

When the Water Come Up

By Alexander Saxton

It was so hot that summer. So hot in that small town, out in the middle-of-nowhere scrubland. So hot by the banks of the brown river running through it, slow and sluggish as summer blood, that you would have thought the rains could never come.

I spent a lot of time sitting by the river out back of Zeb's that year. I don't know if it was actually cooler than anywhere else, but at least by the river you could pretend there was a breeze, and that the air didn't feel like paint left out in its tin in the sun.

It was the end of the day, and I was wearing a white t-shirt streaked with reddish dirt, waiting for my sweat to dry. I was alone, if you didn't count Old Zeb, which is to say, I may as well have been alone. Zeb was one of the leathery old guys who you sometimes wonder if they're still human in there, or if the years have just scooped them out hollow, and left the shell walking around out of sheer habit. I'd been helping out at his place every summer since I was thirteen, and he'd never said a word to me that wasn't 'do this, would yeh,' or 'pass me that would yeh.' Never. During the days he worked in his shop; evenings, he sat in a rusted lawn chair on the riverbank, drinking warm beer and squinting into the brown trickle below. And that was his life.

The closest thing he had to a hobby was fishing. Ratch had told me that back before Zeb turned 11 and started working in the mine, there had still been fish in this river; not only fish, but fish you could eat without heavy-metal poisoning. It sounded like science fiction to me. I couldn't even imagine what the world might have looked like without the Mine. That's how anchored it was to my town's reality, even all those years after it had closed down.

Being handy with tools, Zeb had made his own fishing rod out of steel rebar and a winch. The line, they told me, he got delivered custom. 1200-pound monofilament; the kind they use for ocean game fishing. I'd have said I didn't know how he afforded it, except that he never caught anything, so he never had to replace the line.

That day, though, Zeb wasn't fishing. He was just sitting, grey eyes squinting at the brown horizon. Ratch was supposed to have picked me up, but as usual, she was late. I'd have called her to complain, but I was still paying off the contract on my bricked phone, and I wasn't about to start paying off a new one until I had some money in my account. I doubt she'd have picked up, anyway; alone out of almost anybody in town, Ratch always seemed to have something going on.

It was just like any other dull, dusty day.

And then a breeze blew up.

An actual, honest-to-goodness breeze; one that was almost fresh; one that almost didn't stink like burnt concrete and rust in the sun.

I was so excited I almost said something to Zeb, and when I turned to look at him, I saw he was still staring at the horizon, that pale blade between the brown earth and the burning-blue sky. And the horizon, normally flat as a razor, carried a low smudge along its edge.

Rain. It had to be rain. Thank God. Maybe we'd get some relief from the heat.

I grinned at Zeb; he rotated his expressionless head my way for a moment, and then swivelled his grey gaze back to that smudged horizon.

At the time, I thought he was just being Zeb. Now I think he was remembering other long hot summers; the kind that only used to come once in three decades, but now come every-other-year, when the late rains come at last, and they come down hard.

Any other day, I'd've sat and waited; but that three-seconds-worth of breeze had livened me up, and I jumped to my feet, looking for something to do, something to play with, some activity.

But Zeb's yard, like most of the town, was a wasteland of rusted scrap and junk, and finding nothing to fool around with that wouldn't give me tetanus, I decided to get a closer look at the river, and started picking my way down the bank.

I've said already that it wasn't the kind of stream where you caught tadpoles. But it did link up with an underground river that wound through a cave system under the hills. And since those hills were maggot-holed by old mine shafts, sometimes you might find something strange bobbing in the current: a scrap of 1900s mining equipment; a bloated dead fish with no eyes. One kid I grew up with claimed to have seen a yellowed skull once, twirling downriver like champagne cork. Who knows; maybe I'd get lucky: find a handful of gold coins floating in an old leather hat; enough money to get out of town forever, and maybe convince Ratch to come with me.

But before I could make it halfway down the bank, Zeb's rusted, half-used voice rang out behind me.

"Get the hell back from there."

He didn't say it with any kind of heat; just said it like a statement of fact, and not a command. I turned to look back at him in surprise.

"I said get the hell back from there."

"Why?"

"I fuckin said so," he said.

I hesitated. Zeb had never talked to me like that before. On the one hand, sure, this was his property. On the other hand, I'd been raised to believe the words 'you can't tell me what to do' were enshrined in the constitution.

