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THE SURFACING

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Mama, look, the little girl says, holding out her hand. Her fingers are dark red, as if bruised. On her palm is a raspberry, plump, pulled from the bush at the back of the yard—a sphere of thick lumps. She brings it to her mouth and whispers in its ear.

Mama, look.

The fish, if it is a fish, lives somewhere in the waters between the west coast of British Columbia, the islands of Hawaii, and Japan. She glimpsed it once before in the submarine, sitting and watching, as is her custom, the live footage from the cameras coasting along the ocean floor, eleven thousand feet below her in the water. The screens in the observation room are arranged in a grid pattern, pixelated livestream set atop and beside pixelated livestream, like the simultaneously split and interconnected viewpoint of a fly.

View*points*, she corrects herself.

Looking at these screens, looking as if through the eyes of a fly or some other multi-eyed insect, she can see the ocean floor from every angle—or almost every angle. She can't see behind, although sometimes she can see the camera itself from behind, as another camera trails it for a moment, crossing its path. The ocean is always dark, but the lack of a backward-facing camera feels like a deeper darkness. For this reason she's exhausted after sitting for too long in the observation room. She's tackled—as she would describe it—by emptiness, numbness, the bluntness of invisible pain. Sitting here is like trying to locate a headache on the surface of the scalp when the injury is inside the brain.

Rolling, rolling: the ocean floor rolls smoothly by, illuminated briefly by the camera lights.

She once asked Anthony, the head of research, about this blind spot. Why can't we put a camera on both sides of the probe?

We can, he answered. He blinked at her, a little surprised, it seemed, that she would ask such a stupid question. *Less advanced*. She had worked with him for five years and knew this was the kind of vocabulary he used. Not *stupid* but *less advanced*. This language, he reasoned, was more encouraging. It suggested a possibility for improvement.

We can, he answered, but why would we? Each of those cameras costs more than you want to know, and what would be the use in seeing the ground we've already covered? Redundant, he said. Unnecessary.

Yes, what would be the use? She couldn't answer the question, at least not in those terms, in his terms, in terms of use. Maybe she can't answer the question at all. But she finds herself, every once in a while as she sits in the observation room, reaching to turn the probe in a circle, three hundred and sixty degrees, swinging momentarily past the ground they've gained. If she does it too often, the team back in BC will notice and call to check in—or, more specifically, to chastise her for slowing progress. If done only rarely, however, a paused and circling probe won't signal a significant loss in time. The movement will go unnoticed.

It's during one of these rare circlings that she sees it, retreating from the light, shrinking away like lightning running backward, its body white and oddly shaped, thick and bumpy, swollen with growths.

She's dreaming, but she doesn't know it yet.

In her dream, she feels the hurrying expansion of *already*, like something invisible rushing fast at her from the future. Already she can feel her daughter's hair falling from her head. She has the thought again (when has she had it before?) that her daughter is growing backwards. Her daughter is sitting on a stool on the back porch, and she is brushing her hair. They are both looking out at the yard. Her daughter's loose hair is so blonde that it looks silvery in her hands, tangling with her fingers as she pulls them away. Already she can see patches of skin appearing like shadows on her daughter's scalp.

In the back of the yard there is sunshine, and the raspberry bushes are swaying.

She wakes in a thunder to her bed in the middle of the night, her mind shouldering into consciousness with an ache that she doesn't at first recog-

nize as grief swelling in her chest.

Already—in her dream she had been thrown back into the already.

It isn't difficult to locate the fish once they know that it exists. They occasionally turn the cameras around, according to her suggestion, and find the fish is following them, weaving at a distance behind in the water. They take photographs, zoom in, and study its enlarged face. They decide this will be the zenith of their careers, the discovery that will place their names in textbooks after they're dead. She's tired from sitting in the observation room and isn't sure she cares about peaks anymore—about estimating or reaching potentials. But she looks at the photographs and realizes before the rest of them what the growths are covering the fish's body.

They're eyes, she says, squinting down at the tablet in her hand.

What? says Anthony. He slides his wheeled chair over from across the room.

