**Pompano Nocturne**

*For Robert Ballard and his family, The Spearings*

We’re sitting in his pick-up truck again. Pulled over on the bleached sand and coral rock mixed with salt-and-pepper packets and plastic to-go containers for sauce. The topic today is Pompano—in a way, Pompano is always the topic, universally—but today it is *all* Pompano; we have fully stepped back onto this imaginary dock, right here, right at this spot, where his grandfather used to walk along the Bokeelia pier in heavy footsteps past the fish house at night to unmoor his boat and set out in moonlight to follow the Pompano run across Charlotte Harbor.

Today we sit in his old pick-up somewhere between past and present. We both prefer the past. Today I left the recorder at home. We talk simply, plainly. I furiously write myself notes and he tolerates my ignorances well. I don’t know why, but I have a few ideas.

To our left is the dwindling pile of what used to be Cap’n Con’s a couple months ago; connected to the old Martin House circa 1904. Remarkable it lasted this long. All the same, it’s little consolation to see it bulldozed without ceremony, homage. Helene and Milton ended both stories and now a beloved restaurant turned inward and out to sea, along with the recently renovated Bokeelia pier becomes flotsam. Tourists will come here late into the season and ask us what happened here, “Where did everything go?”

This environment can be blinding in the daytime. Especially in summer. Especially after a hurricane. But we are not in the daylight anymore. We step back in time to 1950. To midnight. Robert is shaken awake inside the cabin on the water by his mother. Dressed for a night of cool air, he is carried to the launch where his grandfather is waiting. They untie and set out in the dark. Water lapping against the boards of the boat softly, comforting, an invitation to return to sleep and dreams and the child nods off. They will be out all night. His mother will help with the boat, the fish, and also watch her son. Robert remembers.

Back then the Sea Breeze Bar existed where Cap’n Con’s recently fed us fresh catch and the daily pie slice. The bar in Cap’t Con’s was the old store set on a concrete pad. Buddy Widden worked there and his brother, Robert “Bone” Widden, owned it. Memories like this are fresh as a new catch for Robert; laying out the correct order of fish houses inside the back bay across from our vantage point; The Giles Fish House where the Airstream trailer park crammed trailers back-to-back, in an area so non-descript my notes claim, “to the right of the current boat launch” and “look up a plat map.” Then Strains bought it and Robert frequented the community hall for dances situated inside the trailer park. All was removed 10-12 years ago. The Widden Fish House was next, located now by a set of dumpsters and finally Jesse Padilla’s Pine Island Fish Company was to the left of a current gray building overlooking the water. I know there are photos of all of this, but photos are isolated and difficult to piece together in a cohesive way.

There is nothing like having the story unfold before you in vivid detail by an island historian in his own right. Robert has constructed the Bokeelia of the past. Many eras of it. Many iterations. The booms and the busts. The lore and loss. Captain Peter Hanes’s murder mystery—right there. The old wooden bridge down that way. The path his mother walked along to reach the bus stop, from the house on the west side of the bay, across the beach, past the current fresh egg cart and by the yellow house on the corner. The yellow house whose private resident beach access used to be the shared public beach for everyone back in his day. So much of the island is closed off now.

We parked in front of a small Buttonwood Tree at a would-be intersection, with nothing to see, when he points, “This was where a tiny yellow post office was.” Robert claims, “as tiny as my truck. Mrs. Chippley, elder, worked there…as there were two Mrs. Chippleys.” We hold on to the past.

The pompano at night, one could see the fish run, bioluminescence revealed an underwater mélange of life, “a pompano would come out of the water and hit on its side, like skipping rocks—it would skip across, we called it ‘skipping pompano.’” The skipping was highlighted with bioluminescence and the help of a search light. There existed a thin strip of glowing light and the big light would be used to scare the fish out. Like this, the fisherman would follow the harbor to make their catch.

The Pompano used to be everywhere. From Bokeelia, “up to mainland reef,” “under the bridge” in Punta Gorda, east wall of Cape Haze, Boca Pass, Captiva Pass, the Gulf. His grandfather only fished Pompano. Laying out 400 to 500 yards of net behind the launch when Pompano were found. Then pulling it back in, hand over hand, removing the fish and getting ready for the next “strike.” This would be repeated four to five times a night. Paid by the pound, Pompano fetched .20-.25 cents per.

The entire evening was a cadence. A rhythm.

Inside the truck cab he pantomimes casting and lifting a cane pole. He holds an imagined fish to his chest. The method was used by hook and line trout fishermen. The fisherman needed to enter into a world unknown to most of us. They placed their hands into a black pool of sea water and read the music right under the soft wake. They became part of it, embodied the resonance, they clasped fish to chest, sprung from the sea—a drumbeat, a heartbeat—from cane pole to skiff—they would arc the trout into themselves, and hold them, as if their lives depended on them; and then dropped one-by-one into a basket. Their lives *did* depend on the fish: cast again, no pause.

Robert hands me a sepia photo of a baby, 8-months, sitting in a tub on the dock for bathtime. Behind the baby is a platform—the fish house on Bokeelia Fishing Pier, where his father would know the exact time the run boat would arrive with supplies for Martin’s shop down the pier, and the ice for the fish house where that platform led to. He worked work tirelessly lifting the 300 pound “cakes” of ice with hoist and ice tongs to the insulated cooler while his wife helped too, and kept an eye on the baby; “that’s me.” Robert says.

(1,120 words)