And while I hesitated, Zeb surprised me again.

He stood up, grabbing some kind of rusted trailer hitch from the pile beside him, and flung it at me.

The chunk of metal must've weighed eight pounds; it *whooshed* past me and smashed into the water's surface, spraying the bank with droplets as warm and sour as cider vinegar kept on a shelf beside the boiler. I leaped back from the water's edge.

"Jesus Christ, Zeb, what the fuck!"

But he'd already settled back down in his lawn chair, with his warm tin of beer.

"I fucken said so you got lead in yer ears." He was staring back out at the smudged horizon like nothing had happened.

I glanced back down into the river. The already brown water had been churned up by the hitch, and a plume of sediment the colour of coffee-with-cream was oozing downstream. How deep could that water be? Calf-deep? Knee-deep? Certainly not much more than that, with all those rocks and jags of rusted metal scraping the underside of the surface. And so it must have been a trick of the current, nothing more, that fooled my eyes into thinking they saw the shadow of something moving under the surface. I blinked to clear my eyes, and it was already gone.

As I was trying to figure out what, if anything, I had just seen, the tires of a pickup snarled in the gravel behind me, and somebody leaned on the horn.

I glanced back. It was Ratch, checking the watch on her tanned wrist.

"Hey hurry up kid, we're late." She shouted this through the open window like it was my fault, but that was just how Ratch spoke to everyone, and it was one of the things people ended up somehow liking about her. I certainly did, anyhow.

Zeb hadn't noticed her arrival. He was watching that smudge metastasize on the horizon.

"Doin okay, Zeb?"

He waved a hand in her direction.

She rolled her eyes and I gave her what I hoped was a winning smile as I came up to the truck. Ratch was six years older than me, and I liked the way her collection of weathered denim shirts hung from her shoulders. She was out of my league, even if she'd liked guys, which she didn't, but I was 18, stupid, and an optimist.

"Hey you," said Zeb. 'Hey you' was his nickname for me. I froze with my hand on the latch of the passenger-side door.

The old man half-turned in his chair; something he never did. The sun was starting to go down, veering over his left shoulder, so that half his face was cast into shadow.

He said,

"When the water come up, all your sticks gonna wash away."

He held my gaze for a moment longer, before turning back the river and sinking sun.

I spent a moment trying to make sense of that. I glanced at Ratch. She shrugged. I climbed in. She slammed the pickup into gear and peeled out. Ratch only ever peeled out of places.

"What was *that* about?" she said.

"I dunno. He's been acting weird all day."

"Weird how?"

We were ripping over dry plains now, sending up a plume of dust behind us. The hills ahead were painted with the ochre-and-neon of a polluted sunset.

"Weird like he threw a trailer hitch at me."

"Holy shit, *Old Zeb* did that?"

I shrugged to let her know I was tough and unbothered, even though I still felt a sour pulse of adrenaline in my veins.

"Want me to have a 'talk' with him?"

She jerked her head at the gun rack hanging in the rear window. Ratch made a point of letting folks know she was always armed, since some people took issue with her choice of dancing

partner. That's how she put it anyway; shrugging to let you know she was tough and unbothered.

"Nah, that's okay," I said. "I can handle Zeb."

"Well if you change your mind, you know I'm always in your corner."

"Thanks Ratch."

A bit of a silence followed, and I looked out the window to watch dusk spread like floodwater across the dry fields outside of town. Ratch was taking what you might call the scenic route, if we'd had much to see, just for the sake of driving fast down empty stretches of road. Once upon a time, these fields had been farmed; but then the Depression came; the banks swallowed them up, and flipped the land to coal. And after that you couldn't drink the water, let alone grow corn.

"A trailer hitch," she said. "That doesn't sound like Zeb. I wonder if something's up with him."

"Maybe it's the mine," I said.

I was trying to sound smart. The thing with the mine was what people around town talked about if they knew what was going on.

"Maybe," she said. "He was down there in the bad old days, and probably lost a lot of people. In his shoes, I wouldn't want to see it reopened either."

"What about your shoes?"

She ran a tanned hand through her hair.

"I don't fucken know," she said. "Look around; the town's already fucked, so what does it matter? What-- is the water going to get *more* undrinkable? And it's been a long time since anyone in this place made any money. Not since I was a kid."

"That's not so long ago," I said. I think I thought I was being chivalrous.

