



*Paper Mill Press*

## **The Weight of Salt and Blood**

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After the fishing stopped I spent a lot of time exploring my imagination among the boulders, old wharfs, and flotsam that made up the shore line of our little community. My mother told me not to wander around the arm because tides come up and take you with them when they go. She once told me I can learn a lot from the sea, and I still believe that's true. Now she tells me to fear it.

It's not true what they say, that when you die you get carried off to heaven. When I was twelve I found what was left of my father heaped up into a rock crevice not far from where we lived, just a short ways around the arm. I was not with him when he was taken from my uncle's boat, but I still remember the nature by which he was given back.

There is beauty in how death is a return to that which you came from: the sea, the earth. I found my father washed upon rocks, body battered, partly eaten by sea creatures and birds. He was just a shadow or a stain on the rocks where he laid. There were bones protruding through the rapidly fading flesh poorly preserved in salt. And I wondered; will children find pieces of his vertebrae along a beach and imagine an epic fight between sharks and dolphins and mythical sea creatures? A battle that ended in the inevitable mortality of a hero. He would have been struck down by a greater foe, leaving behind a trophy, a piece of his mighty back bone that carried the weight of his people for the noble time he was alive.

I never told anyone that I found him there. At his funeral I was told his body was lost at sea. As if it just ceased to exist. And for my mother it did just that. I never returned to that crevice beyond the arm. There the tide took from me an emptiness, and I never wanted to go get it back.

I never believed that Dad would be waiting for me when

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I died. I didn't think he was carried off to the clouds where he'd be waiting for me, fishing rod in hand. But my mother tried to convince me that he was up there, watching over me. My mother, she was heartbroken when I returned to the boat. For me this life was different, it filled me with identity. When I would haul in my net against the weight of my catch I could feel him on the other end pulling. It's like he's looking up to me saying: "Carry it son, have no fear. This is the weight of your blood."

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