Nasty

Nick Neely
I'm loitering in the dark with two strangers, Dominican brothers fishing at India Point Park on the waterfront of Providence, Rhode Island. All in our twenties, we watch, momentarily, as a stray tabby cat and its streetlight shadow explore a yawning hole in a rusted-out garbage can. The head of Narragansett Bay, the state's lifeblood, stretches behind us. Orange and white lights waver at its edge. Suddenly, the younger brother—Eduardo is his name—has something on his line, and we turn back to the water. His hands leave his pockets and fumble for the rod as it rattles against the railing.

"A small one," Eduardo says, after the initial jolt, disappointment in his voice and shoulders. "Another schoolie." But I'm always curious to see a fish.

His line swerves, trembles. It glints in the periphery of the park's glow, cutting across the black of the bay. Eduardo draws up and reels, turning slightly on his hips. His catch thrashes as it approaches. We hear anonymous splashes. Then quiet. I think it's lost, but it's only gone deep. One final dive before the rush to surface.

When the water breaks again, Eduardo raises an American eel: roughly two and a half feet long; one roiling, arm-like muscle. Small, but strong. Fighting hard. All resistance. The three of us recoil as it comes wriggling over the railing. Apparition. A glimpse of underworld. The creature is amazing as it panics, swirling and suffocating in midair.

We panic, too, in our way. " Fucking shit," says Alexandro, Eduardo's older brother, both amused and appalled. He and I skip back a few steps, clearing space, while Eduardo pushes his rod as far as possible from his torso. Rigidly, as if this thing is contagious, he cranes the eel over the railing and lets it drop in the grass.

"We got to cut the head off," Alexandro says. Good brotherly advice. On the lawn, the eel reminds me of a violin, alternately
shaping each f-hole as it flails. Back and forth, back and forth. Somehow, it’s also the string. But the eel is soundless, except for the swish of its body on grass. I am silent too, but for a few unconscious groans and hums. Like the brothers, I’m at once attracted to and repulsed by this creature; these emotions are as indistinct, from a certain distance, as the poles of an eel’s body.

“With scissors?” asks Eduardo.

“Oh yeah, with scissors,” says Alexandro. “For sure. These things ... these things are nasty.”

He shakes his body, half instinct, half theater.

“Nasty!”

As if warming his hand over a fire, a man named Tommy readies himself over his rod. It’s a cold early morning. He and a friend, David, are just off the night shift, fishing clam worms under the I-95 bridge that crosses the salty Seekonk River. This is the city of Pawtucket, five miles north of India Point, where the Narragansett narrows to a stone’s throw. By mid-morning, the tide will ebb and these men will be asleep.


“Never mind,” admits Tommy. “There’s something. But I’m going to wait.” Sometimes it’s best to let a fish hook itself. Let it swallow the bait.

“Pick it up,” says David. “Come on.”

“Nah, it’s just biting around the edge. If it were large, it would take the whole thing. If it’s a small one, I don’t want it anyhow.”

“Why not?” David asks. They haven’t hooked even a small one this morning. So Tommy sets it, with a swift, pirouetting yank.

“On?” asks David.

“Yup. But it’s baby.”

Neely 29
It's an eel, actually. A glistening yellow belly, a slate-green back. Tommy lifts it from the water and lets it down in the dirt below the bridge. We watch it roll, in frantic waves. David gives a hoot and pretends to run away, lifting his knees high as if in fright. The fish has swallowed the hook entirely; thin, clear monofilament runs from its mouth like a tongue. No one moves to touch the thing.

"Just look at that," I say, standing with Tommy over the eel. Even on this foreign stage, the sheer speed, the sinuosity, of its athleticism is captivating, metronomic—an unfortunate misunderstanding. How accidental that this found Tommy's worm on the dark bottom; that the eel swallowed it whole; that such a creature evolved to root through mud, the nooks and crannies of the estuarine floor. It is an animated intestine. Watching the eel struggle, I long to see one on its own terms—an improbable wish.