"Easy, Tiger," she said. "It's a long time when you can't afford a doctor."

We drove in silence for a few moments, as the killed sun finally tumbled behind that mass of clouds that was rising on the west horizon. A fresh breeze was lifting streams of dust from the fields. It had been so long since rain; there was so much that needed washing away.

"Where are you going in such a hurry, anyway?" I asked.

She laughed at me.

“Same place as always.”

“That’s why you’re doing a hundred and ten right now? So you can hit the bar?”

“I always drive a hundred and ten,” she said, “And anyway, we’re celebrating tonight.”

We were just reaching the side-road that lead to my folks’ place, but instead of turning off, Ratch just cackled and hit the gas, blowing us down the tarmac into darkness.

“What are you doing?” I laughed.

“The whole town’s celebrating at Johnny’s tonight,” she said. “I’m not letting you miss it.”

“You know I’m too young to drink, right?”

God how those words killed me to say. She dismissed them with a flick of her hand.

“Who gives a shit? The mine’s reopening; they’ll let you drink a fucken coors.”

She turned out to be right. Johnny’s was packed, and even though Abbey at the bar knew who I was, they winked and slipped me a beer anyhow.

Three drinks later, Johnny himself waded through the crowd, and started whacking a crumpled-up beer can on the counter as a makeshift gavel.

He’d been a foreman at the mine before it closed down; and he’d taken over the bar after his cousin’s overdose. A framed photo of the cousin still hung silent behind the taps. The two men looked very much alike.

“Everybody shut up, I got something to say!” Johnny shouted. The air filled with cheers and good-natured booing. Everybody liked Johnny.

“It’s about time we had something to celebrate, isn’t it?”

We cheered even louder, thumping on the tables.

“And that’s why... I’m gonna sing ‘Jolene’. Billy, play ‘Jolene’.”

Everyone laughed as Billy played the first few chords, and Johnny waved the joke away.

“Nah, nah. I’ll need a couple more Jack and cokes before I treat you to that. But to get real for a minute, this is...” he paused, seeming to feel the weight of the moment. “It’s a big day for this town. I know we all had our hopes after the election, but uh, I for one didn’t think we’d actually see the mine come back. It’s... You know, ‘dignity’ isn’t a word you hear used much around here. But, for me, that’s what today’s about. It’s about this town getting a bit of dignity back.

Then his face cracked wide into that famous Johnny smile.

“That,” he said, “AND all of you finally being able to pay off your tabs!”

Everybody laughed and booed again and somebody threw an empty beer can, and an hour later he did sing Jolene off the karaoke box, and he tore the roof off.

It felt at the time like the best night of my life. Abbey at the bar must have thought it was funny to keep feeding me drinks, cause I got drunker than I’d ever been ‘til then. Lucky for me, Ratch never drank much, and when she did drink, she always kept an eye out, given how things had been for her. And so before I could get into trouble, she dragged me out to the pickup and dropped me off back home. I remember laughing with my head out the window, sticking my tongue out at the sky. It was just starting to rain, and the sour taste of the drops cut through the lingering sweetness of coke and bourbon on my tongue.

It was raining heavy when I woke the next morning, and the hard sound of drops on the roof was like railway spikes getting sledged into my hangover. I rolled out of bed and trudged to my small, dim window, which was leaking cold rills down the peeling wallpaper, and making my cold, bare footsteps squelch in the industrial carpet. The rain outside was like falling debris; I’ve never seen rain like it, before or since.

I threw on some clothes and came downstairs to find my mom watching it rain through the kitchen window.

“Any word from Zeb,” she asked.

“Naw. But I don’t think he’s the kind to stop work on account of a little rain.”

“No? How ‘bout the Second Great Flood?”

It had to have been raining like that for hours. The yard was afloat with brownish water. The dirt road looked more like an irrigation ditch.

“Think it’s a good idea to go in today?” She said. I shrugged.

"We need the money."

That got no argument from her; just a quiet, worried grunt. A car honked out front.

"That'll be Ratch," I said.

"Be careful, okay, hon?" She said. "Keep in touch today. If you need to get picked up early, call. I'll figure something out. Okay?"

"Okay, mom," I said.

Ratch honked again, and a moment later I was shivering in the cab of her truck. Just the two second run from the front door had soaked me to the bone.

