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“The Fish Girl”  
(excerpt from a novella)

Only a single incandescent bulb lit the room, and with the curtain wide open, she sprawled out and watched the blueness in the indigo sky slip away. There was that which was inside the room and that which was outside, but as the darkness and the light reached a point of equilibrium the border between the two, defined by a single pane of glass, was erased. All of the blueness turned to indigo, and when color itself disappeared, the glow of the single light bulb made the room brighter than the outside. This we call nightfall.

Normally, this would be when she would draw the curtain, but today she did not. Still lying down, Sawako gazed at the window that was becoming a mirror. Everything was reflected therein. She stared intently at her room as it appeared in the window.

*It's like a hotel room.*

Hozumi had said that once. *Sawako's room is always so clean, it doesn't feel lived in.*

An east-facing window and a bed placed lengthwise along it. A lone bookshelf and a single low-slung table. None of it had anything special in the way of decoration. But now the bed-cover was thrown to the side and the clothes she had been wearing were strewn across the floor. Since she had come home from work the day before yesterday, she hadn't so much as gone outside, and things were a mess. Books were haphazardly piled up on the table.

*I always cleaned it before he came over, she thinks.*

Sawako turned off the light by her pillow and closed her eyes. The light continued to radiate behind her eyelids. She remembered the dream she used to have as a child about an aquarium.

They were looking up at the fish, swimming in circles above them. She had been brought to the aquarium by her parents, and the tanks were all large enough to fit a house into. Looking up at them, she felt her knees go wobbly. Sawako had been a little girl in those dreams; she had cried to go home. But whether she turned back or continued on, the tanks were neverending. The fish opened their eyes and mouths blankly, drifting by in the current.

*They look like they're dead, she had thought.* They were like giant holding tanks for the spirits of the dead. Or something from the ancient past. Maybe she just thought that because someone had told her that people had evolved from fish, and that the fish were our ancestors. Every time she came down with a fever after that, she was haunted by dreams about the aquarium. Manta rays and whale sharks, with slimy, unfeeling maws, floated by over the sleeping Sawako's torso. The deep sea water pressed down on her body. Their slow revolution was like the wheel of fate, she thought, although she didn't know the first thing about fate.

Now, lying down like this, her room seemed much larger than usual, and fish lazily swam across the ceiling. But where were they headed, these creatures of the deep? Sawako in the here and now felt she was on familiar terms with them.

Without the heater turned on, the room was so quiet. Only the part of the bed where she was lying was warm, from the heat of her body. Sawako thought about the appointment she didn't keep, the place she didn't go. The place that she was supposed to be

right now. Hospital beds are supposedly cold. If she were sleeping from the anesthetic, maybe she wouldn't have felt the cold. But the anesthesia would be wearing off soon. Right about now, she would have gotten everything wrapped up, would have left the hotel, and would have been on her way to the hotel where they had agreed to meet. There would still be a dull pain, so perhaps she would have gone by taxi.

The surgery had been scheduled for the afternoon, when Hozumi would be at work. He had meetings all afternoon. They had to do with university administration, and they were always fussing about this and that, on and on, so he simply wouldn't be allowed to skip.

But that was probably over by now, too. He was probably on his way to that hotel. It had been Hozumi's suggestion that they be together after the surgery. Had he only said it out of a sense of guilt, to appear kind? It really would have been too much to make her way back home by herself from the hospital they had chosen in the next town over to avoid prying eyes. And, Sawako had thought, better to stay in a real hotel than in a room that just looks like one.

They had chosen a hotel that they had stayed at many times, before they had started meeting at her place. It was a little building tucked just inside an alleyway. The image of Hozumi moving away from her and slipping through the lobby flashed before her. Sawako always felt unsettled when, in order not to be seen with him, she waited a little while before following him into the hotel.

When she opened her eyes, it was quite dark. She squinted at the clock by her pillow—it was after seven. Surely he had noticed by now. *That I'm not coming. And if he has, surely he will call. And if I don't answer, he will definitely come here.*

It felt as though the room, already close to being pitch black, turned yet another shade darker. When she closed her eyes again, the fish were still there. Together with the figures of the aimlessly moving fish, Hozumi also disappeared. In the space between the ceiling and her upturned torso, something large passed by. A glittering silver stomach and red, slender, whiskery tendrils. A ribbonfish, with such a long body that it looked like a trail of ribbons. Its dorsal fin sliced through the air, and then it was out the window and gone. When even the tip of its tail had disappeared from view, nothing was left in the room save for a slight quiver.

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... and that's when I turned to foam and found myself floating in the water. I moved here and there, and little by little I rose up. There was a light up above, and it was calling out to me.

