

## The Last Fishermen

Volker Harry Altwasser

Translated by Katy Derbyshire

The *Saudade* had been underway for the no man's territory off Somalia for six hours now, heading out to hunt tuna. The Third Officer surveyed the nautical chart of the huge area, pensive. It belonged to nobody. It had never belonged to anybody. Only to the tuna, the fish dying out beneath their keels. The young naval officer wiped both hands over his face, exhausted at this early hour. Hundreds of Russian, Spanish, Portuguese and Japanese trawlers plied these waters, outperforming the local anglers for decades; the Somali fishermen had eventually turned to piracy. The Italian Mafia had dumped toxic waste in this oceanic no man's land in the mid-1980s, and as he looked at the sonar screen the Third Officer wondered once again whether it was all worth the bother in the first place. Was it time to find something else? That was one of the questions that had been troubling him for some time. What with the new risks! Pirates had attacked a trawler for the first time the past week. Despite it having almost ninety men on board. The crew of the *Verlaine* had managed to drive the pirates away of their own accord, but didn't the attempt show that things were really coming to an end? The ambitious young man glanced at the radar. He saw a small green dot shooting towards the *Saudade*. What if it was a pirate ship?

He commanded 'full speed ahead' and went to the yardarm. He inspected the fishing boat through the ship's binoculars with concern. It was an old pirogue. No outboard motor. The only sail was set. A teenage boy and an old man, no other crew. No tarpaulins on board that might be hiding weapons and men.

The boy stood at the bow, waving something to and fro that looked like a rag, like a grey rag. Almost triangular. Some kind of fish? 'But what kind?' wondered the duty officer, suddenly filled with positive intuition. He returned to the bridge, ordered all engines stopped, and made an announcement over the loudspeakers: 'Attention! – Processor

Robert Rösch to the bridge immediately! – Attention! – Processor Robert Rösch to the bridge!’

Robert Rösch was sitting on the edge of his bunk, nursing a hangover. The first thing that came into his mind, after a curse, was the thought that something was up with Mathilde! She’d gone and done it. The message he’d been afraid of all these years had come. His wife had – but no! Not at all: Mathilde had asked him to stay on land for good, and he hadn’t said no straight off. He had strengthened his wife’s newly awakened will to live. For the time being, anyway.

He was keeping her alive with this hope; that reassured him but he still approached the duty officer at top speed: ‘To the bridge! – Processor Robert Rösch.’

The Third Officer waved him onto the yardarm and held the binoculars out to him: ‘What do you say to that?’

Robert looked through the lenses: ‘Definitely some kind of batfish the boy’s waving. But it might be just a red batfish or a damn toadfish. – It could be a shortnose batfish though.’

The officer nodded: ‘What’s your advice?’

Robert handed the binoculars back: ‘Take a look, check it out. – Maybe they’ve got more than that one scrap on board.’

The officer nodded and said: ‘My thoughts exactly! – Go to port amidships. We’ll put out a cutter.’

Robert nodded, descended the yardarm stairs and heard the cutter crew being ordered to the upper deck via loudspeaker. Not much later he was sitting in the small boat with the paymaster and two men from the deck department, winched down by a crane. It hit the surface of the quiet sea hard, the hooks were released and the engine started. Robert saw the old man striking the pirogue’s sail and heaving to.

The batfish specialist Robert Rösch thought he’d soon be looking at a red batfish. The species was well known from Ibaraki in Japan to Korea and India. It grew to thirty centimetres in length and its skin put out spines when touched on the belly or the lower part of its head. It had only been discovered on the twenty-fourth of April 1999, but since then it had spread rapidly. It had previously inhabited the deepest parts

of the deep sea, but something was now driving it into shallower waters, Rösch recapitulated. Its flesh was inedible and of no interest to other fish either. Like all batfish species, it was among the most bizarre sea fishes. From above, its body appeared flattened and was almost round in its triangular shape, as if looking at the Egyptian pyramids from outer space.

If it were a toadfish the body would be slimmer and the skin rougher. Its belly would be broader and there'd be a protrusion of flesh above its eyes. The toadfish stayed on the bottom at all times, barely moving. It dangled its fleshy lure in the current, and when it caught the attention of a smaller fish swimming past the toadfish simply opened its mouth for the current to drive the hunter in inexorably. The smaller fish would be eaten, and the toadfish would close its mouth again to wait for its next meal.