"Zeb's still got you working today?" Ratch didn't seem hung over; just uneasy, the same way my mom had. She kept leaning over the steering wheel to squint up at the sky's blue-black underbelly.

"Ain't heard nothing to the contrary," I said.

"Well... let's go then."

She put the pickup in gear, and for once didn't peel out. Normally it took 30 seconds to reach the paved tarmac at the end of our dirt road. Today it was a five-minute drive downstream, with grey-brown water sloshing halfway to the hubcaps of the pickup's oversized wheels.

"You're sure about this?" She said.

"We need the money,"

She grunted and didn't say anything else. Where I grew up, "We need the money," was a phrase everyone respected.

The drive went smoother once we hit the paved road, which had transformed into a dry causeway across huge swathes of flooded plain. It was tough to imagine these fields had been dust-caked just ten hours ago. In some places, the snapped yellow shards of dry grass still pricked the cloudy surface; but in others, if it weren't for the rusted hulks of old farming gear that hunched alone, half-glimpsed through shifting cataracts of rain as they wept red streaks into the spreading waters, you might have thought you were staring out over the open sea.

The highway barrelled headlong toward the river, swerving west just in time to lead us parallel to its thrashing waters. I swear, since the day before, those waters had risen by at least four feet.

And they looked angry; yesterday's sluggish trickle was forgotten; today the river ran fast and full of rage.

"Don't like the look of that," said Ratch. "If it keeps up the town'll flood."

"It's been going all night," I said. "I doubt it keeps going past noon."

"Hm," was all she said.

Up ahead, the dark outlines of Zeb's place congealed out of the downpour at last. I've never seen a place look less inviting. Ratch pulled up as close as she could to Zeb's front door.

"Well," she tossed another doubtful glance in the river's direction. "I guess you're probably right about this rain. But if it you're not..."

"What, you'll come *save* me?"

I remember saying this with a sort of teenage smirk that makes me want to smack myself in the face. But Ratch just looked at me, completely serious.

"That's exactly right," she said.

[beat]

I remember this moment so clearly. I had thought, from the time I was fourteen years old, that I was the one who loved Ratch. Now I found it was the other way around, that despite my vain, teenage thirst, she was the one who loved me; not in the way I wanted, of course. But there are deeper, more important kinds of love.

A moment later I was standing, drenched under the awning at Zeb's, watching the red embers of her taillights vanish through the rain's grey veil.

After a long, cold moment, I sighed, turned, and tried the door.

It was locked, which was surprising for that time of day. After a moment of fumbling with my keys, I felt the lock crunch and thunk, and the door swung open with a low squeal. The inside of Zeb's shop was silent, grey, and dark.

"Zeb?"

I let the door click shut behind me, muting the rain's dull roar.

After all that noise, the sudden quiet made my skin crawl.

“Zeb?”

No answer. Maybe he wasn't up yet. Maybe he'd been up late drinking, like the rest of the town.

I wandered through the shop and into the kitchen.

“Zeb?”

Nothing. A prickle in the hair on the back of my neck. I decided to make coffee. The hangover was prying apart the bones of my head. Outside, the water slowly rose.

It was only after the percolator had been making its gentle little noise for about two minutes that I realized the old grounds I'd emptied out had still been warm. They weren't from yesterday's coffee. Zeb had already been up.

“Zeb?!?”

Silence. I thought back to how strange he'd been the day before, and an image crowded into my mind; Zeb, deranged in the darkness, watching me through the crack of some hidden door, with a rusted blade.

I pushed the thought aside and crept upstairs to the cramped, filthy apartment where he lived above the shop. Silence. Falling rain outside. I half expected to find him dead in his bedsheets, wide, empty eyes staring blindly at the dim grey ceiling.

But the room was empty; and there were no clues among the piles of crusted, reeking dirty clothes.

I crept back downstairs, trying to be quiet, though I don't know why. Living or dead, I was the only person in the house.

A puddle of brackish water was spreading across the linoleum tiles at the back door, carrying in little black flakes of rust from the flooded, junk-filled yard outside. Another puddle was forming on the shop floor, its edges lapping higher and higher with each cold drop that fell from the leaky ceiling. The two puddles were reaching for one another like long parted relatives. I splashed across the linoleum and opened the back door, letting in the cold wind and its flecks of enraged spittle.

The backyard was a snarl of trash and mud and spreading sumps. Beyond it, the crazed river gnawed at its banks.

