

BO BARTLETT

Via Mal Contenti, 2006
oil on linen, 82 x 56 in.



COURTESY THE ARTIST

ANTHONY DETRO

On the Wharf

*There is one spectacle grander than the sea,
that is the sky; there is one spectacle grander
than the sky, that is the interior of the soul.*

—Victor Hugo, *Les Misérables*

Sean McKenna had a week off from his second-grade class over spring break, and his dad took him fishing nearly every day in the old Chevy truck to the spot they'd always gone to at the end of the Santa Cruz Wharf. A wharf that, in itself, should not be underestimated when it comes to history or unsavory odor. Granted, it might not be as popular or well-known as the Fisherman's Wharf in San Francisco, or the one in Monterey, yet the boy had still long ago claimed it as being HIS wharf.

As children it is only natural to love and embrace that which is familiar and warm, and to loathe everything else.

Therefore whenever Sean visited these other wharves, he sought out all of the things he disliked about them and did not allow himself to have much fun. And not because they weren't good wharves—for Sean knew that they were—but because he somehow felt it would be an act of betrayal towards his own beloved wharf if he did not emphasize the shortcomings and failures of these other wharves.

And so Sean was there, with his father, at the end of the wharf, which was indeed a good wharf because it was HIS.

The weather was perfect on that first day. It was one of those days when there was no fog and no clouds and hardly any swell and you could see clear across the bay to Monterey and to the smokestacks at Moss Landing.

Looking back to the Main Beach at the Boardwalk, you could see the rides going, and you could hear people scream every time the Giant Dipper took that first drop and came back up and around that sharp left turn, which nearly threw you out of your seat. And taking it all in from the wharf you knew what it smelled like down there on the Boardwalk, because you loved the Boardwalk like how you loved the wharf and the big orange-and-yellow dome of the Coconut Grove stuck there all alone in the sand and vibrant under the sun like a scoop of melting sherbet.

Sean and his dad had baited up and cast out and set the poles down against the railing and let them rest in the little notches that were carved into the wood. Sean's dad stroked his magnificent beard as they both leaned over the railing without speaking and listened to the seals bark like salty water dogs begging for bait scraps. They kept an eye out for bites at the tips of their poles and Sean's dad chased away a couple of seagulls who were trying to get at the bait. "Dirty bastards," he scolded as he shooed them away.

They fished for a while and didn’t catch anything but a small crab that fell off the line as they reeled it up and a couple of bull fish, which they threw back because they were not good eating.

Afterward they set the gear in the bed of the Chevy and walked to one of the open-air fish markets. They both got deep-fried calamari and chips and lemonades and sat and ate together at a bench on the west side of the wharf. Sean’s dad sipped from his flask as they both watched the sun go down over Steamer Lane.

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On the second day when they went out to the wharf, the sky was mostly gray and dull and full of large, lead-filled clouds that floated slowly through the sky like brooding ghost ships. The swell had picked up and the breeze was steady and it blew an ugly chop across the surface of the water.

They fished all day and didn’t even get a bite but had to keep picking up the poles because they kept falling over on account of the wind, until Sean’s dad got sick of it and secured them to the railing with an old bungee cord. “Dirty bastards,” he muttered and drank from his flask.

They did not eat calamari afterward.

When Sean looked back across the Main Beach, he saw the tall palms along Beach Street swinging in the singing wind and he thought to himself that perhaps the Boardwalk was dying.

* * *

On the third day, Sean could not understand why they were going out at all. The rain was coming down in sheets and the wind howled in your ears like a thousand banshees in a barn fire.

There were no boats on the bay.

No Monterey and no Moss Landing and nobody else crazy enough to be out on the wharf with them.

The restaurants and shops were all closed and the fish markets shuttered up.

The sky was a single black cloud letting loose a water-fall and the sea protested with rage as the waves were so large they almost washed right up onto the deck.

At some point during the Great War between ocean and sky, Sean looked back to the shore. The Boardwalk

looked ominous and threatening and all he wanted to do was to stop this nonsense and go home and get warm and dry. He looked over at his father who struggled to hold his rod in one hand and his flask of Irish whiskey in the other, all the while seeming to laugh at the spectacle of it all.

“At least let me wait in the truck.”

His father did not waiver in his calmness. “It’s locked.”

“Give me the keys.”

“No.”

“Dad!”