I had seen that light before somewhere. But when? I had been in a place like a shed. I hadn't opened my eyes, but I could feel other presences all around me. I sensed a lot of other beings like me, reddish and helpless. Everyone cried furiously, and then our spongy bodies were born one after another.

As my body became capable of movement, I moved around to the very limits of my ability. And then something touched me. My webbed little five-digit feeler touched my fellow next to me, and it let out a cry. I cried out as well, because we were one and the same. Because we were creatures that did not distinguish one from the other. One by one, we all began to cry out.

*The way these fish are schooling,* said a voice from somewhere up above.

*I see that. They're so—* This was a different voice. Even with the mass of sprogs screaming at their feet, their voices were calm and collected. I turned toward them. There

was a light, and an opening. I opened my throat and a scream came out. Something warm covered me. It was large and dusty, and loving. It took me in its arms and held me up high. Something flaked off of my back and fell away. Birth-sand, said the person holding me, and brushed it away. Sand? It was as though I myself had peeled away and fallen off.

I don't remember a thing after that. The span of time that I have forgotten is simply blackness, as though nothing were ever there.

What I remember next is entering the sea. Everyone was going in together, and I just did what everyone else was doing. At first I couldn't swim, but I managed to do it soon enough. Just like I do now. Just like foam does.

For some time, I was in a dark place, but before too long we came out into a brighter place. Some trees were blocking our way, flaying out net-like leaves and flowers that extended their long feelers. Before I had time to react, I bumped into them.

I was torn to pieces and destroyed.

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Sawako got to her feet. She felt as though something were moving in her lower abdomen.

It's way too early to be feeling something like that.

But even while she was thinking that, her body began to move of its own accord. Her mind was piecing things together a beat later. I have to get out of here. Before that person gets here.

She opened the curtain and turned on the overhead fluorescent light. She opened the closet door, and saw a pale blouse and a dress with a floral print. They were the kind of clothes she started to buy once she was dating Hozumi. Her eyes scanned the room, and instead she pulled jeans and a shirt from the bottom of a clothes hamper. And a well-worn navy blue jacket faded around the cuffs. It was a cotton material but well constructed, and it had a fur lining, so it was plenty warm. She tossed her wallet, a towel, and her cell phone into a large cloth bag.

She put on her sneakers and slipped down the apartment stairwell. The dry air cools off quickly, and the heat of the afternoon was already dissipating. She retied her scarf more tightly around her neck and hurried along the path to the parking. Hers was a bright green car that she had bought on the cheap from a friend. He had been planning to trade it in, but just then she needed a car for her commute. Upkeep was a little expensive for an adjunct professor like her, but neither of the private schools to which she was commuting could be reached without a combination of trains and buses. One was on the south edge of town, and the other was on the west edge. Stepping on the clutch, she headed in yet another direction; coming at a diagonal out of a narrow, sloping road onto Shirakawa Street, she drove northward.

Around the time she reached Ōhara, the traffic signals and signage significantly decreased. If she stayed on National Route 367 along the mountains, she should get to the Sea of Japan. It lay in almost the same direction from the city as her parents' place. When she went to visit them, she would follow this same highway to the neighboring prefecture, but to visit her parents, who lived in a place due north from there, she would normally take a low-lying road along the western shore of Lake Biwa.

She remembered what had happened two weeks earlier. She had gone to an out-of-the-way pharmacy that she never went to, and had bought a test kit, avoiding all eye contact with the clerk. She had set it level on the table, and for the few minutes she waited for the

results to appear, she was nauseous from the tension. How many times before in her life had she felt something similar to what she felt now? After her college entrance exams, and after her exams to enter graduate school. It was terrifying. She simply couldn't fail, she had thought. Her parents had told her that they wouldn't be disappointed if she didn't get in the first time around, but Sawako, who had always been a model student, found it unfathomably frightening to take a step off of the right track.

The test kit showed a double line, indicating a positive result. Was that a success? Or was it a failure? Even now, with this all-too-clear result staring back at her, she didn't know which it was. "Congratulations," the ob/gyn said to her a few days later. Did that mean this was a success? Was she still a model student?

She tightened her grip on the steering wheel. She was no novice driver, but this was her first time driving this stretch at night. The high beams from an unrelenting stream of cars flew by in the opposite direction. They pierced straight on through to the backs of her eyes, and her vision would briefly flash white. Sawako turned on her brights as well.

Just when she was thinking how straight the road was, she would come out of a tunnel to find a row of cedar trees in the path of the beams, and she would frantically turn the wheel. The curtain of trees would appear washed of their colors in the headlights. Time and again the road would roll up and down and there would be a tunnel at the end of a stretch of it, and when she emerged from the tunnel she would be in a corridor of cedars. The sky was dappled with clouds, and in lieu of moonlight to show the way, she relied on the reflective markers that had been attached to the guard rail. It was like having a lot of little moons along the way. Eventually, though, even the markers disappeared. After she had crossed over the Hanaore Pass, exhaustion hit her all at once. She pulled over to the shoulder and stopped the car. She could hear a river. Could it be one that flowed to the sea? Sawako took out a map. How much farther was it to the sea?