It doesn't have any scales, she says. No fins. I can't even see gills. It's covered in eyes.

She traces a white bulge on the screen with her fingertip.

Let me see, he says, holding out his hand. They can't be eyes. They just *look* like eyes.

She hands him the tablet. Compare the photographs, she says. The pupils change direction.

He stares down at the pictures. It would be unprecedented, he says. It would be impossible.

Their zenith stoops higher above them. In a week, they catch the fish.

Wait, she says. The word crackles in her throat, caught on a bubble of phlegm. She hiccups through her breathlessness. Wait.

They don't wait. The trap snaps down around the fish, the thin wire edges—she sees them through the cameras—closing on its gliding body. The head has been caught, sure enough, the eyeballs careening in their numerous sockets, but the latter half of the fish, its long, eel-like tail, has been cut, deeply. It twists as if electrocuted, thrashing and pulling against the cage.

It opens its mouth. She wonders, not for the first time, if fish can scream—if they feel a desire to scream. The fish's mouth is long and oval at the front of its face, and inside, deep inside the dark pocket of mouth that stretches down to its throat, she thinks but isn't sure she sees the swell of

white growths shining in the camera lights.

More eyes, and on the inside of its mouth? What's the use in that? What evolutionary process, hard-edged and traceable as a mathematical equation, led to this fish growing eyes on the inside of its mouth?

The fleshy gums of the fish's lips, red like the undersides of large eyelids, angle toward the camera. It's not screaming, she thinks. It's looking.

Then the cage snaps upward, the fish's mouth snaps shut, and the camera remains recording empty sand and rock and shadow.

Wait, she says again, this time under her breath. They're up on deck, on the top of the water, and overboard in the deep she can see the ropes straining, retracting upward to pull the cage into view. The metal wiring emerges from the water. The fish is writhing inside of it. Its tail, black with blood and slippery, hangs half-detached and motionless outside the cage. A single, pale eyeball at the end of its tail is limp and dead, white and quickly drying out in the open air.

She stares for a moment at this eyeball, its black pupil blank and turning milky with blindness. The head of the fish, blistered with eyeballs of all sizes, thumps against the metal cage.

The others don't have time to react. They're preparing for extraction, donning rubber gloves and wheeling over the aquarium, writing numbers in the charts of their clipboards. She steps forward as the cage reaches eye level, snaps open the locks, and reaches for the fish with her bare hands. Her fingers close around the eyeballs. They're smooth and firm like hard-boiled eggs on her skin.

The others lurch toward her. There's blood, sticky and wet, between her fingers. She hears the rattle of supplies hitting the deck and the splash of the fish as it hits the water and disappears.

Anthony shakes her brutally until she thinks her neck will snap.

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In her dreams, in her memories, which are the same now, more or less the same, she's standing on the back porch looking into the house. It's dark inside the house—she can barely see the outline of the kitchen counter and the refrigerator and the chairs. The outlines of furniture are dim, blurring into shadow, shapes emerging momentarily from the darkness like fish un-

derwater. She finds herself straining to see if there are little blue polka-dotted boots by the back door. This is a staple of time, a stamp, a certification. If the blue polka-dotted boots are by the back door, then there must be feet to put into them. There must be a little body somewhere very close, surely within sight, or just out of sight, at the corner of her eye. Her vision smudges with darkness, a smear of ashen charcoal behind her eyelids. She is dreaming, after all.

She strains to see, but even in her straining she knows that she's wasting her time looking for these polka-dotted boots. Behind her, if she could just turn around, her daughter crouches at the back of the yard, way back through the grass and between the flowers bobbing their heads in the breeze. She's crouching in the grass, barefoot, reaching into a tangle of thorny bush, plucking raspberries that lean in through the fence from the neighbouring yard. She knows that if she could turn around she would see her daughter scooping the front of her dress into a bowl to carry the raspberries, her lips and chin and fingertips stained dark red, as if bruised, her hair soft and falling around her face (not falling out, not yet, not *already*), blades of grass coming up between her toes, dirt on her kneecaps from where they pressed into the earth.