This bait was the main difference to the red batfish, which only differed slightly from the shortnose batfish – whose skin was worth its weight in gold in the South of France.

Both species had large pectoral fins and a large number of spines on their backs. In these spines was a poison, ten times more fatal to humans than snake venom. All batfish species lived in sandy areas, often burying up to half of their bodies, with only the upper skin and the spines above the sand. These nocturnal fish used their skin as their hunting equipment, and it was this skin too for which the shortnose batfish was hunted. Robert took another look through the binoculars: The boy was still holding up the fish. But he had a cloth wrapped around his fingers! Robert considered that a good sign.

He waved at the fishermen, who returned his greeting in silence, curious. The cutter throttled its speed, and finally the vessels were side by side. Robert climbed onto the other boat, first holding out a hand to the old man, who took it in surprise but didn't shake it, before Robert went over to the boy, who had laid the fish on the planks in front of him.

'It's too big really,' went through Robert's mind, 'but what does that mean anyway!'

He turned the languidly flapping fish onto its back and rubbed slightly at the lower skin. Then he turned it back over and nodded. No doubt about it! It really was a shortnose batfish! Almost thirty centimetres long. Its skin was in pristine condition, but the most important thing was: the fish was still alive!

That meant it hadn't been trawled up by a dragnet, it had been brought to the surface slowly and mechanically by a rod, adapting to the changes in pressure so as not to implode. So they had time! Rösch nodded at the paymaster. He made a silent estimate of this one skin's value at two hundred and forty thousand US dollars.

His breath stopped when the boy lifted a cloth from a bucket and pushed it over to him. Seven other shortnose batfish were swimming in it. Rösch needed only a glance to be certain: They were smaller, but together they must have a market value of about a million US dollars!

As casually as possible, Rösch laid the largest fish back in the bucket, watched it recover quickly, and signalled to the paymaster to buy up all eight of them.

The Indian paymaster nodded and the two coastal fishermen were glad to find they understood him. The bid was for a hundred US dollars.

The old man shook his head, having heard plenty of stories about these high-seas fishing vessels from faraway countries.

The paymaster immediately raised his offer to two hundred US dollars. The old man looked at his grandson, something puzzling him. Was it that hurried rise in the offer? The old man started brooding. What was so special about these useless flatfish? His people scorned them because of their poisonous spines. He shook his head again and listened in amazement as the Indian fixed the price at a thousand US dollars.

He indicated to the old fisherman that this was his final offer.

The old man nodded slightly, stretching out three fingers. He looked at his grandson as he did so, and suddenly the old man remembered his ancient dream of the sea! Now the sea was making that dream come true. It wanted to make him rich so that he could send his grandson to a big, important school! He raised his other hand right away to show that the price was eight, not three thousand US dollars.

He left the eight demanding fingers up in the air, smiling for the first time when he saw his young grandson's excited face. He ignored the Indian paymaster's shaken head, looking stubbornly past his face and waiting.

The eight fingers stayed where they were. The old fisherman didn't want eye contact; he wanted to be paid his price. Calm and proud, he looked out into the distance.

In the end the *Saudade's* paymaster shrugged and counted out eight thousand US dollars into the boy's trembling hand.

Happy with the deal, the two men bowed to one another and took their leave. Sitting back in the cutter with the bucket of valuable batfish between his legs, Robert watched the old man stroke the boy's hair and kiss his forehead. Robert Rösch turned to the front, ignoring the cutter crew's whispered questions.

Nor did he reveal the value he estimated for the eight fish to the paymaster. All he said was: 'You know I'm not allowed to tell you that! I have to skin them first! Something might go wrong! Then you'd tear me to shreds! – No, no, I'll only tell the captain. In person!'

He took another glance at the fish before he dropped the cloth over the plastic bucket like a magician.

Skinning, the art of skinning the shortnose batfish – an art not even ten men in the world had mastered – Robert Rösch had everything ready to start skinning. He stood in the divided-off corner of Processing Hall Four, and while the other processors headed, filleted, gutted and froze tuna Robert Rösch looked down at the largest of the shortnose batfish he had taken out of the old pail and laid out on the table. It opened its eyes now and then, stretching its jaws but otherwise not moving. Robert Rösch waited. It was all a matter of the right moment; he mustn't be impatient, but he mustn't wait too long either. 'You could sink in this silence, if you had the peace to do it,' he thought, removing his left glove.

