

Pulling a Coin from the Mouth of a Fish

I.

Punched in, we gather outside the hatchery.
The blue, predawn grass soaks through our tennis shoes.

Maglites and fog, crossing beams.

J.T. and Armando smoke behind the garage;
just twenty-four, J.T. is bald, but astutely built,
as is Armando, their shoulders and heads roil
crisp against the high-rose, palm of the sky.

Jeeps loaded, we join the smoke-break,
our faces embering with every drag.
Hector warms his hands beneath his shirt.
We joke he looks embarazada
as we pick through what's left of breakfast,
blow divots into our coffee. Billy and Paco
laugh as they part the cattails to piss.

In the highgrass spillway, frogs, night-hoarse,
chirp and croak.

II.

The work begins with shovels, many hands
brown the sanded shafts with blood—just a little.

Cracked, the grow-out pond's irrigation
pipe softens the earth, a bruised pear.

We can't find the PVC, nicking limestone instead.
The white protrudes like broken bones
in the pooling black sop.

We turn the water back on to hear where it gushes;
we put our ears to the clay.

A strange hum washes through the clod.

III.

10 a.m. The moon still cleaves its arrowhead
enamel through the sky.

Spotting something off the trail, Luiz
leaps from his ProGator,
releasing a Oaxaqueño sigh as he lands,
boots thumping in stride.

Searching the thicket, he utters coaxes,
like a cricket caught in his throat.

He returns with a red-winged blackbird.
Its thimble head droops in his cupped hands,
black eyes blinking.

Sick, man. Fucking sick. Luiz
cradles the bird over the picnic trashcan,
an immolation. We take turns

poking our eyes inside. The bird
seems to roost; the red-capped shoulders
splay and slack.

IV.

After lunch, we farm the ponds.
The six of us move as one in the water.

The brown murk darkens the hair on our chests,
the lighter fronds on our hands.

We pull the net taut, nudging the seine
with the toes of our wetboots. Channel cats

swag against our rubbered shins and calves;
their barb-whiskers thrash the mesh
as we gather their squirming pounds for the crane.

Sweating against the cool splashes,
we wade back to shore. A breeze
tugs the dimpled water eastward like a tablecloth
as sunlight curly-cues the margins of a passing cloud;
its cumulous shadow
trundles the berm until there's nothing.

These hours, we are paid.

This poem previously appeared in Issue 40 & 41 of *Third Coast* (Fall 2015).