Sean’s dad set his pole against the railing and the wind instantly blew it over. He ignored it and drank from his flask. “Sean?”

“What?”

“Are you mad right now?”

“Yes.”

“Cold?”

“Yes.”

“Hungry?”

“Yes.”

“Miserable?”

“Yes! Dad!”

“Good,” his dad said, capping his flask and placing it into his coat pocket. “That means you’re likely to remember this. Toss the bait and put the tackle away. I’ll take care of the rods.”

“Are we going?”

“Yes.”

Now that it was all over, Sean felt bad for ever calling his father a dirty bastard in his head.

* * *

The very next morning his dad woke him early and told him to get ready.

“For what?” Sean said from under the covers, still half asleep.

“We’re going out.”

“I’m not going. Where’s Mom?”

“She had to go to work,” his dad said, pulling the covers from Sean’s head. “Come on, get up. We’ll get breakfast at Gilda’s.”

Sean pulled the covers back over his head. “I said I’m not going.”

“Why not?”

“Because yesterday sucked. And we never catch anything anyway.”

“That’s not the point, we still tried.”

“Stop saying that.”

“If you give up, I’ll never take you out again.”

“You don’t mean that,” Sean said.

“It’s not raining anymore.”

“It might.”

“But it’s not right now.”

“So?”

“So that means it’ll probably be better than yesterday.”

“I’m not going.”

“Well, I’m not going to beg you.”

His dad walked out without saying anything else and Sean wondered if he really meant what he said about not taking him out anymore. A few minutes later, Sean heard the front door shut. When he heard the truck start, he jumped out of bed and put on his socks and shoes and grabbed a shirt, jacket, and pants and then bolted out through the front door in his underwear.

His dad hadn’t seen him come out because he’d been looking back as he backed out of the driveway.

“Dad, wait!”

When his dad stopped to put the truck in drive, he saw Sean running down the driveway and suppressed a smile.

Sean ran up and got in and put his clothes on inside the cab. The stereo was playing low and Sean recognized Bob Dylan’s voice singing something about it being all over now for someone called Baby Blue.

“Can we still get breakfast at Gilda’s?” Sean said.

“Of course.”

As they drove on, Sean realized that his dad had been right: it wasn’t raining anymore. And although it was still gray and wet out, Sean thought it probably wouldn’t rain again today.

After breakfast they went to the end of the wharf and cast out and Sean felt all right. He noticed that the swell had died down a bit and that there seemed to be a lot of people out and about again. And even though the wind was still going pretty good, the sunlight had begun to poke holes through the cloud cover in some places. The gulls fought and cried out. The seals barked. The Boardwalk showed signs of life. And all while the surf breaking off in the distance attempted to seduce you along with the hush

of the rise and fall of the water against the barnacle- and starfish-covered pilings.

Sean and his dad were leaning against the railing and looking out onto the water, each lost in his own thoughts, Sean’s dad appearing to look outward while simultaneously gazing inward at some distant sorrow and with a sad smile on his face, both humor and suffering akin to brother and sister in the eyes of the Irish.

Sean looked over at his father and was staring at him in the curious way that all children sometimes stare at their parents when contemplating their immortality when Sean’s pole got a vicious bite and it bowed forward.

“Dad!”

“Grab it,” his dad told him. “Nice and easy.”

Sean looked over the railing as he reeled in, and when the fish broke the surface he saw that it was not a bull fish, but something silver and large. “I got one!” His excitement was so contagious that his dad nearly started freaking out with him. A few people who were passing by had also stopped to see what he was bringing up.

Sean and his dad were both laughing as they pulled the fish up and over the railing.

They lay it on the ground.

It flipped and flopped and glistened in the sun.

“It’s a perch,” his dad said.

The onlookers clapped and continued on their stroll.

Sean picked the fish up and held it out with both hands and his dad pulled the hook out with needle-nose pliers. Sean tossed it into their little three-gallon bucket of seawater and watched it swim around and thought about how he almost didn’t come out today.

“Take it to the sink with the knife and gut it,” his dad told him. “I’ll get the gear together.”

Sean didn’t move. And after a moment of thought he said, “Can we throw it back?”

His dad smiled. “So you wish to save this one too, Herr Schindler?”

“Can we?”

“Why?”

“I don’t know.”

“Hmm,” his father said, stroking his beard. “I suppose that’s as good a reason as any. Go ahead.”

