

SHORT FICTION/ESSAYS

I HEARD A FISH CRY

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Eurydice kept on dragging herself to these parties, up out of her agoraphobic angst, because she refused to believe it was hopeless. Hope was all there was, for God's sake, *the thing with feathers that perches in the soul*. She'd been singing the tune for so long, it took her hours to cover up deepening facial lines that reflected anxiety about the broken world, an off-the-charts libido, and a stay-at-home-under-the-covers need to be alone. At thirty-seven, she finally understood what Demeter, her surrogate mother, meant when she said, "We feminists have lost a hell of a lot of ground. We're falling into a fucking abyss." Most guys were too self-absorbed to even see her. She wasn't blonde, she wasn't small, and she wasn't submissive.

Each attempt was a performance piece. She soaked cotton balls with witch hazel, closed her eyes, thinking tranquility, opened them, hoping for sparkle, applied mascara and kohl for dramatic effect, popped in contacts and said to herself, "Arise, you slumbering fools. Look deep into the windows of my soul. I am so worth it!" She put on a moderately daring décolletage and carefully arranged her breasts to suggest cleavage, not to fully expose it. Lastly, she layered three lipstick tones, all red.

On the Myers-Briggs test, a hokey but convenient personality inventory based on Jungian principles, she learned she was an ENTJ, which meant that she was an Extroverted-Intuitive-Thinking-Judging person. Myers-Briggs was one of a battery of self-tests she took as a stop-gap measure to make sure there was nothing seriously wrong with her. Demeter tried to pretend she wasn't worried, and suggested therapy as a means to an end. Eurydice agreed on the end, but not on the means, never on the means. She had zero tolerance for waiting in an office decorated in computer-generated prints of sunset stained in passive shades of lavender where a shrink welcomed her in a whispering voice, dirty beard, stained shirt, and sandals barely covering his naked white feet and torn yellow toenails.

Lunch with a brutally honest friend was less agonizing.

Comparing herself to others on large-scale graphs was often confusing, filling her with self-doubt, even though other females she knew in her late thirties were at least as desperate as she was, especially the ISFP or Introverted-Sensing-Feeling-Perceiving types. Her introverted friends had a terrible time, always stewing, always anxious, slaves to their work, agoraphobic, xenophobic.

On the MMPI, she was high on the OCD scale, but she was grateful she filled no other categories on the DSM-IV List of Mental Disorders. It was the rest of the world that was screwed up. At least she hadn't gone on line to get laid.

Match-dot-com. Harmony-dot-com. Not for her. She needed to meet people in the flesh, bump up against them. Feel their chemistry. Smell their pheromones.

The room was packed. Although she liked people, she also had an ear condition called BPPV or Benign Positional Paroxysmal Vertigo, which meant in a noisy crowd, she had little staying power, feeling dizzy and disoriented quickly. If new people weren't immediately captivating, her head spun, her body started to twitch, and she felt an urgent need to run away.

Over in the corner, the guy sitting in an amber corduroy armchair was kind of cute but his hair and teeth were a little too straight, a sign of inflexible sexism. Nevertheless, she was drawn to his posture, the way he inhabited the area, an "I own my space" kind of certainty. He was helping himself to generous handfuls of M&M's out of a glass bowl. She liked M&M's, but she didn't like the new colors. Intense blue chocolate put her off. She'd been eating red for so many years, it was hard to adjust. She also suspected they'd gotten a few millimeters smaller.

M&M's knees were spread wide and he was talking in a moderate but self-assured voice about various gauges of hunting rifles and dogs with another guy whose hair hung limply in a long straggly ponytail. Ponytail was stretched out sloppily in the sofa next to M&M. He was wearing stained jeans and an orange t-shirt that had some kind of chainsaw logo on it. Being in the very presence of someone like Ponytail made her want to dig in her bag for hand sanitizer. She hung around, waiting for an opportunity to interrupt M&M. Since she knew little about guns, ten minutes passed before she felt it was time to interject. Finally the men shifted the subject back to dogs and seemed to settle there, where she found herself in familiar territory.