There was an umbrella stand by the door, where Zeb usually kept his scrap-metal fishing pole and huge, rusted gaffe. It was empty.

He'd gone out fishing? In this weather?

I stepped out into the pouring rain, and the mud beneath my feet was loose and slick as engine oil. I staggered out through the wreckage, coming close as I dared to water's edge.

I could not believe how high the water had risen. The place I'd climbed down to when Zeb threw the hitch at me was now under four feet of seething, muscular current.

"Zeb??!!"

I could barely hear myself over the rain. I could see no sign of Zeb.

Hm. Except... for one.

That old lawn-chair of his, leaning askew in the soft mud at the water's edge. Next to it, his fishing gaff had been stabbed into the soft mud like a wooden grave marker. I took a slow step closer. Right in front of the chair, a three-foot slab of the river bank had given way. Zeb was gone; so was his makeshift fishing rod with its 1200-pound wire.

I stood under the cold torrent, putting it all together. For some unsane reason, Zeb had decided to go out fishing in the storm of the century. The bank must have given way under his weight. I reached out, nudging the gaff with my fingertips, and it veered wildly for a moment, before the loose mud that anchored it gave way, and its heavy iron head smacked the surface of the river.

I don't exactly know how to describe what happened next.

It was like a hole opened up in the river, a vacuum of three square feet where the water just disappeared. And then, around that dark void, something surfaced from the roil. A set of flat, square jaws with thick lips, the same yellow-brown colour as the soiled river. They crashed shut, snapping the gaffe like a pencil, even though its haft was oak two-inches thick. A set of fleshy whiskers stretched from either edge of those jaws, as thick as my wrist and as long as the length of my arm. From the top of its immense, flat head, a pair of blank and sightless eyes rolled at the blank and sightless heaven; and then huge muscles thrashed; the surface of the river seemed to boil, and the thing was gone, except for a flash of a barbed tail on the surface.

A wave of brown water rolled over the bank, calf-deep, and I staggered back as the mud beneath my boots began to collapse. Out in the river, that barbed tail lashed again, and a low wave turned against the current as its huge body angled back toward me. I lost my footing and landed badly, slicing my arm on something in the mud as I flailed for higher ground. A whole, groaning slab of yard sloughed into the current behind me as I struggled to my feet at the back

door, and another calf-high wave rolled past, flooding the shop an inch-and-a-half deep. Bright dark blood trailed through the tatters of my sleeve, and as I tried to stanch the bleeding, I saw that I had left a red streak in the mud, and a taste of myself in the water.

Whatever was in the river knew I was there. And as its low bow wave passed back and forth before me, I realized something else that it must've known:

The rain was still coming hard. And it was only a matter of time before the waters rose above the bank.

I found a pillaged, decades-old first-aid kit in the shop and did the best I could with my arm. All those years I'd thought Zeb was crazy, trying to catch something in the river. Not crazy, as it turned out; only stupid. How had he *known*? It had to have been his years in the mine; on the shores of its lightless sumps and sunless rivers. He had to have seen things like this down there; just waiting for the water come up.

I felt sick. I decided it was time to get away from Zeb's. But when I picked up the ancient receiver in the kitchen, there was no dial tone.

Shit. Shit.

The water was lapping at my ankles now. Glancing through the back window I couldn't tell anymore where the yard ended and the river began. I left the receiver dangling and sloshed to the front door. All I could see were sheets of falling rain, and scrubby grey-brown water drowning the speartips of scrubby grey-brown grass, far as the eye could see.

Zeb's truck was quietly rusting around the side of the building; but I couldn't find the keys anywhere; and after long minutes of frantic searching, splashing back and forth through grey rooms filled with rising grey water, I realized that he must have had them on him. When... when whatever happened to him, happened.

Which left me with one way out. I could walk. I returned to the front door and stared out, following the brown abstraction of the road as it faded into endless grey. Six or seven miles to the nearest gas station. I'd done it before; it wouldn't be so bad.

Except:

Those six flat miles were drowning already; and deeper water was creeping 'round the edges of the house. How long before the grey tide had overrun those miles? How long before I was swimming, alone and quickly tiring in the middle of a grey and rising ocean? How long until I felt the slow ripple of that huge body in the water beside me, circling, slowly circling and drawing closer in?

I was trapped. I had all the space in the world; miles and miles of once-dry land. And I was trapped like a rat.

