

Helen Gill

ITS LITTLE HEAD GLOWS

He curls his finger down the side of his shoe and scoops out a small pebble. He puts it in the pocket of his shorts, along with a ball of yellow plasticine, a small bone, and a blue feather. He sneaks a look up at his father. His father stands next to him with one hand on his fishing rod and the other on his hip.

The boy squints across the river at the other men fishing. His eyes sting from too much sun. He tastes a crack in his lip. He hasn't caught a fish and he doesn't want to catch one. He squats down and pulls at a flap of loose rubber on the side of his shoe. Below the narrow wooden planks he can see mud and green weeds and a plastic bag. He glances up at his father who seems busy watching the men across the river with their bending lines. He leans forward onto his toes and lines his face up with a gap in the planks. He opens his lips and lets out a small squirt of saliva. It slips right through the gap into the water and sits on the surface, white, floating, a little juicy cloud.

He senses his father's eyes on him, and stands up. He checks his line like he was shown. He pokes at the line tentatively—no bite. He steps back next to his father and looks at him watching the men across the river. His fingers play with the part in his hair, the skin is sore because he left his hat on the end of his bed—along with his sandwich and tub of strawberry yoghurt—and the sun is hot. His eyes ache.

—Looks like they've got something over there.

The boy follows his father's eyes up the river a few metres to where a small crowd has gathered around a big man in long green waders. He's got a big beard and his fishing rod is twitching and bending like it could almost snap. The boy glances nervously at his own line. He turns back to see the bearded man haul a big yellow thing out of the river. His stomach lifts and he takes a step back behind his father. He takes a breath and peers around his father's elbow. The fish is awful. It's long and thick and yellow and rubbery. It twists and bends in the air and has tiny eyes embedded in its strange doughy skin. Its mouth, a small gummy flap, opens and closes like it's trying to speak.

—Reckon that's a shark of some sort. You stay here and watch the lines, I'll just nick over and get a closer look.

The boy watches as his father puts his rod between the planks and heads up the river. He watches as his father stands and talks to the other men who are like the bearded man and laughs and pokes the fish. A stumpy sort of man

wades into the water and stands near the fish then he suddenly wraps his arms around it, hugging it. The fish twists and writhes and the man moves with it. The gummy mouth flaps around over the man's shoulder and the boy sees one of the little eyes roll. It looks at him. The sickly thick yellow fish looks at him and he turns and runs into the trees behind.

He stops running because his socks are full of seeds. The grass is dry and his head is hot. The yellow fish's skin would be drying. The sun would be cooking its rubber skin. First he imagines it melting, then he imagines it bubbling. He sits down in the grass and pulls the plasticine from his pocket. There are seeds stuck to the outside and it's sticky and soft. He moulds it into a long fat shape and picks up a twig and pokes in little holes for eyes on either side. Then he scoops out a small hole in the dust and places the lump down and covers it over.

He stands up and wipes his face. His hands are red from the dust. He walks further through the grass until he reaches a tree. He picks off a piece of bark and crumbles it in his hand. He rests his forehead on the rough trunk and closes his eyes. They water and sting and it runs down his face and down his neck. He tickles and turns and lowers himself down to sit in the shade. He pulls the flap of rubber off his shoe and puts it in his pocket with the small bone and the pebble and the blue feather. He rests his chin on his bony kneecap. Something small and white in the grass catches his eye and he leans forward and picks it up.

It is a tiny egg. Not as big as the ones he eats. He passes it from hand to hand, fingering it gently. It hardly weighs anything. He places it in the dust between his shoes and stares at it. He thinks of the big rubber fish all yellow and twisting and he looks at the egg all white and still. His head aches and he winces and blinks as a fly flicks past his mouth. He thinks of his sandwich and hat and tub of strawberry yoghurt on his bed at home. He feels himself tighten all over. He thinks of his father happy with his fish, twisting the hooks out of the sides of their faces. He thinks of the man wrapped round the yellow fish. He sees its gummy mouth gaping and his own spit amongst the weeds. He sees its little eye staring at him. Rolling and twisting. He lifts his shoe, looks at the white egg and brings it down.

He stays there under the tree for a few minutes. His eyes are closed and he holds his breath, counting in his head. He lifts his shoe slowly and opens his eyes. He looks down. There is an object lying in the dust. He wipes his eyes and squints. It is small and pink. The dust around it is dark and wet. There are two half formed limbs and a large black eye covered in thin skin. The boy picks the soft body up and it folds over his finger. He holds it in front of his face and studies it.

The sun shines through it and he sees thin threads of purple and blue. Its little head glows. He pats the small swollen belly and smiles. He hears the crackle of twigs and sees his father's head over in the bushes. He looks down at the pink body then back at his father. He thinks for a moment, then gently he closes his hand around the soft form and slips it into his pocket. Along with the blue feather and the small bone, the pebble, and the flap of rubber from his shoe.