"Your standard setter, now there's a dog," Ponytail said. "Jumpy, but fast as hell goin' after quarry."

"You mean Irish setter or something else?" M&M had deepset sapphire eyes, not exactly her type, but passable. He sat up straighter, moved in head to head with Ponytail.

"Naw, English, ya know, the spotted ones. Brits are like, ya know, like, more tight-ass than the Irish. You could call 'em more refined. Easier to handle." Ponytail cranked his head up to look at her standing over them. "I whistle. She comes, if ya know what I mean. Name's Betsy. Like for the Queen. Get it? Elizabeth? Betsy?" He threw his head back and laughed. She could see his rear molars, an area she didn't particularly want to see because there was residue of ground-up food particles deep within. She preferred smart-eyed, articulate types.

She made a quick decision. M&M liked Irish Setters, playful by nature. She plunked herself down next to him and broke right into the conversation. "Every setter I ever knew was wild. How do you train a dog like that?"

The men said nothing, as if they hadn't heard or didn't know she was there. "Slide over," she said, wiggling into the couch, and then, facing each one of them squarely, "Soooo, you guys like to hunt and fish?"

"Yeah. Hunting's cool. Maybe kind of a guy thing, though, I guess." M&M looked at Ponytail and then back at Eurydice and smiled, licking the chocolate off his palm.

Ponytail said, "Bet you're one of those Bambi lovers. Well, hate to break it to ya, little girl, animals don't have feelings."

M&M adjusted his buttocks in the chair, adjusting both flanks down into the cushion as far as he could, settling in. He straightened his back to look up at her, check her out. "Don't mind Neil here. He can be a little brutal. He doesn't mean anything by it. Just a dumb ass." He licked his fingers, one at a time, slurping noisily. She decided not to move even though she found his manners unappetizing. "My name's James." He stuck out his dry hand.

"Which animal can't feel?" She didn't extend her hand. Her volume was on Medium High. It had taken some doing to catch their attention. She wasn't ready to release. M&M was still a weak possibility. She recrossed her legs. "Fish can't feel. Have you ever heard a fish say ouch? Sorry, didn't catch your name." He leaned forward to look at her, curving up one side of his mouth into a smirk. Ponytail snickered.

"Actually, yes, once I actually heard a fish cry," she said.

"Cry?" Ponytail raised an eyebrow.

"Yes. Know what a yellowfin is? They put little pieces of it on sushi." She didn't wait for him to respond. "Well, I was in a small boat south of Tulum with a tiny Mayan guy who motored around for about an hour until he found a spot where he thought yellowfins were biting. Before I could bait and throw in my line, the guy tore a live lobster apart claw by claw, threw each segment into the ocean to attract other fish, and reeled one into the boat. Its fins were yellow... like daffodils! Parts of its body were blue as glacial ice. Absolutely incredibly beautiful." She watched M&M's face for signs of emotion. Not finding any, she raised her volume to High. "And it screamed!" she said. Then she dipped her voice to Low for dramatic flair. "The yellowfin screamed in grief." She flattened her lips and sharpened her teeth on the two "f's," simulating fish torture. Her head spun. She was feeling sick.

"Right. And I'm God," Ponytail said, laughing. He rose up out of the sofa. "I'll let you two figure this one out. I need another beer," he said, disappearing into the crowd.

"It really happened. It had a hoarse scream." She stuck out her hand. "My name's Eurydice."

"You'll have to forgive me. I've never heard a fish cry. And I've never heard a horse scream either. Sorry, Eurydice."

"Not horse as in neigh, neigh. Hoarse. H-O-A-R-S-E. I never want to hear it again. It said, 'I have children at home. I have a family. I have coral to see and waters to swim and you're taking them all from me. This hook really hurts. Take it out.'" She knew she was tipping the OCD scale now. But someone had to fight for the rights of fish. Someone had to educate the poor, dumb slobs of the

world. It didn't matter if M&M didn't buy it right off. Skepticism was healthy. He'd think about it later. It was her responsibility as a TJ person to help him understand. She paused. Hearing no response, she continued.