There was a rush of water coming in through the back door. The water in the shop had reached my calf. Not much time left. I grabbed a case of bottled water and some stale granola bars from the pantry, and waded to the staircase. And just as I was dragging myself up out of the water, that bow wave crested through the open back door, and I felt, as much as saw, the arrival of a cold and ancient presence in Zeb's home.

The lights were still on in the shop. The water was filthy, but clear enough that I could still see the huge, dark silhouette that drifted toward me as I scrambled backward up the stairs.

Something like... a catfish. In the same way a condor is something like a crow.

You sometimes get rumours about catfish the size of a man, reaching six feet, maybe three hundred pounds. This thing... must've been three times that size, and its weight would've snapped Zeb's 1200-pound line like kitchen twine. Just by swimming slowly toward me through the shop it sent vibrations rumbling through the wooden frame of the house. It came right up to the bottom of the stairs, where it drifted slowly to the surface of the murk, revealing itself to me. Green-brown membranes slicked back, revealing blank, dark eyes beneath. I don't even know if it could see me, but it stared up at me for a long, long time, and the sound of rain seemed to fade away to silence. And then it sank again, twitched its tail to come round, and drifted slowly back outside. I fell back against the steps and closed my eyes. The sound of rain returned.

From the upstairs window, I could see its dark outline gliding through the floodwaters which now churned on every side; its broad head, wide whiskers and spreading, winglike fins guiding it slowly through the roil. It looked so at ease; as if it had been sleeping for decades in some underground pit of tainted water, just waiting, waiting for some such flood to let it rise, and taste the water of heaven, and *feed*; as if it was the god of this poisoned river, finally come to collect.

And all this time the water rose, creeping up the stairwell step-by-step like slow footsteps; the downstairs drowned like a kitten in a sack, and from the windows you could see nothing but water, stretching from horizon to horizon to horizon. And the water still rose. I wondered how long it would take to fall again, or before someone came and rescued me. Days? Weeks? Or maybe the water would just rise, and rise, and rise, until the River-God reclaimed this whole part of the world, starting with me in this room.

Just as that thought occurred to me, a rumble passed through the building.

I staggered back into the middle of the room, trying to keep my balance, and then I was thrown off my feet as the entire building groaned, lurched and tilted. With a roar, the river tore Zeb's house loose from its shallow foundations, and I was flung against the wall, shelves and ceramics landing on top of me like blows from an axe-handle. Brown water rushed up the

stairwell, and before I could climb back to my feet, the room was thigh-deep in filthy water. I half-swam to the window, and outside, the river boiled at the window-sill as the sinking house whirled like a waterlogged cork, lower and lower, until the river surged in, nearly tearing my grip from the windowsill, stinging my eyes like lemon juice, tasting of dirt and mining waste. I tried to pull myself out through the window, to get outside and onto the roof so I wouldn't drown, pinned against the ceiling, but I wasn't strong enough, and that, in the end, is what saved me.

Split-seconds after I would've gone through, a set of titanic jaws slammed shut just outside the window. A huge, fleshy antennae brushed against me, trembling with excitement, and I cried out in horror at the sight of the river-god's blank, staring eye. I swam and scrambled back as it smashed against the open window; breaking glass and ripping through the frame of the house as it tried to get me. Glass shards and huge slivers sliced through the current; I tried the opposite window, but it was painted shut, and Zeb, a paranoid libertarian had welded steel bars across it. I was trapped; the River God thrashed and thrashed, filling the room with its dark, viscous blood as it tried to break through. I had no other options. I did the unthinkable. I dived down the stairs.

Five summers I'd worked at Zeb's. I knew my way around in the dark; but I didn't know if I knew my way around in the dark, underwater, through clouds of debris and battering currents. But I went down; fighting against every instinct that screamed at me for light and air. Down, down, down the stairs, for what felt like a thousand feet: with my eyes screwed shut, knowing nothing but the water's slimy, cold touch, the roaring of it, and the burning feeling in my lungs..]

Finally, the bottom of the stairs. How long could I hold my breath? Forty seconds? A minute? I had been in the cold and darkness ten thousand years already; but I had to go even deeper, even as the chill pressure closed in around me, and the horror of the unknown and unseen boiled into my throat.

I pushed off the right-hand wall and dove deeper, swimming down toward cold hell until I hit the front door. It was shut. I groped blindly for the doorknob, and couldn't find it, I started to panic; and then, somewhere up above, I felt as much as heard that window-frame give way.