"Will you use it for bait?" I ask.

"This thing?" Tommy raises his eyebrow skeptically. "Don't think so."

"That fuck'n eel is nasty, dog!" David bellows. He hops about in anxious excitement. He takes a photo of the fish with his cell phone and shows Tommy immediately, as if to verify its existence. Tommy squints at the tiny, pixilated image. Or cringes. Then he hoists the grit-covered eel back over the railing and dangles, letting us all breathe.

"It just wants to sink to the bottom," David says, lifting it again. The eel is clean now. Elastic as a bath toy. Reluctant to let his fingers near the eel's mouth, Tommy slips on David's yard gloves to unclasp the leader, fish and all. When he manages, it dangles like a Christmas ornament from his hand. Like a stocking from its own loose end.

"Want it?" he calls down the railing, to be neighborly. Two other fishermen shake their heads.
“I’m gonna let it go right from here, give it a chance,” Tommy says. He lets it drop. “Maybe the hook’ll rust out.”

Along River Drive, another stretch on the tidal Seekonk between India Point and Pawtucket, a man named Miguel, wearing sweatpants and a white tank top, fishes with his two sons after dark. He has hulking, sculpted arms. The children spot a rat scurrying through the cracks of the riprap. The little one is afraid of the motion, the quickness.

“Do you like to fish?” I ask the older boy, as his brother plays with plastic toy trucks in the rutted dirt between the street and the river.

“Yeah,” he says. “I don’t eat them. But, yeah.”
“Why not?”
“Um ...”
“You don’t like to eat fish?”
He hesitates, rubs his throat. He’s about nine or ten.
“My dad,” the kid says, “he cuts the head off and the blood ...”
His voice trails off, like the words are caught. Too personal. Pulling his chin to his neck, the boy makes a face and raises his hands, as if to rid them of a thing they’ve seen.

“The other day, my dad caught a blue one,” he goes on. He means a bluefish, which is what people primarily fish for on the Seekonk River. That, and striped bass. “Right away, he cut the head,” says the boy. “I don’t like to see. It’s nasty.”

Twenty minutes later, Miguel drags a petite eel through the reeds of the shallows, the smallest I’ve ever seen at the end of a line. The kids move in to take part in the landing. I follow, too. A friend of Miguel’s helps hold it, as the children and I watch, wide-eyed. Deep in its throat, bulging, is the hook, like the lump of a mouse in a snake.

“Guys,” Miguel says firmly, “go over there for a second.”
The older boy looks to his father. Then he puts his arm around his younger brother and leads him away. They wander down the bank, reluctant, eyes trailing.

Slipping a pocketknife from his baggy sweats, Miguel stabs the eel beneath its peanut-shell jaw. Blood runs black in the dim light down his strong hands. The fish slows. Stops. With a pull, Miguel removes the hook and strides off after his boys, while his friend wraps the small, glistening eel in a rectangle of used tinfoil, carefully folding the crinkled silver over its pencil-body and crimping the edges.

The eel writhes on the grass at India Point Park. Eduardo, Alejandro, and I circle around. Three young men unnerved by a fish. Such power in form.

“I’ve heard they’re good to eat,” I offer.

Though true, these words seem absurd, ridiculous, in the moment. Eduardo and Alejandro are incredulous. How do you eat this shapeshifter, this slippery energy?

Alejandro moves to a picnic table, rifles through a tackle box. “Take it over there, under the light,” he directs. Eduardo lifts the rod, dutifully carrying it to a bike path where he sets the dangling eel down beneath the electric hum of a streetlamp.

“You want it?” Alejandro asks me, in the sterile, florescent light, as he strides up with a large pair of scissors.

“Want it?”

“Want to keep it?”

“You won’t eat it?” I ask.

“Hell no,” Alejandro says.

“Too much work, anyway,” adds Eduardo. “Too hard to peel off the skin. You have to peel it off like a sock.”

