

The background of the cover is a dark, starry night sky. A large, bright, yellowish-orange full moon is positioned on the right side. The lower portion of the image shows a dark, silhouetted landscape, possibly a forest or a body of water, with some light reflecting off the surface.

MOONFISH

SHORT STORY

MARINA GERRARD

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By Marina Gerrard

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It was a warm summer's evening. The sky was clear and the moon was full. He felt wide awake. Sleep would not come till much later. Perfect time for a leisurely stroll in the woods.

The heady scent of honeysuckle drifted his way. He breathed in deeply and set off.

It was very quiet. Only the occasional bird call, a slight breeze rustling the trees. Once in a while, further off, the natter of ducks and other water birds that could not yet find sleep. Not a soul about. Just how he liked it.

As he neared the lake in the middle of the woods he caught the sound of a fishing rod being cast. For a moment he was disappointed about not being alone but the sound blended in harmoniously. He soon forgot about being peeved. He ambled down the path that led to the lake, mildly curious about the other person.

The silence deepened. The only other sounds that could be heard now were the crunch of his feet on the shells that covered the path and the rod being reeled in and cast again. The woods and the woodland creatures had gone to sleep.

The angler was a dark shadow in the fading light. He halted at the spot where the other sat huddled, wrapped in hood and shawl. The only things that moved were the line and sinker that drifted gently on the ripples.

'Evening,' he said jovially, the sound of his voice carrying loudly across the water.

There was no reply. The angler did not stir. The woods were silent. The water rippled and murmured quietly.

'How's it going then? Are they biting at all?'

He wondered if the man -he assumed it was a man- had fallen asleep. Which was not surprising, he thought, under the circumstances. So he cleared his throat and spoke up.

'ARE THEY BITING TODAY?'

The reply was soft, neutral, vague. The voice barely rose above a whisper.

'If you're not careful . . .'

'Oh . . . er . . . right,' he said hesitantly, somewhat taken aback.

'It's not *wise* to talk about biting, you know, when biting is possible.'

The hint was light, the voice almost inaudible.

Chuckling quietly to himself, he replied 'No, probably not.'

Silence reigned again for a moment.

'Good evening for it, though,' he tried again cheerfully.

The reply was slow to come, the voice low and considering.

'Who knows . . . Tonight's a full moon . . . No, it's not *wise* . . .'

'I like coming here,' he continued the cheerful chat. 'Usually not round this time . . . I've never seen you here?'

The reply was neutral.

'I'm always here. Fish, fish-er, fishing, fished. Use that to your advantage.'

'Excuse me?'

There was a barely visible shrug but a movement nonetheless.

'The one who does the fishing and the fish are one. Fishing is a process, a duel. Who wins, eh? . . . Who wins?'

There was not a doubt in his mind.

'The angler.'

'Not always . . . Everything hangs on the angle, doesn't it?'

'I suppose it does,' he said dubiously. 'The fish does, when it's caught, I guess.'

There was no reply. The water rippled and sighed. The moon was the only thing that seemed to shift position. It cast a reflection on the water. He idly looked at the reflection, as it broke up and became whole again.

'I like doing it myself,' he said after a while.

'What?'

'Fishing.'

'At which end of the rod do you dangle?'

It was only a polite enquiry without any interest in a reply.

'Eh?' he said nonplussed. He was beginning to feel a little uncomfortable.

'Don't say I didn't warn you.'

He did not know what to say to this. Instead he listened to the silence. Everything was quiet but the silence did not feel empty. His ears began to be attuned to the woodland. He could hear small burying sounds. Mice, he thought, or perhaps moles. Water voles more like. The call of a bird that woke up and went back to sleep. An occasional gust of wind rustling the trees, stirring the water. The sounds only served to underline the silence. It was almost a shock when the angler spoke again, softly, sibilantly.

‘They say the silence has ears . . . Sometimes though . . . sometimes the silence has teeth . . . In the silence things happen, invisible things . . . underwater things . . . They are there . . . *behind* you . . . in the corner of your eye . . .’

