Yarmo and the Catfish

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The mist that early from the smokestacks rose was falling then, dank on the walls, melted and meandered molten through the sidewalk cracks, hiding somewhere the forms but not the calls of children playing in the dumpyard trash. Beneath the street where river sliced river, was the place I couldn't go, the shack. I know where now he lives, where lives Yarmo. I couldn't go.

The Florida flat banks; the rounded mounds of mudpie simmering in the southern sun was where we used to stretch, naked as sweltering puppies, digging into the sweet muck like sun through our skins and yelping dreams that wandered aimless as the streams. The loudest of us all was brown Yarmo, The smallest, swiftest, toughest of us all was Yarmo; running, his legs were quicker than a spitfish, slipping under the pulpy water, fearless for leeches; he was leech himself, a leech of sun and mud and water. Under the steam beaming heat, with the smoke of green leaves wrapped in rough paper lying tart and sour on our tongues, we talked often of the shining cities that waited anxious beyond the shallow blue dusk of the high horizon; and after dusk we tore sweating through the sticky-sour smelling shadows, playing at city cops and gangsters; and Yarmo was the gangster, the uncatchable devil of a tooth flashing, dark dashing gangster, O the terror and the splendor! But most we whispered of the Catfish, the bulging, monstrous, green gilled porpoise of a fish that hid its sullen, whiskery anger under the rotted dock where the stream ran deep.

Once I had touched the Catfish, caught daring from the fear tight mouths of the others, I had
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clutched the last great gulp of air within me, 
and pawing froglike through the silt 
hung greenness, I squirmed far under the cool, 
dark dock shadow to beneath the bank 
an abscess where I saw Him. 
Moment of sick beating; water in my ears, 
heart in my chest. Vomit bright flesh, 
I will never forget it, that shock of light. And 
the quick memory of mothers to shrieking 
children: Ole Catfish gonna eat you if 
you dont watch out. But I touched Him. 
Forcing my hand out, I touched, and 
feeling the sudden quiver, turned about 
and fled in frantic haste to the air, 
and the day, and the sun.

The ring of days revolved then to a year, 
went on for two, and to the long drawn 
memory of Yarmo, weary of heat-prickle 
flies, tossing with a choked heart of 
coconut out to the stream, a challenge: he 
would catch the Catfish. We following, ploshing 
behind his eagerness through the marsh to the island 
forgot to jeer our fear, and when he dripped 
oil-like beneath the dock to merge his 
shadow with the longer overhead, I held my 
breath as his. Through the slimy boards we 
watched, waited, knew the moment by 
the sense of silence his hands were poised to 
clutch. O burst, the ripping threshing 
tortured turn of froth, the spume of water 
flailed by twisting air hose under pressure, 
the surge of thrust from thrust to 
thrust to - break water! a mouth 
above the spray. Running down the bank, 
we chased the stream, could see now his 
fingers in the gills. His nails, I knew, 
I had fought him once, were hooked in and 
under, digging down for life. His legs, 
like brown oil, oozed about the Fish, 
trickled together and held, held fast. 
Twirled, the fish twirled, and bucked and 
bucked and spun about itself, and lept 
and dove and flipped and
Yarmo, Yarmo held fast. Down the stream we ran, plunging through the muck, following the gasp of mouth, the snap of eye, the smash of tail and water thrash. Around through the muck and slimy swamp we ran plunging, struggling down and up and wallowing on, and we ran hard running mud pumping we ran and ran. At last, so soon and very later, the Fish with one last smart smack lifted itself to a convulsive lurch, shivered high against the air and shrank back to quiet belly turned shudders near a shallow stretch of sand. Whopping into the water we picked up Yarmo and the fish, and with laugh storms rippling high hoisted them back to camp where we gutted the fish and cooked it, and ate all the murky flesh and got sick, and laughed when we puked it up.

O thoughts there are that never can be shared, feelings born to bleed alone, I thought standing on the cement rise; for down the street I could not go. Yarmo was from then on something wrong, a catch gone from his eyes, he slipped away to older boys, the quick demand of rabbit thump beneath a skirt, and after this, the drink from bottles colored of a wasted sun, the drink that in him drank. So Yarmo went north, I knew for him it was the only thing to do, and now when his leech of hunger drink desire demands they say, he loads the boats that there in the bay come to dock, a choked coconut of a small brown man. The mist that early from the smokestacks rose was lifting then again above the walls, scurrying high above the ceilings of cement and green glass halls, wet like the memory of mothers' bawls: It goes to show, I told you so. Drifting away was the mist, the childrens' calls, the memory of simmering mud and sticky nights. I could not stay, I could not go. But as I turned away I wondered if sometimes, when above the docks the dun sun wallows through the mist to gold old oil and rust moving under the water, he recalls, relives again the thing he wrestled with.