Stubbornly she stares into the dark interior of the kitchen, watching for the revelation of household objects, the shape of the wall, the spiralling metal rings of the stove.

Six days after she loses her job and goes back to her house that she never sold but always meant to, she finds a bulge on the back of her neck, in the crook between the base of her skull and the top of her spinal column. It's painful, sore like a raised zit, and she pokes it experimentally throughout the day. By evening, it's the size of a small egg, firm like stiff jelly beneath the skin.

She calls her mother, whom she realizes mid-ring she hasn't told about losing her job.

About time! says her mother. You know it's been ages, don't you? Your father and I started watching the news for a story about a flooded submarine. I told him the other day, I said, I don't know how she can stand that job, way down at the bottom of the ocean. It's about time she called us, and it's about time she came back up to the world of the living for good.

She listens for a moment to the static hum of her cell phone. It's quiet

down there, she says. Mostly. She thinks of Anthony.

Well, says her mother, this is another one of your breaks, I guess? Have they put you up in a hotel like usual? It's awful living in hotels part-time and on a boat the rest. It can't be healthy. You always have a home with us, you know. You should come up for dinner tomorrow night, if you're near enough. Your father bought some steaks, and I'm making asparagus. It won't be an inconvenience to have you. It's always good to have you.

I'm far away, she says. She stammers, We—we've landed far up the coast.

Shame, says her mother. She pauses, deliberating. That's not a life, you know. That's no kind of life.

Is Dad there? she asks. I could talk to Dad, if he's around.

He's in bed, her mother says.

Oh. She thinks about hanging up the phone.

Her mother breathes. I know I've said it before, and I'll say it again. It's not healthy. It's not any kind of life. It's time you came back up and started living. It's been five years since the funeral and that's long enough for anyone. I know this job felt right at the time, but five years is plenty enough time to get your head the right way on your shoulders again. We miss her too, you know. You're not the only one out there in the world who's ever lost a child. I said to your father the other day, I said, time doesn't turn around for anyone, and if she thinks—

She hangs up the phone and places it on the kitchen counter, staring at her dark reflection in its rectangular face. In the silence, her fingers move involuntarily up to the lump—which feels larger now—on the back of her head.

When she balances the smaller mirror from her bedroom on top of the back of the toilet, positioned so that, when she looks in the bathroom mirror, she can see the back of her head—when she ties up her hair and looks in the bathroom mirror and pushes the knife into the skin at the base of her skull—she expects fluid and pus but gets neither. Instead, she slices, pulls the skin, and sees a pupil in the centre of a white eyeball on the back of her head.

She is looking into both mirrors now, from the front and the back, a kaleidoscope of reflections colliding. She vomits into the sink, tries to blink, and feels the skin on the back of her neck pulling together like a clenched

fist.

Vertigo rocks through her as she moves out of the bathroom and into the kitchen, walking simultaneously forward and backward, watching the hallway slide under her as in the same moment it slides away.

The next lump appears behind her left ear, and the next just above her forehead, in her hairline. She cuts each open with meticulous precision. She becomes balanced—she can move around the house without issue—and she wonders now how she ever moved before, her head thumping with the revelation not only of all that she can see but also of all that she can possibly not see—all the absences of points of view that she didn't feel until these new ones arose.

With each new eye, more hair falls from her head. She shaves off all that's left over, as if in invitation.

She dreams that looking from behind herself she can see her daughter sitting on a stool on the porch having her hair brushed by a woman who is looking away toward the back of the yard. Her daughter's hair is falling out as the woman brushes, already silvery in the woman's hands. And beneath the hair, where the pale shadows form already, are eyeballs breaking out against the skin. As the eyelids, which are also the skin of her daughter's scalp, clench shut, they squeeze the hair from their pores, and it tangles in silvery strands between the woman's fingers as she draws her hands away.

In the dream, the woman turns and looks at her where she stands looking from behind herself, looking from inside the back of her neck. They look at each other.

The woman opens her mouth, an oval wideness in her face. In the dark cavity of her scream there are white lumps swivelling on her tongue.