The fish-eyes were closed; the specialist placed two gentle fingertips on its lids and felt his own pulse for a long moment.

Then the twitching in the fish-eyes as he increased the pressure just a little. He saw the venomous spikes rising and the back curving slightly. He removed his fingers with a smile.

Something was distracting him, and he didn't like that one bit. It was his own thoughts that didn't suit him. It was the question of whether these were his last batfish or he'd stick it out on this steel island of moribund masculinity.

Rösch looked down at the fine specimen on the table, concentrating and waiting for the last tiny spark of life. It was only at the final moment of life that the rough, spiky skin didn't stiffen, only at this one moment that the rows of spikes didn't rear up. Only at the final point of dying did the stripped skin remain supple, reaching its enormous market value. Rösch had to remove the skin almost tenderly from the near-dead fish to preserve the unique colour on the inside of the skin. That was his big secret, something he never told anyone.

Should he tell someone one day? Perhaps young Ishmael? But how long would the world of high-seas fishing vessels exist any more? Long enough for young Ishmael?

Once the fish had almost run out of strength but death had not yet settled greyish over its skin – that was when that last moment of life came.

Robert Rösch had only found out by coincidence, three years ago. He had made the cuts over a batfish's eyes too soon, arriving at this fundamental finding. No trembling of the skin, no rearing of the back muscles; it mustn't put up the slightest resistance any more, not even against death. Robert Rösch nodded to himself. The shortnose batfish had to be skinned in a quasi-death trance as its body expired.

Voluntarily.

Robert Rösch closed his own eyes now, stroking his bare fingers across the rough skin, curving around the cartilages with the spines, stroking over the head, feeling the eyelids, under which there was no more twitching. Yes there was! And again! What a powerful fish! Rösch felt admiration for it, respect. He'd never seen such a long struggle with death. Ought he to release the fish back into freedom?

His colleagues would string him up! They'd seen how many fish there were. So there had to be eight skins in the end as well. They all wanted their share of the unexpected bonus.

Nothing else for it!

He was so lucky to have his slim motherly hands. He looked briefly over at the other men, who had to work by the piece with their broad, stiff father's hands, hard work. Rösch looked around; nobody was watching him. He nodded at the fish and picked up the short slitting knife that *Old Blade* had sharpened specially for him.

Rösch made two short slits above the fish's eyes and watched with a smile as it beat its tail only a single time. It was the perfect moment! Yes! He took the fish's soul along with its skin.

He circled its eyes slowly with the tip of the knife, then drew the cut once around the head and put the knife down.

Then he inserted both forefingers sideways between the skin and the flesh from the front. He stretched the skin, the spines standing up stiff in the air. The venom dripped out of them. Patiently, Rösch stretched the skin more and more, going round the fish's body several times, and while he'd started with just his fingertips under the skin, soon his fingers were fully inside the fish. Rösch stretched on and on, now reaching the start of the tail.

He felt the mechanical twitching in the flesh and saw the poison running off the skin. Then he'd separated the flesh from the skin. He felt his way round again to check but met no more resistance anywhere.

The specialist Robert Rösch opened his eyes again and pulled his fingers out.

There was next to no blood on his hands. He lifted the fish up by its tail, sprayed the table and the body clean with a thin jet of water, the fish poison running down, and began to thrust the cadaver out of the skin with short hand movements, starting from the tail end.

A little later the heavy head and the complete flesh fell onto the tabletop. Rösch held the valuable skin out in front of him at chest height and inspected his work. Not an indentation or a cut to be seen. It was intact and absolutely empty.

He lifted it slightly higher, turned up the edge and feasted his eyes on the crimson hue of the skin's inner side. 'More beautiful than any papal vestment,' he thought, sniffing its bewitching ambery scent.

What a gift of nature! Hidden for thousands of years and only found by chance. Robert Rösch was overcome with goose pimples, before he hung the skin on a peg above him and gave three short whistles across the hall.