He half-turned to check if he could see anything behind him but there was nothing. The voice continued.

‘In the silence danger lurks . . . When there aren’t any people, you can hear . . . *that* . . .’

He strained his ears but he failed to hear anything. He shifted from foot to foot uneasily.

‘But only when you are still, very still . . . quiet inside yourself . . . Do you understand?’

He cleared his throat. ‘Er . . . I . . .’

The voice became even softer, more of a singsong. He could barely hear it.

‘No, I can see that you don’t . . . understand. If water ruffles, when the wind doesn’t blow . . . If forest speaks, when the birds are silent . . . When the moon is . . . *full*, the night full of shadows . . . *then* . . .’

‘Then *what?* What happens *then?*’ he demanded urgently.

‘Shush, listen . . . Those who have ears, use them to listen . . .’

He listened. Far away, in the distance, he thought he could make out the sound of gills moving. The mouths of fish gulping air. A soft, regular and very slow heartbeat.

‘*Their* breath . . . They are sleeping.’

‘Their? They?’

‘Mmm.’

‘I don’t hear anything.’

‘Shush.’

They listened. Again he thought he could hear the sound of gulping mouths, slightly louder this time.

‘Look, there’s the moon.’

The angler suddenly reeled in and cast the line and sinker again. They hit the water with a little splash. Ripples went out in circles and the reflection of the moon rippled with it.

‘There’s no hook on your line!’ he said surprised and somewhat put out.

The reply came after a slight pause.

‘I . . . fish in the moonlight. Fish light. Dream light. Under water fish dream. I . . . flounder . . . caught in their dreams . . .’

‘I rather believe *I’m* the one that’s dreaming,’ he muttered to himself, partly laughing, partly uncertain.

‘Dreaming or being dreamed. It’s all the same. That is what we are talking about,’ the angler confirmed.

‘Oh . . . er . . . right. Well. Yes.’

He fell silent, again unable to think of a suitable reply. In the far distance he picked up a kind of buzzing noise. It sounded like a cluster of flies. It was hardly audible but there. He began to feel more and more uncomfortable. Sweat was trickling down his back. He wanted to take off his shirt but did not think he could do so in the presence of the other person. He coughed and shuffled his feet.

‘Pff, it’s warm tonight,’ he mumbled. ‘Close. Feels like thunder . . . And yet, there isn’t a cloud in the sky . . . A *clear* summer’s-’

‘They’re coming!’

The water babbled and murmured. The flies buzzed. His eyes almost closed as he tuned in to the sounds. The warmth in the air made him feel sleepy.

‘Not a cloud in sight,’ he said dreamily, ‘and yet . . . Silence all around us, *close*. Closing *in*.’

‘Not the silence, Jonathan.’

‘How come you know my name?!’ he said, shocked out of his reverie.

‘Not the silence . . . *Them* . . . The silence is full of moonfish. Look, there’s one!’

There was the plopping sound of a fish jumping.

‘Silver,’ the voice said with quiet admiration and wonder. ‘Silver. Like the moonlight itself.

‘Moonfish? *Moonfish*?!’ he muttered to himself, rejecting it as a crazy notion. ‘And the rest! I for one don’t see a thing.’

He waited for a reply to his challenge but it did not come. The angler sat perfectly still, a black silhouette in the moonlight, rod poking out, line and sinker immobile. The only thing that moved was the sound of flies buzzing. It seemed to come nearer, become slightly louder.

‘Fish see things differently from us,’ the voice continued mildly. ‘Through fish eyes. Under water eyes. Lidless alert eyes. Every eye its own field of vision. For them the world is split. Eat or be eaten . . . Under water fish sleep with their eyes open. They dream. With their eyes open. About eating and being eaten. The same as when they are awake. Sleeping, waking. It makes no difference. To them. Even in their dreams they devour one another . . . A harsh world . . . under the surface.’

The voice became a dreamy whisper.