"My name means justice, wide justice. When I was in the sixth grade, I read in my *Weekly Reader* that giraffes have no voice. I was stupid enough to believe it until I went to Africa. Then I heard a giraffe grunt. After that, I stopped believing in other people's animal facts. I believe what I can see with my own eyes."

"How do you know it wasn't the driver, grunting I mean?" said M&M, rocking his weight forward, looking for just the right moment to escape.

"Just take off, would'ja?" she shouted, surprising herself.

Another man stepped forward and sat on the arm of the sofa. He'd been on the periphery of the circle of chairs, but now he looked directly at Eurydice, peering over the rims of his trifocals to admire her. M&M slouched back. It was one thing to choose to lose, but quite another to be one-upped by some preppy jerk. This guy was dressed in a black turtleneck sweater tucked into dark slacks, nattily trimmed with a black braided belt. He had thick wavy hair, graying at the temples.

Eurydice blinked back at him. His eyes were warm as fur. She needed to stretch and she wanted to meet this situation head-on. She stood up, squared her feet, and faced him.

"How would you describe the voices of whales?" he asked in a low voice, leaning toward her.

Her head suddenly cleared. Someone understood her truth. She was an expert in fish voices. She answered with great authority. "Whales sing. Through their mouths. With sonar." She swallowed and continued, "They sing just for the hell of it. Have you ever heard humpbacks sing?"

"Yes. Mystical. Very mystical. It puts me in touch with my liquidity. What's beyond the bumper-to-bumper. I pop in my humpback CD and I'm there. In the sea."

"Wow. That's great. Whales instead of road rage. Did you know they call that Intermittent Explosive Disorder? Which one do you have?"

"I don't have intermittent anything."

"No, I mean which humpback CD?"

"Oh, I don't know. I found it at Cheapo Discs when I was looking for Thelonius Monk."

"Which Monk?"

"You don't do jazz?"

"Yes. I 'do' jazz." She hated that expression. "Doing" music sounded supercilious, bordering on trifling. "But Cheapo has its music in categories, like Rock and Roll, Western, R and B, Female Vocalists, Country, Jazz. How come the whale CD was next to jazz?"

"Call it intuition."

"I don't get it." He was a bit strange, but she liked that.

"Some genius salesclerk filed it there, sensing a guy like me would come along. She knew we don't have to stay in any one assigned category. We can mix it up. Just because your name is Eurydice doesn't mean you can't move off the earth. And just because my name is Nereus doesn't mean I'm stuck in water. We can survive in other elements." He looked up at her slyly.

She thought he was an interesting blend of her Myers-Briggs complement, and something else she couldn't name. She also thought he was peering down her dress to find what he couldn't see. She had made the wrong wardrobe choice. She felt objectified when men pretended to care about her ideas just so they could take her to bed. It was always a tossup between putting a sack over her head and strutting her stuff.

She threw him a heavier line. "Talk about survival, did you know we're overfishing the ocean? Doesn't that make you feel guilty? I mean I hardly want to order tuna anymore. A lot of species are already extinct."

"I find guilt a complete waste of time. Caviar tastes excellent with champagne."

M&M got up with visible effort, farted softly, and walked away.

"Well, I like fish too, but we're absolutely raping the environment." She couldn't break free of her need to press home the point. "Snowmobilers chase deer out of the woods. Polar bears are drowning from melting ice. The cassowaries in Australia are pissed off because their gum trees are going."

"Cass-o-whaties?"

"Cassowaries, the only frugivore large enough to disperse plant species in Queensland's rainforests. They're attacking Australians with their spurs."

"I like it when you say the 'fru' part. Your mouth makes a rose... I don't suppose you want to explain frugivores?"

"It's an animal that prefers fruit. So, anyway, my point is we're polluting the land and the ocean too. It's nothing more than a slop bucket for cruise liners." She was talking too fast. She didn't often get a captive audience. She could hardly keep up with herself.