All the men turned around to him instantly, yelling with enthusiasm and hammering with joy at the metal edges of their conveyor belts, the blood of the tuna dripping from them. The men removed their gloves, gave Rösch the thumbs-up and got back to work. They were still smiling minutes later, now that each of them was several tens of thousands of US dollars richer.

Rösch took the next shortnose batfish out of the bucket and laid it on the processing table in front of him. He shoved the skinned, twitching cadaver onto the metal floor, its mouth still gasping for air.

He had often dreamed of that repulsive sight. The fish, skinned but still alive for a few more minutes, with its open mouth and its lidless eyes – that sight had often come to him in his dreams.

Sometimes it even spoke.

Yet its words had never been accusatory; always advisory. Rösch thought back as he looked down at the slightly smaller batfish; he noted with a routine eye that it had just reached maturity. He remembered that it had always been good advice that the souls of the skinned fish had given him in his dreams. He had even followed the odd piece of advice, provided he had been able to bring it back from dreamland. What would these souls advise him? Could they help him make his most difficult decision yet? To stay on board or switch to fish farming. Robert Rösch gave an unexpected smile, suddenly imagining quite clearly what they'd tell him to do. He ought to stay on land, he ought to sign up at a fish farm, he ought to leave them in peace at all cost, the sea and the fish.

'Yeah right,' he said quietly. 'You'd like that, wouldn't you?'



Then he threw the fish back in the pail; the signal for lunch break had just sounded. He took the bucket and the first skin to the captain, who put them straight into the mini-bar and locked it several times over.

‘Why on earth do they pay so much money for these rags in the South of France?’ asked the *Saudade*’s commander, not expecting an answer.

‘No idea,’ said Robert. ‘I don’t even want to know. Either the Basques make ammunition out of it or some Montpellier pharmacist is mixing it into his infernal brew.’

‘What infernal brew?’

‘One of their literary types called it “the poet’s third eye.”’

‘Oh, you mean absinthe!’ said the captain, adding that he’d heard the crimson was used for space rockets, before accompanying his specialist to the cabin’s bulkhead. He wanted to keep this Rösch on board at all cost! As long as he was on a trawler himself he wanted Robert Rösch to stay. The captain decided to give his processor a long-term contract. Why hadn’t he thought of it sooner? He gave Robert a cordial goodbye pat on the shoulder, closing the bulkhead behind him to go straight to his desk and draft a contract, as Robert made his way to the mess to collect his lunch. He was greeted with a chorus. The almost seventy male voices of the port watch croaked: ‘Put him in the hold with a bucket of batfish, put him in the hold with a bucket of batfish, put him in the hold with a bucket of batfish, ear-ly in the morning – Ahab!’

And now he was supposed to go into fish farming? With a chorus like that, which his workmates had surprised him with three hours ago? Robert Rösch was back at his shiny metal table in Processing Hall Four, watching the last shortnose batfish.

The other skins were hanging above his head, swathed in the hall’s clouds of cold.

He had five months to go for his decision, they’d only been at sea a couple of hours, but Rösch thought the sooner he decided the better for all concerned.

But could he do it? How was he to go about it? From his endless years as a social sciences student he knew he had to make a list of pros and cons.

Pros and cons were useful for dealing with problems, but didn't that mean playing off the sea against his wife? Or his wife against the sea? And that was just what he couldn't do to either of them! He couldn't go about things that hard-heartedly, making feelings into thoughts, only to cross them out if they didn't suit him. The eternal vicious circle! It was thoughts like these that meant he'd never got his thesis finished.

From the common sense point of view there were plenty of reasons to stay on land, of course. At least he wouldn't run the risk of ending up as crazy as *Ancient Richard* or as scatterbrained as *The Opera Singer*. That way Robert wouldn't have to live through the *Saudade's* last trips and wouldn't have to process her last hauls. He'd have paid off and he could watch the end of international high-seas fishing from outside, what with the oceans soon being fished empty anyway. That way he'd be a fish farmer when the other fishermen lost their jobs, and that way he'd have Mathilde by his side, every hour of every day. They could spend long evenings by the fire, finally patting the muck of their childhood and teenage days out of their souls and sweeping it out of the front door. All the way to the cliffs! And the wind off the Baltic would do the rest; you could count on that wind, Robert was sure enough of that. He'd be turning forty in three years, but was a life like that worth striving for? For a real man? For a good old-fashioned guy? Or would a life like that mean living like an amputee? The life of a seaman stripped alive of his soul, that thick, reliable crust of salt that repelled all kitchen-sink psychology?