‘Blurred . . . filled with twilight . . . mysterious . . . calmly gliding in and out of green fronds. Plants trailing, waving. In their shadow . . . motionless . . . cold like the water . . . slow like the current . . . death watches. Black, with a silver belly. Without compassion. Cold blooded. Cruel. Because it too is being watched. Always . . .’

A brief considering pause.

‘Fish hear everything that moves in the water. Everything that’s warmer than them they can feel. Nothing gets by them but the water itself. That they can’t see. That is as invisible to them as the silence is to moonfish . . .’

Another pause.

‘Moonfish swim in the silence . . .’

The only thing he heard was the persistent buzzing noise of flies and the occasional pop of fish jumping, invisible to his eye.

‘Look! There’s another one!’

He sniffed.

‘It does, does it? Where, if I may ask?’

‘There! See those rings in the water?’

He looked and saw nothing but water rippling around the sinker. The buzzing nagged at his ear and he flicked at it absentmindedly.

‘When the moon shines,’ the voice said dreamily, ‘moonfish see themselves in a mirror.’

‘Mirror!’

‘When the moon shines,’ the angler said with reproach, ‘the surface changes. Every fish feels it. A change in pressure, in temperature . . .’

The voice softened again, admiring.

‘In the mirror they see their lives. Eating, dreaming, reproducing, being eaten . . . dreamed. Powerlessness. Then they dream in the moonlight. Moon dreams. About travelling *through* the mirror. About power. Power over who eats and who gets eaten . . . In the moonlight their dreams rise to the surface . . . like air bubbles.’

Plop!

‘They touch the surface and burst . . .’

Plop!

Another brief pause, the silence filled only with the sound of buzzing.

‘Only when the moon is . . . full . . .’

He was fascinated in spite of himself. He smiled.

‘Then *what?*’

The angler laughed, softly, mildly.

‘Then the moonfish come *up!*’

Plop!

Plop!

‘Yeah!’ he snorted, unable to detect any form of fish life connected to the plopping.

This did not net any comment. The voice continued this time with some passion behind it, slightly faster, more emphatic.

'*Then* fish dreams have teeth. The fish swim *upward*. *Through* the surface. They jump and sink their teeth into reality. They *gorge* themselves,' the voice said fiercely.

'Power. They eat power.'

The voice became dreamy again, a slight laugh in it.

'Sometimes I catch one . . .'

The line was reeled in and cast again, without any detectable movement from the angler.

The buzzing became louder, ever more annoying.

'*Moonfish* . . . Cool beauty . . .'

The voice was filled with fascination. It was followed by a neutral statement of fact.

'Moonfish only have one eye . . .'

He did not comment.

'Don't you believe me?!'

He shrugged the question away.

'How come you know all these things?' he wanted to know.

'Fish, fish-er, fishing, fished. Use that to your ad-'

'Yeah, yeah,' he said impatiently. 'Dreams with teeth! Dreams are air. You breath them in, you breath them out. They are invisible. Dreams do not *exist*.'

'Just like fish and water? Why are you still here, if you don't believe me?' the voice inquired mildly.

'I came to relax. Have a moment's quietness,' he muttered, more to himself than in reply to the question.

'Allow myself to drift with the stream. Time out from the struggle of existence. Peace . . . Something like that . . .'

There was an amused little laugh.

'You're a romantic, Jonathan. You can't look for peace. Peace is what you *are*. *They* have no peace. *Their* world has no spectators. Those who do not hunt, are hunted. Even their dreams have teeth.'

The last was said with emphasis.

He started having difficulty with breathing

‘I wish the thunder would break,’ he mumbled. ‘The air feels like treacle. Not a breath of air.’

He panted and pulled at the top of his shirt.

The buzzing came closer. It seemed to flit around his ear. He swatted at it but it did not go away. Instead it seemed to hang around him, become louder yet again. Then a new sound wove itself into the buzzing. Voices, he thought as he tried to tune in to what he heard. Fish voices, hardly audible, fading in and out, gulping, sibilant. Six voices, whispering softly, cheerful, hopeful. After a while he could make out what they were saying, repeating, over and over again.

