned to Bebe with his pipe and Bebe went to stand by his side.

"It is the heart," the old man said, fixing the young fingers on his pulse. "Feel it now for a moment."

No one moved, and the beat of his father's heart pounded up Bebe's arm like a man hammering on a bent nail and stopping and hammering again.

"The doctor says that very soon, this — this hammering — will stop. Then I will be dead. It is very much like the old engine in the fish-tug before we got this one. It simply runs down and breaks, Bebe. That is all. That is living—or rather—that is dying."

No one said anything until the mother spoke.

"What of the sturgeon now? The wardens will be watching."

"We will get him out tonight," the old man said. "He is money in the bank."

Raphael agreed. "We can peddle him in Milwaukee like nothing."

"Tail and all," Roger said.

"*You* will get him out," the mother said angrily, glancing at her husband. "What do you mean *you*?"

"The boys and I will go for him tonight."

"The boys and you!" She turned angry again. "Are you gone crazy in your old age? I will not let you leave this house. You will kill yourself with that fish. And what of the wardens? My God!"

"I will not die in jail," the old man said. "Not an old gull like me.

They would have every fisherman an outlaw. What the hell. Is it against the law for a man to feed his family?"

No one said anything.

"A black, rough night," the old man said. "They won't be able to see their noses."

The brothers looked like they wanted to do something for the old man.

"I think it will be all right tonight, Pa," Germaine said. "I don't think this fish will give us any trouble."

The old man started to argue with Germaine. "This last one time," he said. "I wanted to go for one last great fish." He looked at his sons. "It is something a man understands, I think."

Germaine nodded his head in agreement. "We would like you to come, Pa, except that we will be crowded in the boat tonight."

"There would be just the four of us," the old man said.

"The five of us," Germaine corrected him. "Since this morning we have agreed that our brother Bebe is to help us tonight."

"Bebe?" The old man's hand came crashing down on the table and everything rattled. "Bebe! I forbid it. A boy to go after that sturgeon? Germaine, you do not act wisely with your talk. Is this your doing?"

"This is Bebe's doing," Germaine said. "This morning he declared to us that he was a man. We believe him, and we count him one of us now."

The old man relaxed his hold on the table and turned slowly to look at the boy. "This is so, Bebe?"

"Yes, sir."

"And you are a man now? A

man?"

Before Bebe could answer, Germaine was speaking. "You yourself said so, Pa. When you told him about the doctor."

The old man stared at his sons without speaking, and then he pulled Bebe to him and asked that he feel the pulse again. As the erratic hammering came up the boy's arm, the old man smiled and then slapped him on the buttocks.

"So then, your first great fish! For the old man this one, yes?" Bebe told him yes. "So Bebe will no more be Bebe? We are all men here now."

The brothers began to smile, and Bebe thought the old man was going to stroke his head again but he didn't.

"What did he say?" the old man asked. "How did you know this manhood was upon him?"

Germaine rubbed his nose. "He threw a trout into my face. A very large splendid fish."

The old man shook his head and punched Bebe's arm. "You did not want to miss him at all, it seems."

The old man called for whisky glasses then and said that he wanted to drink once with his menfolk all together. The mother didn't exactly smile, but she did what he asked.

"And bring a glass for Bebe also," the old man said. "This day he has a little something with his ginger ale."

He pulled the boy close again, and Bebe could hear his brothers laughing and the pounding of the old man's heart and, over all, the Lake Michigan surf boiling onto the beachlands beyond the dunes.

Bebe did not know if it was the

excitement of actually starting for the pot-nets or the rolling water that dipped under the dory, but when they were a half-mile out from shore his mouth filled up with supper and the taste of whisky and he hung over the gunwales and was sick. The wind was blowing in straight off the lake. It carried cold spray into the back of his neck, and he wanted to huddle under a thwart and fall asleep. It was completely dark without stars or moon, and the wind and the waves moving sounded like a thousand waterfalls. Only the long, swinging yellowbeam of Point Beach light seemed secure and not floating. They were jammed into the little dory, like survivors on a raft, and Bebe was afraid because they were thrown about so much and he couldn't see anything around them.

He reached his hand down over the gunwale, and as they dipped the water swallowed up his hand and part of his jacket sleeve. He wiped his mouth and face clean. Then he heard Germaine yelling in his ear. "How do you feel now?"

He told Germaine he felt all right. "I was feeding the fish a little bit," he said.

Germaine slapped him on the leg. "She is rough tonight, man." He was still speaking, but the wind was blowing away his words.

"What did you say?" Bebe yelled.

"I said we are almost there now."

"The hell you say," Roger shouted.