She rested her forehead on the steering wheel and closed her eyes. She thought about where she was going, and where she had been. Where had she been, before she met him? How had she spent her time in graduate school and at conferences?

Sawako had been studying twentieth century British women writers. "Well, that'll be tough, but good luck with it," her advisor at the time had said when she had decided on it as her research topic. "I can't really teach you anything about it," he had demurred. "I don't understand Virginia Woolf myself."

She hadn't thought too much about it at the time, the fact that someone's attitude toward her could change so clearly just by her saying she was working on Virginia Woolf. Her advisor's clear indifference was preferable to the other responses she received: "I don't understand," they would say, cutting her off, or else they would pick away at what she said. Or else they would act as though Sawako weren't even there anymore. She was a lot like a Virginia Woolf character. They treated her just like a woman who never receives any mail, who may as well not be there. Woolf had written short stories with that kind of woman in them. She had come to understand that academic conferences, more than she had imagined, were the domain of men.

Their first encounter had been more of the same. At the beginning of the academic year in which she had advanced to candidacy in her doctoral program, Sawako was introducing herself and her work to the group when a professor she didn't know interrupted her. "I'm not exactly sure what you're trying to say—could you explain that a little more?"

With that, Sawako went into more detail. "I just don't get it somehow," the professor said. And Sawako continued trying to explain. "I just don't follow you," he replied. It was a typical exchange for her, and yet somehow different. "What is this 'linguistic space'?

that you're talking about?" and "How is that 'space,' then?" and "Do you have a passage in mind that demonstrates this?"

He spoke quietly, but in a way that brooked no dissent. This went on for nearly thirty minutes. She could feel the faces of the people sitting with them go stiff. But the professor wouldn't drop it. He laughed, but despite this his eyes were distant and cold. She felt that he was mocking her, or that he took great pleasure in driving her into a corner. Or was he angry? When she looked into his eyes, she felt confused. And then she heard the word "poetic" come out of her mouth.

Oh, no, she thought, because that was a forbidden word around here. But with that, he said, "Now I think I understand you." The eyes behind his glasses softened. His expression showed a kind compassion for her.

"Well that's Professor Sakashita for you," her classmates consoled her later, at the party that followed for graduate students and researchers, without the professors. "You really fought the good fight," one said. He came from a university in the Tokyo area and was already a professor by the time he turned thirty; he was known to be doing research that was a little strange. When she heard the name Sakashita Hozumi, she was mollified. He had appeared in various media outlets as a public intellectual, but Sawako was a little distanced from all of that and hadn't recognized him in person.

*I had heard he was pretty good, but he actually seems brilliant to me.*

*But wasn't that a little over the top?*

*What's going to happen to our cohort with him around?*

*I've heard he can be absolutely vicious.*

*Speaking of which, the other day ...*

The conversation turned to anecdotes involving Sakashita. Sawako's mind was a muddle. She half-listened to the group, its curiosity piqued, discuss what sort of man the new professor was, but at the same time, her spirit had moved elsewhere. She felt as though something had been taken from her, something important had been pried away, taken by force.

*Why did he understand me, she wondered. Does he know what I know? About the meaning of 'poetic'? About the feeling one has in that moment one pursues the spirit of a word?*

Sawako had always been obsessed with the written word, with the mysterious act of reading it. With the characters that had been hidden away in rough leatherbound editions for decades in a basement library. With these bunches of figures that had been spelled out in another corner of the world over 100 years ago. For Sawako, they would have been meaningless symbols had she not acquired the rules of their grammar. She used a dictionary, worked her way around the wormholes, and tried to work out what they were trying to tell her; in the process, these characters that had seemed so distant gradually began to reveal themselves to her. As they had the dust brushed off of their bodies, as they were followed along line by line, they soon began to make claims for themselves. The characters started to zealously desire her attention. Just as plants seek water, the books sought to be opened, and the symbols were in a frenzy to make their meanings clear. Sawako responded to that power, in willing collusion. It was as though each was supplying a missing half of the other: The letters couldn't survive without Sawako, nor she without them. Just as she would disappear into the stacks, at times making progress and at times losing her way, so would she follow this horizontal writing to the end of each line before wandering back to the beginning of the next one.

And she was always waiting. For the moment when they who had become words ceased to be words. She watched with bated breath. For the moment to come when words

would no longer be words, when they would dissipate into pure spirit, when they would retreat from the world as we know it.

*Translated from the Japanese by Kendall Heitzman*