"Exactly what does an ocean liner throw into the ocean? I mean I thought they'd stopped that."

"Fluorescent lightbulbs, waste, uneaten food, plastics. They all get dumped."

"Where do you get your information? Could you say 'frugivore' again?"

"I trip over the stuff when I'm shelling all over. Mexico, Malaysia, Africa, you name it. Instead of marginellas and wentletraps, what do I find? Plastic shoes, doll arms, long glass tubes and garbage bags."

"Hmmm, marginellas and wentletraps. How do you know ocean liners are the culprits? Maybe it's the beachfront resorts."

"I saw pictures in the *National Geographic* of the contents of an albatross chick's stomach. Its mother had fed it cigarette lighters, broken clothespins, a

pump-top sprayer, a peanut shell, and so much garbage that there was no room for real fish food. The poor little chick starved to death.”

“No decent, self-respecting albatross mother would feed it those things.”

“Do you have any children?” She felt bold. He seemed concerned about the mother-infant nurturing bond.

“Not yet,” he said, “but I’d like a whole mess of them. The non-frugivore type. The type that sing just for the hell of it, into the wind and waves. And I’d teach them to have no guilt.”

“It’s so sick what we’ve done to the ocean. A mother albatross feeds her chick what she finds in the gyres.” What was she thinking? It was way premature to talk about kids. And she was letting him talk her into things like no guilt. How could she restore justice to a world without guilt? Didn’t that mean no conscience?

“What’s a gyre?” He took her hand and held it firmly.

“It’s like a crevasse in a current. A sort of black hole. The mom can’t really see what’s in there. She just plucks out a bunch of stuff she thinks is food for her baby.”

Her head felt light, giddy.

“You’re really over the top, did you know that?” He removed his glasses, folding the bows over the neck of his sweater, and smiled. He had a narrow space between his front teeth, a sure sign of vulnerability. Vulnerability was vital.

“What top?”

“Never mind. I like it.” He stepped closer to her side, pressed his nose down into her hair, inhaled and faced her, wrapping both arms around her waist.

“People think human beings are the best species to walk the planet, but we’re systematically destroying the homes of most other creatures. It’s a holocaust of animals.” She could smell his salty breath.

He kept one arm around her waist and with his other hand, reached across for her hand and placed it on his chest, so she could feel his heart beating. He threaded his fingers through hers. She thought she might faint. She didn’t pull away.

“And then there’s the oil well noise. Offshore drillers pump oil—thump, thump, like a giant heartbeat out of the ocean—and can be heard a hundred miles away underwater. How would you like to hear that thumping all day long? Pretty soon there won’t be any whales to sing.” She needed to hear her own voice.

“That’ll be the end of Judy Collins and the humpbacks. We’ll have to do all the humping, I mean sonar.” He smiled.

She suspected he might be humoring her. “So that’s the one you listen to? I have it too.” His eyes were dark as the ocean floor, where strange creatures lurked. She was swimming in his essence, airless, flapping slowly. She restrained herself from licking the algae she imagined floating over his eyelids. Kelp was good for the nervous system.

"And the end of music for meditation and yoga and Shiatsu."

"You do yoga too?" She was hyperventilating.

"You look flexible. Are you?" He unfolded his glasses and put them back on, raising his head up and down to examine her from head to toe. His eyebrows were thick.

"If whales can't sing, they get depressed and die." She imagined his body was sleek when it was wet.

"I like Bikram where I can get hot." He pressed his lips against her hands.

"Yuk. I hate it when people's sweat flies onto the mirror. It splashes all over and on my face. Big waves of sweat. I like Iyengar better. I don't feel like throwing up."

"Maybe there oughta be whale shrinks," he said.

She could put justice aside just this once. She was tired, so tired of waiting. She didn't care about whales as much as she cared about his eyes and how she would melt into them when he rose up over her, his back a great hump, flukes slapping the sheets, and her, riding the waves, sending loud cries into the air to be carried hundreds of miles away, jettisoning the waste of her hopeful life into the great sea.