He and Raphael were working the oars, and they hadn't said anything at all until now. Roger was still talking but the boy couldn't hear, and he yelled at Roger. Roger's voice came back slicing the wind like a

knife.

"You were feeding the fishes, hey?" There was laughter on the wind.

Bebe still felt sick and was breathing in every time the dory went up and breathing out when it went down in the wave troughs. He was glad Germaine was not asking him anything so he would have to talk.

They just kept rising and falling and sliding, and he tried hard not to think about anything that would bring back the sickness. He watched the Point Beach light swinging around, and he counted one-hundred thirty-nine revolutions and then stopped counting. He watched the light so long it seemed to be getting closer, and he had the feeling they were sliding stern first back onto the old man's beach.

Then Germaine was shading a flashlight in his hands, and snapping it on and off and swinging it quickly. In the bending beam of the little light Bebe could see the forest of spiletops that poked out of the rolling waters like fence posts and the webby stiff glistening nets that strung out in great sprawling perimeters. They were in the fish-grounds.

Instinctively, his brothers had their position fixed and the light snapped out, and they pulled for the lead side of the pot-net—the side that could be loosened and lifted, the side to which they would moor while they brought up the net and the great sturgeon. They made fast to two towering spiles with bow and stern lines, and the water rolled through the nets and lifted and banged them into the spile sticks with a grinding, crushing sound.

"Keep your arms and hands inside," Germaine shouted. "She plays for keeps tonight."

The lead lines of the pot-net were loosened from the spiles, and they began the work of lifting the net by hand. As the sturgeon was free to swim around in the pot-net, the plan was to raise the net under him, forcing him to the surface where he could be shot and hauled into the boat.

The net was tarred stiff like iron cable and it seemed to weigh tons. Germaine and Bebe were in the stern, Roger and Raphael up front. Bebe knew he was not much help to Germaine because Roger was calling constantly about the net coming up evenly.

"Your end," Roger would shout. "Your end, Germaine!"

"My end," Germaine would mutter. "My Royal Canadian end. All right, pull, Bebe. Put your back into it. Now, *pull!*" They pulled and pulled, and together they rested and held their purchase and felt the current working against them below, and then they pulled again. It seemed like hours were going by every time the Point Beach light swung past, and then the nets were swinging too, and the spiles and their dory, and the boy was convinced that the light was stationary and not moving, and that he was swinging past the light like a stone on a string.

"Germaine," Roger yelled. "The light! I think we have him up."

Bebe's pulse nearly pounded out of his temples.

Germaine played the flashlight out over the pot-net. "There he is, Bebe! Look at the size of him."

The sturgeon rolled on the surface

like some heavy log and sank out of sight. He was longer than a man. Germaine snapped out the light. "Another ten feet," he yelled.

"Ten, all right," Roger answered.

"Another ten feet, Bebe. Then our net will be under his belly. He has no place to go but up. Pull, Bebe, *pull!*"

The ten feet of net came up slowly like scrap iron. "I can't pull any more," Bebe said. "My hands are raw."

"Pull, Bebe! Just hold tight like for your life. Pull for the old man's sturgeon fish, Bebe. Pull!"

They got the ten feet. The boy didn't know how. He was crying. The net was taut, like a floor under the fish. The sturgeon had only a few feet of water and then the iron-cabled net.

"Now, Bebe," Germaine said. He worked the net around the spiles somehow so that it hung, and then he switched on the flash and handed it to Bebe and loaded the rifle. "Keep the light on his head, Bebe. On his head. On his head!"

The boy watched the glistening armored body as it twisted and rolled in the wash of water. He grabbed hold of a spile to steady the light, and then Germaine fired and Bebe bolted upright from the thwart. The fish was thrashing against the net like an animal against a cage. Tears were blinding the boy.

"Bebe, get down!" Roger was screaming. "Get down!"

Then the dory lifted as the water slid into them with a sickening slow rush, and the boy toppled into the water. *The flashlight, he thought. The flashlight will get wet. The flashlight is not waterproof.* That is

what the boy was thinking and then the flashlight and everything else went out, and there was warm water filling up his nose.

The next thing he knew, the flashlight was swinging around and around his head like a stone on a string. He tried to grab for it before it went to the bottom.

"How do you feel, Bebe?" Germaine's face was in front of him, but upside down. Then the boy knew he was lying down between Germaine's knees, and Germaine was behind him and bending over him.

"I fell in," he said.

"You were going to feed the fish again, eh?" Germaine pulled something around the boy's neck and he knew that it was Germaine's jacket.

"Hey," Germaine called. "Bebe's okay. He sends his love."

Roger and Raphael began talking at once.

"I feel very religious tonight," Germaine said. "First we baptize him and then we wet-nurse him."