* * *

Sean looked over at his father and was staring at him in the curious way that all children sometimes stare at their parents when contemplating their immortality

The next morning Sean was up and ready to go before his dad was. They went and had a quick breakfast at Gilda’s then headed to the end of the wharf to do their thing.

It was a perfect day—even better than the first—and Sean was still excited from the action of the day before. He did not take his eyes away from the tip of his pole the entire time.

But nothing ever bit.

And every time he reeled it in, the bait was long gone, having either fallen off or been eaten very carefully by crafty sea life.

After a few hours, his dad said they’d better get going.

“Just a little while longer,” Sean pleaded.

After two more hours of nothing, Sean reeled in his rod in frustration.

“What’s wrong?” his dad said, sipping from his flask and already knowing the answer.

“We didn’t even get a bite today.”

His dad laughed, capping the flask. “So what.”

“So what?”

“You can’t always expect to catch something. You know that.”

“I know, but—”

“You thought because you caught one yesterday, you’d catch one today.”

Sean kept silent and looked down at his feet.

His dad motioned around him. “Look how nice it is today.”

“Who cares.”

“I bet when we were out here in the rain yesterday you were wishing the weather was like today’s, weren’t you?”

“Yeah.”

“That’s right. And now that you’ve got what you wanted, it doesn’t matter anymore. How come?”

“We didn’t catch anything.”

“But we hardly ever catch anything.”

“I did yesterday.”

“And look how many times it took coming out here to do it, since the last time we caught that big flounder you threw back. A lot, right?”

“I guess so.”

“You know so. And that’s why it was so exciting to catch something: BECAUSE IT HARDLY EVER HAPPENS.” He went and stood next to Sean at the railing. “How come you were so mad when we were out here in the rain yesterday?”

“It was a bad day to fish.”

His dad laughed. “There are always going to be bad days, Sean. If you knew the days were always going to be clear and sunny and warm and you knew you were going to catch something every time you went out it wouldn’t be exciting at all, and there would be no joy in anything you did because it would all be the same and life would have no meaning.”

The whiskey at work.

“What?”

“No matter what you do in life, Sean, there are always going to be bad times along the way. But it doesn’t mean you give up or lose hope. And then the good times, when they come, will be glorious in ways that only our suffering could allow.”

“Stop talking like that!”

His dad ignored him. “You know where I learned that?”

“I don’t care.”

“From the sea. And the stars. There are oceans inside of us, Sean. And stardust in our veins. If there ever comes the time when your mother and I are gone and you forget who you are, just look to the sea, or to the sky. They’ll

remind you.” He pulled the flask of Irish whiskey from his coat pocket and drank. “Without the stars, men would be even more lost than they already are. They guide us where we need to be . . . your mother’s a star, you know.” He looked up and stroked his beard and squinted his eyes against the sun.

Sean was losing patience. “And where the hell do we need to be, Dad? Huh?”

His father squatted down in front of him and ran a large hand through his son’s hair before gently resting it on his shoulder and taking in every detail of the boy’s image. Sean thought he saw the beginning of a tear in each of his father’s green eyes.

“Well, Sean. I suppose we need to be exactly where we are: right here, right now.”

Sean was quite sure his father had gone completely mad.

“How come you threw that fish back yesterday?” his dad said.

Sean seemed to soften. “I don’t know. I was just watching it swim around in that little bucket and it made me sad.”

“That’s what I thought.” He kissed Sean on the top of his head and stood up. “The fish’s plight became your own. You know what that means, don’t you?”

“What?”

“It means that you’re in tune with the world around you. And as you grow, your world will grow with you. It means you’re going to be all right, but—” He finished off the rest of the whiskey in the flask before capping it and handing it over to Sean. “You’re probably going to be needing this when you get a bit older.”

“How come?”

“Because sometimes it gets to be too much.”

“What does?”

“You’ll see. Just hold on to it. And put it someplace where your mother won’t find it. It’ll be the end of us for sure if she finds out I gave it to you.”

Sean slipped the flask into his back pocket before his father had a chance to change his mind about it.

“Dad?”

“Yeah?”

“Can we get calamari?”

His dad laughed. “Sure, Sean. We can get whatever we want.”

Anthony Detro grew up in Santa Cruz, California. He is currently working on a novel set in Santa Cruz. An excerpt of this novel in progress was published previously in *Catamaran Literary Reader*.