

The fish talked to the boy like a mother, sweet and certain, careful with a practiced patience and quiet sternness that alluded to an unmistakable authority. The fish had been alone in his tank for months now. There had been six others, but they had died, all in horrific ways that had given the fish terrific nightmares that bled between consciousness and sleep. The first to go had been named Aphrodite for its beauty. The fish heard the man and woman in the house arguing over the cost of it. 200 dollars, I swear, if you waste my money on one more ill feed your precious fish to the neighbor's dog. The fish could only agree that Aphrodite was a waste of money when it had gotten caught in the filter only a week later. The fish wasn't surprised. Rancho fish, though beautiful, with their lion's mane of fleshy bubbles that wobbled like sweet Jello, were notoriously stupid. The fish had watched Aphrodite the Rancho Goldfish from a safe distance as it struggled pitifully against the riptide of dirty water being forced clean. Finally, after being vacuumed to the maleficent leech like machine, its intestines stuck like a dirty fly against yellow tape in the gills of the filter, Aphrodite had succumbed. The fish could only think of how beautiful it looked even in death; its dumb mouth forever open in a shocked, infantile way. Then there were the twins, two butterfly telescope goldfish who had been totally identical to the last splotch. The man hadn't even bothered giving them separate names they were so alike in manner and in look. They were mean and crude, always cursing and fighting with one another. Their bulbous eyes were filled with an unbridled hatred for everything and everyone, even the delicate brown flakes of dried calcium and crustacean that they fought over furiously for and swallowed without hesitation. The fish wasn't at all displeased when they had killed each other over the special treat that stank of old sea water and dried clam and sat in a container that looked dirty and unwashed, even new. The fish had watched them nip each other's black and orange scales clean off and admired the way they floated like soft pollen in late spring down to the mix of gravel, dirt, and sand below. The fish, not wanting to get caught in the brawl, had hidden behind a tall green river plant that had grown so rapidly it now flourished past the horizon of the tank's walls and spilled onto the peeling wall and thick wooden table that was the stage on which they performed their sorry lives for whoever stumbled into the living room of the shabby apartment. The fish admired the plant, and its ability to survive underwater and in the moist air above. Jealous even. It had partial freedom of the insufferable tank and that was more than the fish could ever hope for. The other three that had died were long-time residents of the tank. They were kind and simple and happy for reasons the fish could never understand. They enjoyed the too-salty food sprinkled into the tank every morning and night and swam to greet any and all of the apartment visitors, which usually consisted of the woman's mother, a bent-over widow with a tendency to forget when she had last eaten, the man whose hairy hands were to them like god was to the woman, the woman, a gold cross around her neck, a bible never far, who spoke rarely and yelled frequently, and finally the boy who smiled when neither the woman nor man was home. It was a big smile, full of many smooth baby teeth that gleamed white even in the yellow glow of the lamp. Those three had welcomed the fish when he had just been bought. He was a bargain. Only 15 dollars, the man had explained to his wife. The three had told the fish that the man was good and meticulous when it came to feeding time, except on Sundays when he would

drink and forget. That the woman was always threatening the man. That she would never act on what she said because she was weak-willed and a coward. That the boy would not bother him or tap on the glass because he was always at school, or doing homework in his room, or playing soccer at the park with his friends who barely registered the fish tank in the living room aside from a cursory glance whenever they came over. That the fish would swim, and eat, and sleep and shit and piss in this tank for the rest of its life until the day it would die. They were wrong.

Kenneth, you tracked dirt in again. How many times do I have to tell you to take your shoes off. I mopped the floors today and now its dirty all over again. The man yelled back from the toilet, a place the fish knew he was fated to end up one day, how about you get a job Denise, I had to fix six computers today. My head hurts already, can you just shut up. Denise yelled, no words, just frustration