A strange desire washes over me. It is long, like an arrow, with a translucent, narrow dorsal fin for fletching. Thin, fan-like
pectorals hang as if vestigial from the eel’s sides. A moment ago, it was an undulating ribbon in the bay. Now it swims in place, on pavement. Briefly, I imagine taking this fish home with me. I could coil it in a glass pie plate, slide it into the oven and, bite after salty bite, devour it with fork and knife. Or, I could slip it into my housemates’ beds: Surprise, guys.

“No,” I answer, finally. “I won’t eat it.” But perhaps that would do right by this eel: to be consumed, like the normal fish; to be included in the rituals that bear us along—eating, touching with bare hands.

As the brothers talk out a plan, sand on the path scours the protective film of the eel’s skin and sticks. Eduardo then steps on it, pinning it down. Scissors in hand, Alexandro kneels. The hook is large and juts menacingly from its lip. I steel myself.

But when he begins, Alexandro uses the tool like pliers to pry out the hook. He spares this fish, though perhaps its crucial moment has already passed. As Alexandro struggles quietly, red glazes the raised pebbles of the concrete in visible spurts.

When the hook finally retreats, and the eel is released from its hold, it signs a frantic figure eight in rapid stages, first S-ing one way, then the other, over and over. It reverberates like a windmill—the type that resembles a giant eggbeater, blades whirring on a vertical axis. It rotates, rotates, rotates, while there’s still breeze.

Eduardo scavenges a paper napkin from the grass nearby. Bending, he grasps the eel’s neck and walks briskly toward Narragansett Bay with an outstretched arm. Short of the railing, he stops. He straddles his legs, draws the fish back and, as if a kid flinging a branch alone in a forest, lets go. The eel swings end over end, and cracks somewhere below on the water. The white napkin returns to the ground in a flutter.

I ask if it will survive, but know. They shrug.

We scan for signs. Only waves catching the streetlight.
“Now that’s nasty,” Eduardo says, pointing behind us. We turn, again. Back on the path, the tabby and another cat are on their haunches, licking blood under the light. Licking it all up, hungrily, beside the rod.

The first is severed six inches below its head. Iridescent black flies swarm both halves of its body.

The second is wrapped in lime-green fishing line, its tail tucked beneath a rosy towel beside a yellow Solo cup. Bits of broken glass adhere, and glittering sand.

The third rests on a rumpled scrap of black canvas—an old tent, I think, still with a few aluminum poles, left by someone homeless. This eel is a foot long, maybe less, and curled through the hoops of a six-pack’s plastic.

One more: a perfect, frozen S. Two flies work its mouth. Its pectorals remind me of ears set too far back on a head, or of buttresses holding up a cathedral. A nearby McDonald’s cup mimics its body: tipped over, red straw bent at a wild angle.

Even in death, eels seem to smile. BB-black eyes. Tails like oversized butter knives. Their skin: leather on a dark sofa, tightening. Ribs beginning to show. Beneath I-95 again in Pawtucket, I find them together on the granite river wall above the Seekonk.

“They’re nasty-looking, aren’t they?” a passing fisherman says, suddenly disturbing my examination. I nod in agreement: not because they look or feel alien to us, but because they were left here, disfigured, to dry among our trash.

“If they wanted to kill them,” he goes on, “I don’t understand why they didn’t just cut them up, throw them back into the water.”

I nod. “Why not throw them back alive?” I say.

“I was here yesterday evening, and there was only one,” the fisher says, nodding. “Three must have been last night.” Eels are
most active in the elements we fear.

When I lift the first, the flies fall away. The eel stinks, but its rubbery skin is oddly gratifying to my thumb and forefinger. One by one, I hold them up, and let them drop. They sink straight and quick. It feels good to put them back. Maggot eggs float to the surface from their mouths in creamy clusters, like miniature bubbles. The flies circle back to attend to the wet stains, where the eels lay.

The river, I think. The river will eat the nasty.