"That describes Germaine like I never heard," Roger said.

"I'm sorry I fell in," Bebe said.

"She was rough tonight," Germaine said. "It could happen to anyone."

"That fish knew you meant business," Roger said. "When he saw you come into the pot-net I thought he'd have died of fright."

"Where is the fish?" Bebe asked.

"We are all sitting on top of him, the big bastard!"

"If he was any bigger he could have this boat all to himself."

"Close your eyes now, Bebe. We will be on the beach in a little while now."

The boy watched the slickered wide backs of Roger and Raphael swing toward him and then away and then back again. He felt with his legs under the thwarts, and he could feel the sturgeon fish. He remembered what the old man said about this great fish . . . *The oldest thing in these fresh waters. Before there was this world, and even before that, there was this fish in these waters swimming . . . The skin like rocks all wrapped in steel . . . Feeding, it must have fed on the bottoms where the beaches are now . . . Always swimming. It must have moved along and against the currents for a million years without touching shores . . . Without touching shores. Without touching shores.*

They pulled for shore and the boy straddled the terrible stone body with his legs. *For a million years, where the beaches are now.*

He remembered what Germaine had told him that morning and he prayed that the great fish had a happy death. He was very sleepy and warm, and the boat was rocking less now, and the wind was far away.

"Is Papa going to die?" he said out loud, although he did not mean to ask it. There was no answer and he began to think he had only put the question to himself after all.

"We are all going to die, Bebe," the answer came back.

And because of being sleepy, and the rocking and the faraway wind, he could not tell who it was that finally answered. He tried very hard to know who it was, but then he could not tell at all.

They carried the sturgeon up the beach in the dark and the boy held

the door open as his brothers struggled the fish into the house and down into the fruit cellar. The old man came to watch in his slippers, with his pipe dead in his mouth. They watched him without talking because they knew he was thinking and going to say something, and they did not want to spoil it by speaking first.

"It is a great one, this fish," the old man said. "There will be no other like this one."

He turned and Germaine closed the fruit cellar door, and they followed the old man upstairs and into the kitchen.

Germaine got out the bottle of brandy, poured the shots, and handed the glasses around. The water from their slickers and the boots puddled on the floor, and the boy felt the excitement of being a real part of this for the first time. This was a ritual on the Fisherman's Beach: to drink a toast to the great illegal fish that were fought out of the nets the hard way—at night with a big sea running, and the pot-nets lifted by hand and everything against the law.

Germaine smiled and gave Bebe mostly ginger ale and not much whisky, but that did not change the boy's feeling at all. He felt the slime on his hands, and saw it on the sides of the glass, and thought of the great stone body in the basement. *The oldest thing in the fresh waters.*

"So then," the old man said. "How did it go, Bebe, your first great fish?"

The boy thought about being sick in the boat and falling into the pot-net, and the fear he had of the sturgeon.

"Good," he said. "It went good, Papa."

"That is the way," the old man said. "With me tonight it went hard. We waited, Mamma and me, like two old women. She was wanting you back here with her, and I was wanting to be out there with you." The old man sighed. "That is the way."

"Yes, sir," the boy said because he did not know what else to say.

"It is not so easy at night," the old man said. "It takes a good man at night in the small dory."

Germaine cleared his throat and motioned with his glass to the old man. "Pa. You toast, Pa. This is your fish."

"No," the old man said. "No. This is not my fish, but I toast this last time." He looked at the boy. "Bebe, for you! For your fish!" He held up the heavy green glass. "You will see many great things from this water and on the beach." He stopped and looked squarely at the boy. "Do not be afraid of them. To Bebe!" He held out the glass.

"To Bebe!" the brothers answered. The glasses clinked and the brothers looked into the boy's eyes, while the boy sipped from the drink and Germaine refilled the glasses with his bottle and told the old man how it was on the water, leaving out only about the boy falling into the net.

"I have been thinking tonight," the old man said, "about these wardens."

"Those bastards!" Roger said.

"That makes nothing," the old man said. "I have been thinking about how to change the law for the nets."

The brothers looked at each other and back at the old man. The boy knew the look in their eyes to be

pity.

"I am not crazy," the old man said. "I will go to Madison."

"Pa," Roger said patiently. "You can't lobby against those bastards."

"I do not go to lobby," the old man said. "I will go to make the law of this land."

"You mean politics?"

"Even so. I will go as a State Senator," the old man smiled. "The warden told you how many friends I have with the laketrout fishermen. Good. They will elect me and I will go. I will tell our story to the whole state—about these sea lampreys."

Germaine finished pouring the brandy, and the brothers looked at each other and shifted on their feet and no one said anything.