When Anthony calls, she's in the kitchen looking into the fridge and in the same moment looking at the ceiling where a crack forms a spider web constellation in the plaster and in the same moment looking out the glass back door to the porch and the yard and the sun scooping down through the sky.

She's gentle when she places the phone to her ear.

It's Anthony, says Anthony.

Hello, she says.

How've you been?

The phone hums for a moment into her head. Why're you calling? she asks.

We found it again.

She can hear it now—there's an edge to his voice. He's breathing sharply, as if he's just run up a flight of stairs.

Did you catch it? she asks. Her tongue feels numb in her mouth.

Of course, he says, but it's not the same one. At least we don't think it's the same one. We're fairly sure it's not the same one.

What do you mean?

Well, there's a scar.

A scar?

On its tail. The eyeballs are damaged in a full circumference around its tail exactly where—

Ah, she says, pulling the details together in her mind. And no one believes you. That's why you've called?

Well, do you think it's possible?

That it healed itself? She reaches her hands up to her head, touching the folds of skin pinching around her eyes. She closes them all at once. In darkness, she can think.

And she thinks that there's an edge to his voice. He's breathing sharply, as if he's just run up a flight of stairs. They don't believe him. What experiment will they require as proof?

No, she says. It's not possible. It's not possible even in reptiles, you know that. The tail was dead. We all saw it. I had the—the—she stammers, losing some of her composure—the blood on my hands to prove it.

But what if this is different? he asks. What if we should be thinking about this differently?

You'll lose your job, she says, if you kill it. If you're wrong, you'll lose your job.

This is enough for him to consent. She hears the breath piling out of his lungs.

He pauses, unsure of how to say he doesn't need her anymore. How've you been? he asks again.

Her hands move up to her head.

She's been well, she's been nothing, she's been well.

She's well, she's nothing, nothing matters about well in the nothing that inhabits her brain. She's now, in the space between not yet and *already* and since. In the space between the not yet here and the already happening and the since then, the afterward, what she used to call now. Now the now sees forward and backward. Her head is hairless and bumpy with eyeballs. She sits on the back porch, looking out into the yard, and behind her in the dark interior of the kitchen the shapes of furniture loom and surface like the shapes of fish underwater. Now the now sees forward and backward. She sees her daughter in the bed of the hospital and hairless, she sees her daughter in the bed of the coffin. She sees the fish slipping backward like lightning retracting. And the blood of the fish in between her fingers, slipping in between the inbetween of *already*. She sees her daughter tiny on her chest in the hospital, finding her breast with her mouth and then sleeping, her fingers sticky with blood. She sees her daughter eating Cheerios. She sees her daughter standing on the piano in the living room humming "Angel of Music" from *The Phantom of the Opera* as she chimes notes with her toes and tries to climb inside. She sees her red face facedown in the carpet, mad that it's school time—she slept in too long—and her eyes still hold the puff beneath them from her dreams. She wonders what she was dreaming. Was she dreaming of going back to sleep? Now the now sees forward and backward. She sees her daughter in the bed of the coffin. She sees her daughter trying to walk down the stairs and holding the bannister. She sees her toes in the bathtub wrinkled, emerging from the water like pruned eyeballs at the ends of her feet. Now in the now the fish is swimming backward. She turns the camera backward and sees the fish opening its mouth. She sees the pouch of dreaming beneath her daughter's eyes. Her daughter is hairless and dreaming in the hospital bed—she's a baby, it's the first, she's grown—she kisses her. The beginning and end fold together like dough, pouched dough like skin pouched together under the eyes.

She sees her daughter coming up from the back of the yard.

Mama, look, the little girl says, holding out her hand. It's an offering, an invitation. Her fingers are dark red, as if bruised. On her palm is a raspberry, plump, pulled from the bush at the back of the yard. On her palm is her mother's head, hairless and bumpy with eyeballs, tiny, small enough to sit in her palm—a sphere of thick lumps. She brings it to her mouth and whispers in its ear.

Mama, look.