The next few moments are all just pain and confusion. I remember finally finding the door knob and diving through; hitting the river's slimy, rusted bottom, and feeling the house hurtle over me, nearly crushing me across its underside, like a table-leg smearing a carpet-beetle. I pushed off against the riverbed. I think I must have blacked out, because the next thing I remember is I breaching the surface, and gasping so hard for air that my lungs still hurt thinking about it.

A piece of debris: someone's dining-room table, smacked into me. I think it must have cracked one of my ribs, because the sky went red for a moment, but in spite of the pain I held on to it, and managed to climb halfway aboard. I started to kick downstream with all my strength, hoping the speed of the current would be enough to carry me beyond the river god's reach.

For a moment, I was sure that it had.

And then I made the mistake of looking back.

That bow wave was cresting behind me, with the lazy barbed fin a few feet further back. And what really gives me nightmares to this day was how slowly it followed; how unhurried it was. A shark would've swum fast. The God of the River just took his time. I kicked out faster, ignoring the pain in my ribs; the taste of polluted, fecal water, the pounding of blood and water in my ears. Where did I think I was going? There was nowhere to go. This flood went on forever in all directions, and there was no place to hide from the river god because all the trees had been cut down two generations ago.

I kept swimming; not because I had hope, but because there was nothing else I could do.

I felt the River God come up behind me, by that sixth sense by which prey knows it's about to die. The flow of water changed as those huge jaws yawned, creating a chasm which water poured into, sucking in its prey. I felt the brush of mouth-spikes against my boots.

And then a sound split open the world. Louder than thunder, rain or rushing water; louder even than the screaming of my blood.

Of all things, thank Christ, a shotgun.

I glanced back in time to see the River God thrash in the water like a snake, and to see another a white flash of igniting powder against the darkening sky. Thunder cracked in response to the shotgun's roar, and a blue fork of lightning silhouetted a figure standing above the flood. It was Ratch, perched athwart the gunnels of an aluminum outboard, spitting two more shells into the open breech of that shotgun which always hung behind the driver's seat of her pickup. The current roiled and tossed around her, but she stood steady as a rock as the shotgun howled again, and shot hissed through the water where the river-god thrashed. And then spiny fins twisted in the water, and the River God was gone, back beneath the rising flood, in search of easier prey. A moment later, Ratch's strong hand had pulled me, dripping into the launch.

'Y'all right, kid?' That was Johnny, set down by the motor in the stern of the boat.

For once, I didn't care about looking tough in front of Ratch.

"Jesus Christ sir, no I am not." He and Ratch both laughed at that, though I could tell from the look on their rain-swept faces that they weren't alright either.

"Still alive though," said Ratch, sitting down next to me. "And that means you will be. And so will all of us."

For a moment, I almost believed her. But as dark shapes started rising out of the water on either side, I realized that they were buildings, and that the current was sweeping us through what had been our town up until that morning.

“So much for the mine, I guess,” said Ratch.

“I guess,” said Johnny. We passed the dark curl of a dead neon sign, the one that had glowed above his bar the night before. He looked away, trying not to let the pain show on his face. “And so much for my cousin’s place, I guess.”

It didn’t seem fair, ultimately. That no-one got their promised dignity; that it all came to nothing in the end. We spent a lot of time in the boat that day. We rescued a couple other survivors, and it was well past dark by the time we made it back to dry land.

The water was full of swimming things that night; vassals of the river god that had boiled out of deep places when the water came up. When the rain broke, the moon rose over a silent sea, disturbed only by the bow waves of swimming things unseen; by flashes of half-glimpsed bioluminescence.

It took a long, long time for the waters to drain away.

In that time, the remaining people left; cut their losses and moved to someplace else.

As for me, I never saw my town again, except for once. At the end of that Summer Ratch and I drove out, to walk one final time through the warped, strange ruins of places that we used to know. Scraps of old mining equipment had been strewn about by the flood; some of it over a hundred years old.

And there were other things, too, that had been cast up by the retreating flood. You’d have to watch your step as you walked, so you didn’t tread on them. They were strange bodies; rare, bizarre creatures from the depths. I wondered if they were products of nature, or abominations caused by runoff from the mine. Either way, we stood and looked at them for a very long time, watching as they slowly baked in the sun.