Robert Rösch felt at the last batfish, but its eyes were still moving far too fast.

'The sea's the soul,' he thought, 'and the soul's the sea.'

From the emotional point of view, there were plenty of reasons to stay on the *Saudade*, of course. Not having to get into the whole aquaculture thing, that was the most important one. The men on the *Saudade*

knew what he was worth. It was a lifetime achievement, a real lifetime achievement! He could live out his boyhood dreams of the ocean waves here. He didn't have to pretend to be something he wasn't, he could be honest. Yes, for God's sake, he had the luxury of having two homes, one of which was constantly on the move. He was surrounded by workmates who trusted him. That was an honour, a great honour. He didn't have to be grown-up here – anything but. He had the freedom to be a boy among boys, for God's sake, a pirate among pirates, a Peter Pan who was invincible as long as he just stayed on board the trawler. He didn't have to be independent, and he didn't have to take responsibility for others. His only task was skinning and processing. For God's sake, it was an easy life despite all the hard work. So far it had been free from the need to make decisions, but now he'd been backed into a corner. He'd brought a personal problem on board, for God's sake, even though they always warned each other on the trawler: Leave all that crap at home; whatever you do, don't bring it up the gangway with you or we'll all be lost!

And now he'd broken that rule. He had a pretty clever wife, that was for sure! Telling him about those fish farms just before he left, that was pretty damn smart; that way he couldn't refuse straight off.

And now?

Well there was no point complaining. It was the way it was. The processor Robert Rösch tried to keep matters of the heart out of things; there was one thing he didn't want on his stupid list: putting his love for Mathilde and his love for the sea on the plus or the minus side.

Pretty much all he could remember from physics lessons was that plus and plus made a big fat minus. He'd never understood it though.

'For God's sake,' Robert said to his last victim for the time being. 'Those were the days, the ones *Ancient Richard's* always talking about. The married radio operators on the *Junge Welt*, working together on the same ship. That'd be the solution! Back then in the GDR, when the women worked on the production lines and the men on deck. They'd never had to make any decisions. They'd just both of them

come on board. – You're complaining again, you great softie! You lightweight! You soft git! You loser! You idiot!

He dreaded having to face these questions day after day, not being able to make his mind up for five long months. If only there were another option!

Robert Rösch removed his glove again, gave a quick check and thought the right moment to skin the fish had come. But when he made the cut he stopped short. The batfish didn't move a muscle. It was dead! The spines didn't rear up. Robert Rösch skinned it, but the result was no surprise: the inside of the skin was as black as pitch. And it stank like pitch as well.

He'd just screwed up several hundred thousand dollars. Bonuses his workmates had thought were theirs.

Because of personal problems!

Robert Rösch had to stop himself from slapping his bare hand against the spiny skin. He stared at the reflecting metal of the processing table. Was it a sign?

Had he started hoping for signs now? Maybe he ought to go to the prayer room? The three-sided shrine would be empty now, the crucifix attached to one side. On the second was the star and on the third the crescent moon. *Old Blade* had mounted the whole shrine on castors so that the Muslims could always pray facing Mecca, regardless of which direction the ship was moving in. Robert was undecided, but then he thought: 'No, I'll have to make up my mind on my own. I have to make this decision myself.'

Robert Rösch pulled off his other glove, threw the worthless skin and the cadaver on the floor of the hall and left without a word. He wandered around the ship, ignoring the call to come to the bridge emitted from the many loudspeakers.

The words echoed in every corner of the trawler, Processor Rösch report to the bridge immediately, and all one hundred and seventy-six crew members understood what it meant: That loser Rösch had buggered off! All those dollars!

But then the young Third Officer's latest command for Rösch to report to him was interrupted mid-sentence, and everywhere on the ship the men frowned for a moment. They weren't particularly concerned though, and they carried on working as Rösch climbed through a bulk-head to the upper deck.

The short pirate appeared in front of him so suddenly that Robert laughed in surprise, before the kick to his guts took his breath away.

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