"You're damned right," Germaine said finally. "It's a good idea, Pa. We need you down there."

The boy saw how the old man was full of color again and talking and using his hands like he did when the *Ione* was over the fish grounds and the work was fast and hard and plentiful and there was almost no time to think.

"Bebe steps into my shoes," the old man said. "It is not so bad to be on the beach then."

"You are a tough old gull, Pa."

Then the thrashing noises came like crashing glass from the basement. The old man, because he was standing in front of the cellar door, was the first through it. Bebe did not know if it was a dream or he had fainted or was in shock, or dead. When he followed them down, the old man had it all done. The white fruit cellar was horrible with broken glass and berry juice. The old man was straddling the sturgeon with his

back to his sons and the hatchet for kindling raised over his head, flashing and falling, flashing and falling like the breakers on the beach until the sturgeon stopped its swimming motion on the concrete floor and shivered like a man in the cold.

Bebe closed his eyes, and squeezed them tightly, and prayed, and when he opened his eyes again the old man was standing, leaning in the doorway, with his mouth closed, breathing deeply through his nose. His bathrobe was flung with blood and smashed-down berries and juice, and he looked past his older sons, watching Bebe closely. The slime from the hatchet dripped onto the concrete and then the hatchet dropped from his hand and the old man slumped and fell forward to the floor.

The boy screamed and Germaine leaped to the old man and bent over, and the boy closed his eyes. It was all a dream—a dream. A dream. Dear God. Sweet God.

Bebe opened his eyes and Roger and Raphael were slowly rising from around the old man and looking at each other. The boy was afraid to ask the question because of what the answer would be.

Germaine ran his hand over the old man's face and wiped the blood away and closed the old man's eyes and smoothed his hair.

"The fish was dead!" Roger said. "My God, the fish was dead!"

Germaine looked up and his face was painful to watch. "I did not shoot him cleanly," Germaine said. "It is my fault. I should have shot him again."

They stared down at the old man and their faces were wet with slime

and water, and still the boy knew they were crying. The fish, the sturgeon, had killed the old man. The boy ran to the black fish body and kicked it until it slid heavily. The boy kicked it again and again. "God damn you," he cried. "God damn you! God damn you!"

Then he felt his arms pinned and his feet lifted from the floor, and he was staring into Germaine's wet bearded face. "No, Bebe," Germaine was saying gently yet rapidly. "No, Bebe, no, no!"

Germaine held him tightly, off the floor, and then the boy began to sob and Germaine led him to the basement steps and they sat down together. Germaine took out cigarettes and the brothers stood there smoking and looking at the glistening floor of the fruit cellar.

The boy blinked and blinked and blinked his eyes, and finally there were no more tears to come and he stared at the two bodies on the basement floor and he huddled against Germaine.

"They were two great hearts," Germaine said, gently rubbing the boy's head. "There is no reason to feel bad for anybody."

The boy stared and then the tears began again and he closed his eyes tightly and bit his lips and he plunged his head into Germaine's lap and cried, for the last time, like a baby.

EPILOGUE

*We will walk along this watershed.
By the old beaches. We must stand
watching, looking into the sorrowing
winds. The wood has gone into this
sand from all the old bulls. Quietly*

they slip in among the fishheads. The spray blows above the beach like rain. We stand wetted with our remembering. The golden gulls have reached heights and are gone. At the sandbars every spring the water gains. Like dogfish the dunes lie surrounded by duckgrass. The fisherman's beach sleeps in the open grave. From here they watched the fat full trout grounds.

Now, no more the four o'clock mornings. The stiff gas engines rolling beyond the bars. The water goes

into the lighthouse rocks with a banging. Above this beach the sandpipers scratch. Below, the sandworms.

We stand staring at the fish birds blowing. In the waters beyond, the weeds string like anchor chains out of the sandboils. The pile driver barge lies like a broken wall. The dead bolts hang in the holes like worms.

In the deep waters of the great Inland Sea the lampreys go driving into the trout bodies like nails.

A Sincere Song

JESSE STUART

Each morn I rise before my world awakes
 And breathe sweet winds of morning from wild flowers;
 I like soft sounds the early morning makes
 While earth is snoring in her twilight hours.
 I like the sincere songs of rising birds
 Who put new life into beginning day;
 Birds' songs are better than a poet's words
 In mild midsummer's early roundelay.
 Softly I walk upon my waking world
 Where little lyric streamlets speak to me,
 Where brown-eyed susans' petals are dew-curled,
 Their dark eyes winking at eternity.
 A few midsummers more the birds will miss
 My searching when the morning winds have died,
 Ghost-figure in the quietness of mists,
 Searching for something, never satisfied.