

William Ginn

William Ginn took me out that day – my father had not been well – I was excited and fretting to get out of the house so Ginn said he'd take me under his wing.

"Watch me," Ginn said, letting the boat drift out – almost to a halt as he steered into the scrub – waiting for birds to scatter with each noise we made – *"patience is what you need,"* he said, waiting for them to chatter about this and that – whatever birds say to pass the time of day - forgetting they saw us earlier.

"A gentle winds helps", he said – the toing and froing of the creek - creates enough noise to mask those sounds you try not to make although it likes to fight you then - even when you pull right back, you never quite drift to a stop – whereas if you push too hard you move too fast, unable rest, so you have to keep on with your drawn out, long, slow arms - easier when it's calm but the birds hear you then - you never catch much.

After tying up the boat – settle down - wait – completely quiet – barely a thought in your head.

"Simply listen and watch," Ginn said,

"Swallow those words that hang on your lips."

Allow them to wait for hours

because this lets you kill the birds – catch the fish – set the nets – other thoughts can drift off the way they choose to go - your attention must fix on each small thing; squeezed so hard in your hand you can feel it throbbing.

Sometimes, when it's cold, you can hear weird sounds come out of the ice – complaining and whining – sometimes it's more like a cry or a moan – following the wake of the boat – depending on how thick the ice has grown – depending on how deep the lode - before long, the sound cracks and splits and dissipates. Sometimes its hard to see how far the ice has reached – especially on dead days when it can roll on so far through the calm water. Even then, it can shunt the boat and throw you out and, before long you fall in the mere and the cold takes you in its wide embrace and holds you there. He explained all this to me with such with glee, I expected him to throw me in the creek or, perhaps, he just hoped one day to see it happen.

"Never fall in boy," Ginn said, *"because I don't want to risk my neck dragging you back in the boat."*

Sometimes when the wind is strong, you see ice lay where the waves have gone missing

Always follow the edge of it - scrape it with your oar, hear it groan like a living thing.

Never let mess pile on top of more mess so the boat gets cluttered with ropes and nets and all the fish you've caught. It confuses you and slows you down and makes noise and the birds soon notice.

Untie the boat, jump in, push off, choose where to go
– every spring it's new as the reeds rise up and trees come down -
pulling on drowned scrub to steer the boat – keep on the move –
lifting the oars up and down like bird's wings as we snake through the creek.

"Patience – patience – boy – there's no rush - no rush - patience is all you need doing this kind of work."

William Ginn was a mean man, made of bile, but I got used to him in the end.

Sometimes he'd not speak for hours - even at the start of the day - which made me uneasy and tense. Complaining would make things worse, of course, so I tried to ignore him.

William was that type of man – he'd scatter the birds or pull on a cat's tail whenever there was no need.

Anyway, by the end of the day the boat had filled up with eels, slivering over each other – hundreds of black eyes in a mass of slime. William slipped one down the back of my shirt on the first day – forcing me to strip off my clothes to set it free, freezing in the mean time.

William's laugh was like a jackdaw's – harsh and raw. He always made me shift all of the gear though I was small, dragging anchors and nets and ropes round my thin legs, hooks caught on everything I passed as I tripped up and cursed. *"Don't tangle those ropes,"* he cried before he showed me how to loop them up - elbow to wrist - elbow to wrist then to tie them up in a bow.

Pushing away on that first day he said, *"today you'll watch me boy – don't imagine you need to speak – your job's to watch."*

After he tied up the boat, I asked him, *"why here,"* and he groaned and grumbled and said, *"isn't that's what you're here to learn boy,"* then no single word passed his lips for the next hour as he spat, and twitched and niggled with a scowl on his face.

"Better bring up the nets," he said.

Although each net was marked by a cane, I couldn't see one of them - however much I tried - but Ginn could find them - one by one - with barely a look - *"better learn how to do this boy"* he said - *"the last thing you want is losing your nets."*

"Always use the knife to hold them by the gill," he said *"or else the bastards slip right off"* - twisting back and forth each time you tried to grab them - jumping off when you think you're close. He didn't tell me this of course - not before he'd had a good laugh as he saw each one slip through my fingers.

"Better like this," he said, *"always like this,"* using his knife like one more finger, finding the gleam of the eyes to pick out the gills - absurdly small head on its coiled body...domed...squashed...dead eyed...marked with thumb prints - flipping them again and again - knife and thumb in the mass of them in the bucket where they'd all move at once - eye to eye - turning through the mess and spittle they make, curling round the rest of them as they slip in and out - a confusion of heads and tails that try to get in knots but slip right through them.

We returned the nets to the creek.

"Always look for lines," he said, *"near and far - a hill - a tree - the church over there - see - notice how they make lines"*

"That broken branch there - reckon it looks like a snake?" he asked and smiled at me - something as rare as a hen's tooth.

"I suppose so - yes," I said.

"Remember the snake - notice more things now - work out how they cross - coming back you'll see them - you'll know you're here - not there - or anywhere else - just here - here."

"Yes," I lied.

"Every little bit of the mere will be in that head of yours," he said, poking it with his finger.

Gathering the nets this way, the boat was full to the brim.

During all this time, he barely said a word - leaving me to do the work - he didn't do anything more than let clues slip out of his pinched face so I'd have to work out everything.

William Ginn died last year. After a life in the damp and cold his face was like leather dug out of the peat with your spade.

Sometimes, I wanted to kill the old goat and came near a good few times, I can tell you.

Although I worked with him all that time I can't say I got to know him well.

Many thought he was mad.

William Ginn had a little head, hard and off shape like a piece of flint. Sickly as a child they said. Funny how a place so huge as the fen could rest there inside that head of his - every small part of it - every small part of this great wide place.

Everything I know of the fen came out of those years - belonging inside that head of his.