‘We drive a wedge. A wedge in the mirror. We gather the light. The light from the shadow. We gather life and leave death behind us.’

The voice of the angler slipped in between, dreamily.

‘The silence is full of dreams. Unpredictable. Cold blooded. Cruel.’

‘Those flies are driving me crazy,’ he snarled, swatting futilely.

‘Mmmm. Yes. Bluebottles. Meat flies.’

‘*Meat flies!*’

The quiet statement disturbed him. It felt ominous. His breath caught and he coughed nervously. Sweat prickled in his armpits. He felt like scratching himself all over.

‘Meat flies. Vultures. You’re no hunter, are you?’

This was followed by little laugh.

‘No . . . I . . .’

He wiped the sweat of his brow and pulled at the neck of his shirt again.

‘They wait until the moonfish have selected their prey. They take what’s left. That’s the way it goes.’

He cleared his throat and panted, trying to find air.

In between the buzzing and the endless refrain of fish voices came the faint sound of a heartbeat.

‘Silence is like water,’ the voice of the angler announced.

‘Every sound, every moment carries, creates waves, changes the pressure. Fish are very sensitive to that. Those who hunt, don’t make a sound. Those who do, betray themselves.’

The buzzing seemed to close in on him. He felt constricted and had trouble breathing.

‘Flies,’ he snarled in between gulped breaths. ‘I *hate* flies. It sounds like they are coming nearer all the time.’

He gave a nervous little laugh.

‘Maybe their prey is somewhere near *us*,’ he panted.

‘Maybe?!’

It shut him up. The buzzing turned up another notch. It felt like it was everywhere and permeated everything. And yet there was not a fly in sight. The sweat was pouring off him by now.

‘Fish blood is cold,’ the voice continued, pensive, unperturbed.

‘Cruelty is cold passion,’ it mused.

‘Cruelty is power, hunter’s power. Fear is weakness, the prey’s Achilles heel. Fear leaves a trail of warmth, loud like a scream. Fish have an excellent sense of smell. Hunting is their life.’

The sound of a slow heartbeat wove itself into the buzzing more prominently. His head began to pound with the endless noise and the strain of trying to catch his breath. He was beginning to feel faint.

‘When you are very quiet, the moonfish can’t see you. Those who are quiet, are invisible. To them . . .’

‘Then stop talking so much!’ he whispered.

This netted a little laugh.

‘Me! This is *you*.’

The sound of panting and a racing heart beat were very loud for a moment.

‘This is *them*.’

The quiet sounds of fish gills, mouths gulping for air, slow heartbeat, soft babble of voices rising and falling, harmoniously.

‘And you?’ he whispered.

‘This is me.’

There was a moment of absolute silence.

He swallowed and cleared his throat. The sound of panting and a racing heart intruded very loudly on the silence.

‘Still is when you can hear the grass grow . . .’

A light, tinkling sound.

‘Can feel water becoming fluid . . .’

A light babbling.

‘Hear the sap rise in a tree . . .’

A gurgling sound.

‘I . . .’

‘Shush. Listen . . .’

They listened. The gurgling, babbling, tinkling combined with the buzzing and the fish voices to make a melody. Low. Harmonious. Somehow it did not reassure him and gradually his own panting and heartbeat overtook any other sounds.

‘Be still!’

For a moment there were only the buzzing and the sibilant voices to be heard.

A thought struck him.

‘I don’t have a rod,’ he said.

‘No.’

‘Does that mean . . .?’

‘What do *you* think?’

He did not answer.

‘What on earth do you need a rod for?’ the voice inquired mildly. A curious afterthought.

He gulped.

‘I . . .’

The moon briefly hid behind the canopy of trees. The light dimmed and shadows lengthened. His voice rose up the scale and took on a high-pitched note.

‘Why can’t I *see* anything!’ he cried, suddenly panic-stricken.

Then to himself in a quieter tone.

‘Maybe this is all a nightmare and in a minute I will just wake up and . . .’

The angler gave this a sarcastic little laugh.

‘Maybe . . .’

Then the voice changed. It became somewhat metallic and there was a slight echo to it.

‘May-be,’ it said.

The moon popped out above the treetops. He could see it reflecting on the water again and he breathed slightly more easily. The panic only slowly receded.

‘The trees seem to float,’ he whispered, ‘wafting to and fro like water plants . . . Warm . . . Not a breath of air . . . I dream . . .’

Then he did see something. Something moving.

‘There’s something between us and the trees! Shadows,’ he whispered, panting. His voice shook.

‘I see shadows. Motionless. Black and silver in the moonlight . . . No, not shadows . . . transparent. I can see through them. I can still see the trees.’

The sounds of an irregular heartbeat and panting intruded loudly on the silence again.

‘Moonfish,’ the quiet voice confirmed, calmly. ‘Everything waits . . . For the attack.’

He listened. For a few seconds the silence was complete. Then abruptly the sibilant fish sounds were there again, the gulping heavy and avid. The buzzing was there as well, high-pitched and threatening.

‘They are coming. The hunt has begun. The prey’s been selected,’ the metallic voice announced calmly, the echo more pronounced.

The sibilant fish voices remained low but the buzzing rose in an ominous crescendo.

‘Where?! *Where*, for God’s sake?! I don’t *see* anything.’

His voice was shrill with fear.

‘The rules are different here. You see with your ears. Close your eyes, Jonathan. And be still.’

He held his breath, then slowly let it go. He closed his eyes.

‘Be-auti-ful,’ he whispered in amazement at what he saw. ‘Beautiful.’

‘Fool! I warned you!’

‘I can see them! Their fins, their eyes, the sleekness of their bellies! So beautiful.’

He watched the fish, fascinated.

‘They’re so close I can see their teeth!’

Suddenly he gasped for breath.

‘Pull up!’ he cried. ‘Reel in your line! They’re climbing up!’

The angler laughed. A soft, intimidating, metallic laugh that echoed and rung out over the rippling waves.

‘Haven’t you got it yet, Jonathan? You shouldn’t have been here tonight. Not tonight of all nights.’

‘Oh, my god!’

He jumped back and stumbled. He scabbled away from the edge of the lake. The beat of his racing heart pulsed in his ears.

Plop!

The fish fell back.

‘Missed! What a shame,’ the voice chuckled. ‘Better luck next time.’

The line reeled in, moved by invisible hands.

‘What,’ he nearly choked on the words.

‘What do they do to their *prey*?’ he squeaked, his throat tight with fear.

The voice gave another little laugh.

‘They present it to their . . . master.’

The statement held a triumphant note. It made him shiver.

Line and sinker swung out over the water again.

‘Catch!’

The silence suddenly became turgid and fraught with imminent danger.

‘Oh my god!’

He started running, with the sounds of his panting and his thumping heart overriding any other sounds.

‘There is no escape from the moon, Jonathan. Not now. You’re too late. Too *loud*.’

The angler’s laughter followed him as he ran on, heart thumping, breath ragged with panic.

He kept on repeating ‘Oh my god’.

‘I did warn you!’ was the last thing he heard.

Then it was all over.

A long scream briefly woke the woodland birds. When it ended abruptly, the birds went back to sleep. The water stopped rippling. Only the moon continued to move silver across the sky. There was not a single sound to be heard.

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Thank you for reading my short story. If you enjoyed it, won’t you please take a moment to let me know? You can do so by contacting me through my website www.marinagerrardfiction.com. You’ll find more information about my other books there too.

Thanks!

Marina Gerrard

Moonfish is a work of fiction. Names and characters are the product of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to incidents that may have occurred or actual people, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

About the author

Marina Gerrard graduated to writing novels after finishing a creative writing course and producing a few prize winning short stories. She is the author of Journeys into the Heartland, a mini series of three psychological thrillers that delve deeply into the world of relived traumatic experiences. After finishing this trilogy she decided it was time for something less intense. She then embarked on writing a series of light-hearted novels that can be best classed as 'dreamscapes'. Her books are available in e book format.

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